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CONFUCIUS IN A BUSINESS SUIT: Chinese Civilizational Norms in the Twenty-first Century

By Evelyn S. Rawski

Evelyn S. Rawski is professor of history at the University of Pittsburgh. She delivered this paper at A History Institute for Teachers, March 19–20, 2011 on “China and India: Ancient Civilizations, Rising Powers, Giant Societies, and Contrasting Models of Development,” held at the University of Pennsylvania. This History Institute was co-sponsored by The Foreign Policy Research Institute’s [Wachman Center](#) as well as by three centers at the University of Pennsylvania – Center for East Asian Studies, [South Asia Center](#), and [Penn Lauder CIBER \(Center for International Business Education and Research\)](#). Video files of the lectures and corresponding powerpoints can be accessed here: http://www.fpri.org/education/1103china_india/

Chinese attitudes towards their traditional civilization have reflected the shifting political agendas of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the early twentieth century, some intellectuals identified Confucianism as a major barrier to the creation of individuals who could participate in building modernity. In the words of the short story writer Lu Xun, filial piety and other Confucian values had imprisoned individuals, forcing them to sacrifice their own dreams to perpetuate the family.¹ It, along with Buddhism and Daoism, had to be destroyed so that a new society could arise in China.

Iconoclasm, a characteristic of the New Culture movement of the 1910s and 1920s, appealed to Mao Zedong, then a young student. Although he displayed some ambivalence about China’s historical civilizational achievements after establishing the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, he generally expressed the view that Confucianism had been a negative force in Chinese history.² The educated elite who wrote the canonical works of Confucianism came from the “bad classes,” so how could their creative products be praiseworthy? The regime’s hostility to Confucianism was exemplified in the “Pi Lin, Pi Kong” (Anti-Lin Biao, Anti-Confucius) campaign of 1973-74, which ironically may have exposed Chinese youth for the first time to the *Analects*, which purport to be a record of Confucius’ conversations with his disciples. Articles appearing in the press during the mass campaign presented Confucius as “a representative of the declining slave-owning aristocracy who hated the emerging feudal landlords and their supporters, the legalist philosophers.” In other words, Confucius was not even feudal, he was pre-feudal and attempted to block the historical dialectical movement from aristocracy to feudal order.³ In contrast, the first emperor and unifier of China (221 B.C.), Qin Shihuang, who had traditionally been characterized as a villain by Confucian historiography, was hailed as a hero for burning books, in order to break the dominant aristocracy to usher in a new historical era.

The attack on Confucianism, along with Buddhism and Daoism, however, aroused other intellectuals to passionate defense of these civilizational products. Contact with European philosophic models prompted other intellectuals to defend Confucian thought against iconoclastic attack and found a school of “New Confucianism.” Those defending Confucianism as a philosophical system capable of holding its own with any complex philosophy created in Europe have in the process imported

¹ See “Diary of a Madman,” written in 1918; an English translation is found in Lu Xun, *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, trans. William A. Lyell (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1990).

² The positive aspect of Confucius which Mao also espoused was his identification as teacher; see Kam Louie, “Sage, Teacher, Businessman: Confucius as a Model Male,” in *Chinese Political Culture, 1989-2000*, ed. Shiping Hua (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), pp. 29-30.

³ Quote from Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), p. 635; see p. 636-37 for a description of the movement.

European ideas into their writings.⁴ Through the teacher-disciple links forged in the early twentieth century, New Confucianism survived the political turmoil of China's twentieth century in U.S. academic institutions and elsewhere, and re-emerged in the 1980s as a significant intellectual discourse.⁵ Similarly, Buddhist leaders strove to enunciate the ways in which their religion spoke to the new dilemmas facing Chinese people in the twentieth century. During the socialist years, Buddhist institutions in China were damaged; forcing monks to return to lay life virtually destroyed the monastic institution, but not completely.⁶ Daoism, itself identified as "feudal superstition," has also survived into the twenty-first century.⁷

As we begin the second decade of the twenty-first century, almost 35 years after Mao's death, we find a complete reversal of judgment concerning Confucius and the doctrine bearing his name. The recent appearance of a bronze statue of Confucius, which now stands on the east side of Tian'anmen square, at the heart of China's capital, Beijing, in close proximity of Mao Zedong's mausoleum, culminates a political reorientation that uses Confucianism as a cultural symbol to be projected abroad, one that seems to be less threatening to the capitalist countries with which China deals on an increasingly intimate basis.⁸ Some analysts of contemporary politics explain the regime's Confucian patronage as China's emulation of U.S. and European "soft power" policies. The PRC's equivalent of the Goethe Institutes are the Confucius Institutes, first founded in 2004, which now offer Chinese language instruction and Chinese culture courses in 88 countries and regions all over the world. According to an article in *Beijing Review*, there were 282 Confucius Institutes by late 2009.⁹

But the new interest in Confucianism is not merely directed towards a foreign audience, nor is it confined to the PRC. "Confucianism" (*Ruxue*) is a term that has been used at different times to refer to "a form of culture, an ideology, a system of learning, and a tradition of morally normative values."¹⁰ Some argue that the revived interest in Confucianism was actually sparked by Western interest in Confucianism as a significant component of East Asian capitalism.¹¹ Another important stimulus to the transnational intellectual discourse, involving academic participants in the PRC, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and other parts of the world, was the Singapore government's 1982 decision to insert Confucian ethics into the secondary school curriculum, with the advice of eight Confucian specialists from abroad.¹² The idea of a Confucian-style capitalism voiced by Harvard University Professor Du Weiming attracted widespread attention and spurred other events: an international conference on Neo-Confucianism in Hangzhou (1980), 1982 round-table discussions in Taipei and a Zhu Xi conference in Hawaii attended by leading scholars from the PRC and abroad; and Harvard Professor Du Weiming's lectures and appearances in China in the late 1970s and early 1980s.¹³ Among a small circle of intellectuals, Confucianism was not just a product of China's traditional civilization, but should be transformed within the contemporary context, modernized to serve as the foundation of China's modern culture. Whether that goal was possible, and just how it could be achieved, were matters of debate.¹⁴

Not only have foreign scholars paid serious attention to the Confucian revival, Confucianism, albeit in a much more generalized form, has also been embraced by the Chinese leadership since the 1980s. In the PRC, the China Confucius Foundation was founded in 1984, and an International Confucian Association in 1994.¹⁵ In the seventh national five-year plan

⁴ For a survey of the twentieth-century evolution, see John Makeham, "The Retrospective Creation of New Confucianism," in *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination*, ed. John Makeham (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 25-53. For a very different reading of the Confucian movement, see Arif Dirlik, "Confucius in the Borderlands: Global Capitalism and the Reinvention of Confucianism," *Boundary 2* 22.3 (1995): pp. 229-73.

⁵ For a critical appraisal of some aspects of the intellectual revival, see Benjamin Elman, "Rethinking 'Confucianism' and 'Neo-Confucianism' in Modern Chinese History," in *Rethinking Confucianism: Past and Present in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam*, ed. Benjamin A. Elman, John B. Duncan, and Herman Ooms (Los Angeles: University of California Asia Institute, 2002), pp. 518-54.

⁶ Gray Tuttle, *Tibetan Buddhists in the Making of Modern China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Raoul Birnbaum, "Buddhist China at the Century's Turn," *China Quarterly* #174 (2003): pp. 428-50.

⁷ Chi-Tim Lai, "Daoism in China Today, 1980-2002," *The China Quarterly* #174 (2003): pp. 413-27.

⁸ "China's Confucius Institutes: Rectification of Statues," *The Economist*, January xx, 2011.

⁹ Ni Yanshuo, "Confucius Around the World," *Beijing Review* (March 6, 2008); "Zhang Zhiping, "Spreading the Word Overseas," *ibid.* (July 29, 2010), both online at BeijingReview.com.cn. See the Confucius Institute site: <http://www.confuciusinstitute.net/>.

¹⁰ John Makeham, *Lost Soul: 'Confucianism' in Contemporary Chinese Academic Discourse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), "Introduction," pp. 1-2; also his "The Retrospective Creation of New Confucianism," in *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination*, ed. John Makeham (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 25-53.

¹¹ Arif Dirlik traces the interest in Confucianism to Herman Kahn and Peter Berger's writings about the dynamic potential of the East Asian economies in the late 1970s: see his "Confucius in the Borderlands: Global Capitalism and the Reinvention of Confucianism," *boundary 2*, 22.3(1995): pp. 243-45.

¹² Dirlik, *ibid.*, pp. 238-39; Makeham, *Lost Soul*, ch. 1. For a perspective on the cultural milieu in the PRC during the 1980s, see Song Xianlin, "Reconstructing the Confucian Ideal in 1980s China: The 'Culture Craze' and New Confucianism," in *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination*, ed. John Makeham (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 81-104.

¹³ Makeham, "Retrospective Creation," pp. 33-34.

¹⁴ See Makeham, *Lost Soul*, ch. 11, "Marxism and Ruxue" and ch. 12, "Jiang Qing's Ruxue Revivalism," which includes discusses the differences between Fang Keli on the one hand and Luo Yijun and Jiang Qing on the other.

¹⁵ Makeham, *Lost Soul*, ch. 2, 3.

for the social sciences (1986-90), the government approved a large research project on Modern New Confucian Intellectual Movement directed by a professor at Nankai University, Fang Keli; Fang received renewed funding for this project in the eighth five-year plan.¹⁶ Hundreds of books on Confucian thinkers were published in the 1990s, and journals dedicated to Confucian subjects appeared. Centers of Zhu Xi studies were established in Jiangxi and Fujian (where the great Neo-Confucian philosopher lived and worked) in the 1990s; in 2002 People's University established an Institute for Confucian Research (*Kongzi yanjiuyuan*).¹⁷ "Almost all" of Zhu Xi's individual works are available in modern collated and punctuated editions in China today, with a new modern edition of Zhu's collected writings being published in 2002-03.¹⁸ Centers of Zhu Xi studies in Fujian and Jiangxi provinces have held international scholarly conferences on the philosopher in 1987, 1990, 1995, and 2000, with publications of some of the conference proceedings. *Zhuzi xuekan*, a journal edited by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Shangro (Jiangxi) Normal College, also disseminate new writing on Zhu Xi.¹⁹

Confucianism, along with Daoism and Buddhism, has become part of National Studies (*guoxue*) at some major Chinese universities. Allusions to traditional ideals appear in speeches of Chinese leaders like President Hu Jintao.

The contemporary explosion of interest in Confucianism appears in many different guises and is directed to different audiences. Yu Dan, a professor of media studies at Beijing Normal University, became a national sensation after she appeared in 2006 on CCTV to explain the Confucian *Analects* and its applicability to the daily life of ordinary people. The book that she published on this subject was a major bestseller, even though some Confucian specialists attacked her "vulgarization" of the original text.²⁰ In a similar vein, Beijing University since 2003 has offered intensive "National Study Classes" (*guoxueban*) for businessmen which offer them guidance in reading classical Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist texts; Tsinghua, another prestigious university in Beijing and People's University have also followed in Beida's footsteps.²¹ Oral recitation/memorization of the Four Books (*The Great Learning, Analects, Doctrine of the Mean, Mencius*), a major part of the traditional Confucian curriculum, seem to be returning to favor in the "children read the classics" (*shao er dujing*) movement.²²

Confucianism is cited by Chinese leaders visiting foreign countries as evidence of China's great civilizational traditions. A speech in Athens, Greece on October 3, 2010, Premier Wen Jiabao observed that "both the Chinese civilization and the Greek civilization have made major contributions to the progress of world civilization." Greece, like China, would surely stand the test of its current fiscal and economic crisis. Wen looked forward to improving the trade, maritime, and investment relations between the two countries.²³ Confucianism is especially valuable in promoting amicable relations with China's East Asian neighbors. When Fukuda Yasuo, Prime Minister of Japan, met Professor Yu Dan of Beijing Normal University, they chatted about Confucius' *Analects*, which the prime minister said he had read in middle school.²⁴ Nor should Europeans be left out of the dissemination of Confucian texts: one translator of the *Analects* into English, Lin Wusun, said that he compared "the thoughts, experiences and influences of Confucius with those of Socrates and Jesus," extracting "useful quotes" from Confucius for those "who want to engage in further study."²⁵ Jiang Damin, governor of Shandong province, announced in 2008 that he hoped to build a "Chinese cultural symbolic city" in Confucius' native place, Qufu.²⁶

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For information, contact Alan Luxenberg at 215-732-3774, ext. 105 or email fpri@fpri.org or visit us at www.fpri.org.

¹⁶ Sébastien Billioud, "Confucianism, 'Cultural Tradition,' and Official Discourse in China at the Start of the New Century," *China Perspectives* #3 (2007), p. 52. Fang Keli was later appointed Dean of Graduate Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and became a member of the Office of Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council: Jiawen Ai, "Two Sides of One Coin: The Party's attitude toward Confucianism in Contemporary China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 18.61 (2009), p. 694.

¹⁷ Sébastien Billioud and Joël Thoraval, "*Jiaohua*: The Confucian Revival in China as an Educative Project," *China Perspectives* #4 (2007)p. 4.

¹⁸ Xudong Fang, "Contemporary Chinese Studies of Zhuzi in Mainland China," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 3.1 (2003): 121-22; Fang notes that an earlier ten-volume edition, published in 1996, was not collated and punctuated.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 133-34.

²⁰ Billioud and Thoraval, "*Jiaohua*," pp. 18-19. See also Daniel A. Bell, *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), Appendix 1, pp. 163-74, which assesses Yu Dan's book, *Reflections on the Analects of Confucius*. Bell notes that ten million copies of this book were sold.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 15-17.

²³ "Confidence and Cooperation Will See Us Through Difficulty: Speech at the Hellenic Parliament by Wen Jiabao, Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, in Athens, October 3, 2010," *Beijing Review* (December 2, 2010), BeijingReview.com.cn.

²⁴ "Japanese Prime Minister Fukuda Met Yu Dan," *Beijing Review* (February 18, 2008), BeijingReview.com.cn. Yu Dan presented a copy of her book, *Yu Dan Explains the Analects of Confucius*, in both a Chinese and Japanese edition, to the prime minister.

²⁵ "Modern Take on a Master," *Beijing Review* November 18, 2010, BeijingReview.com.cn.

²⁶ Reported in the "Society" section, *Beijing Review* March 13, 2008, BeijingReview.com.cn.