

## **Formation of Cultural Morality in Modern Chinese Society**

**By Walter S. Zapotoczny**

This essay examines modern Chinese cultural morality, relating it to the past. It examines the basis of Chinese morality, identifying its evolution to its present form and examines future ideas. As China becomes a more important player on the world stage it is important to understand its moral construct and how that construct affects China's international relations and Chinese society.

Throughout the cultural history of China, conceptions of morality have been governed by the principles of respect for traditional culture, emphasis on the value of good form, and regular behavior, and realizing moral obligations in the scrupulous discharge of duties. From these principles, Chinese educational norms and modes of thought have taken shape, maintaining the social order for the last three millennium. In his essay *Understanding This Chinese Generation* Nah Huai-Chin writes, "With the rise of the modern culture of materialism and the consequent rapid development of commerce and industry, Chinese view of morality has gradually fallen victim to an ideology of economic valuation that attaches a price tag to all things."

Recently, Confucianism is enjoying resurgence in China, as more and more Chinese seek ways to adapt to a culture in which corruption has spread and materialism has become a driving value. In *New History of the World*, J. M. Roberts talks about China's history: "The most striking fact of China's history is that it has gone on for so long. For over 2,500 years there has been a Chinese nation using a Chinese language. Its government, at least in name, as a single unit has long been taken to be normal, in spite of periods of grievous division and confusion." One of the keys to Chinese historical identity is its continuing experience of civilization. Roberts writes, "China's nationhood is as much cultural as political."

An important aspect of Chinese cultural morality is its religious roots. It is impossible to know when religion began in China. Periodically, archeological excavations supply new evidence of religious practices from an age predating surviving written texts. In *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Religions*, John Bowker writes, "...it is traditionally believed (and supported by archeological evidence) that by the time of the Shang (or Yin) dynasty (1600?-1046 BCE), systematic beliefs and practices relating to the 'otherness' of life had been developed in China."

Belief in the supreme authority that was high above, infinite, all-encompassing, overwhelming, all-knowing, and universal, became the center of religious life in early China. It was manifested not only in belief in the 'Lord on High' of the Shang dynasty but also in the worship of Tian, or Heaven, by the Zhou (1046-771 BCE) and subsequent dynasties. Bowker explains the spiritual-human dynamic of the time: "The close relationship perceived to exist between the 'Lord on High' and human authority on earth would backfire if the worldly affairs of political struggles weakened rather than strengthened people's faith in the power of the Lord." This was exactly the situation towards the end of the Zhou dynasty, when communities were devastated by natural disasters and state cruelty, and prayers and pleas met with no response. People began to ask where the mandate of heaven was. A group of new thinkers emerged who began to search for different interpretations that might lead to an understanding of the deep meaning of life. Among them, was Confucius (551-479 BCE), who pioneered a fresh way forwards.

With his interest in human problems and desire to find solutions, Confucius turned much of his attention from the worship of deities to the exploration of the 'Universal Way' which

could guide and prescribe human activities. The most reliable source of Confucius and his teachings is a short collection, probably compiled by the second generation of his disciples, which became known as the *Analects*. Confucius introduced humanistic elements into ancient Chinese culture and transformed spiritual beliefs into humanistic practices. When one of his disciples asked what wisdom was, Confucius said that it was to devote oneself earnestly to human duties, and respect spiritual beings, but keep them at a distance.

According to Confucius, an individual's ultimate goal should be to live according to virtue, particularly the virtues of propriety, ritual, benevolence, charity, humanity, love, and kindness. Confucius taught about the importance of rites which, to him, meant moral conventions and common decency. These rites or rituals take on an almost mystical quality in his dialogues. In chapter four, paragraph 4.13 of *The Analects of Confucius* he says, "If one can govern the country by observing ritual and showing deference, there is no more to be said. If one cannot govern the country by observing ritual and showing deference, what's the use of ritual?"

An objective of the *Analects* is that Confucius' disciples had a good understanding of justice as the single most important factor of political life. Confucius was suspect of laws, believing that they invite people to become, in his words, "tricky." He believed that laws brought out the worst in people. According to Confucius:

A king leads by his moral power. If he cannot set a moral example – if he cannot maintain and promote rituals and music, he forfeits the loyalty of his ministers and the trust of the people. The ultimate asset of the state is the trust of the people in their rulers: if that trust is lost, the country is doomed.

This idea centers on the concept of universal truths. In other words, laws are not needed because there are morally right and morally wrong activities. If one does what is morally right, then laws are not needed. Confucius taught that politics is an extension of ethic. He said, "Government is synonymous with rightness. If the king is righteous, how could anyone dare to be crooked?"

Simon Leys explains Confucius' statements about practicing the ritual, "The rites represent a fundamental Confucian value, more or less equivalent to our concept of civilization. On the formal level, they constitute a sort of liturgy, but like our own liturgical rites, these forms, when properly understood and performed, are not hollow: they are efficient and operative, they regulate and teach. When ritual practice becomes loose, civilization is eroded and barbarism creeps in."

Concentrating on improving the quality of human life, Confucius called for universal education. He strongly contended that in education there should be no classes. He believed that if a person did not learn, then he could not be, act, speak, or live in a proper way. Central to Confucius' curriculum is the set of ritual formulas known as *li*, which includes rites, moral codes, and rules of propriety. Teaching on rituals, Confucius did not intend to train his students simply to strictly follow rules but inspired them to become virtuous people, the most important virtue being *ren* (humaneness, benevolence, or humanity). A person of *ren* was called by Confucius a gentleman or authoritative person, who would be the only legitimate person to govern because he had a heart of love and acted in accordance with rules of propriety. Confucius also taught Filial Piety as a humanistic expression of an individual's natural feeling toward his parents, without any relation to God or a spiritual authority.

Confucianism is not the only doctrine that has influenced China.

Facing the same realities of chaos, immorality, and war, other doctrines competed with one another in the later part of the Zhou dynasty. Confucianism turned to morality for solutions; Mohism preached universal love as a panacea; Legalism emphasized the primacy of the state over individual autonomy; and Taoism advocated that the people distance themselves from society. The second private school of thought in ancient China, the Mohists, advocated the opposite approach to Confucianism, discarding both the affective and the hierarchical aspect of the ritual system, and instead extending the principle of punishment as a means of social control to all classes. They argued that moral criteria of behavior and action must lie in prosperity and the benefits this can bring. The Mohists reject ritual as a wasteful holdover from the past, abandoning the hierarchical nature of the ritual system. In place of *ren*, which the Confucianist saw as rooted in both spontaneous affection and spontaneous hierarchy, the Mohists advocated 'universal love' of all equally, as rooted in a system of command, threat of punishment, and centralized surveillance. In *The Penumbra Unbound: The Neo-Taoist Philosophy of Guo Xiang* Brook A. Ziporyn writes:

Mencius (371?–289?), focusing on the spontaneity of fellow-feeling, partially in response to Taoist suggestions that the spontaneous of man was morally neutral, holds that human nature is good in the sense of having spontaneous sprouts of inclination that can, if unobstructed and properly nourished, be developed into the full-fledged Mohists virtues; the positive system of ritual is in this case merely a concrete exfoliation of what is natural to man. The inability to stand the suffering of others is the sprout of Benevolence; shame and dislike for certain things is the sprout of Righteousness; yielding and deference are the sprout of Ritual; and approval and disapproval are the sprout of Wisdom.

In the third philosophical school, Legalism, the lone individual had no legitimate civil rights and any personal freedom had to strengthen the ruler. Fundamentally, the Legalists viewed the plebeian (common people of lower class) and their actions as evil and foolish.

Both the Mohist and Confucianist school focus quite centrally on social and ethical matters. Unlike the first wave of ancient Greek thinking, this tradition was initially almost completely preoccupied with cultural, political and ethical matters; *The Analects of Confucius* has nothing at all to say about the natural world, and very little to say about the metaphysical realm of gods and spirits, even, arguably, as a metaphysical justification for the ethical practices it hopes to promote. Mohist texts, while having more to say about the positive characteristics of the ruling deity, are clearly also ultimately concerned mainly with human ethics and social order. In sharp contrast to this is the school that comes to be known as Taoism or Daoism.

There had been a long tradition in China of distinguishing state religion, practiced at the court and by government officials, from popular religion among the family and local communities. While this distinction was maintained during the Han dynasty, beliefs in Dao and a longing for immortality were widespread among the classes and were the inspiration behind a new religion that became an essential part of Chinese life. Daoism (*dao* meaning the Way) is the most mystical of the major doctrines. As the name suggests the focus on the Dao, or the Way. The Dao is the natural flow of the cosmos. Nature follows the Dao; humans with their conscious wills go against the Dao. The goal of the Daoist is to harmonize with the Dao and thereby become one with the cosmos, with nature, with all things. Daoism

became like a cauldron in which useful elements of various practices, religious and non-religious alike were integrated into one system.

After the Han dynasty (618-906), China suffered more than three centuries of disunity and conflict. This ended with the establishment of the Sui dynasty (589-618) which was soon replaced by the Tang dynasty (618-906), a much better organized regime. Based on an economically richer and more civil society, organized religions flourished during this period and were to dominate the spiritual life of the people over and above folk and localized traditions. More religions of foreign origin were also becoming established. Religion, domestic politics, and international relations, and their interaction, became essential, vibrant characteristics of this period and played significant roles in promoting the quality of life in China. Buddhism, which was introduced during the Han period gradually, came to play a particularly important part of Chinese life.

When Buddhism arrived in China it found a culture that already possessed sophisticated religious and philosophical systems. It could not, therefore, become the leading ideology, supplanting the native systems and reducing them to secondary importance, as it had elsewhere. Buddhism had the most creative interaction with Daoism. Its meditation practices and ideas of liberation from death encouraged comparisons with Daoist techniques aimed at gaining immortality. As major religious and secular forces, Daoism and Buddhism penetrated all levels of society and became deeply involved in state politics. The co-existence of the three religions, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, made it possible for each to gain something from the others, which cultivated a moral spirit among the people.

Another most valuable and relevant characteristic of Chinese cultural history is its artistic quality. This has been a significant quality acknowledged by many international scholars. It was over half a century ago, an American scholar, George Rowley, wrote in the preface of his *Principles of Chinese Painting*, characterizing Chinese culture saying: "The Chinese way of looking at life was not primarily through religion, or philosophy, or science, but through art." In the main, modern Western culture is scientific, but Chinese culture is still artistic, even in common life. A very unusual characteristic of Chinese culture is the dominant function of the artistic, which has controlled other aspects of the culture. The function of the artists has blended with philosophy and helped shape Chinese morality.

From primitive religion, Chinese cultural morality has progressed to the development of philosophy and expanded its scope to arrive at the achievements of modern science. Of today's Chinese youth Huai-Chin writes, "Born during the closing days of the twentieth century, today's Chinese youth are caught between traditional and modern values and Chinese and Western currents of thought. Conflicting ideologies and spiritual anxiety manifests as the chaos and strife of modern times." These conflicting ideologies characterize China's current moral construct.

Today in China, humanism in morality, exhibits itself as a major contrast to the morality of the traditional Western world. In traditional West, the ultimate moral authority is God or Spirit. All the moral rules are based on this Spirit. But in Chinese culture, the ultimate moral authority is still the human world. In a certain sense, Chinese morality has transcended the world of spirits or the world of religion. This means, in Chinese culture, the practice of moral life is not following the spiritual authority or God, but to follow humanistic reflection and sensitivity. Straddling the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, China saw the ascendancy of modern culture over tradition and the blending and fusion of Eastern and Western influences in all aspects of life. These trends lead to a turbulent period in which waves of new thinking were awakened in Chinese society. For example, women, who lived sheltered lives hidden away at home were no longer binding their feet and

struggling for equality of the sexes. Meanwhile, men, who formally spent their days reciting the classics and preparing to win fame in the imperial examinations, now shaved their beards, donned business suits, and sang the praises of all things Western. In short, regardless of age, knowledge, or events, Chinese culture is caught in the inevitable process of change. Faced with this situation, many in China see the degeneration of public morality and the vanishing of classical virtues. Many believe the answers lie with classical philosophy.

Confucianism is enjoying resurgence in China, as more and more Chinese seek ways to adapt to a culture in which corruption has spread and materialism has become a driving value. For many Chinese, a system of ethical teachings that stresses the importance of avoiding conflict and respecting hierarchy makes perfect sense, even if it was first in vogue centuries ago. State-supported commemorations of Confucius have become more common, and the number of people studying his works has increased. Marx, Lenin and Mao Zedong are still the guiding political icons within China's Communist Party, but another much more senior figure in Chinese culture is making a big comeback, in the name of Confucius.

Confucius, who had been erased from all memory during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, is slowly being rehabilitated by political authorities to assume a new moral mission for modern China. "China is looking for something to take the place of a failed Marxism," William Theodore de Bary, the John Mitchell Mason Professor Emeritus of Columbia University and Provost Emeritus, told *The Wall Street Journal* recently. In the April 27, 2006 Issue of the *People's Daily Newspaper* Chinese President Hu Jintao said the Chinese government needs to invest more in education to foster a highly ethical nation. The article, entitled "Firmly Fostering a Socialist Ethics Concept on Honors and Disgraces", outlines how the government should put education at the top of its agenda. "Cultural undertakings should be facilitated to offer products that enlighten the public," he says in the article which is taken from his speech to annual session of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in March. "The ability of learning, experiment and innovation is the important quality in cultivating talented people," he says.

According to Hu, Communist Party officials and the masses, especially the youth, should maintain socialist morality in line with the Eight Honors and Disgraces: Love the country but do it no harm, serve the people but never betray them, follow science and discard superstition, be diligent and not indolent, be united and help each other, make no gains at other's expense, be honest and trustworthy and do not sacrifice ethics for profit, be disciplined and law-abiding not chaotic and lawless, live plainly and work hard, do not wallow in luxuries and pleasures. This idea of socialist morality echoes the teachings of Confucius.

In conclusion, as China struggles to chart a new ideological course and attempts to come to terms with the struggles of modern life, there are two important topics, according to Huai-Chin, that must be addressed: "How to shape a new economic philosophy for the benefit of mankind and how to synergistically unite and harmonize the cultures of materialism and spirituality." In the process of working towards this goal China, seems to be moving back to the principles of Confucianism as they pursue humanist ideals. From Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, China has developed a unique cultural morality. Education for modern China is the lifeblood of the nation, as it was for Confucius. In the past, China's notion of right and wrong held man's thoughts and behavior to higher standards of goodness based on doctrines that have evolved for almost three millennium. The cultural morality of modern China is evolving and will be an important subject of future research. The opportunities for this research abounds, as China has opened its doors to scholarly research.

## **Bibliography**

Bowker, John. The Cambridge Illustrated History of Religions. Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

"Chinese President Stresses Education to Cultivate Morality." People's Daily Newspaper. 27 Apr 2006.  
<[http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200604/27/eng20060427\\_261727.html](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200604/27/eng20060427_261727.html)>.

Confucius. The Analects of Confucius. Trans. Simon Ley. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.

Huai-Chin, Nan. "Understanding This Chinese Generation." MeditationExpert. 23 Aug. 2008.  
< <http://www.meditationexpert.com/ChineseGeneration.pdf>>.

Hu, Shao-hua. Explaining Chinese Democratization. Westport: Praeger, 2000.

Roberts, J. M. The New History of the World. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Rowley, George. Principles of Chinese Painting. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947

Ziporyn, Brook A. The Penumbra Unbound: The Neo-Taoist Philosophy of Guo Xiang. Albany: University Press of New York, 2003.

Copyright © 2008 Walter S. Zapotoczny