

A New Appreciation of Confucius
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In order to give a talk on Confucian thought at TASS on March 19, 2011, I sacrificed some of my precious time of chasing after snow geese with Stephen Hung. I often told him that I had to read the Five Classics (五經) and the Four Books (四書).

I was quite reluctant to take up the subject of Confucius (孔子) and Confucianism (儒家). Like many young people in Taiwan, I was raised with a lot of rebellion against traditional Chinese teachings, including Confucianism. This sentiment was reinforced when I studied philosophy at National Taiwan University. The professor who influenced me most was Yin Hai-Kuang (殷海光), who was the representative of Hu Shih's (胡適) philosophy in Taiwan at that time. Hu Shih was one of those rebellious leaders during the May Fourth Movement (五四運動) in 1919, when they rallied under the banner of "Down with Confucius Shop" (打倒孔家店).

After coming to the United States, I spent many years studying Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Later, in order to teach courses of "Religions of Mankind" at universities, I found it necessary to study Taoism and Confucianism. So I was more or less passively drawn to Taoist and Confucian teachings.

When TASS gave me chances to give talks on religion and philosophy, I chose to talk about Lao Tzu (老子) first, and then Buddhism. My sense of guilt forced me to give a talk on Confucianism. I thought I should at least treat the three "religions" or "teachings" (三教) equally ☺

I am pretty sure that many of our TASS members have shared some of my rebellious sentiment against Confucius or Confucianism.

For the random talk on Confucian thought, I prepared 82 slides for my PowerPoint presentation. Knowing that I could never cover all of them in less than two hours, I decided to omit the major sections where I deal with the Confucian views of the ultimate reality; the universe; the human nature; the problems of suffering, evil, and death; the solutions to these problems; and the ideal world.

After a brief coverage on the history of Confucianism and discussion of the Five Classics and Four Books, I concluded with some comparisons of Confucianism with Taoism, Buddhism, and Christianity.

It was my revisit of Confucius and Confucianism after many years. I must confess I have come away with a new appreciation. By reading the Analects (論語) with a new perspective, I have found that Confucius was a very likeable and great guy ☺ His teachings aimed mainly at the rulers, advising them how to be good shepherds

of the people under their government. His criticisms were mainly directed against them. At the same time, he developed an ethical system based on the concept of “human-heartedness” (jen 仁). This concept can be translated into English in many ways, but it is basically the summary of all good virtues that can make us a great human being. It is equivalent in importance to the Christian concept of love (agape) or the Buddhist concept of compassion (karuna).

Confucius’ main focus was on the life in this world, not the other world. In spite of the chaotic and disorderly world in which he lived, he held steadfastly to his ideals of great personal character, good government, and good culture. He had a high view of human nature. Education had been restricted to aristocrats before his time, but he was the first important person promoting education for common people. Mencius (孟子) developed Confucius’ teachings and argued for the goodness of human nature. We may not find any scientific evidence to support that humans are born originally good, but this view is more an ideal than a question of fact. After all, the American democracy is built on the basic belief that all humans should be treated equally, on the assumption that they are basically good.

With the Confucian emphasis on government and culture, Confucianism has not promoted scientific investigations of the universe as we know today, but, in spite of many differences in detail, there is some basic compatibility between the Confucian view of the universe and the modern worldview. For example, unlike many Western religions, there is nothing inherent in Confucianism that would oppose the evolution of the universe from some particles or energies to the physical world to the biological world and then to the cultural world, as expounded in modern sciences. It is almost like the Confucian view that the universe has evolved from the Great Ultimate (太極) to the Yin (陰) and Yang (陽) to the natural world and then to the human society.

It is really important to know the history of Confucianism that has developed from Confucius. It is one thing to understand Confucius and other thing to understand Confucianism. Like any religion or philosophy, in its 2500 years of history, Confucianism has accumulated many great ideas as well as a lot of garbage. It is important to get rid of the garbage in order to appreciate its gems.

One important function of the “Down with the Confucius’ Shop” is to get rid of the garbage. The Cultural Revolution (文化大革命 1966-1976) under Communism went overboard because it tried not only to get rid of the garbage but also to destroy it altogether.

It is very paradoxical that China has now tried to show itself to the world with a new makeup by setting up a new version of Confucius shop for its own advantage. The new Confucius shop is called “Confucius Institute” (孔子學院). Close to one hundred of branch-shops have been set up around the world.

In 2010 after the Nobel Prize Committee awarded the human-right advocate Liu Xiaobo (劉曉波) with the Peace Prize, an organization in Beijing awarded “Confucius Peace Prize” (孔子和平獎) to Lien Chan (連戰) in Taiwan. What a mockery! If Confucius were alive to see it, he would have immediately fainted and most likely died of heart attack. Well, knowing him from the Analects, I believe he would most likely get up and go to protest. He would hate many shops that have been set up in his name.

The very fact that China is taking advantage of Confucius to create a new image for itself also points to, in a strange way, some intrinsic value of Confucius’ teachings in the world today.

I have written an article “Hu Shih” for Chinese Thought (edited by Donald Bishop and published in 1985). I have found that, in spite of his radical slogan “Down with the Confucius Shop” in promoting science and democracy for China, Hu Shih was, deep in his heart, very much a Confucian gentleman. The May Fourth Movement, at least for him, was most likely to clean up the garbage piled up in the millenniums-old Confucian shop. Confucius might smile with approval at Hu Shih from his grave.