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## Confucius Making a Comeback In Money-Driven Modern China

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ZHENGZHOU, China -- At first, the Web site director and his schoolteacher wife sent their 5-year-old son to a Confucian school in this central Chinese city simply because it was two minutes from home. But the more they learned about the school, the more they liked what they saw.

Children as young as 3 were memorizing and reciting ancient Chinese classics, notably the works of Confucius, the philosopher best remembered for promoting filial piety in the 6th century [B.C.](#) Even if students didn't understand all the words, they grasped the concepts of treating their elders with respect and their classmates with care.

"Nowadays society is very superficial," said the Web administrator, Guan Tao, explaining why he continued to enroll his son at the school. "As a Chinese, you must know something about your own culture and literature."

Confucianism is enjoying a resurgence in this country, as more and more Chinese like Guan 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. A new best-selling book and TV program based on the sage's teachings have made Confucianism easy for the masses to digest.

"With the fast economic growth, many people have become selfish and have no morality," said Ren Xiaolin, founder of the Zhengzhou Young Pioneers school, which Guan's son attends. "This has created a need for Confucianism. . . . The change is overwhelming and many Chinese can't get used to it. It's created a clash of values."

Because Confucianism has only recently regained its popularity -- it was seen as an obstacle to modernization during the anti-intellectual Cultural Revolution of 1966-76 -- many Chinese today are hard-pressed to fully describe the philosophy. It has become a grab bag of ideas that people are tailoring to their own needs as they search for a new belief system.

For the government, Confucianism is a way to encourage order and bring more legitimacy to its rule -- the philosophy's emphasis on respect for authority, for example, is appealing to Communist Party leaders. Although they are loath to slow economic growth, those leaders have nonetheless promoted a return to traditional values as an alternative to the Chinese preoccupation with financial gain.

For parents, Confucianism is a way to raise obedient children who won't forget their own culture. In an age of conspicuous consumption, the philosophy is also appealing to a growing middle class whose members often say they can finally afford to consider spiritual matters.

"Now we have the chance and the financial ability to send our son to school to study Chinese traditional classics," said Guan, who never had the opportunity to study Confucianism himself. "This is something that represents the country."

In the town of Qufu, in [Shandong province](#), where Confucius was born in 551 B.C., the observance of his birthday becomes more elaborate each year. State television began live broadcasts of the Sept. 28 celebration in 2004; the event is being hosted this year by provincial officials, a testament to its perceived importance.

Officials seeking promotions in one county of [Henan province](#) are evaluated by friends, relatives, co-workers and members of the public on how well they care for their parents. Traditional values of filial piety and family responsibility "are the foundation of a successful career," Liu Sen, head of Changyuan County's Communist Party committee, told the state-run [China Daily](#) in April.

In [Beijing](#), the Education Ministry has approved more courses in traditional Confucian culture. The government also supports 145 nonprofit Confucius Institutes in more than 52 countries and regions, aimed at promoting Chinese language and culture. People's University added a new major in 2005: the study of ancient Chinese civilization.

The popularity of Confucianism is in part a sign that most ordinary Chinese citizens, except for party officials and some academics, no longer truly believe in a communist ideology.

"[China](#) has made great economic achievements in the past 30 years, and this has brought back a confidence that we lost. With this confidence comes a return to being proud of Chinese culture," said Kang Xiaogang, a professor at People's University and one of China's top proponents of Confucian education. "Another important reason for the growing popularity of Confucianism is that the effectiveness of Marxist ideology has decreased. That's why the government needs to look for new ideologies."

President [Hu Jintao](#) has not officially endorsed Confucianism as a new ideology but has embraced some of its ideas, evoking Confucius's name in 2005 and -- along with Premier [Wen Jiabao](#) -- calling for a new "harmonious society" aimed at calming social unrest.

Kang said he thinks Confucianism should be made China's national religion; other scholars insist that it's impossible to simply turn a philosophy into a religion.

Already, a debate has begun over whether Confucianism can really solve problems that China's fast-paced modernization and current education system have failed to address.

Last year, a charismatic Beijing Normal University professor was plucked from obscurity to host a state television program that explained "The Analects of Confucius," a collection of teachings attributed to the philosopher, in everyday language. Professor Yu Dan then wrote a \$3 book based on her lectures, which sold 4 million copies, more than double the sales of the previous bestseller, "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone."

But Yu Dan's book has been criticized by scholars for providing an incomplete, even distorted view of the philosopher's teachings. Yu herself acknowledges that she did not present all of Confucius's ideas, because she feels not all are relevant to modern China. For example, Confucius advocated a patriarchal system that assumed men were superior to women.

In an upcoming issue of Du Shu, China's leading intellectual periodical, Tsinghua University philosophy professor [Daniel Bell](#) argues that Yu's book depoliticizes Confucius, who in fact was a radical social critic with low opinions of his rulers. It is not surprising that Chinese leaders would play down Confucian values of social or political criticism, Bell said.

Educators say their colleagues sometimes use a selective application of Confucian values that are fashionable at the moment.

"People think they can find happiness in money," said Zhao Zeyuan, principal of another campus of the Young Pioneers school, on the grounds of the city's recently restored Wen Miao temple. "We try to teach the original Confucianism here, and it asks people to discipline themselves and treat others well, so that society can be harmonious. The Confucianism interpreted by some Chinese scholars is not exactly the same as the original Confucianism."

Even government officials are describing communist ideology in novel ways, arguing that it is compatible with Confucianism despite the party's effort over more than a decade to destroy the philosophy.

"Our ideology has never changed. Our final goal is to realize communism," said Li Baoku, a former vice minister of civil affairs and president of the China Aging Development Foundation, which has been promoting filial piety through television programs, books and DVDs.

"The core content of communism is for everyone to get rich, for everyone to have ultimate or unlimited resources, for our morals to be elevated to the highest level. But to realize that, we have to take steps," Li said. "It's not going to happen overnight."

Last year, a bestseller called "Wolf Totem," written by a dissident, was debated among intellectuals and business leaders. One of its central points, some said, was that Confucianism had taught China's Han Chinese majority to behave like obedient sheep, accepting any leadership, as opposed to the more independent, predatory and successful Mongolian wolves in the book.

On a recent afternoon, in a classroom at the Wen Miao temple, Wang Zhenyu, a computer engineer turned Chinese herbalist, arrived to pick up his son. As the father removed his shoes to enter the classroom, his son quickly brought him a pair of slippers. "Here, Dad, you better wear these," said Wang Cihang, 11.

"I don't want my son to be like all those poor kids who have to take exams all the time," said Wang Zhenyu, 41. "My son is more polite after attending this school, and I don't have to push him to study. My older daughter is studying in the U.K. No matter what jobs they find, they should have a happy life and know how to be good people."

Ren, the founder of the Young Pioneers school, said he feels it's only a matter of time before everyone is on the same page.

"Confucianism, as far as I understand, calls for universal harmony in the world with a single culture. In a world with universal harmony, all different religions in the world will share a common view, and all different interpretations about the universe will reach a consensus."


*Researcher Jin Ling contributed to this report.*

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