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Reading Round-Up: 2/12/10

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Reading Round-Up: 2/12/10

February 12, 2010 in [The Five-List Plan](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)

1. *China Beat* team members Jeff Wasserstrom and Kate Merkel-Hess have a new piece at *Foreign Policy* discussing the recent joint report issued by the governments of China and Japan regarding the 1937-38 Rape of Nanking. In "[Nanjing By the Numbers](#)", they argue that focusing on the continued controversy over the massacre's death toll overlooks the greater significance of the report:

It would be too much to hope that any joint report over the causes and events of the Pacific War would reach accord on every issue. But as partisan as the debate on the Nanjing massacre has often seemed, a close reading of the new report shows that the divide in it over the number killed in that city is not exclusively a political standoff. Instead, it largely reflects scholarly concern over the reliability of the numbers — on both the Chinese and Japanese sides. And it would be unfortunate if the lack of agreement over death tolls obscured the significant new points of consensus.

The main points of agreement constitute a major step forward in Sino-Japanese relations. For years, there have been some historians in Japan moving toward a more moderate position on Nanjing, but there have also been periodic efforts by Japanese officials to sidestep or minimize the issue of Japanese culpability and misbehavior, their sentiments echoed by a small number of textbooks authorized for use in Japan's classrooms. Japanese leaders have historically ignored pleas to acknowledge fully the extent to which Japan was responsible for Pacific War-era devastation and violence not just in China but also in Korea, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. So, all in all, the report has much to recommend it.

For another analysis of the Rape of Nanking and its role in Sino-Japanese relations since 1945, see Mark Selden's 2008 article in *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, "[Japanese and American War Atrocities, Historical Memory and Reconciliation: World War II to Today.](#)"

2. Thomas Mullaney has previously written about the Chinese typewriter for *The China Beat*, and is currently working on a book on the subject. Stanford University's "The Human Experience" site [profiles Mullaney](#) and his research; there's both an article and a video of Mullaney explaining the history of "a problem that makes the QWERTY typewriter look like child's play by comparison."

3. *Shanghaiist* recently cast its spotlight on a new and useful resource for those of us who don't know much about the contemporary Chinese art scene: [ArtSpeakChina](#), "the wiki on Chinese art." The site offers a dual-language database that collects biographies of Chinese artists, explains the major elements of Chinese artistic movements ("what is the 'Big Tail Elephant Group,'" you wonder? Check out the answer [here](#)), and provides a glossary of some helpful ideas and buzzwords.

4. At *Newsweek*, Melinda Liu's article, "[U.S. of Who?](#)", examines the plight of China's America-watchers in recent years, as funding for Chinese academics to go abroad and study the United States has evaporated. Liu argues that the decreased amount of scholarly resources available for those working on the U.S. is due to a combination of factors: although it is partially related to America's economic downturn, another element is that the Chinese government has shifted its focus inward:

It's not that Chinese leaders no longer care what the Americans think. They're just so much more worried about what ordinary Chinese think. Growing prosperity and greater communication with the outside world have made the country's more than 1.3 billion people much harder to manage than they used to be. Now it's a matter of basic survival for party bosses to keep a close eye on public opinion. "Today's government needs to be more responsive to rising nationalism among its own people," says the dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University, Wang Jisi. Widely regarded as China's leading expert on the United States, he deplors the notion that America doesn't matter anymore. "These days I'm studying China more than [I'm studying] the United States," he says.

5. Richard Rigby discusses "[The Challenge of China](#)" at *East Asia Forum Quarterly*. In this "big picture" piece, Rigby writes that China poses unique problems to observers attempting to assess the country through any sort of one-dimensional framework:

If there is a single word that should be applied to China, whether speaking of its international impact or its domestic situation, it should be 'complexity'. There is simply nothing simple about China; and this being the case, we should be distrustful of any simple descriptors or characterisations, be they benign — China's peaceful rise, harmonious world, harmonious society — or the opposite, such as comparisons of a rising China with Wilhelmine Germany at the beginning of the last century.

And with complexity comes size: expectations that China will take any path, the nature of which can be predicted from the experience of other countries are almost certainly going to be proved wrong. This was so of American hopes for a Westernised, democratic China emerging from World War II; it was so of the expectation post-1949 that China would become a clone as well as a client of the Soviet Union; and expectations have similarly been disappointed in both the pre-and post-1989 phases of the era of reform and opening.

China is just too big, and carries too great a civilisational and historical throw-weight to be anything other than *sui generis*.

Exchanges: “Reconciling Confucianism and Socialism”

February 12, 2010 in [Exchanges](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)

Last month, we began a series called “Exchanges,” which invites authors to debate each other on a particular question. The first “Exchanges” post featured an essay by Daniel A. Bell and response from Michael Walzer on the topic of “Reconciling Confucianism and Socialism.” We also asked readers to submit their own thoughts on the subject, and received the commentary below from Peter Vernezze (which was also published at [China From Afar](#)). Bell, in turn, has written a reply to Vernezze’s critique.

By Peter Vernezze

In search of “a new moral foundation for political rule in China” because “communism has lost its capacity to inspire the Chinese,” Professor Bell asks whether Confucianism can step up and take this role. Not, according to Bell, if we stick to a traditional “conservative” or “official” Confucianism, which can simply be used to prioritize such values as “filial piety” and “harmony” as a way “to justify quietude and submission to the powers-that-be.” Bell as well rejects a classical liberal version of Confucianism because it tends to read the Confucian tradition through the lens of liberalism and not take Confucianism seriously in its own right. Instead, Bell advocates for what he calls a “left Confucianism” that draws on the socialist tradition for inspiration. There are six main tenets to his “leftist Confucianism”:

1. Independent social and political criticism
2. Concern for the disadvantaged
3. Concern for basic material well-being
4. Solidarity with strangers
5. Global justice
6. Religious toleration

My problem is not that these are not six desirable tenets. Rather, the difficulty I have is that it is hard to see how any of these can be said to meaningfully follow from Confucianism. And, if no meaningful line can be drawn between Confucianism and the six tenets that Bell offers, then the extent to which the theory can be called Confucian must be called into question.

To begin, Bell sees the *Analects*' claim that exemplary persons should pursue harmony but not conformity as serving as the basis in Confucianism for his first tenet, a belief in the value of independent social and political criticism. A Confucian political criticism, he adds, would be far more restrained than we understand it in the West. It would be “carried out on the basis of social harmony and trust” as well as “motivated by affection rather than hostility and expressed in gentle and humble ways.” For left Confucianists, the media would be part of the mechanism of social criticism, but “[an important task of the] media should also be to promote social harmony by portraying moral exemplars.” Harmony, however, is much too abstract a concept to serve as a ground for meaningful social criticism. Indeed, one cannot imagine the most repressive social measure that could not be

justified because it serves the goal of harmony. Indeed, most of them use precisely this justification. As such, a mere expressed preference for harmony over conformity would hardly seem to open the door for any meaningful social criticism.

The second tenet in Bell's leftist Confucianism is an obligation to provide for the disadvantaged. However, Bell offers no text on this point except Mencius's that "the government should give first consideration to 'old men without wives, old women without husbands, old people without children, and young children without fathers.'" That this is the one Confucian text he cites demonstrates the lack of connection between this virtue and Confucianism, since the groups cited cannot be considered "disadvantaged" in a meaningful sense of the word without massively equivocating. The problem is that there is not the ground in the *Analects* for an obligation among citizens — not one of the five relationships mentioned in the *Analects* involves this relation — and hence, no obligation to care for disadvantaged citizens.

The third element of Bell's leftist Confucianism is a concern for basic material well-being. Bell does not even follow the example in the previous point and offer a lame passage. He offers no text within the Confucian corpus to support this point. Instead he argues that "Confucians would choose economic equality and make social inequality work to support it." Since the statement is not supported by any evidence in Bell's article, it does not need to be refuted by any.

The fourth trait of leftist Confucianism is solidarity with strangers. Here, at last, Bell offers up a Confucian text and tries to connect it with the trait in question. Unfortunately, the argument is unpersuasive. Bell cites a claim from the famous opening passage of *The Great Learning*: "...when the family is regulated, the state will be in order; and when the state is in order, there is peace throughout the world." Bell wants to argue that "the idea is that ties should be extended from the family to the state and ultimately to the whole world." However, the text does not say that taking care of family will lead to a concern for strangers, which is what Bell's thesis requires. It simply says that when the family is taken care of, then the state will be in order. This implies no more than that the family being regulated is a sufficient condition of the state being well-ordered. It does not imply a concern for anyone outside of the family is necessary for the state to be well-ordered. For much the same reason it seems unlikely that a concern for "global justice," Bell's fifth trait of leftist Confucianism, can be linked to that philosophical system.

The sixth and final aspect of Bell's leftist Confucianism is religious toleration. He does not so much offer a positive argument as to why leftist Confucianism would tolerate other religions as a negative one. "Left Confucians do not take a strong position regarding religion. Following the example of the early Confucian thinkers, they leave metaphysical commitments open, focusing on the problems of earthly." But a concern for the earthly does not in itself assure that Confucianism will lean towards religious toleration. Indeed, if a concern for the social good were part of a Confucian ideal than a religious view that presented an alternate social good would hardly be tolerated: witness Han Yu's attack on Buddhism.

In conclusion, while I admire Professor Bell's effort, I fear thinkers will have to look elsewhere than Confucianism to find a philosophical system compatible with a leftist/liberal ideology.

Response by Daniel A. Bell

I am grateful for the thoughtful response to my article. Let me try to clarify my intentions, which may help to dispel areas of disagreement. I agree that the six tenets do not follow from Confucianism. But that's not my argument. My strategy in the article is to take six widely-agreed upon humane and progressive values and to think about how they might have particular characteristics if they are interpreted via a Confucian moral framework.

Let me address some of the points made about the particular values. Again, I agree with much that is said. For example, I agree that harmony is "much too abstract a concept to serve as a ground for social criticism." But it can serve as a ground for social criticism if we try to understand what Confucians mean by the harmony. The line from the *Analects* that exemplary persons pursue harmony instead of conformity is known to most educated Chinese. And the contrast between harmony and

conformity, as mentioned in the article, comes from the *Zuo Zhuan*, where it clearly refers to the idea that the ruler should be open to different political views. Yes, the term harmony can be misused by political authorities to justify political conformity, just as any other idea can be misused (think of all the damage done in the name of promoting freedom and democracy). All Confucian social critics can do is point to the gap between the ideal and the reality.

Regarding the second value. I agree that the *Analects* does not focus on the relation between citizen and citizen. But it doesn't follow that Confucians cannot think about the question of what the government should do for the people and the different kinds of obligations owed to different kinds of people. Mencius argues that the government should give first consideration to those deprived of key family ties, and I think that's a distinctive and morally defensible way of thinking about our obligations to the disadvantaged.

Anyway, if the concern is to provide more references to the Confucian sources that inspired the arguments of this paper, let me immodestly refer to my books *China's New Confucianism* and *Beyond Liberal Democracy*, where I develop these ideas in greater depth. Having said that, it might not be so important to go through each tenet to "prove" that I'm putting forward a Confucian viewpoint; it might be more fruitful to ask whether the viewpoints put forward in the article are worth defending in contemporary China. I do believe they are inspired by the Confucian tradition – I would not have come up with these ideas had I not studied and learned from the rich and diverse Confucian tradition – but at the end of the day the label used to describe those ideas may not be so crucial. If they are implemented under a different label I would not lose any sleep.

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