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What Confucius would make of it

Charles Stafford

- *Governing educational desire: culture, politics and schooling in China* **By Andrew Kipnis**
- *Drink water, but remember the source: moral discourse in a Chinese village* **By Ellen Oxfeld**

About a quarter of the way into Andrew Kipnis's fascinating new book the accumulating evidence starts to sink in: he is not kidding when he says that people in China "desire" education to a remarkable extent. In Zouping, Shandong, where he conducted fieldwork, the new Number One Middle School cost 230 million yuan to build (about \$35 million at current exchange rates). The campus – "which resembles that of a small university" – is networked, of course, and boasts an Olympic size pool, not to mention "all manner of specialized equipment" (p. 32). Parents want their children to attend a marvelous school of this kind in the hope that doing so will secure them admission to a good university – even though, as Kipnis points out, going to a technical college would actually give many of them better job prospects. This fact notwithstanding, paying for university (the tuition fees have "skyrocketed") has been added to the list of standard parental obligations, even replacing house building "as the most important large-ticket expenditure for many rural families" (p. 35).

Then there is the question of what actually happens inside schools. The schedule for one junior middle school in a rural township, as reported by Kipnis, is very striking. The students there are boarders and follow a more or less nonstop routine from 6.15 a.m. until lights out at 9.40 p.m., including four discussion and study sessions *after* dinner. Little wonder that a fifteen-minute period is set aside at 2.45 p.m. for them to do eye exercises: an attempt to deal with problems arising from "the intensity of study" (p. 41).



In brief, it all sounds a bit mad, and Kipnis does refer to the Chinese obsession with educational achievement as a kind of fever.

One might assume that this fever (a problem, it must be added, that many countries would dearly love to have^[1]) is fed by a scarcity of places in middle schools and universities. In fact, secondary and tertiary educational provision has expanded hugely in China in recent years. As Kipnis notes (pp.39-40), getting into an academic senior middle school is now relatively easy – something like 80 percent of students in Zouping do so. And then a high proportion of these students manage to perform well enough to gain admission, in due course, to either a regular university or another tertiary programme of some kind (about 40 and 45 percent respectively).

So what is the fuss about? Kipnis observes that “... the intensity of educational desire in Zouping [and, by extension, elsewhere in China] arises from the interactions and mutual influence of thousands of actors and governing actions” (p. 53-4). We are dealing here with a “total social phenomenon” for which no simple causal account can be given. For example, one – perhaps unexpected – factor in the case of Zouping is local government indebtedness. Briefly, the county has been successful at getting students into university and this has allowed local schools to attract fee-paying students from elsewhere. This fee income, in turn, has enabled Zouping to pay off some of the huge loans taken out to build the remarkable facility mentioned above, i.e. the Number One Middle School with its networked classrooms, etc. Of course, in order to keep fee-paying students coming it is vital (as local education officials well know) that university entrance figures for Zouping should remain very good in relative terms, with the result that, well, they are (p. 40).

This illustration raises one of the questions at the heart of Kipnis’s book: what exactly is the role of various levels of government, and various officials, vis-à-vis educational desire in China today? In some respects, this phenomenon is surely a monster of the state’s creation. China’s so-called one child policy was meant to result in fewer children, but also ones of “higher quality” as parental investment in each child increased. The difficulty is that parents took this logic very seriously indeed, so much so that the role of the state in recent years has actually been to try to constrain the monster of parental investment in children’s education, so that it does not get completely out of hand (p. 65 ff).

Kipnis provides interesting examples of this from Shandong. Broadly in line with national policy, well-meaning officials there have sought to promote “education for quality”: i.e. to promote a system that gives students a bit of breathing room, or at least does not literally crush them to death with work. They required schools to cut back on classroom hours, they banned the organization of study sessions during holidays, they explicitly encouraged students *not* to overspecialize too early in their schooling (as many had been doing for exam purposes), and so on. As Kipnis notes, however, initiatives of these kinds have had mixed success. In a number of cases, schools – under pressure from fidgety parents and students alike – have managed to break new guidelines. Where they could not, the market for private cramming schools and tutoring has expanded to fill perceived gaps in public provision (pp. 77-81). In other words, the educational desire juggernaut is not easily stopped. Kipnis

comments that "... it has been much easier to bolster [educational] desire than tame it, more profitable to bet on its expansion than to invest in its redirection" (p. 89).

In seeking to provide a synthetic account of this situation, Kipnis focuses, for most of the second half of his book, on levels of analysis beyond the local. More specifically, he relates the phenomenon of intense educational desire, as observed by him in Zouping, to issues of national governance (Chapter 3), to a more general "imperial governing complex" that is found, he suggests, across East Asia (Chapter 4), and ultimately to "universal dilemmas of human desire and social hierarchy" (Chapter 5). The analysis in these chapters is ambitious and thought provoking, and I admire the agenda behind them, i.e. the attempt to explain the local with respect to the national and even the universal. However as I read these chapters I also found myself wishing, for reasons I'll explain in a moment, that I knew a bit more about people in Zouping, and especially about everyday life there *outside* of schools.

By contrast, Ellen Oxfeld's new book is "unabashedly ethnographic" from start to finish, as she herself puts it. Her focus in *Drink water, but remember the source* is on morality, but not as this might be "ascertained with reference to a great text or unyielding set of rules" (p.xv-xvi). She wants instead to know how people really live morally, and think and talk about moral questions, in the flow of everyday life. She provides us with an excellent account of this.

Of course, many observers have claimed that China is suffering from a kind of moral vacuum in the post Mao era, when neither traditional nor Communist values appear to have much purchase, and nothing other than consumerist individualism has shown up to replace them. But if there is a moral vacuum in China, the people of Moonshadow Pond – the single surname village in Guangdong where Oxfeld conducted fieldwork – appear not to have heard about it. More specifically, although these people frequently disagree about the nature of particular moral obligations they nevertheless agree that such obligations exist. To be human, they say, is to incur moral debts of various kinds, starting from within the family. And someone who *forgets* these debts, and fails to repay them in appropriate ways, has shown himself to be without "conscience" (*liangxin*). In short, memory and morality are deeply intertwined.

Oxfeld provides the illustration of a local leader who went out on a limb, back in the 60s and 70s, to help another man. Providing this help was controversial at the time and doing so eventually contributed to the leader having to step down from his post. Many years later, at the time of Oxfeld's fieldwork, this history remained directly relevant to relations between the two men's families. Had the one who received help actually forgotten about it? Sometimes he was accused of having done so. When he behaved badly towards his former patron in the present, the patron's wife commented to Oxfeld that it's like the old proverb: a person saves somebody's dog "... only to have its owner send it back to bite them!" (p. 55).

With all this talk of obligation and memory, one might imagine the moral universe of Moonshadow Pond to be fundamentally backward looking and therefore conservative. The reality, Oxfeld suggests, is that the moral landscape of rural China has been greatly transformed in recent decades. The economy has changed, of course, but then so too have family life, religion, local politics and just about everything else. Perhaps partly as a result of this, for there to be debate and disagreement about moral issues is the norm rather than the exception. Indeed, as Oxfeld observes, even individuals may hold, within themselves, competing models or “schemas” about what should happen in particular circumstances – appealing in turn to traditional, Maoist, modern, etc., frameworks.

Among other things, women in Moonshadow Pond confront “evolving and sometimes contradictory expectations” in relation to their roles as daughters and daughters-in-law (p. 73). It is not just that expectations about these roles have changed, however, because many of the old principles seem to apply, at least some of the time. For instance, one woman spoke with Oxfeld about the background and qualities of her prospective daughter-in-law. The implication of her comments was that this girl was effectively “marrying up” by tying the knot with her son. As Oxfeld explains, older women may see this in a (morally) positive light: a socially inferior daughter-in-law will, in theory, be more subservient within her new family. Commenting on the daughter-in-law’s personality, this woman said: “Oh, she is somewhat shy ... but if you curse her out, she doesn’t mind. Her personality is good!” (p. 94). If this seems an old-fashioned view, one of Oxfeld’s points is precisely that radical changes to social life sometimes have the effect of selectively reinforcing traditional ideas.

Or take the example of return migrants, i.e. overseas Chinese (often separated from their families as a consequence of the Civil War) who return to their ancestral homes on the mainland for brief or extended visits. Is this a good or a bad thing? In theory it is a wonderful thing, partly because such visits are seen as a manifestation of “traditional” morality, but also because return migrants often invest in their home communities. Oxfeld relates the story, for instance, of Old Guosheng – a retired Nationalist Army pilot, rather comfortably off financially, who left his home in Taiwan to set up residence in Moonshadow Pond, his ancestral village. This should have been great news for the community. But as Oxfeld points out, having “a potential benefactor in the midst” of the village also “sets gossip and stories in motion, as well as negative moral evaluations about those who are seen as trying to curry favor in order to get personal financial rewards” (p. 168). Moreover, evaluations of the man himself – simultaneously “one of us” and a foreigner – were ambivalent. Old Guosheng was rich, by local standards, but he also had such a bad temper that one woman who cooked for him eventually quit because of it (in spite of the fact that he had provided her with significant financial assistance). Indeed, it seems that the basic reason this bad-tempered man moved to Moonshadow Pond was his desire “to *avoid* his family in Taiwan” – his wife and sons were there, but he couldn’t get along with them – rather than any particular wish to reunite with abandoned kin on the mainland. As local people put it, this guy has money, sure, but he evidently doesn’t know how to *zuo ren*, “behave properly”.

The question of proper behaviour in Chinese contexts brings me to a general observation about both of these books, when taken together. Neither Kipnis nor Oxfeld has a great deal

to say about Confucianism, as such, and probably with very good reason. As Kipnis points out, to speak of Confucian ideals as the ultimate source of educational desire in China is to risk being accused of orientalism. After all, describing China as Confucian is like describing Europe as Christian: it explains everything and nothing. Oxfeld, for her part, puts the word Confucianism in scare quotes at least a couple of times, highlighting the fact that she doesn't *really* believe there is some easy correspondence between properly Confucian theory/ideals/texts and what she observes on the ground in Moonshadow Pond.

Still, it's hard not to draw the conclusion that the picture of 21st century China drawn in these two books is unremittingly Confucian. Kipnis focuses on education, and more specifically on a situation in which the traditional Chinese emphasis on learning and educational achievement (both as an end in itself and as a means of being filial) has been taken to a stunning extreme. What could be more Confucian than that? Oxfeld focuses on morality, and points out, as I've said, that people in her fieldwork village often seem to be selecting between the rather wide range of moralities on offer. And yet it often seems to come back to the enduring demand, in the Chinese countryside, that people should never, ever forget their moral obligations, especially vis-à-vis their elders and their ancestors. Drink water, but remember the source. Surely this represents a kind of victory for Confucianism over the forces of (anti-Confucian) Maoism, market-oriented individualism, and whatever else has come.

But is a Confucian picture of modern China an accurate one? My own view is that it is indeed accurate: both of these books are wonderfully empirical and therefore very convincing. Having said this, what they perhaps do *not* convey, at least not fully, is the darker, less regimented, certainly funnier, possibly crazier – and in some respects very un-Confucian – China that also exists out there. I sometimes think of this, in a kind of mental shorthand, as being a “Daoist” China, meaning one that is roughly opposed to the po-faced seriousness of Confucianism while still being deeply moral (and serious) in its own distinctive way. (Of course I am not suggesting that when this is found in today's China it is always literally linked to the practice of Daoism, as such.)

This takes me back to the point I made above, that in Kipnis's book in particular I would have been interested to know more about what happens outside of schools, where I suspect that some of this other China can be found, even in an education-mad province like Shandong. (Oxfeld, for her part, is more conventionally holistic in approach than Kipnis, and she gives us very well-rounded portraits of a number of key informants, including their moral frailties and their religious [in some cases Daoist, as it happens] practices as observed in everyday life. However her desire to work against the idea that China is suffering from a moral vacuum arguably leads to her drawing a somewhat strait-laced, i.e. Confucian, image of the place as a whole.) My own experience when doing research on schooling in Taiwan many years ago^[2] was that parents there were very keen for their children to be taken over by the educational apparatus – if that is what it took for them to succeed in life. And yet the Confucian/nationalist orientation of local schools was, in some respects, diametrically opposed to the moral orientation (as well as the general life aesthetics) of these parents and their communities. Schooling had profound effects, of course, but I would say that neither the children I met nor their elders had capitulated entirely to its Confucian/nationalist ideologies. In my experience, they had a healthy skepticism not only towards schooling but

in fact towards pompous “good behaviour” in general. In subsequent fieldwork in rural mainland China, including most recently in Heilongjiang, I have observed a very similar spirit and general life aesthetics among many of the people I’ve met, including young people who spend a great deal of time at school.

Anyway, my point is that if traditional Confucian morality is shown, by these books, to have persisted into China’s modern era in some form, it is also true that other, perhaps equally traditional, ways of living continue to rumble on as well.

Kipnis reports, by the way, that the very Confucian-sounding motto of Zouping’s Number One Middle School is spelt out in huge letters over the school’s central office building: “Be the First to Worry and the Last to be Happy”. What a thing to say to youngsters as they arrive at school every morning! In fact, as Kipnis notes, the motto is taken from the politician-scholar Fan Zhongyan, and its substantive meaning – something like “Place the Affairs of the Nation Before Your Own Happiness” – is rather less exotic sounding than the literal translation. Of course, the students meanwhile have their own version, half-jokingly reported to Kipnis: “Happiness will only come to those who first worry about their studies” (p. 38). Perhaps.

1. ^[1] For an interesting comparative case, see Chris Fuller’s review of Craig Jeffrey’s book, *Timepass*, which focuses in part on the “educational disaster” of two colleges in India: <http://aotcpres.com/articles/timepass-boredom/>. ↵
2. ^[2] Charles Stafford (1995), *The roads of Chinese childhood*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.