Confucianism—Revival

As twenty-first-century China adjusts to changes brought about by the country’s opening to the West, Chinese are beginning to search for new and inspirational models, both in politics and as a philosophy to guide everyday life. Sinologists have been surprised that government officials, critical intellectuals, and ordinary citizens are turning not to Western liberal democracy for the answer, but to the venerable tradition of Confucianism.

In the late 1980s Chinese culture was viewed as the source of China’s “backwardness” and an impediment to modernity. Today, however, Chinese students often seek inspiration and guidance from Chinese culture, both for engaging in everyday ethics and for thinking about political reform. In this revival of Chinese culture Confucianism stands at the vanguard.

Several reasons exist for the revival of tradition in China. China is a rising economic power, and with economic might comes cultural pride. The view of the German political economist Max Weber, that Confucianism is not conducive to economic development, has come to be widely questioned in light of the economic success of East Asian countries with a Confucian heritage. Unlike Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, Confucianism has never had an organized resistance to economic modernization. It’s China’s turn to affirm its cultural heritage.

But modernity also has a downside: It often leads to a kind of atomism (individualism) and psychological anxiety. The competition for social status and material resources becomes more and more fierce, with declining social responsibility and other-regarding outlooks. Communitarian ways of life and civility break down. Even those who make it to the top ask, “What now?” Making money, people realize, doesn’t necessarily lead to well-being. It is only a means to the good life, but what exactly is the good life? Is it just about fighting for one’s interests?

Most people—in China, at least—do not want to be viewed as individualistic. The idea of simply focusing on individual well-being seems too self-centered. To really feel good about ourselves, we also need to be good to others. Here’s where Confucianism comes in: The tradition is based on the assumption that the good life lies in social relationships. To be fully human involves an ethic of social responsibility and political commitment. In short, Confucian ethics can help fill the moral vacuum that often accompanies modernization.

Of course, a more political reason underpins the revival. Communism has lost its capacity to inspire the Chinese: Hardly anybody believes that Marxism should provide guidelines for thinking about China’s political future. The ideology has been so discredited by its misuses that it has lost almost all legitimacy in society. In reality even the “Communist” government won’t be confined by Marxist theory if it conflicts with the imperatives to remain in power and to provide stability and harmony in society.
Why Confucianism?

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the government is turning to tradition rather than Western-style liberal democracy as a new source of political legitimacy. Government leaders are quoting Confucius and deploying Confucian values such as harmony and civility in their speeches. Political practices also reflect such values: Chinese Communist Party officials in Henan Province are assessed on the basis of Confucian values such as filial piety and family responsibility. The 2008 Beijing Olympics highlighted Confucian themes: A choir at the opening ceremony chanted well-known sayings from the *Analects* of Confucius, and booklets handed out to visiting journalists were sprinkled with such quotes as well. Abroad the government has been promoting Confucianism via branches of the Confucius Institute, a Chinese language and culture center similar to France’s Alliance Française and Germany’s Goethe Institute.

But the revival of Confucianism is not just government sponsored. Many critical intellectuals are also turning to Confucianism to think of ways of dealing with China’s current social and political predicament. For most of the twentieth century both Chinese Marxists and liberals engaged in a comprehensive critique of their own heritage and looked to the West for inspiration. Today many Chinese intellectuals also look to their own traditions for thinking about social and political reform. Without entirely rejecting Westernization, they believe that stable and legitimate political arrangements need to be founded, at least partly, on political ideals from their own traditions. Such ideals as meritocracy, civility, and social harmony are being revived and promoted, not just by the government but also by independent intellectuals and students.

Over the last decade or so the teaching of the Confucian classics has moved back into the mainstream of society. Once dismissed as “feudal,” “hierarchical,” “patriarchal,” and “backward,” the Confucian tradition is being examined more charitably, with lessons being drawn for present-day society. An explosion has taken place in conferences and books on Confucianism in China. Courses on Confucianism are among the most popular on university campuses. The teaching curriculum for secondary schools now includes teaching of the classics, and many experimental schools focus largely on the classics. More than 10 million children are now studying the Confucian classics, many through ad hoc initiatives outside the formal educational system.

Diverse Traditions

In short, this mixture of psychological, economic, political, and philosophical trends helps to explain the revival of Confucianism in China. But Confucianism is a rich and diverse tradition, and more than one type of Confucianism is being revived. The most influential intellectual involved in the revival of Confucianism is Yu Dan, who has written a self-help book on the *Analects* of Confucius that has sold over 10 million copies (including 6 million pirated copies). She is a national star who often appears on television to lecture about the benefits of Confucianism for everyday life. Yu Dan also visits Chinese prisons and lectures prisoners about Confucian values. From an academic point of view, however, her contribution may not be as significant: She deliberately avoids controversial themes and resorts to ahistorical simplifications to make her points. More problematic, Yu Dan herself is openly committed to a relatively individualistic form of Daoism, and her interpretation of Confucianism neglects key Confucian themes such as social responsibility and political commitment. Her account of the *Analects* seems apolitical, but it deflects attention from the economic and political conditions that actually cause people’s misery. It is an implicit justification for the status quo.

The more academic revival includes historical studies and interpretations of key figures in the Confucian tradition that are not meant to have direct bearing on contemporary society. Of greater interest for our purposes are the competing interpretations of political Confucianism: interpretations that are meant to affect the way we carry out our social and political lives. Perhaps the most influential form—the form disparaged by twentieth-century critics—is traditional “conservative” or “official” Confucianism. Throughout Chinese imperial history Confucianism was combined with Legalism, China’s other main political tradition, to justify such practices as blind obedience to the ruler, the use of harsh punishments as a tool of social control, and the subordination of women in ways that offend modern sensibilities.
Today the Chinese government emphasizes “harmony” and family values such as “filial piety.” Such values may still be worth promoting—if harmony means the peaceful resolution of social conflicts instead of violent Maoist class revolution, who can object to that?—but they are often used in problematic ways that justify social quietude and submission to the powers-that-be. To be fair, the official promotion of Confucian values has been an improvement compared with the past: Today, few government officials openly invoke Confucian values to justify the subordination of women (and some academics like Chan Sin-yee are reinterpreting Confucianism so that its central values, like the idea that we should all strive to become exemplary persons, do not exclude women). Still, there is a need to consider the more critical interpretations of Confucianism.

One such interpretation is “liberal Confucianism,” promoted largely by scholars outside of China such as Tu Weiming and Theodore de Bary. According to “liberal Confucians,” Confucianism need not conflict with liberal values such as human rights and democracy and can be used to promote those values. But that’s also the problem with “liberal Confucianism”: Liberalism is used as the moral standpoint to evaluate Confucianism. The parts of Confucianism that are consistent with liberalism should be promoted, and the parts that conflict should be rejected. But this sort of approach doesn’t take Confucianism seriously as a tradition that can enrich and challenge the liberal tradition. Is it not possible that Confucianism can offer a compelling alternative to Western liberalism? Liberal Confucians tend to reject such possibilities, and not surprisingly that form of “Confucianism” is not popular in China among intellectuals who look to Confucianism for inspiration. Confucianism is not just a vehicle to promote liberal values.

Another form of Confucianism can be termed “left Confucianism.” Chinese new leftists and Confucian intellectuals are engaged in dialogues with the aim of putting forward a left interpretation of Confucianism that stresses such values as the responsibility of intellectuals to criticize bad governments and the obligation of the state to provide for the material well-being of the people. These values owe their origin mainly to the “original Confucianism” of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, before Confucianism became established as state orthodoxy. In imperial times the critical tradition was carried forward by such scholars as Yang Jisheng, Huang Zongxi, and Gu Yanwu. And today new leftists such as Gan Yang are calling for the creation of a “Confucian socialist republic.” Confucian scholars such as Jiang Qing openly acknowledge that their interpretation of the Confucian tradition most closely parallels socialist ideals: not the “actually existing socialism” in China today but rather the socialist ideals defended by the German philosopher Karl Marx and others. This Confucian tradition aims to influence contemporary politics, but it also remains separate from state power and orthodoxy, always ready to point to the gap between the ideals and the social reality.

What Is Left Confucianism?

Left Confucianism is an attempt to combine the socialist tradition with the Confucian tradition—and in a way that doesn’t just take socialism as the standard but takes Confucianism equally seriously, such that Confucianism enriches and changes socialism during the course of the encounter. But one should address—parallel to the concern that leftists are using the Confucian label simply to promote progressive or socialist ideas that owe their origin to Western roots—a concern that would parallel a critique of “liberal Confucianism.” Granted, such “Western” values as social democracy, solidarity, human rights, and the rule of law need to be adopted in China. But they also need to be adapted in China. They need to be enriched, and sometimes constrained, by Confucian values. The meaning of “left Confucianism” will become more clear by sketching some traditional leftist values and showing how they might incorporate some “Confucian” characteristics. Not each characteristic is distinctly Confucian, but together they may constitute a distinctive package that warrants the label left Confucianism.

Independent Social and Political Criticism

The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates was famous for truth-seeking, and he was merciless in exposing the errors of those who made false claims to the truth. The Socratic model still informs the educational system in Western countries, where students are taught the importance of
developing a critical perspective on what they learn and seeking the truth without worrying about social harmony. The critical perspective also informs Confucianism. One of the most famous lines of the Analects of Confucius—that exemplary persons should pursue harmony but not conformity—has clear political implications. The contrast between harmony and conformity owes its origin to the Zuo Zhuan, which clearly referred to the idea that the ruler should be open to different political views among his advisers. In imperial Chinese history the ideal of the independent social critic was institutionalized in the institution of the Censorate, consisting of scholar-officials who had the mandate to criticize the government’s mistaken policies. Independent Confucian academies, often located far from the country’s capital so as not to be subject to political control, trained scholars in the art of criticism. Confucian-inspired social critics such as Yang Jisheng and Huang Zongxi penned more radical political criticisms outside of formal channels. Today social critics have drawn on the contrast between harmony and conformity to urge the government to be tolerant of differences and not simply enforce one dominant state ideology on the whole population.

But a Confucian twist, so to speak, is that criticism is best carried out on the basis of social harmony and trust. If two enemies criticize each other, they will question each other’s motives, and the result may be more bad blood. Criticism may be most effective—in the sense that it leads to improvement—if it’s founded on affective ties. Whether in the family or in the political realm, criticisms should be seen as being motivated by affection rather than hostility. In practice, it means that criticisms should be expressed in gentle and humble ways, so as to maintain harmonious relationships. Today the language of “not losing face” is used to express this ideal. The strident and self-righteous criticisms of some Western politicians and Western-based human rights organizations often fall on deaf ears in China because they are viewed as rude and
disrespectful even by those who might agree with the substance of the criticisms. Conversely, the cooperative and long-term-minded approach of such organizations as the Danish Institute of Human Rights is often more effective.

Today, of course, the media are often regarded as an important vehicle for public criticism, with investigative journalists aiming to expose official wrongdoing and social injustices. Left Confucians favor more space for an independent media with the power to tell the truth about social problems and blame the government when it’s at fault. From a Confucian perspective, however, there is also cause to worry about the kind of media model that focuses almost exclusively on bad news. It is fine to encourage private media to report on news as they see fit (so long as they avoid extreme violence and pornography), but an important task of the media would also be to promote social harmony. Such media reporting might involve the portrayal of moral exemplars, appeals to people’s better nature, and sympathy for the disadvantaged. More concretely, a Confucian-inspired model of media regulation might mean space for private media but also funding for public media that seek to promote social harmony rather than loyalty to the party. The publicly funded media might well involve positive portrayal of government leaders when they contribute to social harmony—the television news showing President Hu Jintao singing along with disabled children during the Paralympics was an inspiring moment—because leaders who do good should be seen as setting examples for others. But it is equally important for leaders who do bad to be subject to criticism.

**Concern for the Disadvantaged**

Socialists and left Confucians can agree that the government’s first obligation is to provide for the disadvantaged in society. To a certain extent they can also agree about what it means to be disadvantaged: It means being deprived of material goods that underpin any decent conception of the good life. But the Confucian would add that being disadvantaged is not just about lacking money. An equally serious harm is being deprived of family members and friends who make up the good life. Hence, when Mencius says the government should give first consideration to “old men without wives, old women without husbands, old people without children, and young children without fathers,” he doesn’t mean just that people are materially poor. For Mencius they are disadvantaged (partly, if not mainly) because they are deprived of key human relations. Such views help to explain why East Asian states with a Confucian heritage often rely on the family to provide welfare services, with the state stepping in to help those without family members. For example, health care insurance in Singapore is family rather than individual based—with family members responsible for each other’s insurance, including the obligation of adult children to take out insurance for elderly parents—and
similar arrangements have also been implemented in China’s rural areas. The state takes responsibility for elderly parents without relatives. Such insurance schemes might seem peculiar in Western countries, but they are not nearly as controversial in East Asian countries with a Confucian heritage.

**Concern for Economic Equality**

Socialists seek to reduce the gap between rich and poor. In Western countries they also tend to favor social equality, that is, a society in which people treat each other as equals regardless of status. To the extent possible, the elderly and the young as well as bosses and assistants should disregard social status when they engage in everyday social behavior: For example, they should address each other on a first-name basis. There may be several reasons why social equality and economic equality are thought to go together. One reason is that an ideal society would do away with all power relationships, whether based on social status or class (modern liberal ideas put forth by some philosophers, such as John Rawls’s original position and Jurgen Habermas’s ideal speech situation, are meant to express the ideal of equal power). Another reason is that social equality is more likely to contribute to economic equality: The more likely people treat each other as social equals, the more likely they are to support measures that reduce the gap between rich and poor.

Confucians do not deny that an ideal society should do away with all power relationships. But such utopian ideals may be appropriate only for small communities of like-minded people, such as Israeli kibbutzim, or advanced technological societies where machines would do almost all of the unwanted labor, as in Marx’s ideal of communism. Confucians are realists in the sense that they take for granted that power relationships will exist in large-scale societies and that the question is how to make those power relationships work for the interests of the powerless. And here’s another Confucian characteristic: Confucians worry less about social hierarchies, particularly hierarchies based on age and achievement. If a choice must be made between social equality and economic equality, then Confucians would choose economic equality, and social inequalities should be made to work for economic equality.

How might that work? The ancient Confucian thinker Xunzi proposed the idea of social rituals that include people of different social statuses. By participating in common rituals, those with more status come to develop feelings of care for the others and thus become more willing to do things in their economic interest. For example, a boss in Japan or South Korea might enjoy singing karaoke with a worker. The ritual is hierarchical—the boss sings first and perhaps for a longer period, but after a period of singing and drinking affective bonds are strengthened, and the boss is less likely to dismiss the worker in difficult economic times. Such rituals help to explain the practice of lifelong employment in large Japanese and Korean corporations. More generally, such inclusive rituals help to explain why Japan and Korea—perhaps the most socially hierarchical societies in East Asia—also have relatively equal distributions of wealth.

A small society such as that of Norway, which is relatively homogeneous and endowed with substantial natural resources, may be able to afford equality all the way through. The Confucian, however, recognizes that the choice for most societies is between a socially egalitarian society like the United States, where the way to express power typically takes the form of wealth, and societies governed by informal rituals that express differences in social status, in which the powerful do not have to rely to the same extent on material wealth to show their “superiority.” For the Confucian the latter society is preferable: The key is to promote rituals involving the powerful and the powerless so that the rich are made to feel a sense of community with the powerless and thus are less likely to seek other forms of domination (such as material wealth).

Another difference between Western socialists and Confucians is that the former are more likely to favor political and civil rights over economic rights (in cases where such rights conflict) as a society seeks to secure material equality. The U.S. Constitution expresses the basic liberal preference for civil and political rights. Even left liberals such as John Rawls stipulate without much argument that civil and political rights outrank principles of economic justice in cases where they conflict. Rawls does allow for very poor societies on the verge of starvation to prioritize the right to food, but that’s about as far
as most leftists in the West are prepared to go in terms of sacrificing civil and political rights in the interests of economic rights.

In East Asia it’s not just the Chinese Communist Party that believes the right to food comes first. The idea that the state has an obligation to deal with material deprivation goes back more than two thousand years—as opposed to Western political history, where poverty was considered a problem for political stability or a matter for charity until the eighteenth century or so. Hence, it shouldn’t be surprising that the obligation to secure a people’s means of subsistence is a widely held value that trumps other political values in cases of conflict. China is probably beyond the “Rawlsian minimum,” meaning that few Chinese are starving or malnourished, and yet the idea that democracy should wait until the economy is more developed is not nearly as controversial as it might be in leftist circles in the West (whether there actually is a conflict between democratic rights and economic development now in China is an empirical question, but where the issues are not so clear cut even independent leftist Chinese intellectuals might prefer not to argue forcefully for democracy now). Another example might be the hukou (household registration) system in China, which limits people’s mobility in the interests of securing a stable and orderly environment for economic development. The hukou system is breaking down now, but there are still restrictions on moving to large cities such as Shanghai and Beijing, and such restrictions are not nearly as controversial as they might be in the West.

The Confucian way to solidarity is different in both means and ends. The idea is expressed in the opening passage of the Great Learning:

The extension of knowledge consists in the investigation of things. When things are investigated, knowledge is extended; when knowledge is extended, the will is sincere; when the will is sincere, the mind is rectified; when the mind is rectified, the personal life is cultivated; when the personal life is cultivated, the family will be regulated; when the family is regulated, the state will be in order; and when the state is in order, there is peace throughout the world. (Tian Xia)

The idea is that ties should be extended to others, starting from the family to the state and ultimately to the whole world. But the end is not a universal solidarity by which all treat each other as equals. Rather, ties are extended with diminishing intensity, so that strangers will be treated well but without the same degree of love shared among family members.

And how is this ideal of “graded love” to be realized? Confucians have emphasized two mechanisms. The first is to learn care and compassion within the family and then to extend care to others by applying family-like labels and norms to nonfamily members. In Chinese, for example, students and alumni will refer to each other as younger or older siblings; graduate supervisors will refer to their students as younger siblings; and (in the best cases) employers and employees will use family-like language to refer to each other. The extension of such terms of family endearment to nonfamily members is far more widespread than in most Western languages and contributes to a sense of solidarity in East Asian societies.

Confucian solidarity is also realized by means of rituals that civilize and elevate, particularly in the context of competitive relationships that would otherwise degenerate into hostility and antagonism, if not warfare. Confucians take for granted that human desires can undermine social cooperation, but the task is to civilize those desires rather than suppress them. And it’s particularly important for the “winners”—those with power and social status—to act in civilized ways, to show modesty and courtesy during the course of rituals designed to civilize human desires. These rituals are particularly evident in sporting activities, past and present. Confucius’s account of the
gentleman-archer—“Exemplary persons are not competitive, but they must still compete in archery. Greeting and making way for each other, the archers ascend the hall, and returning they drink a salute. Even during competition, they are exemplary persons” (3.7)—echoes the rituals of sumo wrestlers. Such rituals also inform sports that developed in Western countries—the rituals of helping opponents up after a fall and exchanging sweat-soaked shirts at the end of football games come to mind—but they are more central to sporting traditions that developed in Confucian-influenced East Asian societies. In the 2008 Beijing Olympics the gold medal winners from China often seemed humble and kind to opponents, perhaps due (at least partly) to the civility campaigns conducted prior to the games. In the same vein the Chinese fans were generally respectful of other teams and athletes.

Global Justice

Socialists often take a global perspective on justice. Confucians agree—the ultimate end of politics is a form of government that serves the whole world’s peoples, or at least takes their interests into account: a politics for the people. But which people count? Leftists in the West tend to emphasize the interests of the current generation of the world’s peoples and more recently, in response to the environmental movement, the interests of future generations. But Confucians also take seriously the interests

Rubbings from residence of descendents of Confucius. Qufu, Shandong Province. The Chinese government in the twenty-first century is turning to tradition rather than Western-style liberal democracy as a new source of political legitimacy, quoting Confucius and deploying Confucian values such as harmony and civility in their speeches.

PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.
of their dead ancestors. In Confucian-influenced South Korea and southern Chinese provinces such as Fujian, for example, many households and communities still practice ancestor worship. The Confucian scholar Jiang Qing has proposed a house of government (the House of Historical Continuity) with the explicit task of maintaining continuity of various traditions, including the traditions of minority groups such as Tibetan Buddhists. For Confucians, identities are constituted by the values and practices of one’s ancestors, who may still be hovering overhead in some form or other, and it doesn’t seem so far-fetched to think about how to secure the interests of one’s not-so-dead ancestors in social and political life. Put differently, a regime that secures the interests of the current generation of the world’s peoples but neglects those of its descendants and ancestors would be unjust from the perspective of left Confucians.

Another key difference lies in ways of thinking of how to realize politics for the people. Perhaps the most sacred political value in the West is politics by the people in the form of “one person, one vote.” Those who question this democratic mechanism are often thought to have lost their moral bearings. (In the nineteenth century, it was a different story: The British philosopher John Stuart Mill justified democratic mechanisms in terms of their consequences, and he was prepared to contemplate modifications that produce better consequences.)

One clear problem with “one person, one vote” is that equality ends at the boundaries of the political community; those outside the community are neglected. The national focus of the democratically elected political leaders is part of the system, so to speak; they are meant to serve the community of voters, not foreigners living outside the political community. Even democracies that work well tend to focus on the interests of citizens and neglect the interests of foreigners. But political leaders, especially leaders of big countries such as China, make decisions that affect the rest of the world (consider global warming), and they need to consider the interests of the rest of the world when they make decisions.

Hence, left Confucians put forward political models that are meant to work better than Western-style democracy in terms of realizing global justice. The ideal is not necessarily a world where all persons treat each other as an equal—as mentioned, Confucians favor extending care but recognize that care will diminish in intensity as it extends from intimates to strangers—but rather one where the interests of strangers would be taken more seriously than in most nation-centered democracies. And the key value for realizing global justice is meritocracy, meaning equality of opportunity in education and government, with positions of leadership being distributed to the most virtuous and qualified members of the community. The idea here is that everybody has the potential to become morally exemplary, but in real life the capacity to make competent and morally justifiable political judgments varies between people, and an important task of the political system is to identify those with above-average capacity. One idea might be to give extra votes to elderly people. Confucians assume that wisdom normally increases with age as people’s roles change and life experience deepens—the role of an adult child caring for an elderly parent in particular cultivates such virtues as empathy and humility—and as they gather longer experience in particular roles. A doctor with a few years’ experience, for instance, should have better understanding and judgment than a brand new doctor.

Another proposal is for a meritocratic house of government, with deputies selected by such mechanisms as free and fair competitive examinations, which would have the task of securing the interests typically neglected by democratically selected political decision makers such as foreigners, future generations, ancestors, and minority groups. A meritocratic house of government would balance and complement a democratic house, and, however imperfect, the idea is to better approximate the ideal of global justice. The value of political meritocracy is deeply embedded in East Asian political discourse, and political proposals to realize it are not typically seen as eccentric or dangerous (in the West, by contrast, much of the political discourse assumes that states must be either democratic or authoritarian, and alternatives that do not fit neatly within that dichotomy are often dismissed out of hand).

Another characteristic of left Confucianism is support for humanitarian intervention abroad, but only if the aim is to remove tyrants who violate people’s right to life. Even Mencius, the most “soft” of the left Confucians, defended the idea that wars can be launched abroad in order to remove ruthless tyrants who are resistant to morality. Leftists in the West who defend humanitarian intervention have abroad put forward different justifications. For Michael Walzer, perhaps the most influential theorist of
just war, the value of membership in a particular political community is a fundamental human good and helps to underpin judgments regarding the justice of warfare. Other prominent intellectuals such as Michael Ignatief and Thomas Friedman defended the U.S. invasion of Iraq partly on the grounds that it was supposed to promote democracy in the Middle East. Left Confucians reject both those justifications for humanitarian intervention: Only the relief of human suffering at the hands of a tyrant could justify the use of armed force abroad.

**Religious Toleration**

Today most leftists recognize the ideal of tolerating different forms of religions. The “fact of pluralism” is a feature of modern societies, and it seems only fair to allow different people to practice the forms of religious life that are most compelling to them. Even those who are convinced of atheism do not argue for banning religion. But some leftists in the West object to any role for religion in public life.

Left Confucians do not take a strong view regarding religion. Following the example of the early Confucian thinkers such as Confucius himself, they leave open metaphysical commitments, focusing their efforts on the problems of earthly life. Hence, it’s not inconceivable to be a Confucian in social and political life and, say, a Buddhist or Christian regarding metaphysical commitments. Early Confucianism was not meant to provide a final answer to existential questions about human suffering and life after death, and it leaves open the idea that religions may do a better job in that respect.

But some left Confucians like Jiang Qing do take Confucianism seriously as a religion with a metaphysical foundation and draw the implication that there should be official state sponsorship of Confucianism as a kind of religion. The idea is that Confucianism needs to be taught in schools and promoted in villages and communities with some sort of financial support from the state. Partly the idea is to train future rulers in Confucian ethics so that they will rule with moral sensitivity. But Jiang Qing emphasizes that other religions would be tolerated, and he compares his ideal with state support for official religions in Sweden and the United Kingdom: Other religions would not be prohibited and would be able to flourish despite state support for one religion. Jiang explicitly makes room for the political representation of other religions in his proposed third house of government, the House of Historical Continuity.

Still, the idea of state support for Confucianism does seem to go well beyond the northern European model, especially in terms of state backing for Confucianism in education and community life. Jiang Qing has also proposed the reintroduction of state-supported Confucian burial rituals after natural disasters such as the 2008 Sichuan earthquake (although he allows for the possibility that members of minority groups could follow their own burial rituals). Another way in which “official Confucianism” would influence policy is that civil servants would be able to take paid leave for a limited period of mourning in the event of the death of a parent, similar to the one-month period of mourning leave granted to civil servants in South Korea. It could also be argued that Confucian ideas already influence state policy—for example, elderly parents are entitled to a share of property if an adult child dies intestate in the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, notwithstanding different political and legal systems—and making Confucianism official would make such policies matters of public debate and perhaps lead to improvements. If such proposals for “official Confucianism” are implemented in ways that tolerate and respect other religious practices, they are worth taking seriously. The history of “official Confucianism” in imperial China does offer reason to be wary of state misuses of Confucianism, but it also offers some inspiring moments. In the late sixteenth century, as Yu Ying-shih notes, Matteo Ricci was amazed to discover that the Chinese religious atmosphere was highly tolerant, with Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism all seen as capturing a vision of the same Dao (Day).

**Beyond China?**

Early Confucian thinkers assumed that their ideals were universally valid: They were meant to be applicable to all human beings, and an ideal world would be composed of people who endorse (and live by) those ideals. A world where different people live in accordance with different values in different parts of the world would have been considered second best. In that sense Confucianism
is put forward as a philosophy with universal validity, similar to liberalism and Christianity. It is inaccurate to say that liberalism is universal whereas Confucianism is particularistic: They are both meant to be universal in scope.

But which interpretation of Confucianism makes most sense in China today depends on particular factors. It depends on what Chinese people actually think now: Any interpretation must be consistent with basic aspirations, though it should also push to improve those aspirations. For example, left Confucianism may be compelling to Chinese because it is draws and builds on widely shared values such as concern for the disadvantaged. It also depends on what Chinese intellectuals regard as pressing needs. Jiang Qing, for one, thinks there is a need for a different philosophical foundation for the state. He argues that Marxism no longer appeals to people and that Confucianism is most likely to do so. Hence, he tries to articulate an interpretation of Confucianism that addresses the political need for institutions that are stable in the long term because they are founded partly, if not mainly, on Chinese political traditions. Interpretations of Confucianism also depend upon claims that can be supported by empirical evidence. It would be important, for instance, to test the idea that caring for elderly parents is an important mechanism for developing a sense of empathy extended to others.

Under what conditions is Confucianism likely to be seen as compelling by the rest of the world? One condition is that societies undergo prolonged crises of confidence. It is a sad truth, perhaps, that people are more inclined to learn from others when their own ways prove to be problematic. Chinese intellectuals looked to the West only when traditional ways of social and political life broke down, and it may take a similar crisis of confidence in the West before large numbers of Western intellectuals turn to Confucianism for hope and inspiration. Meanwhile it is important for the West to tolerate, if not respect, areas of morally justifiable areas of difference. Another condition that would aid the project of universalizing Confucianism is that Confucian ideas are widely seen as influencing China’s political practices and institutions. The theory has to come alive, so to speak. After the Chinese state acts morally in accordance with Confucian ideas, then it can articulate and promote its soft power to the rest of the world. If it’s just talk, nobody will listen.

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Further Reading