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A Conversation on “Confucius” with Daniel A. Bell

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The film *Confucius* premiered in Beijing last month, to a backdrop of controversy over *Avatar* being dropped from cinemas to make way for more patriotic fare. I saw the film last weekend with Chinese student friends, and we couldn’t hold back the occasional open snigger: in a word, *Confucius* is cornier than maize. It also raises interesting questions about the selective interpretation and political uses that modern China makes of its ancient Confucian tradition.

I put some of these questions to Daniel A. Bell, Professor of Philosophy at Tsinghua University, who has written widely on Confucianism (including pieces for *The China Beat*), and is author of *China’s New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton, 2008; new edition 2010).

I’ll preface with one comment of my own. As well as being an entertainment and commercial beast (though if it will be a successful one remains in doubt), I would say that *Confucius* serves a clear political agenda. Namely, presenting an appealing humanitarian philosophy and nudging audiences to link that with the CCP’s modern China. Within China, there’s an added emphasis on the “put your country before everything” side of Confucianism (the film reminded me in its style and hyperbole to *The Founding of a Republic*). And overseas, it’s a weapon of China’s ‘soft power’.

Finally, a spoiler alert for what follows – for whatever it’s worth, the ‘ending’ of *Confucius*’ life story is given away. And Professor Bell has confirmed that no new academic information has come to light to support the film’s idea that Confucius’ fabled meeting with Laozi happened not in an inn, but atop a mountain shrouded romantically in clouds at sunset.

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**Alec Ash:** Anyone who has seen *Confucius* was no doubt groaning over their popcorn at its kitschier moments. But within the obvious constraints of film, how accurate was it to the reality of Confucian teaching and the history of his life?

**Daniel A. Bell:** The film is not an effort to accurately present the history of Confucius’s life. As Annping Chin notes in her book *The Authentic Confucius*, he had only a weak link to the powerful men of his time and a minor role in their political adventures. As such he was rarely mentioned in their records. Yet he is presented in the movie as a major military commander. There is even less known about his marriage – early sources were written three hundred years after the events, and they simply say his marriage ended in divorce. So the scenes with his wife are mainly fabrication (or imagination). The Analects of Confucius is of course the work most closely associated with him, and it was compiled within the hundred years or so after Confucius’ death. The work does provide telling insights of the relationship between Confucius and his students, so the second part of the film on Confucian teaching may be closer to historical reality. I did like the part about dancing and drinking with his students. If it were up to me, I’d have made the whole movie about Confucius and his students. There’s a lot in the Analects about Confucius’s most talented and virtuous student Yan Hui and it’s certainly true that Confucius was deeply moved and affected by his death. But the movie doesn’t really build up their relationship, and when Yan Hui dies trying to retrieve scrolls from icy waters, it’s hard to be moved.

**AA:** In particular, what of Confucius’ ‘love interest’ in the film, the seductive Nanzi, who’s advances he resists? Is Confucianism compatible with sex, lifestuff of the movies as it is?

**DB:** I actually thought that scene was well done and it sticks more or less to what we know about Confucius’ visit to Nanzi. It also makes sense of a seemingly puzzling statement attributed to Confucius that appears twice in the Analects: “I have never met anyone who is fonder of virtue than of [female] beauty.” But again, it’s hard to be moved by the death of Nanzi because we don’t know enough about her in the movie, and there is no effort to explain why she is killed. Since we’re going to take interpretative liberties anyway, it’s best to develop the characters in greater depth. And why not give a greater role to the beautiful love interest, it would also help from a marketing point of view!
**AA:** In an early scene, the film makes a big show of Confucius saving the life of a kid fated to be buried alive with his dead master, arguing to change this antiquated tradition. Is this accurate, or does the movie over-emphasise Confucius’ progressive side, deliberately glossing over his conservatism to make him seem more relevant to 21st century China?

**DB:** As far as I know, that scene was not based on what we know about Confucius. Could it have happened given what we know about Confucius the man and his ideas? To me, Confucius seems more like Socrates in that scene, taking a principle and showing that it would challenge conventional understandings if it is applied in a consistent way. It’s a bit too clever. And the way Confucius deliberately sticks it to his opponent at the end of the scene, almost gloating in his verbal victory, again makes me think of a somewhat arrogant Socrates provoking the jury at his trial. Confucius the man valued humility, he was a seeker of social harmony, he would not have engaged in such unnecessary provocation that his antagonist is not likely to forget. Having said that, I’m quite sure Confucius would have objected to the practice of burying slaves alive with their masters if only because it seems so at odds with the Confucian value of ren仁, which we can translate as humanity and compassion. Confucius is indeed attached to rituals, but the rituals are morally defensible if and only if they serve the purpose of promoting humanity and compassion in the social world.

**AA:** What are the key distinctions between this cinematic re-appropriation of Confucius’ life and teachings (which one might harshly describe as watered-down, pick-and-choose Confucianism) and the 'new Confucianism' about which you write?

**DB:** Confucianism is a rich and diverse tradition and to a certain extent we’re all picking and choosing. The question is what drives the picking and choosing. For the film, it appears to be mainly a concern with entertainment value, why else spend so much time on military battles? Personally I could have done without the blood and gore. Today, different people in China draw upon Confucius’s life and teaching for different purposes. The most famous case is Yu Dan’s book on the Analects which is more like a self-help book designed to make people feel better about themselves. I’m more sympathetic to the work of social critics in China who seek inspiration from different parts of the Confucian tradition for thinking about political reform. Those with a more political agenda won’t limit themselves to Confucius the man.

**AA:** In a forthcoming piece for the History News Network, Jeffrey Wasserstrom suggests that an “unstated goal” of this movie may be “to persuade overseas Chinese that they can identify with and invest in today’s People’s Republic 2.0, even if they hated Mao”. Does this ring true to you? Will they succeed?

**DB:** I’m not sure about that. Wealthy overseas Chinese do not usually need to be persuaded to invest in China; if they’re reluctant to do so it’s mainly for economic rather than moral or political reasons. Most people know China’s Maoist days are long gone. You may still have a few with horrible memories of the Maoist era who refuse to invest on those grounds, but I doubt a whole movie needs to be made to persuade that (tiny) constituency. Yu Ying-shih is the only intellectual I know of who refuses to visit China because of what Maoism did to the country, but his knowledge of the Confucian tradition is deep and broad and his mind won’t be changed by this movie. In any case, I would guess that China itself is the main market for the movie, and that the movie is trying to cash in on the Confucian revival here. But to be honest, I don’t think it will do well at the box-office, if only because it doesn’t succeed at tapping emotions. I saw the film when the whole theatre was filled with people who got discounted tickets by the teachers’ “union” at Tsinghua; the young woman sitting next to me spent her time on the cell phone and left before the end.

And to the extent that the movie has a political agenda, it is designed not to rock the boat. At the end, Confucius returns to his home state of Lu and we are made to believe that this was his true life goal, that what he really cares about is patriotic attachment to his native land. But exemplary persons are supposed to be attached to a life of virtue above all (in this sense Confucius and Socrates are on the same side) – at the end of the day it may not be so important where they lead that life. To be fair, Confucius (in the movie) does impose a condition for his return: he says that he will only accept to return to Lu if he is freed of political responsibilities. But that is even more implausible: according to my understanding of the Analects, Confucius would serve the political community if it’s possible to
bring about morally desirable results; an academic life, so to speak, would be a second choice. The movie seems to be telling academics that we should just stick to our books rather than seek to involve ourselves in politics. But maybe I took it too personally.

AA: And how about the Western world? Do you think that the guarded attitude of the West towards modern China can be successfully offset by the soft power of China’s past, presented in such palatable and relevant form as it is in Confucius?

DB: In that sense, I think the movie may have something to offer. To the extent that people in the Western world view Confucianism as authoritarian, feudal, backwards, and so on, the movie may help to dispel such myths.

AA: Would you like to see the movies Laozi or (god forbid) Han Feizi come out in China? Or are these figures of immense influence on China’s identity best left alone, for school textbooks but not the silver screen?

DB: We know even less about Laozi the person, and there is even some doubt as to whether he was a person, so any movie on Laozi would be almost pure fantasy. Han Feizi is of course the most famous defender of Legalism, but a movie about Legalism already came out: Zhang Yimou’s Hero, which glorifies the ruthless king of Qin who drew on Han Fei’s advice to conquer and rule all of China under the title of First Emperor of the Qin dynasty. But I’d still like to see a movie about Han Feizi the man, that develops stories based on his sayings, like in Confucius. Han Fei’s sayings are so extreme in their cynicism that they would have great entertainment value. But the movie should not have a happy ending.

Alec Ash writes the blog Six, following the lives of six young Chinese in Beijing, whose generation he also wrote about for The China Beat.