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What Confucius Might Say in a Free Society

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Panel: Freedom's Limits? Core Values in a Changing World

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What Confucius Might Say in a Free Society

In this discussion on whether Western principles of freedom and democracy should accommodate such traditional values of “order” or “honor” existing in certain traditional societies in Asia and elsewhere, I would like to focus on one philosopher, whose ostensible doctrines are often mentioned in support of certain arguments.

In October 2000 when President Clinton signed an act granting China “Permanent Normal Trade Relation” with the US and de-linking trade with human rights, he felt obliged to point out that “a proud Confucian culture that prizes order over liberty is specially reluctant to take a step that is perceived as kowtowing to the US.”

Actually, the sage is on record as saying, “Let humanity be your highest standard.” Confucius may not exactly be a democrat by present-day standards, but he believed in the rule of law and accountability in government. Though Confucius was convinced that hierarchy and ritual were vital to the running of a state, he was clear that princes should rule through moral authority and not through violence and oppression. An even more humanist and democratic development of Confucianism is represented by Mencius, who not only put the interests of the people above that of the ruler but even vindicated tyrannicide.

In his book *The Burning Forest*, the Belgian art historian and China scholar Simon Leys tell us that “In traditional China, ‘morality’ (which means essentially Confucianism) was the main bulwark against incipient totalitarianism.” He refers to the Chinese historian Yu Ying-shih, schematically summarising an article by him on this question as follows: “Confucianism described the world in terms of a dualism; on the one hand there is the concrete, changing realm of actual politics, on the other hand there is the realm of abstract, permanent principles. The duty of the scholar-politician is to serve the ruler insofar as the ruler’s behaviour and policies harmonise with the unchanging moral principles, which provide a stable reference by which to judge them. In case of a clash between the two realms, the Confucian scholar must, in the strong and unambiguous words of Xun Zi, ‘follow the principles and disobey the Prince.’”

At the end of the last century, the neo-Confucian scholar Kang Yu Wei (1858–1927), who was also China’s first great modern reformer, came up with a radical interpretation of Confucius’ teaching which shook the intellectual world of the Chinese gentry-literati. In Kang’s view, Confucius was a forward-looking “sage king” who saw history as a progressive unilinear development from an age of disorder where kings and emperors ruled over people, through an age of approaching peace guided by constitutional monarchies, eventually to an age of universal peace and republican government.

Kang had been the main inspiration behind the extraordinary but short-lived

reform movement of 1898 by the Manchu Emperor Guangxu. The emperor's aunt, the ruthless, reactionary Dowager Empress Cixi, had the young emperor arrested and six of the main reformers beheaded. Kang just managed to flee China in a British warship. In exile in Darjeeling (my old hometown) in British India, he completed a synthesis of Confucian, Buddhist and Western Utopian ideas, which he explained in his astonishing *Book of the Great Community (Datongshu)*.

Beside such standard utopian prescriptions as the abolition of nation states, the creation of a world government, and the ending of all wars, class and economic distinctions, Kang's most original reflections concerned the problems of abolishing the two other "boundaries" in the Great Community, the boundaries of the family and boundaries of gender. Such ideas were at the time revolutionary not only for a Confucian scholar but even for a Western one.

Long before the seeds of Communism were first planted in China, there was a broad intellectual movement embracing democracy. "Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science" represented, for the youth and intelligentsia of turn-of-the-century China, the two fundamental requisites for a modern Chinese state. The founding father of the modern Chinese state, Dr. Sun Yatsen, was a democrat. His widow, Song Meiling, together with Cai Yuanpei, chancellor of Beijing National University and the writer Lu Xun, founded the Chinese League for the Protection of Human Rights as early as 1930.

It should be stressed that democracy and human rights do not merely represent foreign values now being forced on a reluctant Chinese or Asian society. They existed in China's political debate since the end of the last century. They appear now never to have existed only because of the effectiveness of totalitarian propaganda in erasing the political memory of an entire nation and in blurring the historical perception of the rest of the world.

The notion of a set of "Asian values" (as Confucian values are referred to in a larger context) of hierarchy, order and tradition that places little value on freedom and democracy can be dismissed outright if we take into account a large section of Asia which is oddly, but invariably, overlooked in this debate. I mean, of course, the world's largest and, arguably, liveliest democracy, India. The Nobel Prize winning economist, Amartya Sen, has strongly condemned this attempt to depict Asian history "in terms of a narrow category of authoritarian values which does little justice to the rich varieties of thought in Asian intellectual tradition." In his *Freedom as Development*, he brushes aside such negationism with a brusque dismissal: "Dubious history does nothing to vindicate dubious politics."

For those who advocate order and security above freedom and democracy, China's great modern writer, Lu Xun once helpfully provided "... a formula that it seems no one has thought of yet - and that is the model offered by Number One Prison in Peking. The inmates need not worry anymore that the neighbours' house may be on fire; their two daily meals are guaranteed; cold and hunger cannot affect them: their shelter is stable and soundly built, and there is no danger that the roof will cave in. As they are carefully watched by their jailer, they have no opportunities

for new brushes with the law. They are being afforded superb protection against burglars. One could not dream of a safer place. Only one thing is missing - freedom.”