

Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History

Volume 7 | Issue 2

Article 12

11-1-2017

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Recommended Citation

Dison, Payton Jay; Smithberg, Fred; Freeman, Michael Chase; and Lee, Brian (2017) "Education and Government in the Eyes of a Confucian Scholar in Modern China," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 2 , Article 12.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2017.070212

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol7/iss2/12>

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Education and Government in the Eyes of a Confucian Scholar in Modern China

Editorial Introduction

In times of rapid socio-political changes, individuals accustomed to the old ways of life are left scrambling to find a new place within a new system that bears nothing in common with what they once knew. *The Man Awakened from Dreams: One Man's Life in a North China Village, 1857-1942* by Henrietta Harrison is the case study of Liu Dapeng, a Confucian scholar who experienced the extreme changes brought on by the fall of the Qing Dynasty and rise of the Chinese Republic in the early 1900s. Liu Dapeng witnessed the replacement of traditional Chinese institutions with Westernized ones. This collection focuses primarily on the themes of education and government within China during this period of great change. The first essay examines various aspects of a Confucian education and their ramifications on Chinese society. The following essay draws comparisons between the traditional Confucian education and the contemporary Western university system. The third essay explores the Confucian virtue of filial piety and its deep roots in the role of government. The fourth and final essay looks to examine the government legitimacy as understood by this Confucian scholar. Together these essays aim to provide insights into the Confucian aspects of education and government in one man's life during a time when his understanding of both is rendered irrelevant. (Guest Editor, Brian Lee)

The Role of Confucianism in Education of Modern China

Payton Dison

China's education system in the 19th century revolved mainly around the ideas of Confucian teachings. This is depicted most notably in Henrietta Harrison's *The Man Awakened from Dreams*, which is a recounting of the life of Liu Dapeng. This recollection sheds an especially clear light on the educational system of China and all of its shortcomings. Students were expected to memorize the moral teachings of Confucius from ages before. However, education in China was less about learning and more about testing. This caused a unique problem within China's society since the fastest way to attain status was through the achievement of a degree. Exams were extremely difficult and based heavily off memorization and essay-writing. Furthermore, there were several different degrees required to make it to the top of the social class. Although he is committed fully to the teachings of Confucius and being a moral man, Liu Dapeng ultimately fails in his attempt to achieve the highest degree. His failure highlights key flaws within the Chinese educational system.

Traditional Chinese education was problematic in that it blended Confucian ideals with a rigorous exam system. This mixture of church and state would be unheard of in today's Western education systems. However, at the time in China it was a great way to teach children morality and literacy all at once. To the Chinese, "education was seen as a form of moral indoctrination" (25). In theory, this is an effective way to groom a generation to be upstanding citizens as well as learned men. In practice though, it led to various problems. For example, the exam system made it difficult to focus on being both a moral citizen and a successful student. Liu Dapeng's first instructor "tried hard to keep his pupils from limiting themselves to learning how to pass the government examinations" and "emphasized the moral and philosophical content of the texts" (26). This illustrates best the common issues that young pupils faced. They could either commit

themselves to the moralistic teachings of their textbooks, or focus their efforts on figuring out how best to pass the exams. It was nearly impossible to do both due to the structure of the exams. Since the degrees were often earned based off how well students could write essays, most pupils dedicated their time to perfecting their writing skills. To Liu, there was a clear difference in the exams and the knowledge they tested: “In order to pass the examinations, [Liu] should focus on the formalistic rules of essay-writing” (38). However, Liu also believed that “the failure to emphasize the moral content of education was harming society and local government” (38). This was not the only part of China’s education system that caused issues in lives of old intellectuals including Liu.

China’s gentry class saw numerous new members in this time due to the social mobility that the national exam system afforded to degree holders, but this came with its own unique set of problems. First and foremost, students who wished to achieve a national degree would often spend their entire lives in pursuit of these degrees. The number of degrees given out was limited each time the exams were held, so performing well did not guarantee a degree. Rather, students had to outperform the other test takers. This meant a student could try for a degree for a substantial amount of their life and never achieve one. This was fine if the student was from a wealthy family. However, in the case of Liu Dapeng, his time spent at school was a result of his father’s investments in him. “Supporting a son to live away from home in Taiyuan and attend the academy so he could try to attain a higher degree was a much greater financial commitment (than supporting a son to obtain a licentiate degree)” (33). If he came back with nothing to show for his time spent in studying, he would have not only wasted his father’s money, but also years of his life he could have been working to support his family. In this regard, education and social mobility heavily favored those who had less to lose.

Liu Dapeng lived in a time where the education system directly impacted him and those around him both negatively and positively. Heavy focus on Confucian ideology taught Liu all he could ever hope to know about how to live a moral life, but they failed him when it came time for the state exams. With a testing system more focused on essay writing than moral behavior, Liu was often confronted with the choice between studying good essay writing and focusing on being a morally conscious citizen. Doing both in this time period proved exceedingly difficult. Although Liu was a provincial degree-holder, he never achieved his goal of holding government office. His failure can certainly be attributed to the shortcomings of the Chinese education system in imperial China. Liu lived in an ever-changing period, and an old Chinese curse certainly sums up his life: “May he live in interesting times.”

Confucianism and Liberal Studies

Michael Chase Freeman

Humanity has struggled with the purposes of education for thousands of years. Education is relative to the society that one is brought up in; different cultures define the purpose of knowledge differently throughout time, changing every now and then to benefit the society as a whole. In ancient China, Confucius viewed education as a way to cultivate character and become a better person, although it also served the purpose of producing men capable of reforming and serving the government. Nevertheless, this belief that education was more than just training, but rather a path to becoming a more enlightened “gentleman” permeated China through the ages.

Even today in Western culture this idea of moral improvement through observation, study, and reflective thought is held in high standards at colleges and universities of liberal studies. But, as Liu Dapeng witnessed, there is always a tension between this Confucian/Liberal train of thought and the belief in a singular purpose for education—job training.

In Liu Dapeng's lifetime, China was in a state of upheaval and social change. Confucian ideals were quickly becoming ignored and irrelevant. As a true Confucian scholar, Liu was deeply conflicted during his years of schooling as social pressures and his traditional values competed in his mind. Although he had been raised on traditional values of commitment to ancient texts and philosophy, there was an increasing popularity of focusing simply on passing the exams to gain a degree and ultimately, government office. Liu was torn, and it is obvious from the way others talked about – or made fun of – his dedication to Confucian ideals that he was being left behind by the rest of society. It is difficult not to draw connections between his struggle and that of a Liberal Studies major today, dedicating their time to understanding the content of classes and making connections between disciplines as a holistic approach. Contrast to this is the student who simply endures a class, without thought or effort, because they must eventually earn a degree. As Liu writes, “If you don't try to understand the underlying principles but only study essay-writing to try and get a degree, it will not be easy for you to do well in any exam, and even if you do, I fear that your words and deeds will not be principled” (38).

Of course, Liu was not a perfect man, even if his belief in education was respectable. He was, along with much of Chinese society at the time, an example of the hypocrisy in the educational system. He valued *being* educated – even if it was not as moral as he would have liked – but criticized and shamed the role of teachers and tutors. In a way, for a society that values education, moral or not, this seems very backwards; you cannot become a pupil without a

master, and you cannot ensure your values and ethics will be passed on without teaching them to the younger generations. Perhaps the decline of moral teachings was partially a result of this social discrimination of the profession, since most teachers were considered simply as men who failed at getting more than a provincial degree. But as Henrietta Harrison points out, “The sad lot of the scholar turned teacher was, after all, an inevitable consequence of the examination system as it had existed for centuries” (39). Liu Dapeng despised and yet participated in this vicious cycle of viewing education as a means to political power. In the end, he was a victim of both social discrimination and social upheaval, as well as his own fault at not realizing the true flaws of traditional views.

Liu Dapeng was certainly a very high-minded individual during a period in China which saw many citizens abandoning traditions and values that had been staples of their culture for generations. Liu remained adamant about his beliefs in how society should be managed, and who it should be managed by, that is dignified gentlemen of Confucianism. Again, there are parallels that can be seen between his world and today. Ultimately, due in part to the corrupt system, as well as his own convictions of morality, Liu found himself left behind as his country moved in another direction. “In a society in which business was family-based, the tutor,” says Harrison, “like most other employees, was a subordinate in someone else’s family rather than the head of his own” (44). This was Liu’s ultimate shame; not living up to his parents’ expectations would haunt him for the rest of his life despite his involvement of many public positions in local government. By the end of his life, he was, ironically, well respected in his village of Chiqiao because of his respect for tradition that were scarcely present in the newer generation. So perhaps we need to reevaluate our own cultural views toward education, look to philosophers such as

Confucius to understand the nature of humanity and how education can improve us, as Liu Dapeng so whole-heartedly believed.

One Man's Intellectual Resistance to the Republic

Fred M. Smithberg

The influence of Confucianism as an impediment to the changing political, social and cultural fabric of modern China cannot be underestimated. In Henrietta Harrison's *The Man Awakened from Dreams*, Liu Dapeng's personal journey during a period of political upheaval focuses on Liu's loss of status as an upright Confucian gentleman and his intellectual resistance to political change and the erosion of proper filial behavior. Liu's Confucian conservatism developed as a result of his early pursuit of a classical education and as a provincial degree holder (*Juren*) served to impede his personal success in a revolutionary China. His indoctrination by the Confucian classics placed him in direct opposition to political and social changes resulting from the creation of the Republic. In his life, as a scholar, filial son, merchant, farmer and finally as a representative of the people, Liu refuses to embrace those Republican political changes and relinquish his mantle as a Confucian gentleman and filial subject of the Emperor. China's Republican revolution would bring political changes, but for Liu, it destroyed his identity, his prospects for social advancement and magnified his inability and reluctance to change his views on filial behavior and let go of the past.

Liu's conservatism is rooted in his classical Confucian education, an education that focused on the past, acknowledging traditional social and political relationships. A Confucian philosophy, based primarily on a social hierarchy and morality with the Emperor as the head of the country and the father, as the head of the family. The first Confucian classic that Liu studied as a young scholar was the *Classic of Filial Piety*, a treatise on the hierarchical relationships of father to son and subject to sovereign. This classical Confucian work was in direct conflict with Western egalitarian democracy and stressed loyalty and obedience to superiors rather than equality. It is Liu's identity as a Confucian gentleman that creates his negative view of the new Republican policies resulting from the Revolution of 1911. Mired in the past, he sees the revolution as a foreign inspired movement and does not approve of the changes it brings, nor does he embrace them. He states, "those who hold to the old cleave to the way of Confucius and Mencius, while those who hold to the new seek only after Western methods." (6) He insinuates that he is not against modernization as long as it is home grown and traditionally framed. Liu saw Western definitions of equality to be a foreign threat to the filial and moral order of China. After hearing a story about the erosion of filial piety between an official and his Western educated son, Liu declares: "If it is really like this, the force of moral obligation will be totally destroyed and the whole country will fall into disorder." (79) Liu Dapeng, as a conservative upright Confucian gentleman, is looking to the past and views political disorder as a result of changes to traditional Confucian relationships, specifically not being filial to one's parents or to the sovereign.

Liu Dapeng is dismayed by the overthrow of the Qing Emperor and views this development through the eyes of an upright gentleman, and filial subject. The new government, under Yuan Shikai, in Liu's eyes is illegitimate and Yuan treacherous and disloyal to the

Emperor. Liu describes the situation this way: “The treacherous official Yuan Shikai overthrew the dynasty’s government, concealed the Emperor in the depths of the palace and took the position of president. More than a year ago he gave an order that the country should henceforth be known as the Republic.” (97) Not being filial to superiors was against everything that Liu believed and identified. He would say this about Yuan Shikai: “If Yuan really is declared Emperor, then where is the proper behavior between monarch and minister.” (101) Liu’s reference to a disruption of filial piety challenges the new social and political order and the very legitimacy of the Republic. Many years after the revolution, Liu continued to look to the past and place responsibility for ineffective republican government on the overthrow of the Emperor. “I think that those who are officials today are acting wrongly and scorn their failure to remain loyal to the dynasty.” (13) Disloyalty to superiors was a change to traditional values of filial piety, a change that brought political disorder, and was unacceptable to an upright gentleman, like Liu Dapeng.

Liu views the Republican election process as a corrupt exercise and not adhering to Confucian moral and filial principles. More importantly, the new democratic elections excluded men like Liu from the social mobility they enjoyed under the Qing Dynasty. “It has become common to buy votes and to campaign to become an assembly member. This is the worst fault of the selection policy. From now on upright gentleman will not be able to be assembly members.” (103) Liu is looking to the past and his criticism is based upon a comparison between the Dynastic System and the Republic. In the old system, government officials were selected through examination, and only the best were selected regardless of financial status. In the new Republic, Liu was feeling his exclusion from government employment and social mobility as a result of his traditional education and relative poverty. This change to the means of traditional social mobility

within the new Republic was never accepted by Liu Dapeng, because men of his social class became its first victims.

Liu Dapeng would identify as a Confucian upright gentleman and filial subject of the Emperor until his death in 1942. He was educated in the traditional Chinese humanities, therefore, a generalist and not prepared for the modern changes to come. He was disoriented by his loss of status and struggled with an identity that was no longer valid or valued in China's new Republic. The examination system that ended in 1905, once the key to his social mobility was replaced by elective office. Liu felt excluded by this new and strange means of social mobility. He remained mired in the past, a result of the erosion of old social privilege, his traditional education and his own poverty. Republican changes to traditional filial relationships and means of social advancement directly affected Liu, and he was not willing to accept those changes. Unfortunately, Liu Dapeng, a filial subject of the Qing, would continue to cling to the past as a changing China swirled around him.

A Confucian Scholar's Perception of Government Legitimacy

Brian Lee

The legitimacy of a newly formed government's power is rarely accepted by supporters of the replaced regime. Confucian scholar Liu Dapeng, the focus of *The Man Awakened from Dreams*, denounces the legitimacy of the republican government that replaced the Qing dynasty in China after the 1911 revolution. Liu Dapeng's Confucian worldview did not support the

policies and methods of the Republic as they rejected Chinese tradition in favor of Westernization.

The rise of the Qing dynasty was, like the Republic's, a forceful seizure of power from an existing government. Although the Qing dynasty was established by Manchu people that conquered China, Liu Dapeng does not challenge their legitimacy. By the time of Liu Dapeng's birth in 1857 the Qing had ruled China for over 200 years, making them a long-established regime. While the Qing strictly enforced some Manchu customs, such as the queue hairstyle, they also adapted many traditional Chinese cultural aspects. The Qing dynasty officially supported a version of Confucianism "that had been developed in the twelfth century" (26), and while they may not have been "pure" (5) interpretations, the works attributed to Confucius and his disciples formed the basis for the Qing educational system. The Qing also maintained the examination system based on Confucianism until 1905, which had been the primary source of social mobility in China. The traditional examination system allowed Chinese men to serve as government officials in the same manner as before the establishment of the Qing dynasty. The dynasty changed but the system itself remained largely intact, giving legitimacy to Qing rule.

The policies of the republican government were "profoundly in conflict with Liu's Confucian values" as they promoted "modernity and democracy" (97) which primarily originated from the Western world. Liu makes his disdain for modernization and Western learning clear in his regular use of the term "barbarians" (83) to describe both Westerners and their ideologies. These unfavorable associations with modernization were worsened after the new took power and failed to solve China's growing problems. Attempts to alter Chinese culture were also made by the Republic that Liu Dapeng could not tolerate, such as the replacement of the Chinese lunar calendar with the Western solar. This was viewed harshly by Liu Dapeng, and he

would routinely make “attack[s] on the solar calendar” (97) in his personal diary. He considered this change as an attack on Chinese culture. Such moves to alter tradition could not be accepted and it delighted Liu when the local peasants ignored the mandated changes.

Corruption was another factor in Liu Dapeng’s assessment that the republican government was illegitimate. While Liu did see corruption in the Qing government through the practice of “selling government offices” (83), this did not make the Qing dynasty illegitimate. Although the system was not free of problems, it was not in and of itself corrupt. Liu’s perception of the republican government is that it was “immoral” (106) and the electoral system was based on “depravity” (102). According to Liu Dapeng, only “rogues and villains” (103) were capable of winning office in the new system. Candidates went to great measures to win votes, using feasts and bribery to achieve office. Liu himself was bribed to alter his vote, solidifying his perception that the electoral system was corrupt. Without the examination system, “upright gentlemen” (103) would never be able to obtain office. The core of the new system was corrupt and used methods that went against Liu Dapeng’s Confucian education, making it impossible for him to reconcile elections as legitimate for choosing government officials.

Liu Dapeng’s Confucian worldview rejected the Western ideals that the republican government used to support their claim to power. Despite the Qing making forays into modernity, their rule had been based on Confucianism and other traditional Chinese values and thus retained their legitimacy. The Confucian scholar remained loyal to the Qing, and saw the failures of the Republic as the wrath of Heaven, seemingly confirming the conclusion brought by his Confucian education that the Republic was nothing more than a band of usurpers unfit to rule.

About the author

Payton Jay Dison hails from Henry County, Georgia and is currently pursuing a B.A. in English with a focus on professional communication. He is a member of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity and interested in video games, soccer, and studying other languages. Fred Smithberg is a retired military officer and commercial pilot, currently participating in Armstrong's Over Sixtytwo Program. Michael Chase Freeman is graduating with honors from Armstrong University with a B.A. in Liberal studies with a focus in History and minors in anthropology and biology. His focus is in archaeology and physical anthropology with an interest in ancient history. Brian Lee is a junior history major at Armstrong State University. He plans on pursuing a master's degree after finishing the undergraduate program.

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