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Inside-Out China

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China: Democracy, or Confucianism?  
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by Xujun Eberlein

Last October, when the CCP held its 17th congress, CNN reported the event with the headline “China rules out copying Western democracy.” My first reaction to this headline was, So what? That spontaneous reaction might have been an unconscious consequence of my reading *Political Confucianism* by Jiang Qing (蒋庆), a contemporary Confucian in China. In this book, Jiang Qing draws a blueprint for China’s political future based on Confucianism. It is the first such conception since the 1919 May 4th movement that denounced the traditional Chinese ideology as a feudal relic and began the age-old country’s modernization efforts.

It seems typical of American thinking to regard either a republic or parliamentary democracy as absolutely the only right model for all countries. For a political system to succeed, however, it needs to be rooted in the particular country’s cultural history. Throughout thousands of years, China has never lacked great thinkers, political or philosophical. Which poses an interesting question: why does China need to adopt a Western model for its political system, be it Marxist communism or capitalist democracy?

But it is true that China hasn’t had a great folk thinker like Confucius for quite some time. Especially in the communist regime, there has been no soil for such a thinker to grow. This frozen ground seems to have begun thawing lately. Jiang Qing’s Confucian orthodox thoughts, at least, have not been subjected to suppression yet.

Among the contemporary Chinese scholars actively seeking solutions for their country’s future, Jiang Qing is exceptional in that he investigated various philosophic schools and ideologies before embracing Confucianism. As a 20-year-old soldier in the 1970s, with a mere middle school education, he had taken a stab at Marx’s voluminous *Capital*. In 1980, an undergraduate student in Southwest Politics and Law College, he was the first in the country to criticize Chinese Communist practice as having abandoned the humanitarian essence of Marx’s early works. His self-assigned, hand-written thesis “Return to Marx” spread apace in many universities, and brought him years of political trouble.

In his early 30s, Jiang Qing’s political predicament drove him first to existentialism and then Buddhism. After his visit to the Shaolin Temple in 1984, he shut himself up on Chongqing’s Gele Mountain for four years to study Buddhist scriptures, eventually concluding that Buddhism solves the “life and death” issue on the individual level, but provides inadequate guidance for national political problems. Later he would find that, unlike Buddhism that teaches detachment from the dusty real world, Confucianism has a long tradition of involvement in political construction, and that would become the breakthrough point in Jiang Qing’s theoretical exploration.

Jiang Qing had also turned to Christianity, and translated several English books into Chinese, including James Reid’s *Facing Life with Christ* and Louis Proal’s *Political Crime*. He was deeply moved by Jesus’s spirit and attempted several times to join a Christian church in Shenzhen. However, his attempts
would not come to fruition as he felt “the entire Chinese culture dragging my leg.” (Miwan: “Biography of Sensei Jiang Qing,” unpublished manuscript in Chinese)

After all this exploration, only Confucianism makes him feel that he is at home and embracing his destiny. This is not because Confucius, some 500 years older than Jesus, had 72 disciples while Jesus had only 12; it is simply that cultural background has an indelible impact on one’s ideological choice.

In 2001, 48-year-old Jiang Qing quit his college teaching job and established a Confucian seminary in the remote mountains of Guizhou. For three seasons of the year, except winter, Jiang Qing dresses in the traditional long buttoned shirt, studies and teaches Confucianism in the mountains without electricity or a cell phone signal, and pushes a nation-wide “children reading Confucian classics” movement.

Since 1989, Jiang Qing has published several scholarly books. Political Confucianism, available in Chinese only, was published, with partial sponsorship from the Harvard-Yenching Institute, in 2004 by SDX Joint Publishing in Beijing. It has not been banned, though I couldn’t find it in China’s bookstores during my visit last year. (The copy I read was lent to me by a friend.) On the other hand, Jiang Qing’s plan to publish a collection of recent articles and speeches on Political Confucianism was rejected this year, because the book did not pass the publishing house’s “political examination.”

In his books and articles on Political Confucianism, Jiang Qing calls for a restoration of Confucianism as the state ideology, as it had been in many dynasties. Further, he outlines a Confucian political structure strongly distinct from both Soviet-style communism and Western-style democracy.

Democracy is Westernized and imperfect in nature, Jiang Qing points out. If applied to China, a western style democratic system would have only one legitimacy - popular will, or civil legitimacy. Such uni-legitimacy operates on the quantity of votes, regardless of the moral implications of decisions taken. Since human desire is selfish by nature, those decisions can be self serving for a particular majority’s interest. Because of this, Jiang Qing argues, civil legitimacy alone is not sufficient to build or keep a constructive social order.

The uni-legitimacy criticism makes sense to me because western countries, which have evolved the concepts of sufferance, law, tolerance and community standards over hundreds of years, have a broad base for governance. China, on the other hand, does not have this same evolution. Western democracy simply dropped onto China is likely to face pitfalls parallel to those seen in Iraq. The foundation of majority rule alone is not sufficient to provide good governance.

In contrast, the Confucian state Jiang proposes is tri-legitimate: it carries numinous, historical, and civil legitimacy simultaneously. In particular, the governmental body consists of three mutually constraining institutions that represent religion (members chosen through community recommendation and Confucian examination), cultural tradition (members based on sovereign and sage lineage and by appointment), and popular will (members elected), respectively. Jiang Qing believes that such a structure would avoid many of the mistakes that appear inevitable under a uni-legitimate system.

The above ideas can be traced back to a Confucian concept: “The sovereign rules through the heaven, the earth, and the people.” The Chinese had thousands of years of tradition with these elements in their political systems, and of all the great ancient cultures, China is unique in having survived with recognizable continuity.

Jiang Qing’s idea of political Confucianism has found as many advocates as dissenters. Followers honor him as “the greatest contemporary Confucian,” while dissenters accuse him of being a “benighted cultural conservative.” Jiang Qing says he accepts both titles without the modifiers.

The website of China Daily, a government-run English newspaper, published an article on January 6, 2006 titled “Confucianism will never be religion [sic].” It concludes, “Religion as a state power, as Jiang advocates, should never be allowed, not in this country.”
Chen Lai, China’s top Confucianism scholar and professor of philosophy at Beijing University, welcomes the new departure in political Confucianism research conducted by Jiang Qing. In fact, he helped to have *Political Confucianism* published. Still, he considers the suggestion that Confucianism become the state ideology, let alone a basis for government, impractical. In my chat with Chen Lai when he visited Harvard University last spring, he shook head at the theology that does not separate state and church.

On the other hand, Daniel A. Bell, an Oxford-educated Canadian scholar and professor of philosophy at Tsinghua University in Beijing, deems that “it is not entirely fanciful to surmise that the Chinese Communist Party will be relabeled the Chinese Confucian Party in a few years time.”

There is in fact a sign that China’s current leaders have begun to encourage the revival of Confucianism. President Hu Jintao has alluded to Confucius’ teaching in various speeches – a gesture toward the return to traditional value that was not seen in his predecessors. This tendency was again displayed in CCP’s 17th Congress.

It is a welcome change, displaying a small degree of tolerance that has been lacking. But it is a far cry from the Confucian state proposed by Jiang Qing.

Last summer in Beijing I had a conversation with Miwan, a disciple and friend of Jiang Qing’s and a professor himself in a renowned Chinese university. When asked what he thought of the feasibility of Jiang Qing’s ideal, Miwan said, “To a great thinker, feasibility does not have to be an immediate concern. Sensei Jiang is a great thinker.” All of Jiang’s disciples and followers reverently refer to him as “Jiang xiansheng” – sensei Jiang, whether in front of or behind him. This is a practice of the Confucian “respecting the teacher, valuing the tao” tradition, in sharp contrast to the behavior of today’s irreverent young generation. To a Chinese history addict like me, the reappearance of this long-abandoned reverence for a teacher is heart warming.

In an email to me later, Miwan summarizes his association with Jiang Qing by using a classic phrase, “Though unreachable, my heart longs.”

After Jiang Qing returned his home in Shenzhen for winter last year, I emailed him asking what he was busy on. He replied, “Reading all day long, nothing more.” I asked what he thought of the potential for Confucianism to become the state ideology. “I’m not optimistic,” he said, “I’m afraid it might have to wait for several decades.”

Well, that is optimistic.

*Xujun Eberlein is the author of *Apologies Forthcoming* and blogs regularly at *Inside-Out China*, which also contains links to her webpage.*