

# The Future of Confucianism

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## 1. Historical development

For the last 2,500 years, the teachings of Confucius have had a great and enduring influence on Chinese society and its people. This article will discuss briefly the history of Confucianism, its teachings, followed by a critique of its place in the modern world. It will then discuss the future of Confucianism and its survival into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Historically, the main periods of development for Confucianism took place as follows:

Confucius 551-479 BC

Mencius 371 – 289 BC

Hsun Tzu 298 - 238 BC

Western Han Dynasty 206 BC – 8 AD

Early 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> Century - Decline of Confucianism

Tang Dynasty 618 – 907 AD

Sung Dynasty Confucian revival

Yuan Dynasty 1271 – 1368 AD

Korean Dynasty 1392 – 1910 AD

19<sup>th</sup> Century – Encounter with Foreign Ideas

### **Confucius (551-479 BC)**

Confucius was an ardent admirer of the King of Chou, who lived in 1094 BC, in the Age of Yao and Shun, known to be an Age of great harmony in ancient China. In his lifetime, Confucius had about 3000 disciples. He started the “Scholar tradition.” Scholars were men of action as well as of ideas. Confucius tried to reanimate the old Order so as to attain a new one. He believed it was possible to retrieve the meanings of the past by breathing vitality and life into outmoded rituals. Among these were the ancestral cult, reverence for Heaven and mourning ceremonies, all of

which had survived for centuries in China before his lifetime. He regarded the everyday human world as profoundly spiritual. He tried to found human unity on the unity of Heaven. The period from 550 to 200 BC was known as the Age of the hundred philosophers – a golden age in classical Chinese thought. Flourishing during this epoch together with the thoughts of Confucius were Taoist and Moist philosophies. Of these schools, only Confucianism managed to penetrate virtually all aspects of life in ancient China.

### **Mencius (371 – 289 BC)**

Mencius, the most famous Confucian philosopher after Confucius, was a native of the state of Tchou. Like Confucius, he travelled widely to get an audience for his ideas with the various rulers of the time. He was not successful. Finally he retired and together with his disciples he compiled the *Mencius* in seven books. *Mencius* later became one of the famous Four Books. In it are recorded the conversations between Mencius and the warlords and Mencius and his disciples. Mencius taught that human nature is basically good and proposed the cultivation of a class of scholar officials who were not to be involved in agriculture, industry and commerce in ancient China.

### **Hsun Tzu (298 – 238 BC)**

Unlike Mencius, who believed in the goodness of human nature (the latter also requires rituals and authority to be good), Hsun Tzu teaches that human nature is basically evil. A person's passions and desires have to be controlled so that he can act within social norms. Hsun Tzu outlined the process of Confucian education, from nobleman to sage. He said that this is a ceaseless endeavour by man to accumulate knowledge, skills, insight and wisdom.

### **Western Han Dynasty (206 BC – 8 AD)**

The Han Dynasty was significant as the Emperors adopted Confucianism as a model to base the Chinese state on. In 124 BC, during the reign of the Martial Emperor, Emperor Han Wu Ti, he appointed five Confucian Scholars (called Erudites) in his Court. They became the Masters of the five Classics, in effect, creating the first University in China. Fifty official students were assigned to support their work. By 1 AD, 100 men were entering the Imperial government service via entrance exams conducted

by the state. By 50 AD, there were 3,000 students in the Imperial University at the Court. In 58 AD, all government schools were required to conduct sacrificial rites to Confucius. By this time, Confucianism had come of age. In 175 AD, the Imperial Court approved the official first version of the five Classics. These were as follows:

*The Book of Documents,*  
*The Book of Poetry,*  
*The Book of Rites,*  
*The Book of Change*  
*The Spring and Autumn Annals.*

### **From the Early 3<sup>rd</sup> to Late 6<sup>th</sup> Century AD**

When the Han Dynasty ended, China went through a turbulent period and non-Chinese invaders captured large parts of North China. For the next four hundred years no one ruler was able to rule all of China. As the Chinese State declined, so did the influence of Confucianism. During this same period, Buddhism flourished and made a significant impact in many parts of China. Although many Buddhist schools arose and were established, neither Taoism nor Confucianism disappeared.

### **Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 AD)**

The Tang Dynasty was the next significant period of Chinese history. China was again a unified state, and under the rule of the Tang Empire it rose to new heights of power, prestige and prosperity. This gave a boost to Confucianism as it had done in the Han Dynasty, and the Tang Dynasty based its political structure on Confucian principles. The Emperors recruited

their staff through the Civil Service Examinations System with the syllabus based mostly on Confucian Classics and publications. A newer and more definitive official edition of the five Classics was published during the Tang Dynasty.

### **Sung Dynasty (960 – 1279 AD)**

The Sung Dynasty saw the revival of Confucianism. During this period the Imperial Examination system was fully implemented by the Emperors. Chu Hsi (1130 – 1200 AD) the eminent Sung scholar of the epoch placed the Four Confucian Books (namely *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Great*

*Learning, The Analects and Mencius*) above the five original Classics. His major contribution was in restructuring the priority of Confucian scriptural traditions.

### **Yuan Dynasty (1271 – 1368 AD)**

In 1279 AD, the foreign Mongolians conquered and united all of China. Although they generally treated the Confucian scholars badly, it was during the Mongol Dynasty that the Yuan Court officially adopted the Four Books as the basis of the Civil Service Examinations. This system of examinations was religiously observed till 1905, a period of about 600 years. Hsu Heng the eminent Confucian scholar of this period educated the sons of Mongol nobility to be teachers of the Confucian classics.

### **Korean Dynasty (1392 – 1910 AD)**

Among all the dynasties in China (both Chinese and foreign) the Korean Choson Dynasty (1392 to 1910) is considered to be the most thoroughly Confucianised. The Korean Confucian scholar, Yi T'oegye (1501 to 1570), re-interpreted Chu Hsi's teachings for the Koreans. To this date, the vitality of the Confucian tradition is still felt throughout both North and South Korea. We note that the late North Korean communist leader, Mr Kim Il Sung, passed over the leadership of the country to his son, Kim Jong Il, a practice which is very much part of Confucian tradition.

### **The Encounter with Foreign Ideas in 19<sup>th</sup> Century China**

Ever since the Yuan Dynasty (1271 to 1368 AD) both Chinese creativity and originality in China had slowed down, as people were more content to repeat old social customs and forms. This was probably due to enforced conformity brought about by Confucianism and the lack of stirring and stimulating contacts with external cultures.

As China was steeped in Confucian traditions for a long time, a traumatic and revolutionary clash of cultures happened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century between the Chinese people and foreigners who brought new ways of thinking and advanced technology. The people who were imbued with Confucianist teachings for many centuries could not understand nor withstand the tests and challenges of more progressive European ideas and way of life.

Coincidentally at the time, 19<sup>th</sup> century China was also faced with an incompetent, decadent and weak leadership under the Ching Emperors. During this period, social and political changes were slow. The Chinese concept of a State was that of an Empire embracing all civilisation (with China as The Central Kingdom). To them, all states owed allegiance to the one sovereign Son of Heaven, the Emperor. China was governed by trained Confucian scholars schooled only in Confucian principles. China was also primarily an agricultural and rural country.

On the other hand, the foreigners from the New World were educated differently. They had an industrial and urban background. Their experience was shaped by the Industrial Revolution and they were very much part of the machine age. Applied science had made profound social changes that had transformed every aspect of human life. The western conception of the nation and international order was driven by a vision of a commonwealth of nations, with each nation being a sovereign state. The latter was also guided in international relations by international law.

As opposed to these new ideas and concepts brought by foreigners, social relations in China were based on the family. China was a patriarchal society. The individual and the state were subordinated to the family. These differences in social and scientific experiences caused conflict and mutual suspicion between Chinese people and foreigners in 19<sup>th</sup> century China.

In many ways, clashes of ideas also occurred in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in China, as it emerges from obscurity into a more technologically advanced world. Although the clash of cultures is less severe, there is still a lack of understanding between Chinese people and Western people, and when they meet, it is often with a feeling of mutual suspicion.

## **2. The Teachings of Confucianism**

Confucius described himself in the following way:

“At 15 I set my heart on learning; at 30 I firmly took my stand; at 40 I had no delusions; at 50 I knew the Mandate of Heaven; at 60 my ear was

attuned; at 70 I followed my heart's desire without overstepping the boundaries of right."<sup>1</sup>

When one of his students had difficulty describing him, he said:

"Why do you not simply say something to this effect: he is the sort of man who forgets to eat when he engages himself in the pursuit of learning, who is so full of joy that he forgets his worries and who does not notice that old age is coming on."<sup>2</sup>

Confucius was concerned with self-improvement and acquiring virtues: "It is these things that cause me concern: failure to cultivate virtue, failure to go deeply into what I have learned, inability to move up to what I have heard to be right, and inability to reform myself when I have defects."<sup>3</sup> He believed education to be a ceaseless process of self-realisation and self-teaching. He told his students that they must be willing to learn: "I do not enlighten anyone who is not eager to learn, nor encourage anyone who is not anxious to put his ideas into words."<sup>4</sup>

Mencius thought virtues were innate to human character, and that education was required for their full development:

"All men have a mind which cannot bear (to see the suffering of) others... If now men suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, they will without exception experience a feeling of alarm and distress... From this case we may perceive that he who lacks the feeling of commiseration is not a man; that he who lacks a feeling of shame and dislike is not a man; that he who lacks a feeling of modesty and yielding is not a man; and that he who lacks a sense of right and wrong is not a man. The feeling of commiseration is the beginning of human-heartedness. The feeling of shame and dislike is the beginning of righteousness. The feeling of modesty and yielding is the beginning of propriety. The sense of right and wrong is the beginning of wisdom. Man has these four beginnings, just as he has four limbs... Since all men have these four beginnings in themselves, let them know how to give them full development and

<sup>1</sup> S. Leys, *The Analects of Confucius*, 1997, 2.4, p 6.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 7.19, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 7.3, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 7.8, p. 30.

completion. The result will be like fire that begins to burn, or a spring which has begun to find vent. Let them have their complete development, and they will suffice to protect all within the four seas. If they are denied that development, they will not suffice even to serve one's parents."<sup>5</sup>

### **A Transmitter of Traditions**

Confucius considered himself to be a transmitter of traditions rather than a creator of something new. In China, he is known as the "First Teacher" and the 16<sup>th</sup> September of each year is still being celebrated in Taiwan as Teacher's Day in his honour. Confucius was keen to learn from history and he said:

"A transmitter and not a maker, believing in and loving the ancients, I venture to compare myself with our old Pang."<sup>6</sup>

"I am one who is fond of antiquity and earnest in seeking it there."<sup>7</sup>

His aim was to put into practice the political ideas that he learnt from the ancient sage kings (in particular the Duke of Chou). He did not realise this dream during his lifetime, but later, his philosophy of moral persuasion was influential and became an indivisible and enduring part of Chinese society.

### **The Five Obligations**

According to Confucius, people's readiness to be governed arose from five Universal Obligations. These obligations are between individuals of different social status. They are reciprocal duties and are considered to be appointments of Heaven. If all these duties are faithfully discharged, a state of "happy tranquillity" will prevail for all people under Heaven. The five universal obligations are those between:

- The Sovereign and the minister
- The Father and his son
- The Husband and his wife
- The Elder brother and younger brother
- Friends

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<sup>5</sup> D.C. Lau, *Mencius*, II, A.6.

<sup>6</sup> S. Leys, *Analects*, 7.1, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, 7.20, p. 31.

Within the family the two important obligations are those between the father and son and between elder and younger brothers. Master You said: "A man who respects his parents and his elders would hardly be inclined to defy his superiors. A man who is not inclined to defy his superiors will never foment a rebellion. A gentleman works at the root. Once the root is secured, the Way unfolds. To respect parents and elders is the root of humanity."<sup>8</sup>

A human being is connected to humanity through various degrees of kinship. One should love one's parents more than the other members of the family, other members of the family more than members of the same village and so on until one reaches humanity at large. As love for humanity is only an extension of the love for parents or for son, it is not considered to be as important as family relations. Mencius elaborated on these obligations:

"... love between father and son, duty between ruler and subject, distinction between husband and wife, precedence of the old over the young, and faith between friends..."<sup>9</sup>

Kung-sun Chou asked, "Why does a gentleman not take on the teaching of his own sons?"

"Because in the nature of things," said Mencius, "it will not work. A teacher necessarily resorts to correction, and if correction produces no effect, it will end by losing his temper. When this happens, father and son will hurt each other instead. 'You teach me by correcting me, but you yourself are not correct.' So father and son hurt each other, and it is bad that such a thing should happen. In antiquity people taught one another's sons. Father and son should demand goodness from each other. Not to do so will estrange them, and there is nothing more inauspicious than estrangement between father and son..."<sup>10</sup> The content of benevolence is the serving of one's parents...<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, 1.2, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> D.C. Lau, *Mencius*, IIIA, p. 102.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, IVA.18, p. 125.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, IVA.27, p. 127.

A benevolent man extends his love from those he loves to those he does not love."<sup>12</sup>

Between the old and the young, he said:

"There are three things which are acknowledged by the world to be exalted: rank, age, and virtue. At court, rank is supreme; in the village, age; but for assisting the world and ruling over people, it is virtue."<sup>13</sup>

Between Ruler and the Minister:

"If a prince treats his ministers as his hands and feet, they will treat him as their belly and heart. If he treats them as his horses and hounds, they will treat him as a mere fellow countryman. If he treats them as mud and weeds, they will treat him as an enemy."<sup>14</sup>

There is a common expression, "The Empire, the state, the family." The Empire has its basis in the state, the state in the family, and the family in one's own self."<sup>15</sup>

### **Benevolent Rulership**

Confucius preached that men can and should adapt to the ruler and that there is within them a readiness to be governed. He said that this human quality could be harnessed effectively by the ruler if he goes about it in the right way. He said if this were done, the response of the people would be like them following a true "shepherd of men."

He taught that the Emperors needed to practise benevolent rulership:

"The growth of government would be rapid, just as vegetation is rapid in the earth: yea, their government would display itself like an easily growing rush."<sup>16</sup>

This principle was called "benevolent government" by Mencius, who expounded it in greater depth. Mencius said that the Emperor has to be

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, VIII.B.1, p. 194.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, IIB.2, p. 87.

<sup>14</sup> D.C. Lau, *Mencius*, 1970, IVB.3, p. 128.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, IVA.5, p. 120.

<sup>16</sup> J. Legge, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, chap. 20.3, p. 405.

seen by the people to have the Mandate of Heaven or he will be considered unfit to rule China. The virtues of the Emperors were essential for their remaining in power and retaining their authority over people. Their mandate to rule was also believed to be linked to their ancestral lineage. They had to practise filial piety towards their ancestors and to Heaven.

To the people, the Emperor was akin to the Father of China:

"The people of are supreme importance; the altars to the gods of earth and grain come next; last comes the ruler. When a feudal lord endangers the altars to the gods of earth and grain he should be replaced. When the sacrificial animals are sleek, the offerings are clean and the sacrifices are observed at due times, and yet floods and droughts come, then the altars should be replaced.<sup>17</sup> ... It was through losing the people that Chieh and Tchou lost the Empire, and through losing the people's hearts that they lost the people. There is a way to win the Empire; win the people and you will win the Empire. There is a way to win the people; win their hearts and you will win the people.<sup>18</sup> The kingdom, the world, (can be) brought to a state of tranquillity."<sup>19</sup>

Mencius proposed the cultivation of a class of scholar officials who were not to be involved in agriculture, industry and commerce in ancient China. This implies a form of division of labour and puts scholars on an equal footing with other governmental concerns, such as economic progress:

"No man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others. Such a sensitive heart was possessed by the former kings and this manifested itself in humane government. With such a sensitive heart behind humane government, it was easy to rule the world as rolling it in your palm."<sup>20</sup>

### **The Golden Rule**

Confucius' teachings focus on The Way, ethics, rites, education and improving the duties of the individual. He teaches that the individual must learn to be human. His purpose in life is to be a good man (a gentleman).

<sup>17</sup> D.C. Lau, *Mencius*, 1970, VII, B.14, p. 196.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, IV, A.9, p. 121.

<sup>19</sup> J. Legge, *The Great Learning*, paras. 4 and 5, p. 357 – 359.

<sup>20</sup> D.C. Lau, *Mencius*, II, A.6.

However, Confucius did not hold out any rewards in this world or the next for being a gentleman or for achieving good morals and goodness. He said that one's life should be based on the Golden Rule:

"Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire."<sup>21</sup>

According to Confucius, the gentleman (chun tzu) must have the virtues of wisdom and courage. For instance:

"The man of wisdom is never in two minds; the man of benevolence never worries; the man of courage is never afraid."<sup>22</sup>

His objective was to reformulate and revitalise social institutions that are necessary for political stability and social order, namely, the family, school, local community and the state. He said that virtue is a personal quality that must be possessed by the Emperor. His virtues are needed for individual dignity, communal peace and political order.

### On Women

According to Confucian writings, women were subject to the three obediences. When young, she must obey her father and elder brother, when married she must obey her husband. When her husband is dead, she must obey her son. She may not think of marrying a second time. A women's duty lies in the preparation of drinks and food. There is a strict injunction that no instructions or orders must issue from the harem. She must not be known beyond the threshold of her apartment. She may take no step on her own volition, and may come to no conclusion through her own deliberation.

Women were supposed to follow the instructions of men, and help carry out their principles. The following five types of women were not to be taken into marriage:

The daughter of a rebellious house

The daughter of a disorderly house

The daughter of a house that had produced criminals for more than one generation

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, 12.2, p. 55.

<sup>22</sup> D.C. Lau, *Mencius*, 9.29, p. 43.

The daughter of a leprous house

The daughter who has lost her father and elder brother.

A wife may be divorced by the husband for the following six reasons:

Disobeying her husband's parents

Not giving birth to a son

Dissolute conduct

Jealousy

Talkativeness

Theft

However, there are three humane considerations for not divorcing a wife:

She has no home to go to

She has gone through three years of mourning for her husband's parents

If the husband has become rich from being poor.

### 3. Modern Day Criticisms of Confucianism

Criticisms of China's Confucianist past have been made by many people ever since China was successively defeated by different foreign powers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the severest criticisms have come from the Chinese themselves. The humiliation of defeat gave rise to many reform movements within China. Under intense pressure from many reform groups, the Chinese Emperor just before the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century issued the following declaration

"... Those who claim to be Conservative patriots consider that all the old should be upheld and the new ideas repudiated without compromise. Such querulous opinions are worthless. Consider the needs of the times and the weakness of our Empire! If we continue to drift with an army untrained, our revenues disorganised, our scholars ignorant, and our artisans without technical training, how can we possibly hope to hold our own among the nations. ....The virtuous rulers of remote antiquity did not cling obstinately to existing needs, but were ready to accept change, even as one wears grass-cloth garments in summer, and furs in winters. We now

issue this special Decree so that all our subjects, from the Imperial family downwards, may hereafter exert themselves in the cause of reform..."<sup>23</sup>

The numerous 19<sup>th</sup> century Chinese reform movements are too many to describe here. The reader is referred to works such as Vohra's *China's Path to Modernization*.<sup>24</sup> A classic book illustrating Western criticisms of modern Confucianism is Joseph Levenson's, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*, written around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Levenson summarises the fate of Confucianism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century amongst the intellectual elite in the following way:

"What was the 'new world' in China? Not the Confucian intellectual world with technical interests pasted on, but the Confucian world transformed by the western interests, the Classics paling into functional insignificance... the rise of business (historically associated with the rise of 'yung-ian' science), under western aegis, to a point of possible rivalry with Confucian-official status. Western *yung*, embraced by literati, corrupted the literati's way of thought, ultimately sapping the fullness of their conviction of the Confucian learning's indispensability; and western *yung*, wielded by westerners, put a challenge to the literati's way of life, by encouraging a social alternative, the commercial-industrial way of life, which likewise made the Confucian learning seem more and more irrelevant – and Confucian sanctions (like those behind the family-system) more and more impossible."<sup>25</sup>

Much has of course changed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Just when the Chinese were following through their reforms, communism in China rose to power. At the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is timely to take stock and re-evaluate the influence and relevance of Confucianism in our modern technology centred world. In the present context, only a brief summary of the more obvious problems with Confucianism today will be mentioned. It will be assumed that communist rule in China does not substantially change the issue of whether Confucianism will survive in the future.

<sup>23</sup> R. Vohra, *China's Path to Modernization*, p. 85.

<sup>24</sup> See particularly chap. 3, "The Decline of the Old Order, Beginning of the New", p. 52-79.

<sup>25</sup> J. Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*, p. 64.

**Parochial regional outlook**

Confucius' teachings were meant for a feudal, traditional and family-centred society and obviously did not address international relations among independent nation states. In a globally interdependent world, it is necessary to have an open and close contact with people of different cultures. The context of society has changed – during Confucius' time, Chinese society was agrarian and isolated, families were the main social units, and there were many small principalities. Now the world is more urban, industrial and integrated. Individuals have much greater power than they ever had before, and their family heritage no longer seems to play the same important social role as it did in the past.

**Elitist and narrow form of education**

It is now a more democratic world. The modern world is less hierarchical, and has an egalitarian outlook. Such an approach is not in sync with elitist Confucianist principles. It is also a rapidly changing world in which traditional values have been undermined.

The focus of Confucian education was extremely narrow and rigid. The examination syllabus was based only on the four Confucian classics and this system had operated in China for twelve centuries. The students' examination technique was based on rote learning. There was a restricted range of subjects, as the students were occupied only with Confucian writings.

For the scholars, to pass the Civil Service Examinations was a practical necessity for success in life. It was a means to an end, as the aim was to obtain a job with the Imperial Bureaucracy. The Civil Service Exams created an elitist and exclusive culture that was perpetuated by scholars. The Confucian educational system was geared towards training a class of scholars to be bureaucrats to serve as advisers to the Emperor and there was a tendency to reserve education for the upper classes.

As the Confucian scholars were a relatively small group in the country, the great majority of Chinese people did not participate in public affairs. Although Confucius' teachings were for the masses, in subsequent periods, scholars were unwilling to share literacy and learning with the masses.

Ironically Confucius' intention was to share learning as widely as possible with the people. Chu Hsi in 12<sup>th</sup> century in *Great Learning* stated that there was a need for schools in every town and village. Confucian scholars also said similar things in the 13<sup>th</sup> century (in the court of Kublai Khan) and in 17<sup>th</sup> century (Huang Tung Hsi and Lu Liu Liang). Nothing much came of such suggestions to introduce education to the masses. Even when an imperial decree was issued to this effect it did not succeed. One possible reason was that China was an agrarian society. In each family every able-bodied man was needed in the field and the families were loath to release them to school. The Imperial Bureaucracy was also not big enough to manage the large numbers of candidates. There was no large middle class with surplus wealth and leisure to provide attractive alternative careers or cultural pursuits that were independent of the bureaucracy and the official establishment.

Problems abounded because the scholars were mainly interested in securing a career within the Civil Service Bureaucracy. As a result, they failed to address social changes, new needs and fundamental human issues. China failed to industrialise, as education based on Confucian classics did not promote science and technology. Students took exams to obtain magistracy and for a better life, and not for the sake of learning and enlightenment.

### **A hierarchical and paternalistic community**

A major characteristic of Confucian society is its hierarchical and paternalistic nature. The Chinese people have often been considered to be submissive. It is also thought that Confucius' teachings inculcate subordination and subservience. Among the Chinese people, there is a certain love of order and peace, a certain willingness to submit to "the powers that be."

Foreign writers attribute this to Confucianism, but that is not a fair comment, since the Chinese were like that before the lifetime of Confucius. It is more likely that Confucius was moulded by the character of the Chinese people and not the converse.

### **Not much elaboration on the five obligations**

Confucius' own teachings did not explain much about how a happy well governed state depends on the five relations: he spoke more about the first

two (relations between the sovereign and the minister, between the father and his son) – but not much about the other three (relationship between the husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, and between friends).

### **Ancestral worship**

Confucius encouraged the practice of ancestral worship, which required that children carried out elaborate rites and ceremonies for the dead. Large sums of money and energy were often spent by many families (even by poor families) to ensure that the traditional rites for their dead ancestors were carried out dutifully. Generally speaking, the practice of ancestral worship with its elaborate rites, rituals and funerals is not popular among the young generation today.

### **Unfavourable teachings on women**

Traditional Confucian teachings are not favourable with respect to the role and status of women in society. The subordinate position they give to women is generally not acceptable in today's society where women and men have equal rights. Traditionally, the system of civil service examinations did not allow women to participate.

### **Lack of teachings about Life After Death**

Confucius did not provide teachings about the purpose and the meaning of life, human destiny or human origins. He also did not discuss the subject of life after death. Confucianism therefore, cannot claim to be a complete philosophy of life. Historically, it tended to focus on this world. Chi Lu asked about serving the spirits of the dead, and Confucius said:

“While you are not able to serve men, how can you serve their spirits?”

The

disciple continued, “I venture to ask about death,” and he answered, “While you do not know life, how can you know death?”<sup>26</sup>

### **Teachings Lack Scientific Content**

There was little scientific content in Confucius' teachings. Confucian teachings did not lead to the development of the physical sciences in China. Unlike the situation in Europe, no Industrial Revolution took place

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<sup>26</sup> J. Legge, *Analects*, 11.9.

in China. Any philosophy or system of thought that ignores science cannot hope to survive in today's world.

### **Suspicion of Foreigners**

Traditionally, Confucianism has had a conservative view of foreigners. China was considered to be the Central Kingdom and people outside it were considered to be rude barbarians. Once when Confucius expressed his disgust of China and expressed his intention to go and live among foreigners, his disciple asked him as follows:

"They are rude. How can you do such a thing?" He replied, "If a superior man dwelt among them, what rudeness would there be?"<sup>27</sup>

Confucius had no knowledge of distant foreign nations. Confucianism was ethnocentric and China-centred. Unlike Buddhism it did not allow the absorption of other races and cultures and new knowledge from outside China.

"Barbarians who have rulers are inferior to the various nations of China who are without."<sup>28</sup>

The aforementioned limitations of Confucianism are not by themselves enough to discard it. True, its teachings on women are clearly sexist, but then again, Confucius lived a long time ago. Moreover, Confucius drew his inspiration from ancient tradition, and did not seek to start something new. Just because Confucius did not mention science or say much about how Chinese people should relate to foreigners does not mean that Confucianists need reject modern science or harbour feelings of racial superiority. But historically, particularly during the last seven centuries or so, that was what happened. The problem is that Confucianism, in the garb of Neo-Confucianism, became a philosophy of everything and rejected anything that was not specifically mentioned in the Confucian classics. It monopolised everything, and this was a mistake. It is this mentality that does not have a future. This aspect of Neo-Confucianism resulted in China not being able to make progress while Europe was experiencing its industrial revolution.

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, 9.13, p. 107.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, 3.5.

#### 4. The Future

Having pointed out aspects of Confucianism that are not likely to survive, this section describes Confucian values that are enduring and are likely to remain.

The concept of social order and the governing of a state being ultimately rooted in individual self-cultivation and family unity is an important part of the Confucian heritage. The aims of being a "gentleman" through self-transformation, of striving to create harmony within the family, are Confucian teachings that are relevant to the modern world. In an interdependent world, where relationships between people can all too easily be undermined by technology and individualism, these ethical teachings of Confucianism are an invaluable human resource.

The Confucian scholar, Tu Wei-ming, emphasises the continuity between Confucian self-cultivation and the concept of the fiduciary community in the modern world:

"The logic of taking the cultivation of the self and the regulation of the family as "roots" and the ordering of the community, the governance of the state, and universal peace as "branches," may give the impression that complex political processes are reduced to simple relationships explainable in personable familial terms. Yet the dichotomy of root and branch conveys the sense of a dynamic transformation from self to family, to community, to state, and to the world as whole. Self-cultivation is the root, and harmony attained in the family is a natural outgrowth, like the branch, of our cultivated selves. Family is the root, and harmony attained in the community, the state, and the world is a natural outgrowth of the well-regulated families. In this sense what we do in the privacy of our own homes profoundly shapes the quality of life in the state as a whole.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the Confucians do not, by stressing the centrality of self-cultivation, undermine the corporate effort that is required for the family, the community, the state, and the world to become humane or fully human. Just as the self must overcome egoism to become authentically human, the family must overcome nepotism to become authentically human. By analogy, the community must overcome parochialism, the state must overcome ethnocentrism, and the world must

overcome anthropocentrism to become authentically human. In light of Confucian inclusive humanism, the transformed self individually and corporately transcends egoism, nepotism, parochialism, ethnocentrism, and anthropocentrism to “form one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things.”<sup>29</sup>

This passage has much in common with Bahá'í teachings. It encourages a global perspective, where each person in the world is looked upon as a member of the human family. Bahá'u'lláh stated, “We desire but the good of the world and the happiness of the nations... That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened... Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; but let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind.”<sup>30</sup>

Tu Wei-ming argues for a “third epoch” in Confucianism, where it becomes a “common creed for humanity as a whole”, and where “concern for the survival of the Confucian tradition and for the continuity of traditional Chinese culture must be subsumed under a broader concern for the future of humankind”. In the context of the challenge facing modern Confucianist scholars, Tu Wei-ming writes:

“The real challenge to them is how a revived Confucian humanism might answer questions that science and democracy have raised. In a deeper sense, these scholars perceive the challenge to be the formulation of a Confucian approach to the perennial human problems of the world: the creation of a new philosophical anthropology, a common creed for humanity as a whole. They are fully aware that concern for the survival of the Confucian tradition and for the continuity of traditional Chinese culture must be subsumed under a broader concern for the future of humankind.”<sup>31</sup>

This is of course, very close to Bahá'u'lláh's words on placing love for humanity above love for one's country.

<sup>29</sup> W.M. Tu, *Confucius and Confucianism*, p. 115-116.

<sup>30</sup> J. E. Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, Bahá'u'lláh's words to E. G. Brown, p. 40.

<sup>31</sup> W.M. Tu, Quoted by R. L. Taylor, *The Religious Dimension of Confucianism*, p. 138.

Another important contribution of Confucianism to the modern world is its positive approach to education. According to Confucius, learning is a process that can never be completed. In a world where the boundaries of knowledge are rapidly growing, a deep respect for learning is an ethic that is much needed.

"He who by revising the old knows the new, is fit to be a teacher."<sup>32</sup> Maybe there are people who can act without knowledge, but I am not one of them. Hear much, pick the best and follow it; see much, and keep a record of it: this is still the best substitute for innate knowledge."<sup>33</sup>

Traditionally, Confucianism has always been directed to human ends, to self-improvement in moral rectitude, to self-cultivation in virtues. Confucian teachings have focussed on attaining better relationships between people, whether it be in the family or in society at large. Some critics have accused it of being too one-sided in this, claiming that it emphasised the learning of human virtues at the expense of making scientific or technological progress. Ironically, today's modern society, dominated as it is by science, is arguably suffering from the reverse problem. Our society seems to give priority to scientific and technological learning, and relatively little attention, in comparison, is given to instruction in human ethics and morals. Confucianist teachings within this context may play an important role in gaining a better balance. Okada Tahéhiko, a modern Confucianist scholar, points towards this being the future contribution of Confucianism:

"The main purpose of Confucianism is to establish true humanity. No matter how far science has developed, the Confucian never loses sight of the development of humanity. Before any discussion of logic or rationality the Confucian focuses upon the importance of subjectivity. In our day-to-day lives we distinguish what goes on within us from the outside world, but we become trapped by the outside world and in this way we lose our humanity. Given this situation we should try to control that external world, but in practice this is a very difficult thing to do. The important issue is to establish one's own inner subjectivity within the mind."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> S. Leys, *The Analects of Confucius*, 2.11, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, 7.28, p. 32.

<sup>34</sup> Okada Tahéhiko quoted by R. L. Taylor, *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism, Modernity and Religion*, p. 143.

These views are close to the Bahá'í principle that "spiritual progress" must develop alongside "material progress". While in Paris in 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated:

"It is indeed a good and praiseworthy thing to progress materially, but in so doing, let us not neglect the more important spiritual progress, and close our eyes to the Divine light shining in our midst. Only by improving spiritually as well as materially can we make any real progress, and become perfect beings. It was in order to bring this spiritual life and light into the world that all the great Teachers have appeared. They came so that the Sun of Truth might be manifested, and shine in the hearts of men, and that through its wondrous power men might attain unto Everlasting Light."<sup>35</sup>

From the Bahá'í point of view, Confucius is in the category of "great Teachers". 'Abdu'l-Bahá referred to him as a "Blessed soul" who, among others, was the "cause of illumination of the world of humanity":

"Blessed souls - whether Moses, Jesus, Zoroaster, Krishna, Buddha, Confucius or Muhammad - were the cause of the illumination of the world of humanity."<sup>36</sup>

The spiritual aspects to Confucius's teachings, such as self-cultivation, of acquiring moral virtues, family unity, are relevant to the modern world, and can help it acquire a better balance between "material progress" and "spiritual progress". There is much common ground between Bahá'ís and modern Confucianists on these points, and this may provide the basis by which they can work together in the future.

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<sup>35</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 63.

<sup>36</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 346.

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