

The Evolution of Confucianism:
Navigating Tradition and Modernization in China

Cate Salditt

CHIN 3130

Professor Yanming An

December 7, 2023

Nestled at the heart of China's rich cultural tapestry is Confucianism's profound and enduring philosophy, a system of thought that has played a pivotal role in shaping the nation's societal fabric for over two millennia. Founded by Confucius, a revered ancient Chinese philosopher, Confucianism has not merely endured the test of time but has woven itself intricately into the very essence of Chinese society. Its influence extends beyond philosophy, permeating various aspects of daily life, governance, morality, and interpersonal relationships. Delving into the exploration of Confucianism's impact on Chinese society, it becomes evident that this philosophical tradition has served as a guiding force, providing a moral compass and shaping the collective consciousness of the Chinese people throughout history. To comprehend the intricate interplay between Confucianism and Chinese society, we must navigate the philosophical underpinnings, historical context, and the enduring legacy that molds the nation's identity. Confucian values are strongly intertwined with the culture and values of the Chinese people, as these ideals have shaped their perspective of the world for centuries. Although these solid Confucian roots were once beneficial in advancing the agricultural methods of Chinese society before the Industrial Revolution, they proved to cause complications in China's attempts to pursue a more industrialized society and compete with the rapidly advancing West.

The rise of Confucianism as a quintessentially Chinese ideology unfolded against the backdrop of a tumultuous period marked by political disunity and social upheaval. Emerging during the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), Confucianism was spearheaded by the teachings of Kong Fuzi, known as Confucius in the West. Faced with the chaos and moral decay

of the times, Confucius sought to restore order by advocating for ethical governance and cultivating moral virtues. His teachings emphasized the importance of filial piety, respect for authority, and the pursuit of personal and communal harmony. The subsequent Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) played a pivotal role in elevating Confucianism to the status of state ideology. Under the reign of Emperor Wu, Confucianism became the official state philosophy, leading to the establishment of the Imperial Academy to train Confucian scholars. This institutional support solidified Confucianism's ascendancy and set the stage for its enduring influence on Chinese thought, culture, and governance for centuries. This implementation of Confucianism as the official state philosophy eventually led to motivated efforts by Chinese scholar and political reformist Kang Youwei to make Confucianism a universal religion in China so that it would be able to keep up with the rapid advancements of the West.

The essence of Confucianism must be explored to understand the strong roots of Confucian values in Chinese society and how it has influenced the advancement of China as a modern state. A central idea in Confucianism is The Way or Dao (道). Although Dao is a shared principle in both Confucianism and Daoism, the use of Dao in Confucianism is related to the natural order of human conduct and the organization of government. This natural order is achievable through the cultivation of virtue (得), comprised of the elements of morality and power. Virtue is used as a final cause to lead people in the right direction rather than force them into adhering to laws. Confucius believed that ruling through this natural order was critical to an effective government. Rulers are expected to cultivate moral virtues, embody righteousness, and

act as benevolent fathers to their subjects. The idea is to lead by example and inspire the populace to follow a moral path. As it is expressed in Confucius Analects, "The virtue of the noble person is like the wind, and the virtue of small people is like grass. When the wind blows over the grass, the grass must bend" (*Confucius Analects*). The notion of governance through morality and the natural order is an Eastern perspective on efficient governance, whereas, in the West, governments have always relied on law to achieve political stability. To help facilitate this natural order, an emphasis was placed on the establishment and nurturing of familial relationships as well as other relationships found within society.

There are five universal ways in human relations as described in the Doctrine of the Mean, which include those governing "the relations between ruler and minister, between parent and child, between husband and wife, between older and younger brother, and among friends" (*The Doctrine of the Mean*). By practicing these relationships using the three Confucian cardinal virtues of wisdom, humaneness, and courage, the universal way of the world can be mastered by the combined efforts of individuals within society. These principles facilitated the heavy importance placed on family structure within Chinese culture. The connection between the importance of familial relationships and a harmonious society can be described with the analogy of roots and branches, "family life is described as the 'root'; they bring about all the good things in human society, such as people's good behavior and harmonious human relationships, as naturally as a firmly established root leads to the growth of branches and leaves" (An). The intensely strong correlation between the emphasis on family life and cultivating a prosperous

society led to a flourishing agricultural civilization in China. Prior to China's initial contact with Western cultures and industrialization, Confucianism served as a beneficial philosophy in an agrarian setting since family units often worked together on the land. These values fostered cooperation and a sense of responsibility, contributing to the smooth functioning of family-based enterprises.

Confucian principles enabled China to create a distinct Chinese culture that was based upon viewing family structure as the basic unit for a prosperous society; "Members of a family are conceived as various parts of an integral body. To hurt one part is to damage the body itself; a pleasant feeling in one part means pleasure for the whole body" (An). This concept of viewing the family as one unit was juxtaposed by the West's emphasis on viewing each individual as a separate entity. Due to this elemental difference in perspective, the West primarily focused on self-sufficiency and individual achievement, setting the stage for rapid advancements in technology and science.

It was not until the first contact with the West that the principles of Confucianism came under great scrutiny, leading to the reform efforts of many great Chinese thinkers. Due to the isolating geography of China, contact with external philosophies, religions, and contrasting ideologies was rare until the introduction of Christianity to China by the Jesuits. After this initial contact with foreign ideologies, China was awoken to the vast differences between Eastern and Western cultures. During this time, the first comparisons between Western and Chinese

civilizations were made. However, the critique of Confucianism would reach its zenith during the appearance of Western technological superiority during the Industrial Revolution.

Among the Chinese thinkers who began to observe the deficiencies within Confucianism as China's state philosophy were Zhang Zhidong and Kang Youwei. Both Zhang Zhidong and Kang Youwei sought to reform Confucianism to better serve the industrialized world's demands.

Although both figures had contrasting viewpoints regarding the exact implications of the reformation of Confucianism, both Zhang Zhidong and Kang Youwei recognized the flaws in Confucian thinking patterns in the context of keeping up with advancements of the West.

Zhang Zhidong was one of the leading figures in the empire during the early stages of reform. He recognized that Confucianism needed to be adapted, however, he emphasized protecting the Chinese race by preserving the doctrine. Zhang Zhidong's three principles in saving China included "maintaining the state, preserving the doctrine of Confucius, and protecting the Chinese race" (*Sources of Chinese Tradition* 2000). By preserving the true essence of Confucianism while changing the practical methods in which it is practiced within Chinese society, it was believed that China could be saved. Zhang Zhidong not only identified these principles to lay the groundwork for saving China but also identified the critical differences between the thinking methods of Western civilization and Chinese civilization. He noted, "Chinese learning is for substance, Western learning is for function" (*Sources of Chinese Tradition* 2000). His observation defended the traditional way of life in China, explaining that Chinese and Western learning methods focused on achieving different societal outcomes.

Confucianism was geared towards uplifting China from a moral and spiritual standpoint, while the West was more focused on developing new practical technologies, such as weapons and new transportation methods. This observation would become the basis for Kang Youwei's future reformation of Confucianism and inspire more radical reform efforts in the future.

Kang Youwei sought to expand the scope of Confucianism to include Western learning methods so that China would have the chance to compete with the rapidly evolving civilizations of the West. This approach would preserve the foundation upon which Confucianism was built, highlighting the importance of education and morality. Kang Youwei would "redefine the Way and enlarge its scope... Instead of making more room for Western institutions alongside Confucianism, he would make room for them inside it" (*Sources of Chinese Tradition* 2000). This stance differed from Zhang Zhidong's interpretation due to its motivation to include the methods of Western learning as a function contained within the usage of Confucianism.

Chen Duxiu was yet another Chinese thinker to challenge the methods of Confucianism from beginning to end. With a more radical approach than Zhang Zhidong and Kang Youwei, he argued that Confucianism was responsible for China's perceived backwardness and advocated for its rejection in favor of more progressive and scientific ideas, noting that "the pulse of modern life is economic, and the fundamental principle of economic production is individual independence" (*Sources of Chinese Tradition* 2000). Chen Duxiu perceived the insistence on maintaining the family structure as detrimental to the advancement of Chinese civilization because of its limiting belief that the family unit is to be recognized as its own individual body.

Chen Duxiu argues that "Confucius lived in a feudal age" and, therefore Confucianism had always best served a feudal society. In the eyes of Chen Duxiu, Confucianism did not serve the context of the competitive climate with the West and only functioned as an obstacle in developing China as an industrialized society.

The complexities of these reform efforts reflect the tension between preserving cultural identity and adapting to the dynamic challenges of modernization. Confucianism's enduring legacy continues to shape the identity of China, but the nation has also undergone significant transformations in response to the demands of a rapidly changing world. As China navigates its path toward continued modernization and global engagement, the interplay between traditional values and contemporary needs remains a dynamic and evolving cultural identity. With its timeless wisdom, Confucianism will likely continue to influence Chinese society, adapting and integrating with the demands of the present while retaining its cultural significance.

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