

CONFUCIANISM

Mr. D. Lancashire, Department of Oriental Studies, University of Melbourne

What I want to try to do this morning is to present to you, first of all, something about Confucianism in its traditional form, and then to say a few words about modern expressions of Confucianism. I want to do this because the tendency today is to say that Communism has taken over in China and that therefore there are no longer any spokesmen for Confucianism among the Chinese people. In fact, there are some excellent exponents of Confucianism writing today, and I would like in the second half of my lecture to allow them to speak for themselves as much as possible.

But, to begin at the beginning. If you were to go to Taiwan you might be rather mystified by the number of temples devoted to the worship of one or several deities. You would find a great many, of course, belonging to what is known as popular Taoism, and in these you would discover representations of the most popular deities of this province of China. You would also come across Buddhist temples and monasteries, but you would find it very difficult to discover any statues or images of Confucius to which people go and pray, and you might be excused for taking the view that Confucianism has ceased to exist in Taiwan as well as on the mainland of China. But Confucianism is not like the popular religions of Taoism and Buddhism. Rather is it the "theology" of Chinese culture, with Confucian scholars the custodians of this theology. They are the custodians, if you like, of the interpretation of the significance of both Chinese culture and the Chinese people.

Now Confucius--his dates are usually given as 551-479 B.C.--and Mencius (372-289 B.C.), the man who played Paul to Confucius, both lived at a time which was highly significant for Chinese history. The dates assigned to Confucius coincide with the later years of what is known as the 'Spring and Autumn' period (722-480 B.C.), and those of Mencius with that of the 'Warring States' (403-221 B.C.).

In some ways, of course, the times in which Confucius and Mencius lived resemble our own, for theirs was a society which had been stable, which had been held together by certain religious norms and sanctions, but which was disintegrating because of new discoveries, shifts in power, and changes in the structure of society. Then, as now, there were those who sought for a stabilising philosophy of life: an interpretation of the world and society that would lay hold of the imaginations of the rulers of the people and thus become an integrating social dynamic.

Although Confucius seems to have held knightly rank, much of his life appears to have been taken up with scholarship. He was essentially a teacher whose job it was to train young gentlemen in the arts proper to their station. Nevertheless, Confucius seems to have aimed at attaining a position in some feudal court by means of which he could influence the ruler to adopt his policies, for Confucius believed that through his study of past history he had discovered the key to the stability of the governments of former dynasties. Indeed, so assiduously did Confucius study the ancient world, and so certain was he that the ancients possessed the secret of true government that he said, 'I have transmitted what was taught to me without making up anything of my own. I have been faithful to and loved the Ancients ... I have listened in silence, and noted what was said; I have never grown tired of learning, nor wearied of teaching others what I have learnt.'

What, then, was the past of the Ancients, and what sources of information about this past were available to Confucius?

To answer the last question first, Confucius seems to have had access to several collections of early literature which, though corrupted in the forms in which we possess them today, were essentially the same as our Chinese Classics of Poetry and History. (I use the word 'Classic,' but you must not confuse it with this word as it is used, for example, when we talk about 'Everyman's Edition of the Classics' or the 'Penguin Classics.' The word 'Classic' in China is more equivalent to our word 'Scripture', and, indeed, the Chinese word means something much more akin to the word 'canon'). In addition, Confucius probably had access to the court records of at least his own state, the State of Lu. He was also fully acquainted with ritual practices -- which may have been codified to some extent -- as well as with the ancestral worship in the temples of the heads of the States. Apart from documentary evidence of earlier times, there was, of course, society itself which, in its very collapse, witnessed to a past that was slipping away. Terminologies which had been employed in ancient times to designate rulers, princes, feudal lords and the like were still current, but they were now employed by upstarts in order to give an air of legitimacy to their pretensions.

But to return to our first question. The past of the Ancients, as Confucius understood it possessed certain rulers who were regarded as Sages. These men were possessed of a quality of character which was such that merely by the exercise of it the peoples of the world gladly submitted to their rule. What Confucius, therefore, looked for, were signs and portents which would herald the arrival of a new Sage, a Sage manifesting a similar quality of character, and therefore able to exercise universal sway – not by physical force, as was the case with the upstart rulers of his own day, but by moral force.

Now, we must not conclude from this that Confucius looked for mere repetition of what had once existed, for on the subject of 'rites', which are vital to the smooth and harmonious functioning of society and which can only be given to society by one who, through the cultivation of his character, has attained the stature of a divine Sage, he says, 'We know in what ways the Yin [dynasty 1766-1122 B.C.] modified ritual when they followed upon the Hsia [dynasty 2205-1766 B.C.]. We know in what ways the Chou [dynasty 1122-221 B.C.] modified ritual when they followed upon the Yin. And hence, we can foretell what the successors of Chou will be like, even supposing they do not appear until a hundred generations from now.'

But to bring a little more clarity into all this, I shall now proceed to classify what I want to say under three headings: 1. The Transcendental, 2. Man, and 3. The means adopted to bring about harmonious and effectual relations between man and that which transcends him.

1. The Transcendent: Since Confucius claimed to be the transmitter of an already existing tradition rather than a creator of something new, it should not surprise us to find that the same terminology as was to be found in early Chou religion continues to be applied to the transcendent in the Confucian *Analects* (the records of the sayings of Confucius). For the Confucius of the *Analects*, overruling all men and therefore governing life and death, and indeed, such things as wealth and rank in this world, is Heaven. This Heaven, moreover, possessed a will which may be known by man, so that Confucius can claim towards the end of his life, 'At fifty, I knew what were the biddings of Heaven. At sixty, I heard them with a docile ear.' Thus we can say that in the Confucian *Analects*, the transcendent is generally understood in terms of personal deity. It is important to note, however, that the earlier term for the supreme god, 'Shangti', which persisted side by side with the Chou people's 'Heaven' in early Chou literature, no longer appears so frequently. Indeed, this distinctly more personal title seems to be confined to the last book of the Confucian *Analects*, and then only to those portions of it which are quotations from earlier writings. Now I emphasise this because the way is thus opened for a less personal interpretation of 'Heaven.'

There have, of course, been western students of Confucianism who have drawn the conclusion from a reading of the *Analects* that Confucius was not particularly interested in things transcendent or spiritual and was only concerned with man in his social relationships. That he was concerned primarily with man is undoubtedly true, but Confucius never laid stress on man merely as finite man. Always in the background is a dimension to life which is the presupposition underlying all Confucius' teaching. It is this assumption of his, that there is a transcendent guardian of moral principles, which gives meaning and coherence to his own pronouncements.

2. Man: We come, then, to man, who is the main concern of Confucius, but who, as I have asserted, is not viewed merely in his finitude. What then is man? (A clue to Confucius' answer is found in two key passages, the first in the *Book of Mencius* and the second in the Confucian *Analects*. In the first Mencius says, 'It is said in the Book of Poetry: "Heaven in begetting mankind provided laws for our beings. These are the invariable rules of nature for all to hold" . . . Confucius said: "The maker of this ode, did he not know the principle of things?"' In the same ode these Heaven-bestowed laws are seen as forming the character or virtue of an individual. It is not unfair to assume, therefore, that when Confucius says in the *Analects*: 'Heaven begat the Virtue that is in me,' he has the same ode in mind.

From these quotations, it would seem clear that Confucius saw man as being derived, in some way or other, from Heaven, and that there is, therefore, some degree of consonance between man's nature and that of Heaven. It is precisely this relationship between man and Heaven which makes it possible to learn the will of Heaven, and it is also this relationship which makes divine Sagehood a possibility. This, in fact, is why Confucius lays such an emphasis on man, for he believed that salvation, if you can use such a word here, lies in man's own hands. Everything depends on man's own moral cultivation, which is to say the uncovering and bringing to light of that Heaven-derived virtue which is inherent in every man.

Confucius, in the *Analecets*, seems to be content to leave his definition of man at this stage of development and to concentrate on urging both rulers and students to cultivate those qualities of character which, at the heroic level, are to be found only in divine Sages. Supreme among these qualities is that of Jen (a word which is difficult to translate and has been rendered 'Love', 'Goodness', 'Humanity', 'Benevolence' and so on -- I prefer 'Humanity'). 'In its direction,' says Arthur Waley, 'lie unselfishness, an ability to measure other people's feelings by one's own. The Good man is in private life, courteous; in public life, diligent; in relationships, loyal.' Jen (Humanity) on the part of a ruler is complete submission to ritual. The Jen do not grieve and will necessarily be brave. But apart from this wide and general meaning attaching to Jen, it is also the name of a quality so rare and peculiar that one cannot but be chary in speaking of it. It is a sublime moral attitude, a transcendental perfection attained to by 'heroes.' Although one may be tempted on the basis of the sublimity of the concept of Jen in the Confucian *Analecets* to make metaphysical equations, we must be content to leave this side of things to later Confucianists, for so far as Confucius himself is concerned, the important thing is the realisation and manifestation of Humanity in human affairs, and especially in the family and the State. In the family, Humanity appears to express itself chiefly in the practise of filial piety, whereas in the state, it seems clearly to be related to the terms 'Yi' (Righteousness) and 'Li' (Ritual behaviour). In Book II of the *Analecets*, for example, Confucius says, 'Govern the people by regulations, and keep order among them by chastisements, and they will flee from you, and lose all self-respect...Govern them by moral force, keep order among them by ritual, and they will keep their self-respect and come to you of their own accord.' Speaking of filial piety, he says, 'It is the demeanour that is difficult. Filial piety does not consist merely in young people undertaking the hard work when anything has to be done, or serving their elders first with wine and food. It is something much more than that.'

Now, although the term 'Yi' or 'Righteousness' does not figure very largely in the Confucian *Analecets*, the traditional Confucian position is that Confucius devoted his edition of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* to an exposition of this notion; but as with Humanity, he is concerned more with its application in historical and concrete situations than with its metaphysical source. Thus he employs, so tradition would have it, cryptic terminology in his edition of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* to parcel out praise or blame to rulers and ministers who figure in those records.

3. Effective means for the establishment of right relations between man and the transcendental: We must remember, of course, that for Confucius the transcendental world embraced the ancestors of at least the aristocracy as well as Heaven. The key term here is this word 'Li' or 'Rites'. Despite the broad scope of human manners and behaviour actually covered by the term, it is quite clear that it referred initially to seasonal sacrifices offered to Heaven, and then to the offerings made to the departed in the various ancestral shrines.

Although it is a fact that Confucius seems at times to value these rites as much for the disciplining of the participants' characters as for the benefit they offered to the inhabitants of the spirit realm, nevertheless, something of their potent character appears still to remain in passages such as the following from the *Analecets*: 'Master Yu said, In the usages of ritual it is harmony that is prized; the Way of the Former Kings from this got its beauty. Both small matters and great depend on it. If things go amiss, he who knows the harmony will be able to attune them. But if harmony itself is not modulated by ritual, things will still go amiss.'

In this passage, of course, the harmony to be achieved is not merely social but cosmic. It is the harmony between man and his environment. This is why 'Li' must be the product of a divine Sage, for it is only the divine Sage who has so cultivated himself as to have established true harmony with the source of his being.

When we come to Mencius, we find that although all the terminology to be found in the *Analecets* reappears, it does so in a far more systematic and coherent manner. Indeed, when we come to the important terms 'Humanity' and 'Righteousness,' we find them transposed on to the psychological and metaphysical planes. On the psychological plane because he insisted that both Humanity and Righteousness are rooted in man's nature and are therefore innate qualities in the mind of every man, and on to the metaphysical plane because Mencius saw man's nature as being derived from Heaven. He is much more explicit about this than Confucius. Since he believes that Humanity and Righteousness are components of man's nature and are, indeed, Heaven-derived laws of man's being, Mencius considered the full development of these qualities as essential to the life of the true gentleman. The true aristocrat for Mencius, as for Confucius, is no longer the man who is merely born into that

level of society, but rather is he the man who permits his noble virtues to flower and who sets out to live by them.

Inevitably, Mencius' view of human nature led to what we can only refer to as the mystical wing of Confucian thought. Indeed, there is some evidence in the *Book of Mencius*, as Waley has pointed out, that Mencius himself engaged in forms of breath control somewhat akin to Yoga. Nevertheless, as a true Confucian, Mencius was deeply concerned about the society of his day, and self-cultivation was always carried out with a view to exemplifying one's inner moral qualities in government and society.

Mencius, like other thinkers of his day, and like his master before him, went about from court to court seeking official positions where he could put his teachings into practice. We can imagine, however, the kind of reception Mencius received from hard-headed scheming lords when his answers were like those he made to King Hui of Liang. The King said, 'Venerable Sir, since you have not counted it far to come here, a distance of a thousand Li, may I presume that you are provided with counsels to profit my kingdom?' Mencius replied, 'Why must Your Majesty use that word "profit"? What I am provided with are counsels to Humanity and Righteousness, and these are my only topics.'

In the first century A.D. Buddhism was introduced into China and brought with it a wide range of its complex thinking in the realm of metaphysics. The Chinese people had, in Taoist philosophy, ways of thought which paralleled, to some extent, ideas to be found in Buddhism, but Taoism had never reached the level of systematic thinking which was now being presented to the Chinese. It was not surprising, therefore, that by about the seventh or eighth centuries A.D. China had virtually become a Buddhist country. And yet, underneath the Buddhism of those centuries the Confucian tradition was always at work. Confucian assumptions were always present in society, and finally a strong reaction against Buddhism began to make itself felt in the ninth century. This reaction culminated in Neo-Confucianism -- a Confucianism which owed much to the stimulus of Buddhist thought but which was strongly anti-Buddhist in its attitudes.

During the Ch'ing Dynasty, which came to an end in 1911, there was something of a reaction against the 'idealistic' wing of Neo-Confucianism and Confucian scholars turned themselves increasingly to textual and literary criticism. But we must come now to modern times.

In 1916 in the popular magazine *New Youth*, Ch'en Tu-hsiu, its editor, launched a direct and devastating attack on Confucianism, by means of which he intended to demolish systematically every vestige of traditional Confucian ethics, and at the same time to put forward his own philosophy of life which he had largely assimilated in the heady intellectual atmosphere of France. 'The pulse of modern life,' he says, 'is economic, and the fundamental principle of economic production is individual independence. Its effect has penetrated ethics. Consequently, the independence of the individual in the ethical field and the independence of property in the economic field bear witness to each other!' 'In China,' he says, 'the Confucianists have based their teachings on their ethical norms. Sons and wives possess neither personal individuality nor personal property . . . In all modern constitutional states, whether monarchies or republics, there are political parties. Those who engage in party activities all express their spirit of independent conviction. They go their own way and need not agree with their fathers or husbands . . . Confucius lived in a feudal age. The ethics he promoted is the ethics of the feudal age. . . . The objectives, ethics, social norms, mode of living and political institutions, did not go beyond the privilege and prestige of a few rulers and aristocrats and had nothing to do with the happiness of the great masses.'

In the writings of Ch'en Tu-hsiu of this period three things clearly stand out. These are 1. his ethical relativism, 2. his division of Chinese society into two classes -- the aristocratic elite and the masses -- with Confucianism as the philosophy of life of the ruling class, and 3, his belief that the ethics of any one period are determined by economic causes. Despite his rugged individualism, it is not too surprising that Ch'en, in 1921, should become a founding father of the Chinese Communist party.

Now if we look at the writings of other leaders of the New Culture Movement (as it came to be called) of this period, we are quickly struck by the manifesto-like quality of much that is said. There is very little genuine argument over fundamental issues. Rather are we faced with catenae of declarative statements which, because of the seeming novelty of their content, captured the minds of great numbers of embryo intellectuals in the new, western orientated, universities. What, after all, could be more exciting to young people, brought up in homes where Confucian principles were still the controlling factor, than the slogan; 'Destroy the Old Curiosity Shop of Confucius.' But nearly fifty years have gone by since those exciting days,

and although many of the curios in the Old Curiosity Shop have indeed been seen to be fakes, and have gone the way of all fakes, the Shop, I would suggest, has not been pulled down, but has, on the contrary, been undergoing a period of renovation. It is about this renovation that I wish now to say a few words.

The first step in the creation of present-day Confucianism had to be reflection on past experience. But the area covered in this reflective process was not limited to the period immediately following the establishment of the republic in 1911. In asking themselves where the rot first set in, modern Confucianists have come to the conclusion that it was during the seventeenth and eighteenth Centuries when Confucian scholars began to revolt against Neo-Confucian idealism. This revolt, according to our modern Confucianists, is the cause of all the religious and moral confusion of more recent times, and the reason why leaders of the New Culture Movement found it impossible to absorb Western science and democracy into the spiritual reality underlying the Chinese tradition. What was it, then, that these Ch'ing scholars had done in their revolution to damage the creative growth of Confucianism and to hinder its development as a spiritual force in a modernised Chinese State?

This question can best be answered by an examination of the aims of these Ch'ing Scholars which, from the point of view of our modern Confucianists, fall broadly under two headings. First, they wanted to avoid political calamities such as had befallen the state at the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), and second, they believed that the Way or Tao or Process of good government was to be found only between the covers of the books of antiquity, and that to gain a clear understanding of what the sages of old had taught, it was necessary to make a thorough investigation of the texts of classical times. Now this in itself was not necessarily a bad thing, because it led to something like a spirit of objective enquiry. Nevertheless, by insisting on book-learning and holding that the Way was to be found through a kind of scientific examination of the writings of the past, they virtually denied any direct or intuitive apprehension of the *spirit* of the Way through observation and experience of the cosmos, of human life and of society around them. By turning their backs on the creative and imaginative Confucianism of Sung and Ming times they destroyed the spirit of independent thought. But perhaps even more important than this, they created a type of scholarship which became private and segmentary in character. This meant that they failed to produce a philosophy of life for the nation at large, and in everyday affairs, they attempted to solve problems in a purely pragmatic fashion.

As one of our modern Confucian writers put it, 'by doing away with metaphysics and the host of theoretical problems arising from the [Neo-Confucian philosophy] of the Sung and Ming Confucianists, they brought philosophy closer to common sense. But if we take an overall view of the spirit of culture, we find that those who limit themselves to a phenomenological, pragmatic and naturalistic view of the universe always manifest a spiritual decline.'

It should not surprise us, in view of the foregoing analysis, that the Ch'ing empiricists should be seen to be as much the philosophical ancestors of Ch'en Tu-hsiu and the leaders of the New Culture Movement as were Marx, Dewey and Russell. In summing up the New Culture Movement with its iconoclastic spirit and with its devotion to what can only, in this context, be called the twin idols of Democracy and Science, T'ang Chun-yi says: 'The New Culture Movement traced the backwardness of China to the total culture of [Chinese] society. It followed in the romantic spirit of certain scholars at the end of the Ch'ing Dynasty and during the early years of the republic, and it held a low opinion of Chinese culture and the Confucian attitude. Nor did these leaders of the New Culture Movement rest here, but went on to maintain that Confucian thought was the enemy of science and democracy . . . On the one hand, some of them wanted to demolish the Confucian Shop, and on the other, some wanted an immediate resuscitation of the spirit of Ch'ing scholarship. In fact, the spirit they were showing was the direct descendant of the spirit of Ch'ing times. Those of the New Culture Movement who were introducing western thought took little notice of the tide of Western idealism or of the religious and humanistic spirit [of the West]. They had only a vague notion of German scholarship, applying themselves only to English and American empiricism, utilitarianism and naturalism. Nor did they depend on these theories to make a genuine effort at solving social, political and economic problems, but used them simply to destroy a traditional culture. . . The New Culture Movement denigrated Chinese culture, Neo-Confucianism and Confucius, and viewed mankind as being on a par with the animal and inanimate world ...

‘But all these people failed to understand that Western science and democracy, although utilitarian in their application, transcend utilitarianism at their spiritual source, for the root origin of science is in fact a belief in the principles which inform the phenomenal world and which permeate the whole cosmos, and the root-origin of democracy is the firm acceptance of the principle of the dignity of the human personality.’

Now these reflective comments on the past already tell us quite a lot concerning modern Confucian attitudes: but we must go on to see, in a more positive way, the role which our modern Confucianists believe Confucianism should play in present-day society.

In an article entitled 'Confucianism as a Religion,' written in about 1960, and first delivered as a lecture to the students of the Presbyterian Theological College in Tainan, Taiwan, Mou Tsung-san, one of our leading Confucian writers, says, 'No culture can do without a basic inner spirit or creative force. This creative force is religion, regardless of its form. From this, it follows that Western culture cannot be understood through science and democracy alone or without an understanding of its basic motive force, Christianity. In the same way, Chinese culture should be understood through its fundamental motive force, Confucianism.' This statement shows us clearly that for Mou culture and ethics are not primarily dependent on economics. Nor would he accept the view that Confucianism is essentially a philosophy of the gentry elite. In the view of our modern Confucianists, no matter what religious or philosophical accretions have been incorporated into Chinese culture, certain basic notions have been part of the thinking of all Chinese irrespective of their social position. These basic notions are summed up in the terms, 'Heaven,' 'Earth,' 'Man,' 'Five Relationships, and 'Sageliness.'

On the subject of Heaven, Mou recognises the fact that in the Confucian Classics the term 'Heaven' frequently alternates with the more personal term 'Shangti' or 'Lord on High'. Thus, he says, 'The concept of a personal God or Heaven was never absent in China . . . Confucius and Mencius meant Heaven to connote the Lord on High, and all the phrases in which these terms appear express the thought of a Heaven possessed of a will. Lord on High is an emotional way of expressing what is rationally expressed as the Way or Process of

Heaven. Since Lord on High is an emotional expression, the subjective sense of appeal is not absent, and where this sense of appeal is present we find something resembling prayer. Thus, when the emotional and subjective element is dominant with its resulting sense of appeal, what is rationally conceived of as the Way of Heaven is now viewed in terms of a personal God.

'But Confucianism does not especially focus its attention on this emotional and subjective aspect of Heaven and consequently Confucianism did not formalise the subjective sense of appeal, which would have meant its transformation into prayer. The sense of appeal is present in every man and each people, but it is most manifest in Christianity. This makes Christianity the religion most consistent in preserving the primitive religious spirit. That the sense of appeal in Confucianism did not turn into formalised prayer is one of the chief reasons why the concept of a personal deity upheld by dogmas concerning his nature did not become conspicuous in Confucianism.' Nevertheless, in Confucianism, whether Heaven is viewed in terms of a personal deity or as the Way of Heaven, it is regarded as the source of creation, and since both Jen and Yi, Humanity and Righteousness, are manifest in creation, their origin must also lie in Heaven.

Now if Confucianism does not put its chief stress upon Heaven, where lies the heart of Confucianism? 'It lies,' says Mou Tsung-san, 'in how man realizes the Way of Heaven.' Confucianism does not start from the concept of God and His will -- as if we could know this in its entirety from some kind of external source -- 'but it starts with the question, how to realize the Will of God or the Way of Heaven [as it is preserved in our Heaven-derived natures]'. Confucianism regards life as a process leading towards moral completion and culminating in the ideal of becoming a Sage. 'People often say,' says Mou, 'that Christianity is God-centred and Confucianism man-centred. But this is not altogether correct. Confucianism never cuts itself off from Heaven in order to be centred on actual finite man. It stresses the question how to realize the Way of Heaven through man's awareness, and this means bringing human nature to perfection. Because man's inner essence is creativity itself, he may know Heaven through perfecting his nature. As Mencius put it, "He who perfects his mind knows his nature, and knowing his nature he knows Heaven." This is an endless process. . . It is a process of moral perfection. . . The family, the nation and the world are all involved in it, up to the culminating point where the perfectly human person is one with Heaven, Earth and all beings.'

Further reading: *The Analects of Confucius* (Arthur Waley, Allen and Unwin); *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, (Columbia, U.P.); *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, (Fung Yu-lan, Macmillan). (Translations, other than by the writer himself, have been, taken from the *Analects of Confucius* by Arthur Waley, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, and from *Quarterly Notes* circulated by the Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion in Hong Kong.) (The above talk was delivered at a summer school held at the University of Western Australia in 1965, and published by the University's Adult Education Board in the same year under the title *The Many Calls to Prayer*).