

Historical Significance and Modern Relevance of Confucianism

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Across the entirety of human history, societies have conceived a plethora of different beliefs to support their ideologies. When thought about it, a few of these also called “religions” may come to mind: Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism, to name a few. In fact, these three particular doctrines have had such social impact that more than half of the world’s population identified with one of them in 2010 (projections even show a relevance growth by the year 2050)¹. Let this last data serve as a first quantitative attempt to demonstrate the relevance of these generalized doctrines.

But why is it that the human being has come to give up part of its intrinsic individuality for a predetermined set of principles? This is not a single-answer type of question. Others who have approached this enigma have concluded that motivational —individuals finding a source of spiritual attractiveness towards themselves through religion— and social factors —learning these dogmas as part of living in a social context that had adopted them at a prior time— may be the strongest reasons attached to it².

While Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism are the most popular religions, they are not the only ones which individuals once felt and continue to feel identified with. In the same sense, it would be inaccurate to affirm that only those doctrines with a current large devote count have had an impact in humanity throughout history. Let us take and study the case of Confucianism, a doctrine which dominated and set an ideological foundation across the Eastern Asian region more than 27 centuries ago. Much has been said and analyzed from this ancient doctrine, even questioning any form of influence over modern society. Based on this premise, I will now attempt to explore the theoretical foundations of Confucianism and its development throughout history to finally conclude whether there really exists indeed a contemporary and relevant effect over major social and/or political fields.

What is Confucianism and why does it Matter?

Born in 551 BCE during the Zhou Dynasty, Confucius —name attributed to the romanization of his original Chinese name, Kong Qui— grew up amongst the ancient national traditions and beliefs of utmost

¹ Pew Research Center, *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010 – 2050* (Pew Templeton, 2015), 6.

² Brett Mercier, Stephanie R. Kramer, and Azim F. Shariff. *Belief if God: Why People Believe, and Why they Don’t*. 2–3: Current Directions in Psychological Science, 2018.

respect to authority figures and rites, both conjugated in the pictogram “Li” (禮). At the same time, the Chinese territory hosted a series of battles later known as the “Spring and Autumn Periods” where the Zhou government would see a major loss of its power³. It was, however, the history he learned about royalty and proper Chinese customs during the then current dynasty in power that would later on influence his intentions of passing on all of this knowledge to his future disciples⁴.

For the Master himself —epithet given by his disciples and one I shall use indistinctly throughout the extension of this work—, the purpose of life lies in finding the path of “natural law” that contains the values and the insight necessary for reaching a state of self-perfection. Contrary to other beliefs that put salvation as the ultimate goal for humanity, Confucius saw self-knowledge and correction of malign moral deviations as the only true purposes for man to ultimately become a more virtuous individual and contribute to one’s society from a philosophical perspective⁵. Given the unequivocal nature of his logic, the proposed means, and the ultimate desired goal, both the Master and his disciples would define a set of virtues which would constitute the core of the Confucian school of thought: rectitude (*yi*), wisdom (*zhi*), trustworthiness (*xin*), humaneness (*ren*), and the group of traditional rites (*li*)⁶.

It is only precise to clarify right away that Confucius never considered himself as a creator of knowledge, but rather a transmitter of it⁷. He did not intend to conceive an unproven philosophy, but to share one whose fundamental ideas from the Zhou Dynasty he already thought of as vital to reach the self-perfection goal. To achieve this, Confucius used the Five Classics as main learning material for his disciples. These were a set of ancient Chinese books (prior to Confucius times) that were deemed by the Master himself as mandatory for the cultivated minds to know and understand⁸. These works covered everything from a recollection of primitive Chinese history to poetry and traditional rites, which now explains how important of a resource they were for Confucianism based on what was previously explained regarding its main purpose.

During late Confucian times and after his passing, a series of four new books (known as a single group called “Four Books”) were written with contributions from both the philosopher and his disciples about his thoughts and wisdom: ***Great Learning***, worked mainly by Zeng Zi, one of his students, traced an intellectual

³ Eugenio Anguiano, *Historia de China* (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2008), 3.

⁴ Ronnie L. Littlejohn, *Confucianism: An Introduction* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), p. xix.

⁵ Carlos del Saz Orozco, *Confucio y el fin ético del individuo*. 72: Boletín de la Asociación Española de Orientalistas, 1967

⁶ Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 34.

⁷ Carlos del Saz Orozco, *Confucio y el fin ético del individuo*. 72: Boletín de la Asociación Española de Orientalistas, 1967

⁸ Ronnie L. Littlejohn, *Confucianism: An Introduction* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), p. 7.

strategy to let virtue take over the world starting by becoming a virtuous oneself through *zhi*; *Analects* assembles many of Confucius' direct thoughts and understanding of life that would later evolve into its own doctrine; *Doctrine of the Mean* explores in deeper detail this concept originated from *Analects* in the passage "The virtue embodied in the doctrine of the Mean is of highest order. [...]", closely attached to the original purpose of searching human self-perfection⁹; and finally, *The Book of Mencius* includes the thoughts of he who was considered Confucius' most prominent disciple, among which lies the "theory of natural kindness" stating that human beings are born naturally good as well as the idea of "virtue politics" over any cruelty to control a kingdom.¹⁰

All of the above explained, I should note, has a major foundation in Confucius' own belief of a superior entity which he called "Heaven". Throughout the aforementioned Confucian books, the Master refers to it as an unquestionable figure which determines what can be considered as virtuous and provides humanity with the path of natural law to reach its ultimate flawless version. This point turns out crucial moving towards achieving this work's main objective in the sense that it shows how a doctrine, regardless of its self-proclaimed fallible transmitting nature, it usually relies in some form of a divine power to justify its fundamental mandates. There exists an ongoing debate about the true nature of this "Heaven" figure, however I am not taking it into account to enrich this work in any way for two main reasons: one, it has been agreed, based on Confucius' descriptions, that the figure is indeed a divine, conscious entity¹¹; and two, its visual and metaphorical representation may be disregarded on the basis of it being unrelated to the purpose of this argument, which is to demonstrate how humanity as a whole leans on superior beings to defend its most basic beliefs.

Confucianism ultimately set an initial straight path for the Chinese society to recover its lost cultural roots due to a constant state of war and political interests that deviated attention from them. This is, I firmly believe, the strongest reason that makes Confucianism a pertinent study case. As explored further on this work, we will see how the principles of the first Confucians and even the precepts exposed in those classical books, despite ideology changes and later social conflicts, continued to define the moral path not only for the Ancient Chinese populations, but for those that were to come after them.

Evolution and Development of the Confucian Tradition

⁹ Burton Watson, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 46.

¹⁰ Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 63-67.

¹¹ Carlos del Saz Orozco, *Confucio y el fin ético del individuo*, 79-87: Boletín de la Asociación Española de Orientalistas, 1967

Time went by and so did Confucius, but not his teachings and neither did those who heard or read about them. It is around the 4th Century BCE when some of those initial (now referred to as “Classical”) Confucians start questioning the means and the very foundations of the doctrine. It is often thought that those with some form of superior power (regardless of its political or social form) in relation to their equals in a society are capable of redesigning elementary ideological conceptions to favor what they themselves consider as convenient¹². Let us note that this does not necessarily mean that they carry a generalized malicious intent at least in the Confucian doctrine evolution, but rather a set of alterations to the ideological *status quo* for a greater social good.

Two main alternative schools of thought arose with their own perspectives during the period in question: on one hand, there was the Moist School which advocated for a larger doctrine focus on the social well-being through the use of a “good government” instead of the individualist search for such well-being courtesy of the well-known self-perfection state of soul. On the other hand, the Legalist School proposed a much stricter government form with defined laws to protect its population and penalties to punish those who attempt to hurt it in any form whatsoever¹³. This last option differs largely from Mencius’ original “benevolent politics” proposition, which puts into perspective how the Chinese society took Confucianism as an opportunity to reborn in terms of ideology variety.

It could have only seemed intriguing to historians how by the 3rd Century BCE Confucianism had positioned itself as the dominant Chinese social —and now— political ideology. Legalism turned out to be useful in terms of military conflict but insufficient to fulfill all of the citizens’ needs besides security and a primitive rule of law. Daoism, a third alternative option to Confucianism first seen during the Han Dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE) and based on a more liberal view when compared to Legalism, also failed to regulate the people’s individual desires which led to the fall of clearly disjointed ideology¹⁴. In all, Xinzhong Yao states concisely the reason behind Confucianism’s political success: “(Confucianism) proved itself to be a strong candidate to provide new minders of the Empire with the skills necessary to manage the state¹⁵.”

Confucianism would continue to see only slight variations of its core values until the arrival of the Song Dynasty during the 10th Century. It is then when the texts and wisdom provided by Confucius himself are once again interpreted differently focusing this time on what classic Confucians were setting as their priority during

¹² Christina Berg Johansen, Christian De Cock, *Ideologies of Time: How Elite Corporate Actors Engage the Future* (Copenhagen Business School, 2018), 4.

¹³ Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 63-67.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 81-82

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 81

their journey to reach self-perfection. This provided the foundation of what would later be called Neo-Confucianism. Notably, it is Cheng-Yi, a scholar from the 11th Century, who states that natural law itself is not as relevant as once thought. It is rather, among other facts, the coherent set of values and the focus on good health and physical strength what these Classic thinkers prioritized^{16 17}. Neo-Confucians also had a major impact on the Chinese public education by testing those interested in obtaining a public administration position based on both the Five Classics set of books and the Four Books, all of them collecting the complete analysis and studies of Confucianism up until that time¹⁸. It is quite notable that the Confucian tradition overall, rather than shrinking as a consequence of its own ancient nature, was being constantly reborn with new perspectives which evolved relative to the sociopolitical context of the time.

Just as Classic Confucianism once did, Neo-Confucianism as a sociopolitical doctrine continued to endure the test of time as it became the departing point for organizing the upcoming dynasties' government structures (the Ming dynasty, for instance, was deeply influenced by it throughout its entire history from the 14th to the 17th Century¹⁹). Its dominance, however, would come to an abrupt and temporary end with the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912 and the first establishment of a republic in China. The "May Fourth" political movement of 1919 showed a clear despise of the new Chinese republican population towards Confucian values, as they would associate them with a previous era of imperial ruling filled with repression and individual liberties' limitations²⁰. The feeling would not change for the better with the adoption of communist policies during the 1920s since, as Daniel Bell and Hahm Chaibong put it, "communists did their best to extirpate every root and branch of Confucianism that they regarded as a feudal and reactionary world view hindering progress²¹".

Contemporary Revival: is Confucianism still Relevant in the 21st Century?

Throughout most part of the 20th Century, the communist dominance over Chinese and overall Eastern Asian politics put Confucianism in a largely relegated position within the political arena. Far behind were the days of promoting individual self-perfection, humaneness, and all of the core Confucian values in a context where people were now giving up their individual identity to put forth the interests of society as a whole. This is an ideal point to pause and stare back at the last two thousand years' worth of history for the region. One

¹⁶ Peter K. Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), 79.

¹⁷ Jasmyn Murrell, *Virtuous Life, Honored Afterlife and the Evolution of Confucianism*, 103 – 105: History in the Making, 2017.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 95-103

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 151

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 106

²¹ Daniel A. Bell and Hahm Chaibong, *Confucianism for the Modern World* (Cambridge University Press: 2003), 2.

may dare to pose the question: "Could any single political movement vanish such a long time worth of traditions and culture?" It would seem as it could not, according to the politicians which put Confucianist values as the key reason for the modernization process of the entire Eastern Asian region occurred from the 1960s to the end of the century²². Although heatedly argued against to this day, the foundations of Confucianism are claimed to have had such a deep impact in all of these cultures that even a strong foreign political movement like communism could not prevent them from contributing to the rise of modernization right before the new millennia.

It is in this context that Confucianism arrives to the 21st Century with a question that is yet to be answered: is Confucius and his wisdom truly relevant in modern times? And if so, to what extent? I would like to explore the two main societal domains analyzed throughout this paper: politics with its corresponding legal implications and society itself. Concerning politics, there is an ongoing debate regarding the true influence of Confucianist values over constitutionalism. Chaihark sees the former concept as a working government organizational tool as long as there is some form of "civic virtue" or "political culture" among its citizens²³. In other words, citizens of a constitutionalist state must have a clear sense of righteousness and political awareness to guarantee a correct law enforcement. This immediately evokes the Confucianist principle of virtuosity whose absence would bind this modern and necessary political tool to an imminent failure. Moreover, let us turn to the own nature of the state itself, specifically one that follows liberalist principles. While theory suggests that no liberal state can promote any specific form of "proper and good life" as it is for its citizens to decide so, those same Eastern Asian states with a Confucian affinity do demand and expect a specific conduct from their political leaders, more precisely one ruled by humility and uprightness²⁴.

Let us now move on towards society itself. Considering how vast and broad of a term *society* truly is, analyzing one of the aspects that compose it should suffice to fulfill this point. If there is a controversial topic within social affairs in the 21st Century, that spot has been most definitely earned by human gender and its implications. Confucius addressed the differences between the ideas of "male" and "female" as being complementary to one another, not hierarchized. Sin Yee, however, argues that other elements from the Confucian doctrine such as the Yin-Yang system do contribute to a *gender essentialism* by placing "male" as

²² *Ibid.*, 3

²³ Hahm Chaihark. "Constitutionalism, Confucian civic virtue, and ritual prosperity". In *Confucianism for the Modern World*, 31: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 39-42

the strong and active “yang” and “female” as the more passive and weaker “yin”²⁵. She goes on to explain how in other societal dimensions such as the workplace, education, and the domestic sphere, Confucianism would negatively contribute to discriminating the female gender from achieving liberties and opportunities that more recent feminist movements have advocated for²⁶. Although negative, I would like to point out the fact that Confucianism is being indeed effectively employed here as a social doctrine to exemplify the types of modern ideals that collide with contemporary efforts to promote a more prominent gender equality context among the 21st Century societies.

Final Thoughts

Confucianism as a doctrine has come a long way since the very first devotee, Confucius himself. Over the course of more than 2,500 years, many adaptations have been made to the doctrine to fit current social beliefs and political needs. Relevant leader figures amongst those self-proclaimed Confucians have come and go, leaving their legacy for those who came behind them to continue. Several opposing doctrines have even attempted to displace Confucianism as the leading school of thought in Chinese territory. But ultimately, those ancient precepts have transcended the theoretical dimension to become an ingrained and undeniable part of the entire East Asian culture.

Having studied the complete story of Confucianism, its historical development, and the analysis of recent social events, I can now convincingly give a concrete and definite answer to the implied question stated at the beginning of this document: Yes, Confucianism is still relevant in the 21st Century's global affairs as an accurate tool to explain the reasoning and the motivations behind human nature from an individualist point of view. What remains is only to expect new philosophy premises that may continue to contribute to the overall prosperity and effectiveness of Confucianism as a useful and relevant ideology in the years to come.

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²⁵ Chan Sin Yee. “The Confucian Conception of Gender”. In *Confucianism for the Modern World*, 319: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 324-327

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