



RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University. For more information on this, please do not hesitate to email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor of RSIS Commentaries.

Contemporary China: Confucius returns

Nadege Orban*

19 November 2007

Confucius' ideas are clearly making a comeback on the Chinese political scene. Not only are they a convenient tool on the domestic scene, but they are also a good way for advancing China's soft power image abroad and might help provide the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with much desired political legitimacy.

WHEN THE the 17th CPC national congress was held in Beijing last October, much was said in the media about the leaders newly appointed to the highest ranks of the Party. No mention however was made about the return to the scene of a political thinker whose ideas used to have a great influence on China some time ago. Maybe it is not so surprising, as Mr Kong Zi, or Confucius, as he is often better known among the public, died nearly 2500 years ago. But judging from the speech the Chinese President Hu Jintao gave in front of the Party's 2217 delegates on October 15th, Confucian ideas still have some relevance for contemporary China.

CCP: Chinese Confucian Party?

Since February 2005, when the Chinese president first noted: "Confucius said, 'Harmony' is something to be cherished", 'harmony' (*hexie*) has been a theme consistently present in the official discourse in China; it certainly reflects a renewed interest of the communist leaders for Confucian ideas. Along with the official calls for "building a socialist morality" (*shuli shehuizhuyi rongruguan*) based on the "Eight honours" and rejecting the "Eight disgraces" (*ba rong ba chi*), the Chinese government has engaged in a large-scale promotion of the Confucian heritage through school textbooks, university courses. Interestingly, it also uses Confucius as a name for the overseas institutes which promote Chinese language and culture throughout the world. Ideas which, during the Cultural Revolution, were seen as an obstacle to modernisation and achievement of socialism are clearly making a comeback on the Chinese political scene.

Does it mean that the Chinese Communist Party is evolving to become a Chinese *Confucian* Party? Far from it, but one can see at first glance the advantages for the Chinese government to promote Confucian values, which stress the importance of avoiding conflict and respecting hierarchy, within China's contemporary society. Domestically, Confucian emphasis on respect for authority, order and discipline is valuable for a Party whose foremost objective is to stay in power and eliminate any challenges to its rule. In the context of increasing social unrests and disparities, it is calling for temperance and restraint.

Confucian Solution to China's Quagmires ?

Besides, Confucian values are beneficial for a society that has shifted in the last thirty years from communist revolutionary frenzy to materialistic capitalism and is left with a moral void. They offer an acceptable alternative to Falungong or Christian Evangelical sects, which have recently been appealing to more Chinese people, but are both seen as menacing by the authorities. Confucian values of filial piety and family responsibility also appear to be a good way of coping with the weaknesses of the national social welfare system and of restoring altruistic feeling among selfish individuals who are the ill-results of the one-child policy. And lastly, for most of the Chinese ordinary people, concepts like 'harmony' and 'middle-way' (*zhongyong zhidao*) are certainly easier to grasp than, say, Jiang Zemin's theory of the "Three Represents" (*Sange daibiao*) or other offspring of marxist-leninist thought.

On a broader scale, this trend shows that China has become so self-confident during the past few years that it is now proud of its own culture and tradition. As a homegrown philosophy, not a Western import, Confucianism is also particularly important for a country where nationalistic sentiments are quite high and nurtured by the Party. For China to look back at the traditions and values which allowed it in the past to be at the centre of the world is an essential part of the 'great revival of the nation' (*daguo fuxing*). This appears to be an ideal solution to the quandary of (Western) modernity and (Chinese) tradition: thanks to Confucian values, China can build its own 'Asian' modernity that allows her to contest the current Western hegemony.

Lastly, Confucian ideas are a convenient tool for advancing China's soft power and presenting a benign face to the outside world. Indeed, one could not find a better way to deny the theories of a power-hungry, threatening China, than to promote the notion of 'world harmony'. The concept is in itself appealing enough to be accepted by most of the international players as benevolent and innocuous. It is also a rallying idea for China's neighbouring countries and may be a way to bridge misunderstandings and disputes among the region. As Chinese scholar Du Weiming, who teaches Confucianism in Harvard University, underlined: "Confucian thoughts are not merely the civilisation of China but of East Asia".

At Last, a Homegrown Model for China's Politics

So, have the Chinese communist leaders come up with a miracle cure to solve China's internal and external problems? To thoroughly implement Confucius' ideas may not be as easy as it seems: part of it because not all of the Party members are ready to give up communist rhetoric, even in the disguise of "socialism with Chinese characteristics", and part of it because traditional political Confucianism needs to be dusted and adapted to modern day requirements.

When, 30 years ago, Deng Xiaoping acknowledged the economic and social failure of Maoism, he realised the imperative need for China to change its internal and external strategies and decided to open up the country to Western models of economic development and investments. Today China has reached the point where the Marxist ideology has been marginalised and sustaining the country's economic growth has become the main foundation for the Party's legitimacy. However, economic growth cannot, alone, provide political legitimacy, basically because there is no guarantee that it will be ever lasting.

The Party's current renewed interest for Confucian values shows that it is searching for new models – preferably not Western-inspired – of political legitimacy, which will allow it to hold its grip on power. This ought to be regarded as an important step, at least because Confucianism insists on the discipline of the people as much as on the responsibility and good governance of the rulers. But it also means that, contrary to what is sometimes being anticipated, the Chinese leaders do not intend to go down the path of this particular Western value called democracy, as they visibly favour the top-down Confucian

way of handling government matters.

Nadege Orban is a Research Analyst with the China Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.