

THE REVIVAL OF CONFUCIANISM: THE RELEVANCE OF CONFUCIAN THINKING REFLECTED IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

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ABSTRACT. *The Revival of Confucianism: The relevance of Confucian Thinking Reflected in the Educational System in Contemporary China.*

Confucianism can be defined as one of the most representative philosophies or religions in East Asia that had and continues to have an important influence, both in China, where it has emerged, and in the other countries of Asia, which have adapted the Confucian principles to their own politics. In China, the influence of Confucianism made its presence felt in all spheres of society in such a way that the Confucian model offered the principles of governance based on humanism, harmony and an appropriate behavior within the community. Chronologically, however, we can observe fluctuations of Confucian influence, especially in the modern era of China, when, with the change of government, a rejection from the traditional culture and a removal of the tradition has taken place, in order to embrace the modernization according to the model provided by the West. This distancing from the roots of one's own culture leads, in the long term, to the loss of national identity and to a vacuum of spiritual values. Thus, in the contemporary period, the Chinese government promotes a return of the country to the old cultural traditions, in order to regain the values that have been lost in time and to be able to promote their country, internationally, making use of their millenary culture. The purpose of this article is to present how Confucian values are currently reflected in the education of Chinese students, to analyze the effects that this return to Confucianism has on Chinese society and to present the ways in which Confucianism could be applied in education.

Keywords: *Confucianism, Chinese society, culture, education.*

REZUMAT. *Reînvierea confucianismului: relevanța gândirii confucianiste reflectate în sistemul educațional în China contemporană.*

Confucianismul poate fi definit drept una dintre cele mai reprezentative filosofii sau religii din Asia de Est care a avut și are în continuare, o influență importantă, atât în China, acolo unde s-a conturat, cât și în celelalte țări din Asia, care au preluat

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și au adaptat principiile confucianiste la propria lor politică. În China, influența confucianismului și-a făcut simțită prezența în toate sferele societății, astfel că modelul confucianist a oferit principiile unei guvernări îndreptate spre umanism, spre armonie și comportament adecvat în interiorul comunității. Cronologic însă, putem observa fluctuații ale influenței confucianiste, cu precădere în epoca modernă a Chinei, moment în care, odată cu schimbarea formei de guvernare, se produce o îndepărtare de cultura tradițională și o respingere a tradiției, cu scopul de a îmbrățișa modernizarea după modelul vestic. Această îndepărtare de rădăcinile culturii proprii, conduce, pe termen lung, la o îndepărtare de identitatea națională și la un vid al valorilor spirituale. Astfel, în perioada contemporană, guvernul chinez promovează o întoarcere a țării la tradițiile culturale vechi, cu scopul de a redobândi valorile pierdute în timp și pentru a putea promova țara lor, la nivel internațional, făcând recurs la cultura lor milenară. Prezentul articol are ca scop prezentarea modului în care valorile confucianiste sunt reflectate în prezent în educația elevilor din China și analizează efectele pe care această reîntoarcere la confucianism o are asupra societății chineze și modalitățile în care confucianismul ar putea fi aplicat în sfera educației.

Cuvinte-cheie: *confucianism, societate chineză, cultură, educație.*

Introduction

Confucius, the personality from whom this philosophy known as Confucianism emerged from in China, did not consider himself to be a creator of a new ideology. Rather, he saw himself as a transmitter of the values already existing in Chinese culture. The concepts that revolve around Confucianism are humanity, morality, goodwill and discernment.

As a result, in order to attain the path to enlightenment—the goal that every follower of Confucian dogma pursues—man must cultivate his morality through the prism of compassion and be well-suited to doing good. Education is the component that underlies a healthy and prosperous society, being the nucleus that will subsequently generate trained, capable, talented people, to carry on the values acquired during the educational process. Therefore, this component requires special attention from the governments of each country, as a strong country is represented by a nation that has a very well developed educational system. (Ni 2014, 54)

During the Han dynasty, Confucianism was recognized and elevated to the rank of ideology. Thus, in the contemporary period, more than two thousand years after its birth, people from outside Asia, associate China and the Chinese people with the name of Confucius. From a chronological point of

view, we can talk about several stages in which Confucianism had a definite influence on the history of the Chinese people:

The first stage is the period in which Confucius himself lived and traveled throughout China to enlighten people with his philosophy.

The second stage being represented by the followers of Confucianism from the Song and Ming dynasty.

With the change of the political regime in China, and with the formation of the People's Republic of China, the idea of necessity for modernization, reinforced by the relations with the rest of the communist countries that were already modernizing, industrializing and rebuilding the new man, appears among the people. This last stage was a disastrous one for the Confucian philosophy, which was considered by the rulers as a hindrance to the evolution of society and the country, at all levels.

Thus, in the twentieth century we are confronted with the rejection of all that is old, with the replacement of Confucianism with the new ideology that came from the West, ideology which represented the basis of communist China. This period, however, finds valuable representatives of Confucianism grouped around mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore. Despite the fact that at the beginning of the twentieth century, Confucianism was practically removed from China and not recognized as beneficial to Chinese society—which was then in a stage of reinventing its own culture and adapting Marxist ideas—we can understand that from the beginning, Confucianism had a continuity that lasted thousands of years, whether it was viewed as a philosophy, a religion, an ideology or simply a set of rules that make up a lifestyle.

In contemporary society, starting with the beginning of the third millennium—a century after the moment when China decides to turn its back on Confucianism—we are in the fourth stage that this philosophy knows, namely a resurrection of Confucianism, a return of the Chinese people to traditions, origins, to the values that were the basis of the Chinese man and which defines it, a return which, curiously, is also encouraged by the representatives of the Chinese Communist Party.

Giving up old traditions

Stepping into the twentieth century, China is going through a difficult time. Under the pressure of changes in the world, it is necessary to take measures to preserve its territories and to control the discontent of the population, who wanted to see changes in their lives, at any cost. In this sense, in 1927, under Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, the plan was implemented that the “new” should be built on the “old”—practically preserving the Chinese philosophy; an attempt was made to implement western ideas in the practical plan.

Obviously, as expected, the plan was not sufficiently solid. It did not allow profound transformations and led to an internal crisis that led to the collapse of the Qing dynasty and the inability to establish a republic shortly after this development plan. China's entry into modernity is marked by various events that were of particular importance in its history.

China's main problem with entering the twentieth century was to find its balance from a political, economic, strategic but also cultural point of view by establishing the new culture. Compared to other countries in East Asia, China has delayed measures that should have taken it one step closer to modernity.

The most popular revolution took place on the 4th of May, 1919 and was known as the Movement on May 4 (Mitter 2005, 5). This movement was inspired by the revolt carried out by the Koreans in March and April of the same year. It is considered to play a particularly important role in China's further political development, which materialized in the creation of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 by some of the Chinese revolutionaries. The May 4 movement refers to demonstrations that began in the Chinese capital, Beijing, on the 4th of May, 1919, and these are closely linked to the Paris Peace Conference that began in January 1919.

However, the May 4 Movement meant much more than these protests that gradually expanded and subsequently led to the failure to accept the Treaty of Versailles. It is considered that there is no fixed starting point for this revolution as there is no main purpose– the reasons were multiple.

The desire of the young participants in this movement was to change the country in which they live, so that from a traditionalist country, China would become a modern, evolved, stable country that would offer young people a secure future.

The importance of this manifestation is given by the atmosphere and the political context created around 1919. The movement, as a whole, is not limited only to what happened on the 4th of May. It extends to the events that followed, lasting until the beginning of the 1930s, when a group of Chinese intellectuals came to the conclusion that there is an element holding the country to fight against so-called Japanese imperialism and dictatorships of military leaders who, despite the collapse of the Qing dynasty and the subsequent establishment of the republic, wanted to hold absolute power in China.

The conclusion of these great thinkers was that the blame for this barrier fell on the traditional Chinese culture based on the philosophy of Confucius–this archaic, patriarchal form of government was responsible for the impossibility of creating a modern nation state.

The social situation of China at that time involved starvation, strikes, poverty and internal revolts. The question that followed was how China

should react against its Confucian past. The removal of Confucianism was regarded as a maturity of the Chinese people, which set aside a thousand-year-old tradition that was considered to hinder the building of China's new identity and the rebirth of a powerful country with a nationalist people who believe in change, want it and assumes it.

Following the events of the 4th of May, 1919, China witnesses a rejection of the dogmas of Confucian culture and faces opposition from the "old", which meant traditional and "new", which was revolutionary and young.

If the Confucian doctrine propagates the veneration of the elderly—with the New Culture, the emphasis is placed on the youth. Thus, Chen Duxiu founds the *New Youth* newspaper, whose articles describe the role of the young man in Chinese society. The term "new" refers to what China wanted to acquire: a new culture, a new era and a new citizen.

Another Confucian doctrine shattered by the Chinese during this period refers to the rejection of patriarchy and patriarchal treatment of women.

Lu Xun, one of the legendary figures of Chinese literature, writes an article in the *New Youth* newspaper, in which he presents his opinion on the chastity of women— a fact that, from his perspective, was an abuse, as long as men were not required the same thing. At the same time, by Lu Xun's influence in culture and literature, which publishes numerous novels, one can deduce the hostile attitude of the revolutionaries towards the Confucian virtues. This attitude of Chinese intellectuals comes from the negative experiences they have been facing since the twentieth century.

Lu Xun and other anti-Confucianists of the time, including Mao Zedong, believed that Confucian thought was a constraint on the life of the individual and had the role of creating hierarchies for weaker individuals, such as women or the poor.

Although Confucian thinking proposes an ideal governance model, China encountered difficulties even when this thinking system was strong. Supporters of Confucianism intervened, claiming that frequent peasant uprisings were justified by the fact that there were leaders who violated the Confucian social contract (Yao 2000, 34).

The biggest challenge regarding the influence of Confucianism in China was represented by the introduction in the nineteenth century of Western systems of thought, namely the capitalist modernism and Christianity that gave the Chinese people other perspectives on life in society and which gave them the opportunity to take a look at their own society and the possibility of correcting any mistakes.

In the twentieth century, there were many poor people in China who did not dare to revolt against their destiny. Women did not enjoy any favorable status in society, and were more dependent on all aspects of their

partners, including physical dependence – such as the binding of their legs, a painful practice that led to the mutilation of many women.

Subsequently, following the Movement on May 4, a structure for women's rights was increasingly found in Chinese publications. (Mitter 2005, 28)

With the reform of the language, the reading public grew more and more. This was due to the transition from the classical, traditional language style, to the written style of the vulgar language, which was closer to the spoken language—a style that was much easier to assimilate by ordinary people. It is considered that one of the biggest victories of the New Culture Movement is this official adoption of the vulgar written Chinese language, a process that has been around for almost twenty years.

For most thinkers, the only culprit in the situation of the Chinese state was the Confucian thinking that had to be removed from Chinese society and culture in order to save the country. This was also one of the reasons why the traditional writing was abandoned in favor of the simplified one, in the hope that there will be more people who will have access to the culture.

After the manifestation on the 4th of May, the simplified writing becomes the standard of the Chinese language from the beginning of the twentieth century—which is why this day had a great cultural importance. Protesters and people of culture who have advocated for change have emphasized that their goal is to bring science and democracy to China. Later it was claimed that the victory of the Movement on May 4, the desire to transform China into a modern state—was crowned by Mao Zedong's 1949 victory.

With the victory of Mao Zedong and the transition to the new type of government of the country, radical changes are closely linked to the fate of Confucianism at that time. Until 1956, Mao relied on copying the Soviet model in China's leadership, following which after this first stage he tried to signify Marxist ideas and adapt them to his own model.

As for Confucianism, it was not completely forgotten in the field of ordinary people who were still leading their lives according to Confucian principles. From Mao's perspective, Confucian thinking was intended to be replaced by Mao Zedong's thinking.

However, Mao, raised in Confucian style, was familiar with the essence of this philosophy – proving that Mao was able to pass the new Marxist concept coming from the west through the filter of his beliefs related to Chinese culture and implicitly, Confucianism.

The return to Confucian values

In the last decades of the twentieth century, with the economic liberation led by Deng Xiaoping and the gradual opening of China to the west,

signs begin to emerge that lead to the idea that traditional Chinese culture remained, even in the Maoist period – deeply imprinted in the consciousness of the Chinese people.

At a cultural level, at this stage, starting with the 1980s, the phenomenon of cultural fever appears. It bears this name because of the increased interest that the people among the intellectuals showed towards all aspects of China's culture and history. (Billioud 2007, 5)

Thus, in this post-Maoist period, a message of tolerance towards Confucianism was transmitted from the government. This message was not entirely accepted, but it did not face the adversity it once did during the time of Mao Zedong. Proof of this is represented by the participation of Gu Mu, deputy prime minister of that period, at a symposium dedicated to Confucius, which presents Confucianism as the crystallization of Chinese national culture. (Billioud 2007, 6)

Since the 1990s, the attitude of the government as well as the population has been increasingly open to Confucianism. In 2005, Hu Jintao argues that harmony should be the basis of society and emphasized that China's direction is to build a harmonious society. In the 2006 cultural development plan, Wen Jiabao argues that this Confucian culture is the one that will play an important role in the development of Chinese civilization in the future. A year later, Confucian terms such as harmony, filial piety, peace, are met more and more often in Wen's speeches.

Currently, the new ruler of China, since 2014, lays the foundations of a new socialism with Chinese characteristics, which means a renewal of Chinese society through the traditional culture. Basically, Xi Jinping considers the future efficiency of the party dependent on the level of growth of interest towards the country's millennial culture. At the same time, Xi urges the promotion of the cultural spirit that has withstood the test of time and which has a great value today. Thus, the return to Confucianism was made gradually, initially by rediscovering the cultural values, and now – these values make their presence felt in the political sphere of government of the country as well.

Education from a Confucian perspective

Since its inception, Confucian philosophy has placed a great emphasis on education. Two of the canonical books that are representative of Confucianism over time, Lunyu and Xueji, point to its education and importance – explaining how it is done from a Confucian perspective, namely through the questioning technique, which leads to enlightenment.

Confucian values are reflected in every social field, especially in education, a fact proven especially by the rethinking of principles starting

from filial piety, a concept around which the rest of Confucian foundations gravitate. The filial piety implies that attitude of respect towards the superiors, starting from teachers, parents, older brothers, men, etc., being closely related to morality and social cohesion.

In the contemporary period, education is aimed at preserving the national culture, and a series of measures have been taken in this regard, through a campaign to promote it at the level of educational institutions, including the re-edition of classical texts, the introduction of poetry and calligraphy, as well as encouraging students to express interest in Chinese culture, being its product, both internally and externally, in the case of those who opt for study abroad. (Billioud 2007, 11)

In the major university centers in China, with the return to cultural roots, the guoxue study, the national study – which represents a combination of elements related to the culture and history of China – according to Zhang Taiyang, is reintroduced into three parts: the study of the six classics, the study of the schools of philosophy and the study of literary writings. (Xie 2011, 3)

Guoxue, crowning those over four thousand years of history and culture, has thus been associated with Confucianism, given the fact that it encompasses several disciplines, and does not fragment them as is the case in modern education. (Dirlik 2011, 6)

As Xie argues, there is an ambiguity in adapting guoxue to contemporary society, in such a way that there are different types of guoxue that have the same purpose, to provide a general, complete and interdisciplinary framework, depending on the age category or social concerns of those it addresses. There is guoxue for party members, for children in primary schools, for research centers. (Xie 2011,4)

Li Shenming, vice president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, stresses that the role of the guoxue study in China is to convey Chinese cultural traditions, to complete the meaning of Marxism, to facilitate the development of a systematic theory of Chinese socialist nature, to contribute to rejuvenate China, to maintain the link between Chinese communities around the world and to assist, internationally, in presenting traditional Chinese culture to all corners of the world. (Xie 2011,5)

Confucian norms reflected in the teaching-learning process

Currently, the educational reform has focused on improving the quality of education offered to Chinese students, wishing to move from focusing on getting good and very good results to exams, to a qualitative education.

However, in most situations, in Chinese schools there is a strong competitiveness among the students, which leads to the phenomenon of

overcrowding among the students, from the earliest ages. The learning process focuses on memorizing and accumulating information, which leads to pressure from both teachers and parents, in particular.

The learning is focused on the teacher, who does nothing but transmit information that the students memorize and return during the exams, which leads to limiting creativity and the inability to produce new content or to provide a personal and own interpretation of the accumulated knowledge. (Guo 2019,13)

It is known that, for Chinese students, since the beginning of primary school, the main care of parents and teachers is the Gaokao exam, an exam which is held at the end of the pre-university cycle and which is of particular importance in the life of each student. The result from it dictates the faculty or university to which the student will be admitted to, implicitly being the cornerstone for a successful professional life, or on the contrary, for a failure, as it is considered when this exam is not passed.

In a country where competitiveness is high, the pressure and stress of students reflected in the result obtained by participating in the *Gaokao* exam is an increasingly worrying problem for the mental health of young generations.

In this sense, referring to the Confucian current, a pedagogical alternative is offered both for the negative effects of the pressure caused by the current education system, as well as for the development of creativity, analysis, synthesis and training capabilities for a relevant point of view among the students, as they grow older.

The Confucian learning norms, techniques used by Confucius himself and which could be adapted to the needs of the contemporary society, propose that the focus should be on the student's initial abilities to learn and to intertwine the acquired knowledge, and subsequently to raise a series of questions to which he himself will find an answer.

According to this technique, the teacher's role is to be a link between the universe of knowledge and the student, intervening only when the student is unable to find an answer to the questions raised.

At present, Confucius' teaching regarding the learning process implies a progressive learning, on the pattern of a spiral, as follows: learning leads to inquiring which leads to thinking and reflecting then to identifying and finally to applying the concepts learned in your daily life. (Wang 2016, 308)

Also, the role of the teacher is particularly important in guiding the student in the learning process. The teacher must have dedication, in-depth knowledge of the concepts studied and have a different attitude, depending on the level of the students.

Thus, Confucianism proposes that the teaching methods and the attitude of the teacher must be directly proportional to the talent each student possesses, his discovery being placed both on the student's task, but especially

on the teacher's task, which must represent a source of inspiration for his students, like Confucius, the model of the perfect teacher.

Another perspective from Confucianism refers to how the teacher can improve their own knowledge by applying the same principles through the teaching process. In other words, through learning – the teacher – who himself is also a student, has the ability to make an introspection to discover his weaknesses. This is done while he is presenting his ideas in the process of teaching, when he finds it difficult to explain his knowledge. Thus he also gains the motivation to enrich his universe of knowledge and to perfect himself. (Wang, 2016, 309)

At elementary school level, there was a movement called “Children read the classics”, in which children read Confucian texts and more. According to Confucian education theorist Wang Cagui, the purpose of these classic book reading courses by children of early age is a process that has various stages, the first being represented by reading and memorizing, and followed by reciting texts.

Subsequently, accumulating the basic knowledge, despite the fact that they are not passed through the filter of reason and practically impossible to understand for the children of the primary classes, they will nevertheless have a progressive assimilation. In the first stage of childhood, the course aims to determine students to learn the classical texts, and then they will bear fruit and use them as a path for everyday life and for the choices they will make. (Billioud 2007, 13)

This way of learning, according to the teachers accompanying the children in the process of memorization, is a relaxing and rewarding one – children between the ages of 7 and 13 years having a very large capacity for memorizing.

This process involves not only children and teachers, but also parents and implicitly grandparents, as family members are encouraged to actively participate and thus have the chance to increase the number of people involved in the rediscovery of traditional Chinese culture.

These methods, although very well defined, require an adaptation to the conditions of the modern contemporary society, which does not allow a rapid spread and thus, although small steps are taken in researching and finding the different common points between the Confucian pedagogical methods and the Chinese school, we are unable to mention major significant results as a result of their application.

However, looking at the prospect, the Chinese government is putting more and more price on the involvement in culture, the knowledge of the Chinese tradition and the return to Confucianism, so we can consider that the influence of Confucianism in the future will know an upward trajectory.

Conclusions

As argued in this article, Chinese society has withstood the test of time through the culture it has and based on Confucius' teaching. This philosophy has provided the Chinese people as well as the representatives of China with a model of humanity which, once pursued and implemented, led towards a right path, to knowledge, and, most importantly, offered the ability to discern each individual.

From ancient times to contemporary society, China's history has revolved around Confucian values, each period having its specificity and recognizing Confucianism to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the leaders of the country and how they represented it.

China's current state of development and wellbeing, as well as its continuous ascension has been achieved due to the respect towards Confucian values both socially and politically.

By embracing modernity and changing the form of government of the country, through the transition from Dynasty to the Republic, there was the removal of Confucianism and the renunciation of all the "old", the leaders finding in tradition the blame for China's inability to modernize.

As testimony stand the events of the 4th of May, 1919 and the adoption of Marxist ideas as well as the belief that change consists in renouncing the identity offered by tradition and aligning it with new principles.

Marxism represented an alternative to the old traditions, as people eager for change and evolution identified themselves identified them with it.

However, we must take into account the fact that the political factors and the recent political decline of the Qing Dynasty has played a significant role in rejecting tradition and in this departure from the values that have led China over the last two thousand years from the appearance of Confucianism and up to that time.

Of course, these radical measures were, from the perspective of the leaders of the time, necessary and in the light of the new advances that have taken place worldwide, but over time, society has faced a decline in national values and identity.

Marxism was not simply adopted by China. It went through the filtering process of significance, was adapted to the needs of the Chinese people and was relatively assimilated by the whole society.

The effects of adopting a foreign philosophy after the millennia in which China was governed by Confucian thinking were not immediately felt.

Looking over a certain period of time, however, one can see the events that follow a society which tries to uproot itself without trying to adapt its own culture to the rhythm with which the world is developing.

In the case of China, this void that formed, this emptiness due to lack of values which once were present amongst the people, as we stated in the introduction, made its presence felt.

When the representatives of the Chinese Communist Party realized the errors committed by their predecessors – they made the decision to go back and recover as many of the values that were lost as they could, and to bring them back to the modernized, globalized, technologized Chinese people.

Of course, this process requires time and a well-established plan in order to achieve – after all, the Chinese representatives desire a combination of adapted Marxism and Confucianism.

Currently, although this process is an ongoing one, the influence of Confucianism is reduced and limited. What is important, however, as Chinese specialists have speculated, is the implementation of as many measures as possible and the focus on the educational branch for new generations of citizens to be raised and educated in the authentic Chinese spirit.

In this respect, current policies attempt to test and implement new teaching methods, to return to *guoxue*, namely the study of Chinese culture, to introduce the reading of classic books as well as to educate future teachers to actively participate in the education of Chinese students using Confucian pedagogic techniques. These measures and policies are set for a long term, and the results will, of course, be visible over time.

The stake that China places on culture has beneficial effects both internally, through the creation of a harmonious society, a peaceful development and a society without rebellion, strongly anchored in the social life of China, as well as externally, in the event that citizens opt for study or work abroad, furthering the Chinese cultural model and representing China through Confucian values.

The best way in which the effects of Confucianism could become visible and felt in Chinese society and remain as a milestone in the history of contemporary China, without being compromised, is to have the correct teachings applied in the daily life of the Chinese.

Aspects of it should be applied in all fields and in all social layers, thus becoming not only a philosophy, a concept, a religion, but a way of living, a Chinese alternative to all the currents that come and will come later from other parts of the world.

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