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confucius

1. Introduction

Mention Confucius to a typical Western audience, the immediate reaction is likely to be one of amusement. Confucius says followed by a pompous, sometimes ludicrous, occasionally smutty, statement is a frequently used way to tell a bad joke. The only Westerners to take Confucius serious are students and Asian Culture scholars who make a study of ancient Asian literature and philosophy, for whom Confucian ideas are valuable as part of our total cultural heritage, but even they would not usually regard Confucius to be socially relevant in a modern, Western context. Confucian society is thought to be some kind of morally conservative, highly hierarchical and tradition-bound society that modern nations evolved away from and that are in an ongoing process of dying away. On the rare occasion when Westerners think about Confucius at all, they might concede the importance of Confucian ideas to Oriental nations and individuals who have not yet fully converted to democratic and capitalist principles, but this is only because traditions take time to change.

This is an unfortunate misconception. The essential ideas of Confucianism are universal, in terms of time, geography and cultural context. They concern how leaders in an hierarchical system should conduct themselves in a way that maintains stability and maximizes consensus. For all the emphasis on democracy and equal opportunity, even Westerners work and live in hierarchical systems, and they can benefit from Confucian principles as much as Orientals.

It is also a serious mistake to assume an inherent incompatibility between Confucianism and democracy, or between Confucianism and capitalism. South Korea, with essentially no change in its government and social hierarchies, now has a democratically elected President who was once an imprisoned, tortured and nearly murdered political dissident. Whereas the more westernized Soviet Union collapsed after attempting economic modernization, the neo-Confucian China achieved much

greater successes in its economic reform, again without undergoing significant modifications of its hierarchical structure. The success of the compact city state of Singapore to establish a prosperous, modern and technologically advanced, yet highly controlled Confucian society is well known and highly puzzling to Western commentators.

Far from being exotic and antiquated, Confucian principles, when stated simply, sound too obvious and common: the need for moderation and compromise; the need to follow well established procedures; the need for leaders to constantly reflect on their own conduct, take advice and seek improvements; the need to educate the people one leads; The point is to follow these as a way of life, so that they come naturally. Confucianism is not a technology; it does not provide a toolkit that one pulls out when the right spanner is needed for a particular nut, or a book of sample answers to be memorized to answer a particular question that comes up on the examination. Like the economic principle of Adam Smith (which too sounds very simple and obvious when stated by itself), Confucianism is a moral philosophy that has to be applied consistently, yet adapted constantly to particular circumstances.

This is an introduction to the life and ideas of Confucius written for a Western audience without any background in Asian Studies, who wish to gain an understanding of the social context under which Confucian ideas arise, and how they were meant to be applied in practice. It is hoped that the reader would not only gain a better appreciation of the cultural background of modern Asian societies and organizations, but also see value in the Confucian way of life and adopt a more Confucian outlook in their future conduct.

The available biographical texts about Confucius contain much writings introduced by later writers with a different agenda. Taoists extoll those aspects of Confucius and disciples to oppose vanity and overachievement, and Legalists about the need for rules and hierarchy. Confucians anxious to show how great Confucius was made up naive and unlikely stories that made his life mythical rather than real. The fact that so many of the stories look ridiculous explains why it is so easy to dismiss the life and ideas of Confucius as comical, or as contrived by reactionary people as tools to preserve an old order. The present account will try to sieve facts from myth and show Confucius as a human person, both a political thinker and a politician, rather than a figure of legend.

2. Social Background

Confucius lived during the Eastern Zhou period, when the old feudal system devised by the founders of Zhou Kingdom had broken down, but before the free-for-all Warring States period had begun. New ideas for organizing Chinese societies were needed, and Confucius started the process which eventually established the numerous schools of thought that competed for the attention of princes, until one school, the Legalists, and one state, Qin, achieved the unification of China as a centrally governed empire.

To understand the logic of Zhou feudalism, two things must be remembered. First, when the Kingdom of Zhou was founded, China was a sparsely populated land on which wild animals and nomadic tribes still roamed, and civilized government existed only in isolated towns. Second, money had not yet been invented, and the main way for a sovereign to reward a loyal follower or relative is to give him a piece of land and a tribe of followers. With both land and people, the tribe leader could then build a town surrounded by a protective wall, cultivate farming land around it, and call soldiers into battle in times of trouble. In short, loyal followers and relatives are made into feudal lords, occupying a network of mutually supporting towns, each dominating its surrounding territory. Since money did not exist, taxes and salaried officials to collect them were unknown. Instead, the feudal lord extracted labour from his followers: the surrounding land was divided into standard plots of 3 by 3 squares with 8 serf-peasant families occupying the surrounding plots and the centre part reserved for their lord; the serf-peasants were required to spend part of their time working the lords land, as well as take part in public works projects. The higher tribal members, the Shi (knight) class, are entitled to bear arms to fight for the lord, for which they receive portions of land and serfs of their own. They normally lived in the town itself to perform garrison duties, and were mustered to fight in the field when needs arose.

The tribe of followers was regarded the extended family of the lord, and the whole tribe was thought of

having descended from a common, divine ancestor, who must be honoured according to a prescribed set of annual rituals, which were believed to bring down blessings to the tribe and were needed to ensure good harvests and good communal health. As head of the family, the lord was the tribes link to the divine ancestor, and only the right person, chosen according to valid rules of succession, could fulfil this role properly. If the position was usurped by the wrong person, then the divine ancestor would reject the ritual sacrifices or would be unable to rest in peace, thus causing pestilences or natural disasters. A lord that fails to do his duties properly, by not governing well or showing insufficient ceremonial dedication, would have a similarly bad effect on the whole tribal community. In this way, the religious practices provide an ideological underpinning for communal cohesion and legitimate succession. Similarly, the King of Zhou was the supreme head of the family of all Chinese people, and is owed allegiance by all the feudal lords. A similarly elaborate set of rituals for regular audiences between the King and the lords served to reinforce this relationship. Together, the various rules of behaviour form the Zhou Conventions (Zhou Li).

Different from European feudal system, the traditional Chinese rules of inheritance provides for succession along the male line only, but it recognizes all biological sons as being eligible to succeed rather than only issues of the official wife, but with precedence determined by the seniority of the mother. By inheriting from both the mother and the father, a European feudal law could pick up widely flung territories with incompatible political traditions, producing numerous problems of government, and the Chinese system avoids this, and because a lord tended to have numerous concubines and hence many children, lack of heirs was seldom a problem. The problem was rather the reverse of too many heirs; in particular, an old lord may have late life sons born by young favorite concubines, who would usually try to manipulate the lord into renaming a younger son as heir, instead of the previously named heir from the senior wife. This often led to succession disputes, in which powerful barons put in a hand to get their own choice to succeed. Often, princes of neighbouring states would be called upon to arbitrate, or appeals made to the Zhou King to reimpose order.

By the time of Confucius, the central feudal system had all but broken down. The prestige of the Zhou throne had been greatly reduced by the misrule of a number of tyrannical kings, and a major family feud coupled with a nomadic invasion had led to the total devastation and abandonment of the extensive territory around the Zhou western capital, so that the rule of the King was restricted to the much smaller territory around the eastern capital, and he could only command the resources comparable to those of a lesser feudal lord so that he could no longer coerce baronial obedience. There was no longer a central authority to enforce a common code of feudal conduct for the whole of China. At the same time, population increases in the baronial states and military conquests had extended baronial government well beyond single towns. With no central government, individual states fought each other frequently. Instead of small, rather ritualistic combats fought by little bands of town resident noblemen riding chariots, mass infantry battles with peasant soldiers became prominent, and each lord sought to govern over as much population as his land could support. As it was difficult for a lord to make use of the labour of serf-peasants living very far away from the capital, a levy on harvests became the main form of taxation, so that a lord controls stockpiles of collected grain, and paying appointed officials with a ration of grain came into practice as an alternative to the allocation of land. This is a very significant change. Previously, when a lord needed someone to help run the government, he would call upon some member of his family or some other nobility, because they were the ones already paid by the state with land; the state was a family business, in fact it was regarded as a family. Birth was the principal requirement for holding office. Once this ceases to be the only criteria, the natural thing was to use some kind of educational criteria for selection. In this sense, society was changing from aristocracy to meritocracy, and opportunities for upward mobility was being opened up. Instead of spoilt brats of nobility, who inbreed extensively and degenerate rapidly, fresh people with knowledge and trained skills could be recruited from a much wider field, and the content and mode of education became a significant social issue, since it fundamentally affects the future government and leadership of a society.

Thus, Confucianism was a reform movement underwent by a hereditary feudalistic society to adapt to

new conditions. Confucius did not invent hierarchical societies or feudalism, since they existed long before him, but merely devised new ideas of personnel. However, he was in fact seeking to preserve the existing social order, and in this sense his aims were conservative rather than radical. Nevertheless, the process of education leaves room for an orderly, gradual evolution of society, and such a principle is as valid today as it was two thousand five hundred years ago.

3. The State of Lu

Confucius spent most of his life in the state of Lu, on the eastern side of China, strategically placed at the start of the Zhou dynasty to be an outpost of civilization among barbarians. The Duke of Lu was the direct descendant of the Duke of Zhou, the uncle of the second Zhou King and regent during the King's minority, who oversaw the codification of the Zhou Conventions. This gives the state of Lu something of a vested interest in traditions and feudal orthodoxy, and in the early centuries of Zhou's history, Lu maintained a close adherence to its feudal duties. However, an unwise move by King Xuan to side with a younger son in a Lu succession dispute led to a rupture. Had the Zhou Kingdom remained strong, it might have eventually reimposed the previous relation, but as its authority severely declined soon after, the state of Lu lost any incentive to resume its abeyance.

In due course, the same centrifugal tendencies appeared in Lu itself. Three junior branches of the House of Lu, Meng, Ji and Shu, were established in the reign of Duke Zhuang. By successively backing the right ducal heirs in several disputes, the lords of Ji managed to monopolize power for so long that it became virtually hereditary. Together with his Meng and Shu cousins, Lord Ji divided up the peasants and soldiers to swear allegiance and pay tax to the individual houses rather than directly to the Duke, who was reduced to the nominal role of presiding over the annual rituals. An attempt to reassert ducal authority by Duke Zhao, around the time when Confucius was still a youth, failed and the Duke died in exile.

Retribution was swift however. Each of the three lords had a baronial town with the usual garrison soldiers and suburban peasants, but over several generations the lords themselves lived in the Lu capital running the ducal government, so that the governors they appointed to manage the towns usurped their authority, and in their own households in the capital, their chiefs of staff too began to emulate their examples of kicking your boss upstairs, knowing that the men below had become accustomed to the idea of obeying the commands from the level immediately above, rather than from the nominal lords further up. For the period when Confucius was in his forties, Yang Huo, the chief of staff of the House of Ji, was the de facto dictator of Lu, while Lord Ji was virtually kept a prisoner. In doing this, Yang Huo was tapping on a widespread feeling that the three baronial houses were arrogant and exceeding their station in life, though his real purpose in cutting down the barons was to raise himself and other lower order supporters rather than the revival of the higher authorities and re-establishment of the old feudal order.

But this did not last long either. Although Yang Huo held de facto power in Lu, the practising of the various state rituals was too deeply entrenched to change, and it continued to be necessary to regularly present the lords in public ceremonies and pay homage. Finding such obligations irksome, Yang Huo decided to replace the three barons altogether rather than nominally rule through them. In attempting this, he overplayed his hand. Faced with such a serious threat, the barons and their still loyal and semi-loyal followers colluded to counteract, and mobilized sufficient resources to defeat the Yang Huo faction. After being besieged in his own stronghold for a period, Yang Huo escaped to the neighbouring Qi state, leaving behind a government vacuum in Lu. Into this aristocratic vacuum stepped Confucius and his followers, to usher in a new chapter in the history of ancient China.

4. The Early Career of Confucius

Confucius was descended from the royal family of Shang, the dynasty ruling China previously to the Zhou takeover, during which the Shang king committed suicide following his army's defeat. His son was granted a much reduced domain as a vassal of the Zhou king, but soon rose in an unsuccessful revolt and died. His state was then given to his uncle with the title of Duke of Song. A branch of the Song

ducal family was established at the town of Kong, which become the familys surname, and its baron participated in the Song government over several generations. However, in another one of those baronial feuds, the great-great-great-great grandfather of Confucius was murdered, but his son escaped to the neighbouring state of Lu. Little was recorded about the next couple of generation of the Kongs, but Confucius's father was mentioned twice in historical records as a military hero. In one incident, a group of Lu soldiers charged into the town of Biyang, but was threatened with being cut off by a gate being dropped behind them; however, the very muscular Officer Kong managed to hold the gate up with his arms, allowing his comrades to retreat from the town. In another, he was besieged in a town, but successfully broke out to escort a senior officer to safety before breaking back in to help with the defence, which held out long enough for the besiegers to give up.

After returning from the latter campaign, Officer Kong was already over sixty, but he decided to take a new wife, a young daughter of the Yan family living in the Lu capital of Qufu, apparently to have a martially capable son: he already had several daughters and one son who was lame. The wife had some initial difficulty to conceiving, but a visit to some kind of fertility shrine seemed to help, and Confucius was born when his father was well over 65. When he was 3, his father died, aged around 70, and his mother took him back to Qufu to live with her own family possibly because, as a mere knight, his father's estate was non-hereditary and reverted to the state upon death, or perhaps because it was inherited by the elder son, who refused to provide for his stepmother and stepbrother. In any case, Confucius was said to have been raised in reduced circumstances, but claims of abject poverty seem to be exaggerated as he certainly was given some form of training befitting his knightly status in preparation for future state service.

The biography of Confucius mentions his early interest in religious rituals: after seeing adults engaged in acts of sacrifice in the temples, he would imitate the actions at home the way children play house. This is not as comical as it might sound: the ancient Chinese ancestor worship is so closely linked with family life and farming practice that there was no idea of religion as a spiritual activity separate from material living. It was not thought to be much different from getting together for meals three times a day. For the same reason, a separate priestly class did not really exist. There were officials responsible for the upkeep of temples, recording the worship activities, directing and prompting people to do particular acts in ceremonies, etc., but these were not regarded as particularly different jobs compared with other officials who upkeep palaces, barrack or even stables, record births, military actions or astronomical events, or manage proceedings of official banquets. These are all activities that require a particular type of training, which produces people who can read and write, remember procedures, and handle technical details; in other words, educated people rather than aristocratic warriors trained to fight and to bark out orders.

The biography also records Confucius starting his state service as a minor official in the household of Lord Ji, keeping records for storage and supervising herds, his accounts were clear and his herds were plump. The interesting point to note is that, neither meat nor milk were significant components of the Chinese diet at the time, and the herds of cattle were kept for a different purpose: to pull plows in the field or carts on the road, and to be slaughtered in ritual sacrifice. Another description of his activities mentions that, whenever he went into the state shrine, he would ask many questions about the objects kept in the shrine and the ritual procedures followed. In some way or other, he began to distinguish himself to be worthy of more advanced training, cumulating in his being sent to the Zhou capital, where the central archives were kept, to learn more about historical writings and traditional rituals. The biography goes on to say that after returning from the Zhou capital, Confucius acquired more students. Lord Meng, who went on a diplomatic mission but found to his embarrassment that he was ignorant of the steps he had to perform in the official ceremonies he had to witness in the other states, told his two sons to learn from Confucius about such matters.

Does it mean that Confucius was making a living from students paying tuition fees? Not at all. Such commercial enterprise was impractical in those days, first because most students could not afford to pay. Confucius was quoted saying anyone who presents me with a few strings of dry meat could become my student, and most students would not be able to present him with much more than that. Further, with

no mass media and advertising, it would also be difficult for a commercial school to reach out to customers. His school was a state supported enterprise, taking in students who were entitled to knightly training by virtue of their rank. He received an annual stipend of one thousand bushels of grain (or 64000 cups, but the figure was usually stated in the rounded amount of sixty thousand), which supported not just him and his family, but any student that did not have means of living while studying. It is quite possible however that the better off students would provide him with private gifts to supplement the official income. This explains the quotation Since Lord Ji granted me a stipend of one thousand bushels, friends got closer to me; since Nangong Jingshu transported me in his carriage, my ideas spread wider; without these two benefactors, my way would have lapsed. That is, with a stipend to operate the school, he could support more students. Though the stipend came from Lord Ji, it was derived from the state revenue extracted by the Ji household, and Lord Ji was supposedly acting on behalf of the Duke. Similarly, Nangong Jingshu, the second son of Lord Meng who controlled another part of the state revenue, contributed towards the work of Confucius on behalf of the state in addition to a personal show of respect as his father asked.

In fact, even when his students were doing work for the state, they were entitled to draw from Confucius's grain allocation. A story in the text says Gongxi Hua was sent as emissary to another state, and asked for grain to be given to him mother during his absence. The amount Confucius approved was considered too little, and the student managing things for Lord Ji decided on his own to give 50 times the amount. The story shows that Confucius actually controlled his one thousand bushel stipend only in a nominal manner. It is more like the budget of a government department or army unit.

It appears from some of the passages in old texts that more than one such training schools existed, and there was a level of competition between them. Three times Confucius lost students to the rival teacher and three times got them back, but Yan Hui remained throughout. The passage itself is almost certainly wrong, since at the time Confucius was running his school, Yan Hui was still a child, at most a teenager, but passages in other texts support the idea of rival schools. Several texts even claim that Confucius, once he became the Commissioner for Security, had the rival teacher executed for teaching anti social ideas, though Confucian scholars tended to disbelieve the story.

What was the content of the teaching? A number of ancient texts edited by Confucius or his associates indicate that in addition to historical records and ritual procedures, student learned poetry, divination, music, archery and chariot riding. Poetry and music were not only used in rituals and banquets, they also contain lamentations and cursing people utter against tyrannical rule; in other words, they meet political purposes rather than recreational. Though no texts for archery and riding exist, the odd quotations in some texts indicate that Confucius practised both, and presumably they were part of the standard knightly training.

But Confucius was not simply pursuing a scholarly end making an indirect contribution to government; he aspired to be in government. Though the exact timing is unknown, for a while he was chief of staff for a nobleman in the neighbouring state of Qi, and was given an audience by the Duke of Qi on the art of government. The biography claims that the Duke wished to give Confucius a high appointment, but was persuaded otherwise by his chief minister, though the argument given in the text sounded more like a much later critique of the followers of Confucius rather than what a contemporary would say about him. In any case, he returned to Lu without achieving anything substantial in Qi.

The biography also claims that while Yang Huo was in power, he attempted to recruit Confucius into holding office, but the stories all sounded contrived, invented after Yang Huo's downfall to show we have always been against him. The first story says when Confucius was 17, shortly after his mother died, Yang Huo organized a banquet for the knights under the Ji command. Confucius tried to attend but was refused admission. This is highly unlikely since he would be in mourning and not participating in celebratory events. It was also unlikely that Yang Huo would be standing at the door checking the ticket of each knightly guest.

The second story says that Confucius was deliberately avoiding visiting Yang Huo, who thought of the idea of sending a gift (a roast pig, a major item because roast pork was used for ritual sacrifice, and receiving a share of the pork after the ceremony was an indication of rank) to his house when he was

not at home. Under the rule of conduct, if a recipient was not there personally to give thanks for the gift, he must visit the sender to do so. Seeing through the stratagem, Confucius deliberately made the visit when Yan Huo was not at home, but it so happened they met on the road. Yang Huo proceeded to scold Confucius for not using his talents, receiving an ambiguous reply, but Confucius stayed at his school work without fulfilling his apparent consent. This story was also a bit unlikely, since Confucius was already receiving a stipend from the House of Ji, then controlled by Yang Huo, and did not seem to object to it. Men of scholarly dispositions were not what Yang Huo needed to recruit then discontented members of the three baronial houses willing to turn against their current masters were much more useful. However, if Yang Huo succeeded in carrying out his coup, then he would indeed be interested in indications of wide support, and getting Confucius on board would be more valuable.

The exile of Yang Huo meant that a large number of officials, particularly those of the House of Ji, were no longer available, and new appointees were urgently needed. Confucius had previously worked as a minor Ji official and had been running a school with a Ji stipend, and he had a large number of educated followers. It made sense to appoint them to fill the vacancies. So finally, Confucius could fulfil his aspiration and try out his ideas. But for reasons to be explained later, his power too would be short lived. Before we continue with the biography, let us first turn to his political ideas.

5. Confucianism

Confucius sees government as a process of education: people must be taught to know what is right and what is wrong, and rulers must be seen as teachers that set good examples for their subjects and be persons the people look up to. If such a relation is established, then the subjects would do socially correct things with minimal coercion, threats and penalty. This is not just more humane, but also more economical police forces, courts and prisons are expensive to run, as modern governments know all too well and have a tendency to brutalize the law enforcers as well as the subjects (which is again all too familiar with modern as well as ancient governments).

Rulers must constantly reflect on their own conduct and see whether they are having the right influences on the people, and an essential part of this process is to listen to criticisms. Officials who pretend obedience, play tricks and tell the superiors what they want to hear are bad for the system; they are base men (xiao-ren) rather than upright, straight talking noble persons (jun-zi) that the ruler should try to surround himself with.

In the Confucian ideal, education, not birth, is the most important qualification for government; everyone with the right education and attitude to set a good example for the people, is fit to lead, whether aristocratic or not. In this sense, Confucius advocates meritocracy instead of aristocracy. Nevertheless, peasant boys and foot soldiers, being excluded from opportunities of education, are hardly likely to be appointed officials. Opportunities are open only to the knight classes (shi), but even such a limited path of upward mobility would increase the supply of talent to fill government positions, especially as the expansion of commerce and industry, and the decay of the old estate system making land freely tradable, brought new needs to have officials to collect tax, monitor movements of people and goods, arbitrate disputes, and so on. The complex relations between states and powerful families also brought need for diplomats and spies.

Three expressions are frequently heard in Confucian writings: ren, usually translated into humanity, li, usually expressed as rituals, and zhong-yong or moderation, but li is actually broader, closer to conventions or even procedures, ren probably is more like good government, benevolence or even statesmanship, for the most humane treatment one can give to people is to provide them with a good ruler. When Confucius says ke (restrain) ji (yourself) fu (cover) li (procedures), ren lies within, he is advising rulers to channel their ideas and impulses through properly established conventions and procedures, in order to achieve orderly government. Even the desire to do good must be restrained by procedures, since public policies have side effects, and there are different interest groups to look after. Extremism is always harmful and overtaxing of a countrys resources on even a very worthwhile objective is to be avoided, and the rulers job is to set the middle way among the conflicting ideas and needs.

6. Confucius the Official

According to the biography, the first post held by Confucius was the Governorship of Zhongdu, while his student and righthand man, Zi Lu, became Lord Ji's chief of staff. This puzzled Confucian scholars, since governing a town, too small and obscure to be located, seemed less important than Zi Lu's job. They should know better Zhongdu must have been the capital of Lu State, since the three baronial towns of the great lords were known as the three Dus, and Zhong is central. Governing the capital city, where the Duke and the three lords all resided, would seem to be important enough a job. This is also confirmed by a couple of passages in the ancient texts. One says after less than a year in office, Confucius's policies were being copied in other towns. It would seem quite reasonable that other towns would take seriously decisions made for the capital city. Another says Confucius specified the thickness of coffin boards to be four inches inner and five inches outer, which would seem to be a national rather than local decision appropriate for the governor of the capital but not an obscure town.

The biography proceeds to say that Confucius was then made the Commissioner for Public Works, and then Commissioner for Security. Because in the Lu hierarchy, the former position was senior to the latter, and further, was in practice hereditary for Lord Meng, scholars assumed that Confucius was actually only Lord Meng's assistant, and was then promoted. It is however curious that he changed job so quickly within just a short time, because considerable activities were recorded for his term as Security Commissioner and it seemed to have extended over several years; nothing was recorded as Commissioner for Works, and not much more for Governorship of Zhongdu. The time from the downfall of Yang Huo to when Confucius was Security commissioner was only about a year.

The reasonable explanation is that he in fact held just a single job: as recipient of a state stipend, he did whatever public task that happened to be needed, and was broadly responsible for all affairs of the Lu capital, including both security and public works. Because decisions for the capital are also adopted elsewhere, his work was of both municipal and country wide relevance. If the official post for a particular function happened to be unoccupied at the time, then in a vague sort of way, he was said to be holding that position. Whether the job he was doing was senior or junior to the job he did earlier was basically irrelevant.

The single achievement of Confucius in office recorded in history was a diplomatic one. Just over a year after Yang Huo's downfall, the states of Lu and Qi agreed on a peace treaty, and the two dukes met to hold a signing ceremony. The Qi side added a last minute clause requiring Lu to contribute troops whenever Qi went to war; instead of causing problem by refusing a specific requirement as an ally, Confucius made the counter proposal that the new clause was conditional upon Qi returning certain border territory it occupied. This gives Lu not only an immediate benefit, but a future way out by quibbling whether the condition had been fully satisfied. There were some other stories about the Qi side wanting to kidnap the Lu duke using barbarian soldiers pretending to be dancers, an attempt somehow prevented by Confucius through his prompt action, and about Confucius ordering the execution of a barbarian singer from the Qi dukes' entourage who sang mocking songs at the Lu duke. While such dramatic details are unreliable, there probably was some breach of protocol involving some of Qi's barbarian followers for which Confucius criticized the Qi duke and received an apology.

With the glow of diplomatic success, and his students occupying various key posts, Confucius then embarked upon an ambitious program to curb baronial power and revive ducal authority. He got the Duke to decree that the walls of the three baronial capitals were to be razed, and no weapons were to be stored there. This obvious attempt to destroy the military strongholds of the three barons, curiously, had a favorable initial reception, and both Lord Shu and Lord Ji acquiesced. The reason was: both had on past occasions lost control of their own towns, with their governors refusing to take orders and the soldiers obeying their immediate superiors rather than the higher boss (since everyone was by then confused about who the higher boss was: the Zhou King, the Lu Duke, or their own feudal lord?). However, the governor of the Meng capital refused. His town had not been rebellious in the past, and it was an important defense post in the north of Lu against Qi invaders. He also played the main part in mobilizing forces against Yang Huo's coup. Lord Meng was persuaded to feign ignorance about what was going on out there, while his governor closed the town gates against soldiers sent from the capital to

raze the walls.

In the mean time, gossip began to reach the ears of Lord Ji that Confucius was not acting in the Ji interest but had another agenda, with events lending clear support to the talk. Despite the loss of their military stronghold, the House of Ji continued to control the taxation and the men from the bulk of the state; with a bit of time, Lord Ji could always find new ambitious men to replace Confucius and his followers, and they soon found themselves less and less in demand to perform the tasks of governing Lu. This was however a slow and gradual process, and there was no open breach nor official dismissal letter. There was no indication that the one thousand bushel stipend was taken away; in fact the one indication that drove Confucius into exile was his not receiving a share of the ritual meat after the annual rites, meaning that he was no longer in the rank of a state official.

The biography gives a rather weird story. The Qi duke, after his dealings with Confucius at the treaty ceremony, was said to be so impressed by Confucius that he feared Lu would become a strong threat to Qi. Qi officials then thought of a way to weaken the Lu government by corruption: they gathered a troupe of 40 dancing girls and sent them to Lu as a gift, whereupon Lord Ji and the duke spent all their time with the girls and neglected government business, including the distribution of the sacrificial pork. This seems to be rather a ludicrous story invented by people who knew nothing about how governments work. Cutting up roast pigs at the temple and sending them to important officials would be something the ritual officers do every year, whether or not the duke was busy with girls or not. There probably was an actual gift of dancing girls from Qi, but most likely given during the treaty ceremony in an exchange of presents. Someone mixed the stories up, as often happens with Confucian biography. Confucius failed because he was both too early and too late. He perceived, correctly, that chaos and inter-state conflicts occurred because there was no central authority to impose a properly worked out set of common conduct, but his idea of breathing life back to the old hierarchical system, and reimposing the dignified but ponderous Zhou Conventions, could not be achieved because men, in particular powerful men, while continuing to go through the motions, no longer took seriously the idea of ancestor worship, which formed the social base of the system. The fear that violations of rules of hierarchy and legitimacy would lead to certain retribution by divine forces or central authority had long died away. His own example of upward mobility through education, becoming an official rewarded by salary rather than land, goes against the permanent revival of feudal hierarchy.

With the development of industry, commerce and more efficient writing tools, China was on the verge of a knowledge explosion, and after Confucius would come the blooming of the Hundred Schools of Thought. People were starting to think more scientifically. Without the previous superstitious fear of divine punishment, legitimacy and hierarchy were merely what one tries to impose by power. When a central authority was successfully reimposed by the Emperor Qin, he used a much more ruthless system, which however crashed soon under the weight of its own harshness. The softer compromise system devised by the Han rulers brought back many of the ideas of Confucius, in particular the education and selection of officials through a centrally specified set of requirements, but he would not have seen these as the important ideas in his own time.

7. Exile

It would probably have been possible for Confucius to resume his former career as educator, but having tasted power once and showed some results, he was convinced he had something immediate and practical to offer to feudal governments. If the state of Lu did not like it, perhaps there were other lords more appreciative of his ideas and abilities. In this quest he would again fail. He would be given varying degrees of honoured reception and financial support in the states he visited, and some of his students would be appointed to offices, but he would not achieve his ambition of being given responsibility for the whole government of a state and carrying out his program of reaffirmation of Zhou feudalism. At times he faced physical danger or financial hardship, though stories about such incidents tended to be exaggerated and unreliable. After thirteen frustrating years, he would return to the state of Lu as a senior statesman and resume his career as scholar and educator.

His exile could be divided into four main periods, 5 years or so in the state of Wei, a somewhat shorter

period in the state of Chen, a brief visit to the Duke of Chai, and another stay at Wei. Initially things looked promising. Riding into the Wei capital in his carriage, he was struck by the large number of people, an indication of peace and prosperity. It was during this ride that he made the conversation with his student that best summarized his ideas:

Lots of people. What do you do when you have lots of people? Make them prosperous. After you make them prosperous? Educate them.

Meeting Confucius, Duke Ling of Wei asked him what stipend he received from the state of Lu, and immediately granted him the same stipend during his stay in Wei. After that, things went steadily downhill. The Duke ignored Confucius's advice of an immediate attack on the rebellious city of Pu, which he passed enroute to the capital of Wei and was held up there by the rebels until he made a promise (which he did not keep because it was made under duress) to go somewhere else than Wei. He had to accept a request from the Duchess to visit her, which aroused the disapproval of his students because she had a reputation for being an adulteress (apparently with the Dukes acquiescence), and was put on public show by riding in carriages with the Dukes favorite officials. In other words, he was treated as a celebrity, rather than a serious official or counselor. Another story, that the Duke asked him about military matters but he refused to answer, was almost certainly a mix up with a later incident when a senior Wei official, who was having a feud with a relative, sought such advice, more to confirm that he had the right to start an attack, and Confucius, for obvious reasons, refused to be drawn. The biography listed several occasions when Confucius was said to have left Wei in a huff, but most such stories seem unreliable. The most famous incident, the troubles at Kuang, will be discussed later. In all probability, Confucius left Wei only after the death of Duke Ling, when a succession dispute arose between his son and grandson.

After visiting a couple other states without enjoying a decent reception, Confucius and his followers ended up in Chen, where he was given some kind of financial support. The state was then caught in the conflict between two powerful states to the east and west, Chu and Wu, and would be annexed altogether a bit later. State finance was unreliable even during the brief periods of peace. Most of the stories of Confucius keeping up his spirit in the face of hardship and danger and his discourses with followers on such questions, seemed to have been made up by story tellers later, but the following account sounds authentic:

Confucius and his students were living in poverty in Chen. One day Yan Hui went and brought back a ration of rice, and started cooking as Confucius was resting in bed. When the rice was about ready, Confucius saw Yan Hui reach into the pot and then put some rice into his mouth. When Yan Hui brought a bowl of rice to him, Confucius said I just dreamed of my ancestor; I should make an offering to him with this bowl of rice, but Yan Hui replied Master sorry you cannot use this rice, because I ate some of it; some dust fell into the pot while I was cooking, and instead of wasting the rice with the dust I ate it myself

The story fits the characters: Confucius as a cunning politician who could think fast on his feet, as he showed in diplomacy, and Yan Hui as the faithful attendant too honest to keep quiet and let his master commit sacrilege by using unclean rice as offering. Its very lack of drama speaks for its authenticity. There was another story that the King of Chu, after meeting Confucius, wanted to grant him a large fief, but was persuaded against it by his ministers who thought that this would threaten the security of Chu, since with such able people running the new state, it would surely become too powerful. This seems to be another ludicrous tale from flattering story tellers. It is likely that Confucius only met the Duke of Chai, a general of the Chu state, who occupied a frontier outpost not far from Chen, and advised him to please the near and attract the distant Chai was then sparsely populated, so that getting more people to come and settle there would be a priority. The Duke presumably gave Confucius some financial support during his stay.

By that time, things were more settled in the state of Wei, and a number of Confucius's followers were holding positions there. The grandson of Duke Ling invited Confucius to return, and by then Confucius was no longer actively seeking power. He was however asked by Zi Lu: What would you do if you are given the Wei government? and replied To make the titles right, which Zi Lu failed to understand. What

Confucius meant was that, the grandson was occupying the dukedom and preventing his own father from returning to take the position, and somehow the situation must be made to appear legitimate, so that attempts to reverse the situation becomes illegitimate. In this he was prescient, because a couple years after Confucius left Wei, a coup for the father took place, and the two rivals carried on a see-saw fight for years, each supported by foreign backers, greatly weakening the Wei state.

Also around that time, the previous Lord Ji died in Lu, and the new lord felt the need to call back some of Confucius's followers for his own support. One of them became his chief of staff, and led his soldiers to victory in a battle with the Qi army. Upon being informed that the win was all due to Confucius's past training, the young Lord Ji decided that it would be to his own benefit to consolidate his support by bringing Confucius back. A generous offer of some kind was made, and Confucius settled into comfortable retirement as an honoured state pensioner. There were few authentic stories about the next few years. One noteworthy incident was the Duke's gamekeeper capturing a Qilin, the mythical animal symbolizing some kind of royal power and good government, but the reported lamentation of Confucius over the passing of his era was almost certainly another later fabrication.

8. Modern Confucian Society

A discussion of modern Confucian societies would take us too deeply into the economic, political and social issues of East Asia and away from the basic ideas of Confucianism; so only a few brief and general comments will be made here. As discussed earlier, a Confucian society places high value on education, both for selecting and training leaders, and as a tool for gradual changes, in fact taking an educational approach to the whole process of governing. The successful economies of Asia-Pacific are generally known for their good educational systems, their keen adoption of modern technology, and their technocratic leaders. MIT and Stanford graduates fill the top positions in governments and corporations all over Asia, and Berkeley is over 40% Asian (mostly ABCs, a slightly derogatory term indicating that somehow they are neither model Americans nor model Chinese).

However, Western societies also emphasize education and meritocracy; yet they cannot be said to be Confucian. So what are the distinguishing features of modern Confucian societies? The first item has to be elitism and a belief in hierarchies. Confucius said The Conventions do not apply to commoners, and the Punishments do not apply to officers, and a hundred years later Mencius said Those who work with their minds rule, and those who work with their limbs are ruled, despite making some apparently democratic remarks often quoted by approving Asian scholars. The two are just summarizing the common belief of the ruling class that it is different; that only members of the select are fit to rule. This attitude has not really changed today. What has changed is just the mechanism of selection. Instead of noble birth or learning from a celebrated master, high SAT scores and brand name degrees are now required. Upward mobility is present, but heavily prescribed.

In this, the neo Confucians are not far from the right wing Republicans of today's USA or the Victorian British; indeed Republican businessmen are often great admirers of Singapore. Yet, the modern Confucian societies are not like 19th Century England nor the Contract with America picture of Newt Gingrich. So we have to look for some other fundamental cause. One difference lies in the way parts of a system link to each other. The Orientals make connections with each other on concrete factors, whereas Westerners more on shared ideas. Hence the value of family, personal knowledge and past association in Asian systems, compared to the prominence of interest group lobbying in the West. Whereas Chinese people consider it right that rich relatives should share their good fortune with poor ones, Americans give to charities and foundations. Confucius may be speaking along the Chinese line in To promote talent, promote the talent you know and Be a good person; then a good family man; then rule your state; then rule the world. Whether the importance of personal connections can be said to be part of his legacy is something for the sociologists to further analyse.

By using personal networking to identify potential heirs, the Confucian system has frequently led to suspicions of nepotism, an emotionally charged word from the time when Popes and Cardinals worked hard to promote the careers of their nephews, usually their own bastard sons, whom they could not openly acknowledge in violation of vows of celibacy. The word reeks corruption and immorality. The

emphasis on paper qualifications and examinations, which are supposed to have unambiguous correct answers is frequently a way to counter this, for the system to be seen as open and fair. Underlying the Confucian system, we could detect a certain optimism about our ability to know, choose and teach the right persons to join it, and there underlies an even greater optimism, that a ruling hierarchy can always remain the best governing group by absorbing the best elements of a society. Starting again with the example of South Korea: nobody found it strange that a retiring president, the former military strongman Roh Teh Woo, selected the former opposition leader Kim Yong Sam to be his own successor (even handing over a huge slush fund he secretly kept); and in Taiwan the handpicked successor to Jiang Jing Kuo ended up actively promoting the downfall of the Nationalist government and helping to elect Chen Shui Bian. Neither the chooser nor the chosen see different ideological beliefs as a significant factor against switching camp; persons, not ideologies, count. It seems always possible to avoid fundamental reforms by co-opting new blood.

In contrast, the western democracies choose to be much more pessimistic: no particular ideology is superior, and no group of people can be trusted to always strike a best compromise. There can only be different political parties of equal legitimacy competing for power, with some winning and holding power for short periods due to prevailing fashions and other changing factors, and a government system must be based on various checks and balances preventing anyone from becoming too powerful. A mantra of democratic societies is that elected leaders are servants of the people. That is, the leaders promise to give the people what they want, to follow them as much as to lead. In contrast, Confucian leaders want to give people what is good for them: the leadership group sees itself as the best and brightest of the society, with the ideas and skills to make the society better. With their technocratic resources and command systems, they seek to re-engineer their society from the top down. Social engineering programmes, even well thought out initiatives that address real problems, seldom produce the level of benefit the planners envisage, for a number of reasons. The lower ranks are usually unfamiliar with the ideas involved, and, not having generated the ideas themselves, do not have the same motivation to adjust to the new ways of doing things. Given that the benefits of new programmes are often overestimated, the people behind them tend to be too dismissive of the side effects and implementation difficulties of their policies, and are often not well prepared to cope. This accounts for the rather negative connotation of social engineering, quite aside from its association with economic planning and elitism.

Organizations and social systems need room to experiment with ideas, but if new ideas are centrally directed, and the prestige of the leaders are associated with the success of new ideas, then the ideas cease to be experimental, since experiments are supposed to succeed or fail on their own merits. People responsible for implementation tend to pull out all the stops, adding incentives for supporting new programmes to make the success easier, but then means participants may join in for the incentives rather than genuine sharing of the ideas, while programmes might succeed for other reasons than the quality of their ideas. The capacity for change by adopting new members into the system is therefore often accompanied by a curious weakness in idea adoption.

Perhaps Confucians are too naive and inexperienced in the realities of power. All the same, the optimistic perspective is refreshingly different, and promises something that **deserves our serious attention even today.**



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