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Why fast-changing China is turning back to Confucius

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China's Communist party is usually deeply hostile towards any popular social or religious movements that proffer alternatives to its own rule. But when Yu Dan, a Beijing academic, published a bestseller on Confucius late last year, the authorities gave their silent assent.

The book by Ms Yu, a professor of culture and media at Beijing Normal University, was a kind of Confucius for dummies, a simple introduction to the ideas of China's most famous philosopher, who lived 2,500 years ago. It was a publishing sensation, selling upwards of 2m copies.

"Confucius's thoughts have a deep-rooted presence in the Chinese culture that remains alive today," says Ms Yu, now a minor celebrity, in a rushed phone interview before heading overseas on a promotional tour. "He has many useful suggestions on how to establish a harmonious society and smooth personal relationships."

Now it is becoming evident that Confucius is enjoying more than just a popular revival in China. The ancient sage has been politically resuscitated as well, by a Communist party that under Mao Zedong only a generation ago attacked him as a symbol of backward feudalism and dispatched red guards from Beijing to destroy the Confucius temple built in his honour in his hometown of Qufu.

"There has been a complete turnaround in the official attitude towards Confucius," says Zhou Guidian, of Renmin University, an adviser to the government on new programmes to teach Confucius in schools.

The revival is at the heart of the party's ambitious effort to reframe its single-party rule as a part of a long-standing Chinese tradition of benevolent and enlightened government. Under the banner of the "harmonious society", the political catchphrase of Hu Jintao, who holds China's top leadership positions, the party aims to entrench itself as the embodiment of such traditions and in the process buttress its own legitimacy.

Ahead of the quinquennial party congress due to be held late this year, Confucian traditions are being fused with the party's own evolving notions of "socialist democracy" to craft a new official ideology.

"Confucius said that harmony was important – and Hu's 'harmonious society' campaign draws on this, as well as on other traditional Chinese philosophies," says Andy Rothman, China strategist for CLSA, the brokerage. "But the modern campaign takes the concept of 'harmony' another step, by embracing democracy and the rule of law, with Chinese characteristics."

Confucius has simultaneously become part of China's efforts to improve its international image, with his name attached to institutes of language and culture being launched by the government across the globe. Beijing plans to have 500 Confucius institutes by the end of the decade, playing an ostensibly similar role to the British Council, the Alliance Française and the like.

In the initial stages, language teaching will be their most important function, with Beijing aiming to quadruple the number of foreigners learning Chinese to 100m by 2010. But, as with all its “soft power” initiatives, China has some hard-headed aims in mind. A Beijing-based foreign executive who asked a senior Chinese government official what role the institutes would play was told they would help correct foreigners’ “lack of understanding” of China.

These misunderstandings had led foreigners to “behave in certain wrong ways”, the official had said. “For example, when our oil enterprises try to go offshore to buy foreign companies, they are rebuffed; and our shoe companies meet protests when they try to expand their sales.”

Such concerns are vital for the Chinese leadership. With bulging foreign exchange reserves and huge future energy needs, Beijing has an ambitious shopping list abroad and a need to clear political obstacles to its ambitions.

Still, the profile afforded Confucius by the authorities sits oddly with the official symbols that overshadow the domestic political landscape. Within China the image of Mao – the sage’s most vicious critic – still dominates to the exclusion of all other historical figures. Mao’s portrait sits symbolically atop the entrance to the Forbidden City in the heart of Beijing and his face is plastered on every recent denomination of bank note. Open criticism of Mao remains all but taboo outside of the party’s own limited critique of his destructive dictatorship.

Mao despised intellectuals and had no interest in reaching out to the world. Not surprisingly, despite his deification at home, Beijing has shunned Mao in its effort to improve its image overseas. “A ‘Mao Zedong Institute’ probably would not be welcomed in most countries,” says Gerry Groot of the University of Adelaide.

Confucius, too, is an important antidote to organised religion, which is growing rapidly in China, especially Christianity in various forms. At a time when Chinese leaders fret about rampant capitalism and a parallel “collapse in values”, they prefer any spiritual vacuum to be filled by a quasi-state religion framed around Confucius rather than a potentially dangerous import.

In a country both rich in history and changing at a bewildering pace, the Confucian revival has proved popular and comforting. New Confucian think-tanks and societies are proliferating. The sage’s spirit has even been bottled, in the form of a drink called Confucius Family Alcohol.

But the revival of Confucius has not been an intellectual free-for-all. Just as the study of Marxism has been tightly supervised in China because of its role in the party’s ideological firmament, equally, neo-Confucianism is being carefully managed.

Much of the sage’s teaching fits naturally into the Chinese landscape. The notion of “harmony” in China and across east Asia is resonant with Confucian values of good governance and filial piety and forms part of the official rhetoric in many countries, including Japan and South Korea.

Absent in the current craze, however, are the more inconvenient Confucian teachings that sanction political dissent and the duty of intellectuals to criticise or even oust bad rulers. The Confucius preferred by the party provides, in the words of one writer, the “magic recipe for marrying authoritarian politics with capitalistic prosperity”.

“Confucius never encouraged confrontation but the analects [selected writings] say there are occasions when you have to take sides,” says Ding Xueliang, of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Beijing.

The Communist regime is not the first to manipulate Confucius to its own ends. Emperors over centuries used his teachings to justify their own despotism, saddling the doctrine with a bad name in the process. “If Chinese traditions have anything to do with democracy, why did

we have more than 2,000 years of authoritarian dictatorships?” asks Mr Ding.

Nor is the emphasis on Confucius and “harmony” solely about cynical public relations. Mr Hu and Wen Jiabao, the premier, have made addressing the inequalities that have developed over the past three decades central to their political programme.

“Hu’s campaign is not designed simply to promote the idea of harmony,” says Mr Rothman. “It is accompanied by regulatory changes and public spending which targets the real-world causes of disharmony in China: pollution, poor-quality healthcare and education, corruption and a widening rural-urban wealth gap.”

The one institution not on the table for root-and-branch reform is the party itself. Instead, Mr Hu is using Confucian values as a platform for adjustments to make the party more accountable and responsive, while preserving its position as sole ruling entity.

The party has so far outlasted, outsmarted or simply outlawed its critics, defying the many pundits who have predicted its demise at numerous junctures since Deng Xiaoping opened the economy to the market in the late 1970s. With just over 70m members who occupy or supervise every significant government position in the country, it has proved to be a sinuous and malleable beast. Under Mr Hu’s direction, the party’s in-house ideologues have even begun to domesticate the concept of democracy, once considered a largely foreign notion.

One of the most prominent of the new school of thinkers is Yu Keping, who caused controversy late last year with his provocatively titled book, *Democracy is a Good Thing*. Mr Yu, a deputy director of the Central Translation Bureau, declined to be interviewed, saying the controversy over his book made the issue too “sensitive” to discuss with the foreign media.

Mr Yu envisages “incremental” democratic reform, under which the party would be largely separated from government and also subject to the law. Elections would be extended from villages, where they are allowed now, all the way up to the choice of representatives for the National People’s Congress, but from candidates screened by the party.

“We want to absorb all the excellent results from human political culture, including of democratic politics, but we will not import an overseas political model,” he said in a recent article. Any “political democracy”, he said, would have to be based “on the history, culture, traditions and existing social conditions” in China.

Mr Yu’s ideas are far more conservative than kinds that were permitted in China in the 1980s, even though Chinese society now is infinitely more open and globally aware than during that period. But the student protests that led to the brutal military crackdown of 1989 drained the party of any tolerance for alternative political philosophies.

The exception is Confucius, right down to the resurrection of his home town in Qufu, Shandong province, which today is a domestic and international tourist attraction. The Confucius temple – in fact a set of interlocking buildings in a large, leafy compound – has been knocked down and rebuilt 60 times since the first small memorial building was erected in 478BC.

The last bout of destruction, during the Cultural Revolution, was the worst. Over a fevered month in Qufu, Mao’s henchmen destroyed thousands of cultural artifacts and books and ransacked about 2,000 graves.

For those in Qufu who are dedicated to the study of Confucius, the relief over the transformation of the sage’s status is palpable. “It was even dangerous to talk about Confucius before, but I think that his thoughts have had an impact on everyone, including our president,” says Yang Chaoming, who heads the Institute of Confucius Cultural Studies. “Compared to class struggle, we feel that harmony is more in line with traditional culture.”

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