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Dissent, Volume 57, Number 1, Winter 2010, pp. 91-99 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press
DOI: 10.1353/dss.0.0114



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Reconciling Socialism and Confucianism?

Reviving Tradition in China

DANIEL A. BELL

Communism has lost its capacity to inspire the Chinese. But what will replace it? And what should replace it? Clearly, there is a need for a new moral foundation for political rule in China, and the government has moved closer to an official embrace of Confucianism. The Olympics highlighted Confucian themes, quoting the *Analects* of Confucius at the opening ceremony, and downplayed any references to China's experiment with communism. Cadres at the newly built Communist Party School in Shanghai proudly tell visitors that the main building is modeled on a Confucian scholar's desk. 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.

Of course, there is resistance as well. Elderly cadres, still influenced by Maoist antipathy to tradition, condemn efforts to promote ideologies outside a rigid Marxist framework. But the younger cadres in their forties and fifties tend to support such efforts, and time is on their side. It's easy to forget that the seventy-six-million-strong Chinese Communist Party is a large and diverse organization. The party itself is becoming more meritocratic—it now encourages high-performing students to join—and the increased emphasis on educated cadres is likely to generate more sympathy for Confucian values.

But the revival of Confucianism is not just government-sponsored. There has also been a resurgence of interest among academics. Rigorous experiments by psychologists show striking cognitive differences between Chinese and Americans, with Chinese more likely to use

contextual and dialectical approaches to solving problems. Economists try to measure the economic effect of such Confucian values as filial piety. Feminist theorists draw parallels between care ethics and the Confucian emphasis on empathy, particularity, and the family as a school of moral education. Theorists of medical ethics discuss the importance of family-based decision making in medical settings. Those working in the field of business ethics research the influence of Confucian values on business practices. Political surveys show that attachment to Confucian values has increased with modernization. Sociologists study the thousands of experiments in education and social living that are inspired by Confucian values.

The renewed academic interest is also driven by normative concerns: an increasing number of critical intellectuals are turning to Confucianism to think of ways of dealing with China's current social and political predicament. 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. Theorists of international relations look to early Confucian thinkers for foreign policy insights. Legal theorists search for less adversarial modes of conflict resolution grounded in traditional practices. Philosophers draw on the ideas of great Confucian thinkers in dealing with social and political reform. And Confucian educators work on long-term moral transformation by teaching the Confucian classics to young children.

These political and academic developments are supported by economic factors. China is a rising economic power, and with economic might comes cultural pride. Max Weber's view that Confucianism is not conducive to economic

development has been widely questioned in view of the economic success of East Asian countries with a Confucian heritage. Unlike with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, there has never been an organized Confucian resistance to economic modernization, and such values as respect for education and concern for future generations may have contributed to economic growth. Now, poised to become a global power, it's China's turn to affirm its cultural heritage.

But modernity also has a downside: it often leads to atomism and psychological anxiety. The competition for social status and material resources becomes fiercer and fiercer, 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, they 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 focusing solely on individual well-being seems too self-centered. To 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, in responsibility and political commitment. Confucian ethics is the obvious resource to help fill the moral vacuum that often accompanies modernization.

In short, this mix of psychological, economic, political, and philosophical trends helps to explain the revival of Confucianism in China. These trends are likely to continue and intensify. But Confucianism is a rich and diverse tradition, and it's worth asking which Confucianism(s) are being revived. Even more important, which interpretation of Confucianism ought to be revived?

Which Confucianism?

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 ten million copies (including six million pirated copies). She is a national star who often appears on television to lecture about the everyday benefits of

Confucianism. Yu Dan also visits Chinese prisons and lectures prisoners about Confucian values. From an academic point of view, however, her contribution may not be significant: she deliberately avoids controversial themes and resorts to ahistorical simplifications to make her points. More problematic, she is openly committed to a relatively individualistic form of Daoism, and her interpretation of Confucianism downplays key themes such as social responsibility and political commitment. Her account of the *Analects* may seem apolitical, but it deflects attention from the economic and political conditions that 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, which are meant to have an impact on our social and political lives. Perhaps the most influential 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 blind obedience to parents and rulers, the use of harsh punishments as a tool of social control, and the subordination of women.

Today, the Chinese government emphasizes "harmony" and family values such as "filial piety." Such values may still be worth promoting, but they are often used to justify quietude and submission to the powers-that-be. To be fair, the official promotion of Confucian values has been an improvement compared to the past. Today, few government officials invoke Confucian values to justify the subordination of women (and some feminist 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 is "Liberal Confucianism," promoted largely by scholars outside of mainland China. According to "liberal Confucians," Confucianism need not conflict

with values such as human rights and democracy; it can be used to promote those values. But that's also the problem: 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 Confucianism tends to reject such possibilities and, not surprisingly, is not popular among Chinese intellectuals. Confucianism is not just a vehicle to promote liberal values.

So which interpretation of Confucianism makes the most sense? If the concern is to develop a feasible and desirable political theory for the Chinese context, then 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, the interpretation should build on widely shared values like concern for the disadvantaged. It would also reflect what Chinese intellectuals regard as pressing needs: for example, Jiang Qing thinks that a new philosophical foundation for the state is needed. He argues that Marxism no longer appeals to people, and Confucianism is more likely to do so. Hence, he tries to articulate an interpretation that addresses the political need for stable institutions founded partly, if not mainly, on Chinese political traditions. But the critique of Marxism, in my view, should not be "totalizing." As a practical matter, interpretations of Confucianism are more likely to win acceptance in reformist circles of the ruling political class if they are also seen to draw upon socialist ideals. Interpretations of Confucianism should also depend upon empirical evidence: for example, it would be important to test the idea that caring for elderly parents is an important mechanism for extending a sense of empathy to others.

The revival of Confucianism in mainland China is too recent to affirm the superiority of any interpretation. But let me discuss the outlines of what I take to be a particularly promising one, which draws on the socialist

tradition for inspiration and so can be termed "left Confucianism." In a new and exciting development, inconceivable just ten years ago, Chinese new leftists and Confucian intellectuals are engaged in dialogues about a left interpretation of Confucianism that stresses such values as the responsibility of intellectuals to criticize bad policies and the obligation of the state to provide for the material well-being of the people. These values derive from the "original Confucianism" of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, before Confucianism became established (and often misused) as state orthodoxy. Today, new leftists such as Gan Yang are calling for the creation of a "Confucian socialist republic," and scholars like Jiang Qing openly acknowledge that their interpretation of the tradition closely parallels socialist ideals—not the "actually existing socialism" in China today, but the ideals defended by Karl Marx and others. This Confucian "tradition" aims to influence contemporary politics, but it stands apart 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 attempts to combine the socialist with the Confucian tradition in a way that allows Confucianism to enrich and change socialism. But I should address the worry that leftists are using the Confucian label simply to promote Western socialist ideas, a concern that parallels my critique of "liberal Confucianism." I do not deny that 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 clearer if I sketch some traditional socialist values and show how they might incorporate Confucian characteristics.

Independent social and political criticism 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 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 comes from the *Zuo Zhuan*, where it clearly referred to the idea that the ruler should be open to different political views. In imperial Chinese history, the ideal of the independent social critic was institutionalized in the form of the Censorate—scholar-officials who had a 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 Huang Zongxi, Yang Jisheng, and Gu Yanwu penned more radical criticisms outside the 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.

But a Confucian twist, so to speak, is that criticism is best carried out on the basis of social harmony and trust. If enemies question each other’s motives, the result may be more bad blood. Criticism will 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 motivated by affection rather than hostility and 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 their substance. Conversely, the cooperative approaches of such organizations as the Danish Institute for Human Rights are more effective.

Today, of course, the media are regarded as an important vehicle for public criticism, with investigative journalists aiming to expose official wrongdoing and social injustice. In China, the media have been opening up, but far too slowly. 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 a media model that focuses almost exclusively on bad news. It is fine to encourage private media to report as they see fit (so long as they avoid extreme violence and pornography), but an important task of the media should also be to promote social harmony by portraying moral exemplars, appealing to people’s better nature, and expressing sympathy for the disadvantaged.

More concretely, a Confucian-inspired model might mean space for private media but also funding for public media that seek to promote social harmony rather than loyalty to the party. For example, Chinese media were flooded with coverage of the heroic feats of disabled athletes during the Paralympics. Such reporting could not have been carried out under a market system: a journalist friend from Singapore told me that her stories about the Paralympics were often rejected by her editor on the grounds that they wouldn’t sell papers. In China, my impression is that reporting on the disabled did succeed in changing social attitudes: it’s hard to prove such claims, but today more disabled people are seen in the streets of Beijing. Yes, coverage of this sort can seem propagandistic in nature, as when it shows President Hu Jintao singing along with disabled children (though I was watching television with elderly Chinese relatives who were visibly moved by what they saw). But perhaps politicians should be praised when they set a good moral example for others, so long as leaders who act badly are also 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. 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 Confucians would add that being disadvantaged is not just about lacking money. Equally serious is the absence of family members and friends. 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

just mean that these people are materially poor. 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 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. The state takes responsibility for elderly people without relatives. Such insurance schemes might seem peculiar in Western countries, but they are not nearly as controversial in East Asian countries.

Concern for basic material well-being Socialists seek to reduce the gap between rich and poor. In Western countries, they also favor social equality: a society where 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 status when they engage in everyday social behavior—for example, they should address each other using first names. There are several reasons why social and economic equality are thought to go together. One is that an ideal society would do away with all power relationships, whether based on status or class (John Rawls's original position and Jürgen Habermas's ideal speech situation are meant to express the ideal of equal power). Another is the idea that if people treat each other as social equals, they are more likely to support measures that reduce the gap between rich and poor.

Confucians do not deny that an ideal society would do away with all power relationships. But such utopian ideals may only be appropriate for small communities of like-minded people, like Israeli kibbutzim, or for advanced technological societies where machines do almost all the unwanted labor, as in Marx's communism. Confucians are realists in the sense that they take for granted that power relationships and social hierarchies will exist in all large-scale societies. They worry less than Western liberals do about these relationships and hierarchies, particularly when they are based on age and achievement. If a choice must be made between social and economic equality,

then Confucians would choose economic equality and make social inequality work to support it.

How might that happen? The ancient Confucian thinker Xunzi proposed the idea of social rituals that include people of different status. By participating in common rituals, those with more status develop feelings of care for the others and thus become more willing to do things in their economic interest. For example, a boss in Confucian-influenced Japan or South Korea might enjoy singing karaoke with a worker. The ritual is hierarchical; the boss sings first and perhaps for a longer time, but after singing and drinking together, affective bonds are strengthened, and the boss is less likely to dismiss the worker in difficult times. Such rituals help to explain the practice of lifelong employment in large Japanese and Korean corporations. More generally, they help explain why Japan and Korea—perhaps the most socially hierarchical societies in East Asia—also have relatively equal distributions of wealth and do not suffer from 10 percent unemployment rates in bad times.

Perhaps small, homogenous societies endowed with substantial natural resources, such as Norway, can afford equality all the way through, but Confucians recognize that the choice for most societies is between a socially egalitarian society like the United States, where power is typically expressed through material wealth, and societies governed by informal rituals, where the powerful do not need to rely on wealth to show their "superiority." For Confucians, the latter society is far preferable.

Another difference between Western liberals and Confucians is that the former are more likely to favor political and civil rights in cases of conflict with economic rights. Even left liberals like John Rawls stipulate without much argument that civil and political rights take precedence over economic justice. 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 East Asia, it's not just the Chinese Communist Party that says that 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.

Mencius famously defended the well-field system that provides for a relatively equal distribution of land at the local community level on the grounds that most people need the basic means of subsistence in order to develop their moral natures. In Western political history, by contrast, poverty was considered a problem for political stability or a matter for charity until the eighteenth century. Hence, it shouldn't be surprising that in China the obligation to secure people's means of subsistence is widely held to trump other political values.

China is probably beyond the "Rawlsian minimum"—few Chinese are starving or malnourished—and yet the idea that electoral democracy should wait until the economy is more developed is not nearly as controversial as it might be among Western leftists. For example, the influential new leftist scholar Wang Shaoguang argues that the Hu-Wen administration has been aggressively tackling the problem of economic inequality and promoting social welfare reforms in the past few years ("The Great Transformation," *boundary 2* 35:2 [2008]). The increased focus on the public's priorities, according to Wang, is partly explained by increased opportunities for citizens to influence policy formation by such means as the Internet and the mass media ("Changing Models of China's Policy Agenda Setting," *Modern China* [34:1 2008]).

Perhaps economic rights might be more secure under a fully elected government. But there is plenty of empirical evidence that democratization at low levels of wealth may hinder economic growth (see Randall Peerenboom, *China Modernizes*, 2007). The history of other modernizing East Asian countries suggests that strong bureaucratic states in nondemocratic contexts can successfully promote relatively egalitarian forms of economic development. At some point, that same history shows, the regimes will need to allow for political participation that gives more voice to the disadvantaged, but change need not come all at once, particularly in these turbulent times. And China, so large and diverse, is a unique case. The most optimistic scenario is for experimentation with different forms of political participation at subnational levels of government and then the adaptation of what works at the national level. That's how

economic reform proceeded over the past three decades, and such a pragmatic spirit may inspire political reform over the next three.

Solidarity with strangers The value of solidarity is central to the socialist tradition (and less central to the liberal tradition). For French revolutionaries, the task was to change hierarchical social practices—banning, for example, the use of the formal pronoun *vous* in favor of the informal *tu*. For Marxists, the path to solidarity lies in class revolution that would abolish private ownership of the means of production. Social democrats argue for realizing the value of solidarity by means of a state-enforced system of equal rights for all citizens.

The Confucian way to solidarity is different in both means and ends, as expressed in the famous 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 from the family to the state and ultimately to the whole world. But the end is not a universal solidarity, where everyone treats everyone else as an equal. Rather, ties are extended with diminishing intensity, so that strangers will be treated well but without the 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 apply family-like labels and norms to non-family members. In Chinese, for example, good friends and fellow alumni will refer to each other as younger or older siblings, graduate supervisors will refer to students as younger siblings, and (in the best cases) employers and employees will use family-like language. The extension of the terms of family endearment to non-family 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, 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 "winners" to act in civilized ways, to show modesty and courtesy in 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"—echoes the rituals of sumo wrestlers. Such rituals also inform sports that developed in Western countries: helping opponents up after a fall, for example, or exchanging sweat-soaked shirts at the end of football games. But they are more central to sporting traditions that developed in Confucian-influenced East Asian societies. Contrary to the fears of some Western analysts that the 2008 Beijing Olympics would showcase extreme forms of Chinese nationalism, the gold medal winners from China often seemed humble and kind to opponents. Perhaps because of the civility campaigns prior to the games, 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. It's 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 of our ancestors. In Confucian-influenced South Korea and southern Chinese provinces like 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 the continuity of various traditions, including those of minority groups such as Tibetan Buddhists. For Confucians, peoples' identities are constituted by the values and practices of their ancestors, and it doesn't seem far-fetched to think about how to secure their interests in social and political life. A regime that secures the interests of the current generation but neglects those of its descendants and ancestors would be unjust from the perspective of left Confucians.

Another key difference has to do with how to realize "politics for the people." Perhaps the most sacred political value in the West is one person/one vote: those who question this value are thought to have lost their moral bearings (in the nineteenth century, it was a different story: John Stuart Mill justified democratic mechanisms in terms of their consequences, and he was prepared to contemplate extra votes for educated people).

One problem with one person/one vote is that equality ends at the boundaries of the political community: those outside are neglected. The national focus of the democratically elected political leaders is assumed; they are meant to serve only the community of voters. 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 like China, make decisions that affect the rest of the world (consider global warming), and so they need to consider the interests of the rest of the world.

Left Confucians propose political models that are meant to work better than Western-style democracy in realizing global justice. The ideal, again, is not a world where everybody treats everybody else as an equal but one where the interests of strangers would be taken seriously. And the key mechanism for realizing global justice is meritocracy—equality of opportunity in education and government, with positions of leadership being distributed to the most virtuous and qualified members of the community. Certainly, everybody has the potential to become morally exemplary, but in real life the capacity to make competent and morally justifiable political judgments varies among people, and an important task of the political system is to identify those with above

average capacity. One idea is to give extra votes to elderly people: Confucians assume that wisdom normally increases with age as people's life experience deepens; when adult children care for elderly parents, for example, they cultivate such virtues as empathy and humility. Moreover, the elderly are usually less subject to the sexual passions that often get in the way of sound judgment. So if the elderly continue to strive for self-improvement and maintain social networks, perhaps they should be given extra shares of political power.

Another proposal is for a meritocratic house of government, with deputies selected by competitive examinations, which could secure the interests typically neglected by democratic assemblies—those of foreigners, future generations, ancestors, and minority groups. (Note the difference with legal institutions like the U.S. Supreme Court, which does not have legislative power and has no mandate to protect the interests of non-citizens outside the national territory.) A meritocratic house of government would complement a democratic house and—however imperfect—would better approximate the ideal of global justice. The value of meritocracy is deeply embedded in East Asian political discourse, and proposals to realize it are not typically seen as eccentric or dangerous. In the West, most people assume that states must be either democratic or authoritarian, and alternatives that do not fit neatly within that dichotomy are often dismissed out of hand.

Religious toleration Today, most leftists recognize the ideal of tolerating different religions. Even atheists do not argue for banning religion. But some Western leftists object to any role for religion in public life.

Left Confucians do not take a strong position regarding religion. Following the example of the early Confucian thinkers, they leave metaphysical commitments open, focusing 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 religiously. Early Confucianism was not meant to answer existential questions about human suffering and life after death, and it accepts 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 and argue that there should be official state spon-

sorship of Confucianism. They argue that Confucianism should be taught in schools and promoted in villages and communities, with some sort of financial support from the state—partly, in order to train future rulers in Confucian ethics so that they will rule with moral sensitivity. As Jiang Qing puts it, we need to be careful about the state's (mis)using Confucianism, but Confucianism can also use the state. He emphasizes that other religions would be tolerated, and he compares his ideal to state support for official religions in Denmark and the United Kingdom, where other religions flourish. And he explicitly makes room for the political representation of other Chinese religions like Buddhism and Daoism in his proposed third house of government, the House of Historical Continuity.

Still, the idea of state support for Confucianism goes beyond the North European model. Jiang Qing has also proposed the re-introduction of state-supported Confucian burial rituals following natural disasters like the Sichuan earthquake (though he allows for the possibility that members of minority groups would follow their own 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 after the death of a parent, as they do in South Korea. It could also be argued that Confucian ideas already influence state policy; for example, parents are entitled to a share of property if an adult child dies intestate in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, notwithstanding their different political and legal systems. Making Confucianism official would bring such policies into public debate and perhaps lead to improvements. The history of "official Confucianism" in Imperial China does give 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 (Way).

Beyond China? Early Confucian thinkers assumed that their ideals were universally valid. A world where different people live in accordance with different values would have been

considered second best. In that sense, Confucianism is put forward as a philosophy with universal validity, similar to liberalism and Christianity.

So which values are truly universal? At the level of principle, a small set of crucial human rights are valued by all governments, religions, and traditions. The most obvious are the prohibitions against slavery, genocide, and systematic racial discrimination. Of course, many human rights violations occur off the record, but the task is to expose the gap between public allegiance to basic human rights and the sad reality of ongoing abuse. Such work is practical, not philosophical. At the level of principle, Western liberals and left Confucians also share “thicker” values, such as commitments to gender equality and the need to criticize bad governments. Beyond that, however, there will be clear areas of divergence: left Confucianism will place more emphasis on meritocracy in politics, memorization in education, paternalism in government-funded media, and ritual as a mechanism for securing the interests of the disadvantaged.

All political theories should allow for the possibility of mutual enrichment. In its best moments, Confucianism has shown openness to other traditions like Legalism, Buddhism, and Daoism, to the point that it’s often hard to distinguish these theories in practice. In its encounter with Western political theories, however, Confucianism has been the student rather than the teacher, and it’s worth asking under what conditions it might be found compelling by Western liberals. One condition is that Western societies undergo a prolonged crisis of confidence. It is a sad truth that people are more inclined to learn from others when their own ways prove inadequate. Chinese intellectuals only looked to the West when traditional social and political life broke down, and it may take a similar crisis in the West before large numbers of Western intellectuals turn to Confucianism for hope and inspiration. At a recent conference on the “China model,” an influential Western journalist joked, “Give us time, we’ve only had a few months of humiliation.” Meanwhile, it is important for the West to tolerate, if not respect, morally justifiable differences.

But the key obstacle to universalizing Confucianism, perhaps, is the gap between theory and practice. Yes, the revival of Confucianism over the past few years is reason for optimism. But there is still a long way to go. There is no Censorate. The media tend to serve the party rather than the disadvantaged. Social welfare reformers still look more to Europe than to East and Southeast Asia. There has hardly been any reform of political institutions inspired by lower-level reforms. The elderly do not get even one vote for choosing top decision makers, much less extra votes. A meritocratic political assembly designed to represent the interests of future generations and foreigners exists only in left Confucian dreams. Confucian-style education meant to improve social ethics has yet to make any substantial dent in widespread corruption. There are obvious constraints on religious freedom in China, and the state does not officially support the Confucian religion. In short, left Confucianism needs to be translated into practice. Once 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.

Daniel A. Bell is Professor of Ethics and Political Theory at Tsinghua University (Beijing). Material in this essay is drawn from his book *China’s New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton University Press, 2008). He can be reached by e-mail at daniel.a.bell@gmail.com.

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Michael Walzer Responds

The rise of a genuinely left Confucianism in China would be a welcome development, but Dan Bell's account of what this doctrine might look like, and how it is invoked by contemporary "new leftists," leaves me unpersuaded that it could do the ideological work that China needs today. Bell himself recognizes that it still has to be tested—that is, rigorously applied. Meanwhile, I have three worries.

(1) Bell describes left Confucianism as a critical doctrine, but it is only in his last paragraph that he says anything that is seriously, pointedly critical. And he doesn't describe any significant criticism from contemporary left Confucians. Consider one example: China today is one of the most inegalitarian countries in the world, and the inequality is increasing. The World Bank reports that wages in China as a share of GDP declined from 53 percent in 1998 to 41.4 percent in 2005; in the United States, hardly a society of equals, the share is 57 percent. Au Loong Yu (in *New Politics* 47, Summer 2009) argues that the Chinese government's current stimulus program doesn't focus on raising wages, "although the latter measure is more effective [than any other] in addressing the...lack of consumer demand." So the claim of the "influential new left scholar," Wang Shaoguang, that the Chinese government "has been aggressively tackling the problem of economic inequality" (and so there is no immediate need for electoral democracy) doesn't sound, to speak gently and humbly in the style of Confucian social criticism, sufficiently critical.

Nor is there anything in Bell's piece to suggest that left Confucians are actively engaged in opposing the current crackdown on human rights lawyers and journalists who try to expose, say, the shoddy construction of school buildings or the official cover-up after an earthquake brings the buildings down and kills thousands of children; or who criticize the treatment of minorities in Tibet or the Muslim West; or who defend the right of workers to organize.

Bell seems to believe that Confucianism is already a powerful force in Chinese culture (he cites its influence in many areas), but it clearly isn't already a critical force, and there is no sign in his account of an emergent critique. The

focus on harmony, stability, paternalism, and "less adversarial models of conflict resolution" is supposed to make for a better kind of criticism than our Western kind. I would only ask, better for whom?

(2) Left Confucianism, as Bell wishes for it, seems heavily dependent on Western ideologies—at least as dependent as the "liberal Confucianism" that he criticizes. China, he argues, must adopt social democracy, solidarity, human rights, and the rule of law—and also, as he says several times in other parts of his essay, gender equality. But these values must also be "adapted" to Chinese conditions and culture. They must be naturalized. That certainly makes sense both morally and prudently, but it leaves a hard question: how do we judge the adaptations? The values must somehow survive in their adapted form, and we can only decide if they do survive by referring to their original meaning. So, in fact, gender equality, which is not originally a Confucian idea, is the standard by which we judge whatever version of feminism left Confucians come up with. Of course, there is room for negotiation in the naturalization process, but if men and women end up unequal in their rights and opportunities, then we have to say that the adaptation has gone wrong. How is this different from what "liberal" Confucians do?

The truth is that both the adoption and adaptation of Western ideas in China and all over the world began a long time ago and is already well advanced. Human rights lawyers in China are, no doubt, brave human beings, fighting against the odds, but they are in no sense aliens. Ordinary Chinese probably have little difficulty understanding what they are saying. In a recent book comparing worker protest in the Chinese rustbelt and sunbelt, Ching Kwan Lee reports that the older workers in the rustbelt use the language of Marxism while the younger workers in the sunbelt use the language of human rights (*Against the Law: Labor Protest in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007)). Both of these are, today, Chinese languages. It still has to be proved that left Confucianism is a better language of protest.

(3) Bell's proposed Confucian adaptation of democracy strikes me as profoundly undemocratic. I am sure it is true that "the capacity to make competent and morally justifiable political judgments varies among people." And it is also true that "an important task of the political system is to identify those with above average capacity." In a democracy, that's what voters have to try to do. The notion that anyone else can do it has a long history, but it is a history of failure. Aristocratic breeding never worked; it produced political leaders who defended the privileges of the aristocracy. Meritocratic selection gives us the government of the best and the brightest, but as Americans can attest, the best and the brightest make horrifying mistakes, which ordinary common sense might well avoid. The Confucian preference for the elderly has some appeal to this old man, but I know myself well enough, and I know too many other old men and women, to imagine that we have any

special claim to political authority. We will only defend to the death (or to other people's deaths) the mistakes we made long ago. I know of no evidence that old folks take "the interests of strangers" more seriously than young folks—or that people who can pass competitive examinations are more likely than those who can't to support global justice. The way to achieve justice, at home and abroad, is to give political power to those who suffer from injustice. I don't think that there is any other way.

All this said, there is much in Bell's account to admire. I came away from reading his essay thinking that left Confucianism might do more good qualifying and complicating liberalism in the West than it could possibly do in confronting Chinese authoritarianism and inequality. China needs an edgier doctrine.

Michael Walzer is co-editor of *Dissent*.

Daniel A. Bell Replies

In 1989, I strongly supported the student-led pro-democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. Without knowing much about China, I guess I supported the students partly out of a form of self-love; it seemed they wanted to follow my social and political way of life. It didn't occur to me that democracy in China might take particular forms rooted in its own traditions. Five years later, however, I read these words:

I recognized in the arguments of the students [in Tiananmen Square in 1989] a sense of their mission or their special political role that was clearly incompatible with the American [democratic] ideal (in which a certain hostility to the claims of the educated classes has always been present) and probably incompatible too with the prevailing abstract and universal theories. Student elitism was rooted, perhaps, in Leninist vanguard politics or, more likely, in pre-communist cultural traditions (Confucian, mandarin) specific to China and certain to show up in any version of Chinese democracy.

Those words were written by my favorite political theorist—Michael Walzer—in his book *Thick and Thin* (1994), and they inspired me to think about what democracy with Chinese characteristics might mean in practice. For a North American leftist, the idea that educated people could be the ones with a more enlightened vision does not seem plausible, but perhaps I needed to think outside the box. Given the long history of meritocracy in China as well as the country's disastrous experience with the anti-intellectual Cultural Revolution, perhaps it makes sense to think of ways of empowering intellectual elites in the Chinese context. A few years later, I sketched out a proposal for a bicameral legislature with a democratically elected lower house and an upper house composed of representatives selected on the basis of competitive examinations. By that time, I had gotten to know Michael Walzer not just as an inspiring theorist, but also as a kind and warm friend, and he persuaded me to modify the proposal so that the upper house should be constitutionally subordinate to the democratically elected house.

But I've now changed my mind, mainly due to my lived experience in China and interactions with students and leading intellectuals here. Over the past decade, Chinese intellectuals have reconnected with their past, and many different proposals have emerged for political reform rooted at least partly in China's own traditions. The most thoughtful and detailed proposals try to combine "Western" ideas of democracy with "Confucian" ideas of meritocracy, and rather than subordinate Confucian values and institutions to democracy as an a priori dictum, they contain a division of labor, with democracy having priority in some areas and meritocracy in others. If it's about land disputes in rural China, farmers should have a greater say. If it's about pay and safety disputes, workers should have a greater say. In practice, it means more freedoms of speech and association and more representation for workers and farmers in the political process.

But what about issues like foreign policy? Perhaps giving "power to the people" works, but perhaps not. If university-educated people had extra votes in the American political process, George W. Bush would not have been elected, and the United States would not have invaded Iraq. And what about concern for future generations? Michael Walzer says, "The way to achieve justice, at home and abroad, is to give political power to those who suffer from injustice." But which nation-based democracies give power to future generations who will be affected by global warming? In cases of conflict of interest between the current generations of voters and future generations, when have democracies sided with the latter? If China can come up with a meritocratic system of government that institutionalizes the idea that some political leaders have the task of repre-

senting the interests of future generations, foreigners, and all those likely to be affected by the policies of the rulers—*tian xia*, to use the language of Confucianism—shouldn't we encourage them to do so? Why would we blindly want to support democracy as a universal ideal, even if that goes against the grain of China's own traditions and the reflective understandings of many Chinese intellectuals today? Walzer claims that Confucianism "clearly isn't already a critical force," but if that's the case why do Confucian-inspired theorists experience censorship? In today's China, it's easier to publish a text on democratic theory and human rights than a book on Confucian political theory that draws social and institutional implications. The problem, as I see it, is rather the opposite—that Confucianism might be too critical, too utopian, too far removed from reality to really make a difference.

On the other hand, the recent revival of Confucianism does give rise to some hope. Perhaps left-liberals in the West may be increasingly pessimistic about China's political reform because their cherished ideals of one person/one vote and multiparty rule seem further away than ever. But if critical Chinese intellectuals and political reformers are now increasingly seeking inspiration from Confucian values like harmony, meritocracy, civility, and paternalism, thinking about how to combine China's own values with those from traditions of foreign heritage, such as socialism, liberalism, and feminism, shouldn't we be open to such reinterpretations? Perhaps "China needs an edgier doctrine," but I don't think it will get very far if that doctrine doesn't owe anything to "pre-communist cultural traditions (Confucian, mandarin) specific to China and certain to show up in any version of Chinese democracy."

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