

Confucius Comes to Washington

by William Jones

Jan. 16—The China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater brought its dance drama about the life of the great Chinese philosopher Confucius to the nation's capital at the Kennedy Center Opera House on Jan. 13. Without a doubt, it is an appropriate time to perform the ballet here in Washington, since we are on the verge of a new Administration.

The main topic of the life and work of Confucius was the issue of governance, not in the rather trivial sense the term is bandied about in political jargon these days, but rather in governance in the more profound sense of preserving the fabric of society in which, as Cicero wrote, the good of the people is the supreme law of the land.

Confucius (551-479 BC) lived during what is known as the Warring States Period, before China was unified (221 BC). This was a period in which China was divided into numerous states, which often conducted wars against each other, whether seeking more territory, more wealth, or simply retribution for previous alleged grievances.

Confucius traveled the length and breadth of most of what is today's China, seeking a ruler who would adhere to his notions of proper governance and benevolence. Except for some limited and transitory successes, he never really found a government willing to make his principles the basis of governing. At the end of his life, he returned to his home in the state of Lu, where he continued to teach his disciples, and wrote his books describing the lessons that he had tried to teach to the leaders of the various states.

When he died, he may have felt that his work had been a failure, but in fact the lessons he taught and the



Statue of Confucius at Confucian Temple in Shanghai, China.

writings he left behind became the basis of Chinese thinking for well over two millennia, and make themselves felt in Chinese policy and practice to this day.

The ballet drama was sparse with words. In fact no words were spoken until the final act. The drama depicted the life of Confucius. While there were larger groups of dancers performing in the various scenes, as soldiers, attendants, or ladies-in-waiting, there were four main characters:

- Confucius, played by Hu Yang,
- the Duke, played by Zhu Yin,
- the Concubine, played by Tang Shiyi, and
- the Duke's Minister, played by Guo Haifeng.

The drama begins with a prelude in which a group of dancers perform an exquisite plume dance to recall their deceased teacher and philosopher. The figure of Confucius stands with his back to us in the shadows, until he is called forth to begin his mission, beginning in Act 1, labeled "The Chaotic Time." Confucius approaches the Duke with a scroll on which he has written his tenets of governance, but the Duke, more taken with the beauty of the Concubine than with matters of state, refuses to meet with the philosopher or even read his scroll. The Duke's Minister treats Confucius roughly, and angrily throws the scroll down.

Finally, Confucius approaches the Concubine with his scroll. She is moved by what Confucius has written, and tries to persuade the Duke to accept the doctrine of Benevolence that is being propounded by Confucius. The Duke's Minister, however, sensing the danger to him of this alliance of his Duke with the doctrines of Confucius, plots to carry out a coup



China/you tube

The dance drama Confucius

against the Duke, in which he succeeds.

The next scene, titled “Out of Food,” shows the starving people in a land now devastated by war and famine. The Minister, now in charge, comes to distribute food in a haughty manner aimed at winning the obedience of the masses. Confucius responds angrily, and refuses to accept food handed out with contempt. During a blizzard, Confucius continues to play his zither and to sing, full of optimism. He continues to lecture his disciples and teach his doctrines. The beautiful melodies tend to transport him into a beautiful dream-land.

In this state, Confucius, in Act III entitled “Great Harmony,” compares a gentleman of virtue to a piece of jade, cordial and gentle. Large jade figures are brought on the stage, around which the groups of dancers swirl. Confucius even dreams that the Duke has awarded him a sword as a symbol of respect and honor, and performs a beautiful sword dance in joy at his success.

But then reality intervenes. In Act IV, “Mourning for Benevolence,” people have been plunged into an abyss of misery, and death is everywhere. Confucius wanders alone, lost and helpless. Then he imagines his mother bringing him a lighted candle to warm his path of spiritual exploration. Cherry blossoms descend slowly, depicting his beautiful homeland. Melody fills

the air while an orchid blossom appears, a flower which flourishes even in inclement weather. Confucius hopes that, once noticed by the rulers, it might diffuse its fragrance to the world.

In the last scene, “Epilogue: Happiness,” Confucius is back in his hometown, devoting his life to educating his disciples and compiling the Six Classics: the *Classic of Poetry*, the *Book of Documents*, the *Book of Rites*, the *Classic of Music*, the *I Ching*, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, books that would form the basis of Chinese culture for over two millennia.

In the final scene, the dancers are gathered on stage reciting sayings of Confucius in unison, which are translated on a monitor for English-speakers:

- “When one sees a virtuous man, one should think of exerting oneself to be like him”;
- “When one sees someone who is not virtuous, one should examine oneself”;
- “People know it better who work on it, but not as well as those who love it”;
- “He who does not think of the future is certain to have immediate worries”;
- “In the face of benevolence, do not give precedence even to your teacher”;
- “If I learned the Way in the morning, I can die content in the evening.”



EIRNS/William Jones

Hu Yang, as Confucius



EIRNS/William Jones

Tang Shiyi, as the Concubine



EIRNS/William Jones

Guo Haifeng, as the Minister

While encompassing the life and works of a great philosopher in dance and music only, without words, may seem a daunting task, the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater succeeded masterfully in accomplishing it.

The dancing and the music were exquisite. In particular, Tang Shiyi, who played the Concubine, was almost acrobatic in her agility, combining it with grace and beauty to such an extent that it seemed almost effortless. In addition, the noble elegance in the dance movements of Hu Yang as Confucius, reflected well the grandeur of character of the great philosopher.

One of the surprising aspects of the dance drama was that it was choreographed by a young lady, Kong Dexin, a 77th-generation direct descendant of Confucius (Kong Qiu, in Chinese). She is very proud of her family history, and first presented *Confucius* in 2013 in Beijing. “Each person has to go through hardships to reach the prime moment of his or her life,” Kong Dexin told *China Daily* after the performance of *Confucius* in New York on Jan. 9. “So did Confucius. I think my drama, to some extent, brings him from the altar of worship, to the world in which ordinary people are living. I want to show spectators the uneasy part of his life,” she said.

She explains how the drama’s theme song, “Virtues of the Silent Orchid,” was inspired by a poem written by Confucius. “When Confucius was traveling across various kingdoms, he saw orchids blossoming silently



EIRNS/William Jones

Kong Dexin, choreographer of Confucius

amidst the grass by the roads. He thought about himself, and he wished he could grow like those orchids. Many of our spectators cried when they listened to the theme song,” she said.

An interesting personal touch to the performance was that the performers and the choreographer came out directly from the performance to the lobby of the Kennedy Center to sign the programs of the enthusiastic audience.

The fact that these concepts were brought to a large Washington audience at this moment of transition, may help serve as a sign that “business as usual” is no longer an option, since such a policy will only lead to tragedy. The alternative is the concept of “win-win” cooperation, which has been continually reiterated by Chinese President Xi Jinping. This approach provides the only way of conducting policy that reflects a sense of benevolence toward the people.

The visit of *Confucius* may have some effect on the governance of our nation, if only by creating greater interest among those who were touched by the three performances here in Washington and at Lincoln Center in New York, and by getting observers to take a closer look at the works of Confucius, as part of an attempt to gain a greater understanding of the rich culture out of which the Chinese nation emerged. Let us take the valuable lessons Confucius gave to the world, and use them to transform the destiny of mankind toward a condition in which Benevolence becomes the norm.