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The Politics of Defining the Legacy of Confucius

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Abstract

Confucius is an extremely popular and well-respected figure in China today, but historically that has not always been the case, as his reputation has constantly evolved over time. Often, changes in how Confucius is viewed have been the result of attempts by various governments over the years to appropriate his legacy for their own purposes. This paper will look at what some of those motives were, and the extent to which governments were successful at achieving them by examining four cultural sites, each of which represents an aspect of Confucius' legacy: the Temple of Confucius in Qufu, and the Imperial University, National Museum and People's University in Beijing. By analyzing the legacy of Confucius as it is reflected in these four sites, the paper demonstrates that the ability of governments to shape how he is perceived by the public is limited by the public's existing views, which are not easily swayed by the government's unilateral efforts.

Keywords: Confucius, government, public opinion

1. Introduction

Arguably the most iconic figure in Chinese history, Confucius is widely recognized today as a symbol of Chinese culture, both in China and abroad. While his fame makes it easy for one to take his cultural status for granted, historically Confucius has not always been the celebrated figure that he is today. In pre-modern times he commanded great respect throughout the changing dynasties; however, following the Communist takeover in 1949, he became the target of vehement criticism and attacks on his character and ideas. And yet just several decades later, he is once again as popular as ever.

Why was Confucius such a venerated figure in dynastic China? Why was the Communist government so eager to criticize him during its early years? And has the government played a role in his recent revival? This paper will attempt to answer these and other related questions by examining four sites in China that are related to aspects of Confucius' legacy: the Temple of Confucius in Qufu, and the Imperial University, National Museum and People's University in Beijing. It argues that governments throughout Chinese history have manipulated the image of Confucius for their own political purposes, but their efforts to define his legacy have often had to contend with the public opinions of those they are trying to influence.

2. Temple of Confucius

Of the four sites, the one with the longest history is the Confucius Temple in his hometown Qufu, where Confucius worship was a sign of social stratification in dynastic China. Beginning from the Han Dynasty, scholars and lineal descendents of Confucius held rituals and maintained sacrifices at the temple. Often these rituals were viewed as official affairs, and followed codes that prescribed "specific implements, offerings, music and participants." In addition, the descendants of Confucius who participated in these rituals were rewarded by the emperor with titles, tax exemptions and official positions, another sign of the government's role in Confucius worship. Official rituals at the temple in Qufu had a strong hierarchical dimension, as only members of a select male elite were permitted to attend these ceremonies, during which they asked the spirits of Confucius and his disciples to bless the entire realm. By contrast, the ordinary masses were free to worship Daoist and Buddhist deities in other temples, and ask for benefits for themselves and their families (Murray, 2009). The public vs. private divide in the two types of worship was also reflected on a national scale in funding for the Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist cults: while the cult of Confucius was sponsored by the state, the latter two were largely supported financially by the populace (Murray, 1996). In light of the restrictive nature of rituals at the Qufu temple, the government's active role in Confucius worship in Qufu and across the nation can be seen as an effort to affirm the social hierarchy and preserve the status quo.

However, the government's efforts were not always successful in this regard. In 1530, the Ming government instituted a ban on icons in Confucian temples. The emperor issued a decree that all images be removed from the temples and replaced with inscribed tablets. In part, the reasoning behind the decision involved concerns regarding the visual similarities between icons of Confucius and those of Buddhist and Daoist deities. All of these figures were bestowed with posthumous titles and ranks by emperors throughout the ages, which were displayed in the lavish clothing and ornaments that embellished their icons. As a result, many of the icons looked very similar, and could easily be confused with one another. Moreover, the similarities gave rise to popular beliefs about Confucius that were inspired by other iconic figures, but which had no basis in Confucian tradition. For example, even some learned scholars believed that the spirit of Confucius, when summoned in ritual, took on the form of his sculptural icon – an idea that originated from Buddhism, but could not be found in Confucian texts. Such confusions were a source of concern for many scholars, who believed that they endangered the cult of Confucius. They therefore objected to the presence of icons in Confucian temples, and ultimately the government adopted their position. The temple in Qufu, however, was exempt from the ban. As the temple was frequented by Confucius' descendants, and the use of portraits was customary in familial worship, the government allowed the icons in the temple to remain. The decision happened to coincide with the rise of woodblock printing and publishing in the 16th century, and as a result the sculptural icon in Qufu, owing to its now unique status as the only icon of Confucius that still existed in a temple of worship, was widely copied onto prints and circulated among the Chinese masses. These prints helped to popularize Confucius among the general public, who worshipped him through unofficial practices that did not follow imperial codes (Murray, 2009). Thus, even though the government intended for Confucius worship to be an affirmation of the social hierarchy, its ban on icons and exemption of the Qufu temple ended up having the opposite effect. It seems that the widespread popularity of Confucius made it difficult for the government to exercise strict control over how he was viewed and worshipped.

3. Imperial University

While Confucius was worshipped as a deity in temples dedicated to him, in other contexts he was seen more as a teacher figure. For instance, the Imperial University in Beijing, where the emperor performed rituals to Confucius, was also the highest level institution of learning in China until the late Qing Dynasty, a dual function that highlights the venerated status of Confucius within Chinese education. Indeed, Confucius has long been viewed as an educator – not least because his teachings were required learning for scholars who wished to pass the imperial civil service examination. Established in the Han Dynasty, the exam tested candidates applying for official government positions on their knowledge of Confucian classics. From the Tang Dynasty until its abolishment in the late Qing, the exam was the most common way for people to achieve positions in the government (Yu, 2002). By making knowledge of Confucian teachings a requirement for public service, the exam cemented his image among the literati as a respected teacher.

Thus, when the imperial examination system was abolished during the Xinzheng reforms in 1905, the change naturally had an effect on how people viewed Confucius. However, that is not to say that Confucius fell out of fashion – rather, as Ya-pei Kuo argues, he achieved even greater symbolic significance as a figure of nationalism. The same reformers who terminated the imperial examinations also instituted changes to the worship of Confucius. They elevated the status of Confucius worship, changing its official designation from Middle Sacrifice to Grand Sacrifice. In addition, the reformers also targeted certain practices that had previously served to maintain a "ritual boundary" between the state and the populace. Before the reforms, official and unofficial rituals were performed on different days, and followed very different procedures. The state designated special days on the calendar for the imperial worship of Confucius, and deemed it inappropriate for those who were not part of the imperial cult to hold rituals on these days. Official rituals were led by a primary worshipper who performed the most important actions, while others in attendance only played the role of an audience for much of the rite. In the rituals of the populace, on the other hand, everyone moved simultaneously with the primary worshipper, enacting a sense of collectivity. The Xinzheng reforms eliminated the primary worshipper in official rituals, and abolished the temporal distinction between official and unofficial rites. In other words, while the emperor was worshipping Confucius at the Imperial University, members of the populace all over China could simultaneously be holding their own rituals. These reforms aimed to foster unity between the citizens and the emperor, in keeping with the idea of "the emperor and the people in one body" (junmin yiti), a phrase recently coined by pro-reform intellectuals to articulate what they saw as the benefit of Western parliamentary monarchy systems. In addition, as the worship of Confucius was shaped into a collective act involving everyone from the emperor to the masses, Confucius became a symbol of what it meant to be Chinese. This symbolic re-interpretation fed into emerging notions of nationalism, as people in China began to view themselves as citizens of a Chinese nation (Kuo, 2008).

4. National Museum

Before the fall of the Qing Dynasty, governmental views of Confucius, whether as a deity, educator or national symbol, were all by and large positive. The same cannot be said of how the Chinese Communist Party saw the ancient philosopher after coming to power in 1949. The CCP made Confucius a highly controversial figure during the nation's socialist period, and in some ways that image still persists today, as demonstrated in an incident involving a Confucius statue erected in front of the north gate of the National Museum. The museum, located next to Tiananmen Square, was established by the Communist government to showcase China's history and culture. However, it has been criticized by historians for presenting not history but propaganda, as it constructs a historical narrative that toes the party line, emphasizing the party's triumphs while whitewashing elements such as the Great Leap Forward and ethnic conflict that do not fit into the narrative (Johnson, 2011). In 2011, when a 30-foot statue of Confucius was erected outside the museum, some Chinese people viewed it as an affront to the Communist Party, and especially to Chairman Mao (Huang, 2011). Mao, along with other radicals in the Communist Party, had launched a nationwide campaign to criticize Confucius and political rival Lin Piao during the Cultural Revolution (Chang, 1974), an event that the museum largely ignores. The politically sensitive location of the statue was thus a major concern, as not far from the museum was the Tiananmen gate, with its giant portrait of Mao. In the end, the statue was removed from the grounds of the museum (Huang, 2011).

Even though the controversy involving the statue occurred in a present-day context, it reflects attitudes toward Confucius that were popularized by the party during its earlier socialist years. As it led the nation in undergoing radical change, the party used Confucius as a symbol of the nation's past, and a target of its attacks on the old culture that it sought to abolish. As G. P. Deshpande, writing at the height of the "Criticise Lin, Criticise Confucius" campaign in 1974, argues: "Attack on Confucius has to be viewed […] as an attack on a very powerful source of obscurantist ideas" that were resistant to social and economic change. Deshpande cites a 1963 *People's Daily* article in which author Yang Hung Kuo portrays Confucius as "the philosopher of the declining slave system," relating each of his specific ideas to the "ideology of the slave-owning class":

> The *Ren* meant affection and unity with the class. *Xiao* (filial piety) meant preservation of class rule. "Brotherly love" was really meant for class-solidarity of the slave owners. *Zhung* (loyalty) was advocated by Confucius "to ensure slaves' loyalty to their owners". *De* (virtue) was "good-government *only* among slave owners". (Deshpande, 1974)

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, such attacks on Confucius have largely subsided, and today his teachings are generally viewed as transcending social class and historical context. Nevertheless, the controversy around the National Museum statue demonstrates that the party's past criticism has left its mark on his legacy. While it is no longer common to view him first and foremost as a reactionary slave owner, the figure of Confucius continues to be charged with political connotations that (at least in the eyes of the party itself) cast him in opposition to the Communist Party.

The removal of the statue, however, was not universally popular. It sparked online debate in China, with many netizens questioning the reasons behind the move. The director of the museum Lu Zhangshen spoke to the media and argued that Confucius deserved to be celebrated as a Chinese cultural figure. He urged people to "Please do not link the Confucius statue with politics," and asserted that "It has nothing to do with politics" (Huang et al., 2011). His views highlight the revival of the image of Confucius in recent years, as following the government's departure from hard-line communist ideology and rhetoric, the public is beginning to view Confucius once again as a cultural icon.

5. People's University

The government, of course, has not been deaf to the change, as evidenced by the construction of a Confucius statue on the Peoples' University campus in 2001. Formally established in 1950, the People's University had a distinctly political character from the very beginning, as it was founded by the Communist Party in the mold of "red universities" in the Soviet Union, as a step toward reforming the "bourgeois" university system the party had inherited from old regimes (Stiffler, 2007). Since then, the university has maintained its close relationship with the ruling party (Ikenson, 2006). Thus, it is no surprise that the construction of the statue at Peoples' University marked the beginning of a trend, wherein many other schools and universities across China had their own Confucius statues built on campus (Murray, 2009).

The trend can be seen as a re-emergence of the image of Confucius as an educator. During the Cultural Revolution, Confucius' views on education, like everything else that was associated with him, came under heavy attack. As students ditched class and rebelled against their teachers, his belief that the relationship between the teacher and the student ought to be analogous to that between heaven and earth, ruler and subject, and father and son was

criticized as authoritarian. Articles published by radical groups linked his ideas on education with the "revisionist line" that was promoted by more moderate politicians within the Communist Party. However, those criticisms subsided with the end of the Cultural Revolution, and as the new government under Deng Xiaoping reemphasized the importance of education to the nation's modernization, scholars in China began to call for inheriting the Confucian educational tradition. Confucius was praised for his ideas on respecting knowledge and showing reverence to teachers, principles that were still relevant and applicable in Communist China. Even today, education in China shows signs of Confucian influence in its emphasis on the memorization of factual knowledge, as well as in the teacher's role as the center of focus in a disciplined classroom (Louie, 1984). This Confucian legacy in modern Chinese education is, perhaps more than anything else, what the construction of Confucius statues on school campuses across China symbolically recognizes.

In addition, the Peoples' University is also associated with another product of Confucius' modern-day legacy – the Confucius Institute. These institutes are administered by the Chinese Ministry of Education, and operate within universities in other countries with the stated purpose of promoting Chinese language and culture abroad. The Peoples' University is affiliated with thirteen of these institutes, which are located in the US, Costa Rica, Zimbabwe, Israel and a number of European countries ("Confucius Institutes," 2015). Despite their stated focus on cultural exchange, Confucius Institutes have generated controversy in many of the countries in which they operate. Some see the institutes as part of China's "soft power" strategy of projecting a favorable image of itself abroad, amid growing international concern regarding its rise as a major power. Regardless of whether (or to what extent) these suspicions are true, it is clear that the institutes are an initiative led by the Chinese government, which exercises strict control over them. All of the institutes are regulated by the headquarters office in Beijing, the duties of which include "examining and approving the implementation plans of annual projects" and supplying a set of unified teaching materials to the institutes. The institutes, in turn, are required "to accept both supervision from and assessments made by the headquarters" (Paradise, 2009). This strict set of rules reflects the government's desire to maintain absolute control over its Confucian institutes, perhaps to ensure that they will always serve the purposes that it intends for them, whatever those purposes may be. Furthermore, the fact that the government chose to name the institutes after Confucius in itself indicates that it understands the status of Confucius as a global cultural icon, and is taking advantage of that status to further its own goals on the international stage.

6. Conclusion

Together, these four sites offer a glimpse of how governments in China over the ages have tried to shape the image of Confucius for various political purposes. To reinforce the social status quo, pre-modern dynastic governments worshipped Confucius as a deity and designed elaborate hierarchical rules governing his worship. Toward the end of the Qing Dynasty, when reform-minded officials felt it necessary to promote collectivity rather than hierarchical division, they changed those rules and created new rituals that were more inclusive. Once the Communist Party came to power, it needed a target for its attacks on China's old, backward culture, and Confucius, who had been revered within that culture for so long, became a natural choice. This critical phase was short-lived, however, as the government's goals of promoting education in China and later projecting a positive image abroad required it to inherit Confucius' ideas, or at least his name and its associated fame. Although the narrative thus constructed of Confucius' changing image is no doubt a gross generalization, due to the limited nature of drawing conclusions from just four sites, it nevertheless shows some of the political motivations behind the constant re-defining of Confucius and his legacy by governments throughout Chinese history.

At the same time, these sites also demonstrate the limits of government control over how Confucius is viewed. The Ming Dynasty ban on icons inadvertently led to the proliferation of images of Confucius and rituals honoring him that did not subscribe to imperial codes. Nowadays, many in China are averse to linking Confucius with politics, while governments and people outside of China are wary of the CCP's motivations behind its promotion of Confucius. Thus, despite their efforts, governments in China have not been able to unilaterally dictate how Confucius is viewed during their time in power. Rather, it seems that a combination of government agenda and public opinion is responsible for determining the legacy of Confucius in any given time period.

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