

## Confucius in China Today

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Originally, when I was requested to make this presentation on Confucius in today's China, I thought of it as a kind of break without coffee, among so many difficult issues regarding the geopolitical crisis, financial crisis, and so on. But now, I find it's almost a Mission Impossible, because for me, even as a Chinese person, it's too difficult to make clear Confucius's role in today's China, in just a few minutes.

There are two key points. First, who is Confucius, and what is Confucianism? And then, what is the problem of today's China?

I will try. Firstly, I think Confucius is only publicized a little bit in Europe, compared with other Chinese thinkers, such as Lao-Tze. I think for most German people, you prefer Lao-Tze to Confucius, because some German philosophers point out that Lao-Tze's theory is that more of a philosopher, especially from the perspective of German thinking.

But I would like to say that, compared with Lao-Tze, Confucius is an ancient Chinese thinker with more theory, more thinking about law for the human being. How should we live and work? I think it's very, very inspiring for our day, for our problems and the challenges, for the crisis we are facing, that Confucius have a very, very high reputation now in the world. In 1988, more than 35 Nobel Prize winners called for humanity to learn something more from Confucius's wisdom, for the survival of mankind.<sup>1</sup>

And also, as the American philosopher Mr. [Ralph Waldo] Emerson said, Confucius should be regarded as a glory for all nations in the world.

Here I need to quote a sentence from a German philosopher, [Karl] Jaspers. In his book *The Origin and*



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*Dr. Cui: “Even after 2,500 years, I think Confucius’s ideas are still very useful, very instructive for the Chinese people—and maybe not only for the Chinese people, but also for people from other countries.”*

*Goal of History*, he coined the term Axial Age—which means that there was a time [800 to 200 B.C.] when some very great, wise men were found in both the East and the West. In China, there was Confucius; in Europe, Aristotle and Plato; in India, there was Buddha. So, Confucius has a very high reputation in China, and in the world at large.

As some Chinese have described the law of Confucius in the history of China, if Confucius had not been born, mankind would have had to grope in the night. And also now, Confucius is estimated as one of the greatest thinkers, educators, politicians, and moralists in China and the world. His contribution also laid the basis for the Chinese political, philosophical, educational, and ethical system.

Confucius was born more than 2,500 years ago. Of course, his thought was inherited by other Chinese thinkers, and also ordinary Chinese people. So now we

1. For an in-depth discussion of Confucius and Confucianism in China, see Michael O. Billington, “The Deconstructionist Assault on China’s Cultural Optimism,” *Fidelio*, Fall 1997.

call this kind of theoretical system Confucianism. Among the people who inherited from Confucius, as we know, are Mencius, Xunzi, and Zhu Xi, and so on. In different historical periods of China, they developed Confucius's theories.

### The Pillars of Confucianism

In the very comprehensive system of his theories, I just want to take what I think are some of the main points. The core value of Confucianism is, firstly, the spirit of *rationalism*. What is the meaning of rationalism for Confucius? He believed that mankind's existence has its evolution guided by laws, not by natural laws, but by human beings' laws. And secondly, he thought that everybody, all people, should be educated to be a gentleman—but of course maybe you settle for the British Queen!

And secondly, he had a very obvious *dialectical methodology*. He believed that there is a transition or conversion between being good and bad, between gain and loss, so that maybe the biggest treasure for life, for mankind, is balance. We need to make clear what are two extremes; for example, what's the left and the right? What's the best and the worst? And then we need to keep to the middle way.

Third is his *pragmatic activism*. When we talk about the Chinese people's behavior, I think "pragmatic" is one of the most useful words of all to describe them. It's certainly from the very deep influence of Confucianism. As we know, Confucius didn't produce any books, articles, or papers. We can know what he thought only from some notes left by his students. And throughout his life, he just did one thing: He traveled to different countries. Of course, at that time China was not a unified country as it is today. There were many small countries, as in today's Europe. For the purpose of proselytizing his political ideal, Confucius and his students traveled to different countries, to promote his theories, to persuade the kings to do something better for the people.

But, in the end, he failed. Almost nobody understood and accepted what he was thinking, what he was doing.



*Britain's HMS Nemesis in 1841 destroys Chinese ships, during the Opium Wars: painting by Edward Duncan (1843). The European defeat of China, according to Dr. Cui, led many Chinese intellectuals to feel disillusioned with Confucianism, because it did not help them to prevent the European conquests.*

Finally, I think the most important characteristic of the Confucian idea is *humanism*. There are very remarkable words by Confucius: Whether a law or theory is useful or not, depends on whether it is useful for the people. Otherwise, it's nonsense. I think that's a very remarkable reflection of this humanism of Confucianism.

Confucius asked for politicians or kings at that time to practice a kind of *ren*, which means benevolent governance. Because it's a Chinese word, it's a little bit difficult to translate into English or some other language, but now we can find a very comprehensive explanation in English of this word: It means benevolent politics, and it also means humanity. Because it was not so clear a concept, his students kept asking the exact meaning of this word. Finally Confucius said, "What's *ren* anyway? What's benevolence? It's loving somebody else." So, we can find some similarity between Confucius and the Christian.

### Confucianism and the West

Now, I will try to make the main point as quickly as I can.

After 2,500 years, we need to be concerned about the fate of Confucianism in China. I think that in what we call the modern China period, there is some kind of a clash between Confucianism and some other theories, or laws.

In the 18th Century, especially when the European countries expanded into Asia, I call it the first meeting between Confucianism and capitalism from Europe. Because China was defeated by the European countries, and became part of the colonial system of some European countries. At that time, the traditional Chinese intellectual felt more and more disappointed with Confucianism, because they thought, no matter how good it is, it did not help the Chinese people to avoid this destiny, of being conquered like that.

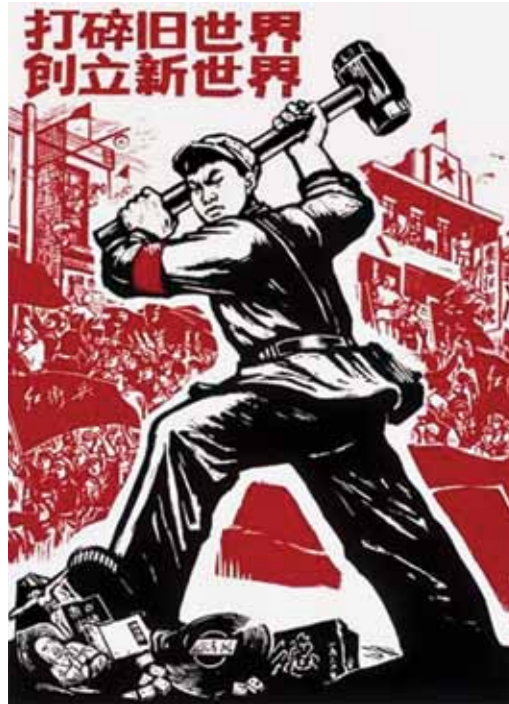
Then there is what happened in the 1960s and the 1970s—the Cultural Revolution. It was the aim of this revolution, as was said at that time, “to break down Confucianism.” That was another tragedy for Confucianism in China.

The third period was after China “opened up,” implemented the reform policy: We called it a “modernization period,” when the market economy was introduced into China. The traditional mindset, the traditional lifestyle of the Chinese people, has been challenged by this very different style of life, style of thinking. These challenges to China are still going on.

That’s the reason we are talking about Confucianism and Confucius today. Frankly speaking, because of the very fast economic growth in the past 30 years, China now faces some huge problems, some big challenges. We have to pay the price for this high-speed economic growth.

Now the problem is that the traditional social structure was broken up by some political movements, and the economic growth was too fast. People felt uneasy about everything, and as a result, the traditional moral system in China needed to be reconstructed.

The bad thing now, in Chinese society, is that most people live only for making money as quickly as possible. I felt a little bit ashamed, as a Chinese person, to hear some days ago, that in the last year, China over-



*During the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and '70s, the aim was “to break down Confucianism.” The poster here says, “Destroy the old world, build a new world,” as the Red Guard smashes books and symbols of Classical culture.*

took the United States to become number one in the world as a buyer of luxury goods! Okay, the Chinese people become richer and richer. But the problem is, it is just a few people; according to the per-capita income, China is still a poor country. It could not be acceptable that in a poor country, only a few people have such big purchasing power.

I think that this whole problem is because the government missed some opportunities for rebalancing economic laws and social justice. With the opportunity of upgrading manufacturing and infrastructure, most of the time, the policymakers in the government were driven by an economic bubble, for example, the real estate bubble. So now, China has to pay the price for these mistakes. Now China has to adjust its economic

model, and to slow down its economic growth.

I think, especially under the impact of the American crisis and the euro crisis, this is maybe a last chance for the Chinese government, and for the Chinese people, to rethink the gains and losses of the last 30 years. The government has to do something more with some new ideas, to have some new model of development.

The goals of the government are clear enough. They want to upgrade manufactures, and invest more into the real economy, not this financial or real estate market. And also they are trying to follow up the thinking of Mr. LaRouche, to develop the national economy, not driven by the foreign stock markets. Some days ago, I heard that Chinese foreign currency reserves have reached US\$3.53 trillion—almost the same amount as the German GDP! I don’t think that’s good news. I think that there is very great pressure on the Chinese government to keep a balance, because now there are more and more complaints from average Chinese people: How could you give so much money to Wall Street, or some other speculative market? Why





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*In modern China, “most people live only for making money as quickly as possible.” Shown is a pedestrian shopping district in Shanghai.*

don’t you give that to the Chinese people? Because you are the Chinese government!

We should go back to the way of thinking, the life-style, of Confucius and Confucianism. Even after 2,500 years, I think all of these theories, these thoughts, are still very useful, very instructive for the Chinese people—and maybe not only for the Chinese people, but also for people from other countries. Because Confucianism means that for everybody, for every part of society, for every organization in a society, we should make clear what our mission is, our position, and our joint efforts for the same goal.

So I think that now, especially for Chinese society, we need to do something more to get to a new consensus among the government, the people, and businessmen—everybody—to reach the same goal. And not only the Chinese people, but all mankind, human beings, do have the same goal. We need to reach a consensus between China and Europe, between China and Russia, between China and some other parts of the world.

I think that maybe in the future, Confucianism will meet with Goethe and Schiller, because I think that in China, Confucianism should be regarded as the Classical face for all of Chinese culture.

So I imagine that once, between China and Europe,

we have more and more communication, especially cultural communication, we can have more and more mutual understanding. Maybe we can find from each other, more and more solutions for our own problems, and for each other. I think it looks good; but what we need to do is start right now!

Some days ago I joined a meeting in Brussels, between an NGO delegation from China and the European Union Economic and Social Committee. We talked about the issue of intercultural exchange. And we recognized some principles: We need to recognize diversity and the differences between us, before we start to find more

common ground. It’s my wish—I hope that it’s also your hope—that we can try to do more, for the last chance for mankind.

### **LaRouche: A Confucian Mentor**

Finally, I will express my tribute, as a Chinese scholar, to Mr. LaRouche and his wife. I know that the relations between Mr. LaRouche and his wife, and China, track back to 20 years ago, when a very popular Chinese journal published an article by Mr. LaRouche. In that article, Mr. LaRouche predicted that China needed to do something more at that time; otherwise the Chinese wealth would transfer from the mainland rural area to the coastal area, and then be exported to other countries. And Mr. LaRouche also reminded us that there was very bad thinking in China at that time: that we need to make money, as quickly as possible. He said that would be dangerous to the moral system of China, and it would be dangerous, harmful for those people, those elites, who can decide what’s the right direction for China as a big country.

So, Mr. LaRouche suggested that what China needed to do was to go back to a Classical, national economic principle, because that is the basis for all of these Western big powers’ rise in history. And ten years ago,

one of my friends, Mr. Ding, conducted an interview with Mr. LaRouche, and he told me that he very, very much admired Mr. LaRouche, because he's almost a

Mr. LaRouche is almost a legend, a person who lives in the United States, in a Western country, but wants to reshape Western civilization. We have always respected people who live their lives for one goal, as a Confucianist. So, please permit me to call Mr. LaRouche a Confucian mentor.

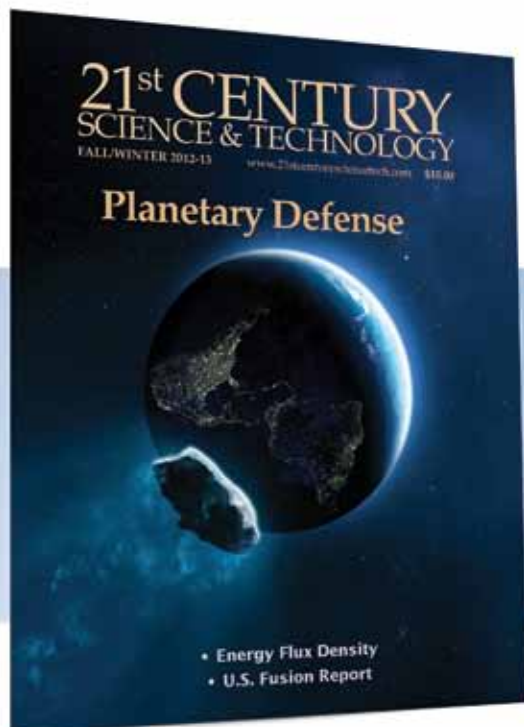
legend, as a person who lived in the United States, in a Western country, but he has this kind of encouragement, wanting to reshape Western civilization.

Time is flying, and also for the Chinese people. We have always respected those people who believe that they practice life for one goal, as a Confucianist. So, finally, please permit me to call Mr. LaRouche a Confucian mentor.

Thank you.



"I think that in China, Confucianism should be regarded as the Classical face for all of Chinese culture," said Dr. Cui.



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