

Culture and Sustainable Development in China

Chuansheng Liu
Director of the Confucius Institute
University of Maryland
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Thank you for inviting me to participate in the discussion of how to achieve sustainable development in China in the age of globalization and the knowledge economy. This subject demands our full attention and is of the utmost urgency for reasons known to all of us at this conference.

I am a physicist by profession. My research is in controlled fusion with a goal to produce unlimited energy for future generations. That is why I am concerned about energy and environmental issues. Today, as the Director of the Confucius Institute, I would like to share with you my thoughts on the relationship between cultural values and sustainable development. I think that culture (traditions, values, ethics, philosophies, religions, customs, etc.) affects the path and the characteristics of development in most countries, if not all. In the past 30 years, China's economy has been developing rapidly due to the economic reform policies and a market economy. This has also brought social and environmental problems such as the polarization of the rich and the poor, pollution and depletion of resources. Whether China can achieve sustainable development is an issue of enormous local and global importance. As David Landes points out in his book *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, "Anyone who wants to understand world economic history must study China, the most precocious and long the most successful developer of all. Here is a country with 7% of the earth land area that support some 21% of the world's population." It is encouraging to see that Chinese leaders, scholars and professionals, are increasingly aware of the urgency required to address this issue. I especially appreciate Hu Jin Tao's call for a "harmonious society." The word "Harmony" is deeply rooted in the Chinese traditional psyche and may well be the guiding principle in a new paradigm for development, maintaining harmony in human relations and between man and nature.

The following is a brief discussion of the relationship between culture and economic development in China, and of what elements in Chinese culture could contribute to sustainable development in the future.

- **Culture and Economic Development in China: a historical perspective**

Connections between culture and economic development have been established by thinkers in many fields. Max Weber, for example, observes that the Puritan values such as industriousness and thrift contributed to the accumulation of capital and economic growth in his classic treatise on culture and development, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Chinese culture shares many of these Calvinistic values, and the emphasis placed by Confucian

societies on hard work and education may account for some of the successful businesses of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia and the rise of four little dragons—Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Korea. These cultural values, after the information revolution, are also a key to development in a knowledge economy.

A similarly important cultural element came into play at the height of the Industrial Revolution in the mid-19th century, Darwin's theory of evolution became popular, and the survival of the fittest became a fashionable slogan. Its adaptation to social development led to Social Darwinism. This fad was used to justify the cruel exploitation and oppression of the poor and the weak at home, and led to excessive aggression and expansion abroad. The regional and world wars at the time bear witness to the rise of colonialism and imperialism.

For about a hundred years, from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century, Chinese people had been the victim of colonial oppression and wars of aggression. The sufferings and the injustice at the time caused wide spread soul-searching and criticism of their own culture. In response to the Versailles Treaty in 1919, the May 4th movement broke out protesting against the treaty's unequal terms, which gave away China's Shandong Province to Japan. Angry students also demanded the abandonment of Confucius's teachings and traditions which, they believed, had led China to its backward and weak situation. Chinese intellectuals and students wanted to learn from the West and introduce democracy and science to China. One of the most influential scholars was Yen Fu. He was educated at the University of Edinburgh and translated major Western works by Huxley, Mill and Adam Smith into Chinese. He later became the President of Peking University. After the First World War, he wrote:

Western culture, after this European War, has been corrupted utterly... Formerly, when I heard our scholars of the old school say that there would come a day when the teachings of Confucius would be practiced by all mankind, I thought they were talking nonsense. But now I found some of the most enlightened men in Europe and America seem to be coming to a like opinion. It seems to me that in three centuries of progress, the people of the West have achieved four principles: to be selfish, to kill others, to have little integrity and to feel little shame. How different are the principles of Confucius and Mencius, as broad as Heaven and Earth, designed to benefit all mankind everywhere. (Herrlee G. Creel, *Chinese Thought from Confucius to Mao Tse-Tung*, 1953, 237)

The disillusion with the West and the rebellion against its own culture combined made Marxism an attractive alternative for many Chinese intellectuals, culminating in Mao's success in 1949. The subsequent trials and errors in search of a development path cost China dearly in terms of lost time and precious human resources. The Great Leap Forward, People's communes and finally the great Cultural Revolution severely disrupted China's economic and social development for almost two decades.

With the opening and reform policies implemented in 1978 under the leadership of Deng Xiao Ping, China quickly embarked on a path of market economy, a path already proved successful by the "four little dragons" in Asia, where Confucian traditions and influence are strong. From all signs, Confucius is back in China, not just by the official establishment of Confucius Institutes, but by popular demand in Chinese society. One of the best sellers in China this year is a book entitled "My Reflections on Reading the Confucius Analects" by Yu Dan, a

young professor from Beijing Normal University. Her book was sold three million copies in a few months, and evoked heated discussions on the contemporary significance of Confucius's teachings and traditional values.

- **Who is Confucius and what are his key teachings that are relevant for Today's China and the World**

Confucius lived 2500 years ago at a time of wars and chaos. He has been the most influential person in the Chinese culture as well as in a number of Asian countries. He was also highly controversial in the last century when China struggled to topple the feudal dynastic rule, and later tried to modernize China. He was blamed for China's backwardness: the feudal system, the national humiliation in the hands of western power, the lack of democracy and modern science and technology. But in spite of his ups and downs, his legacy endures and permeates Chinese thought.

Confucius's teachings focused mainly on how to find the meaning of life, how to conduct our lives, and how to relate to one another in a chaotic world. He taught the precepts of two arts. The first was the art of learning: study broadly, question carefully, think critically, judge wisely, and put into practice eagerly. This is very much the scientific method for research and application of knowledge. The second was the art of ethical and good living: cultivate your mind with poetry, music and historical learning, put your family affairs in harmony and good order, then, extend that care to the affairs of the country, and the well being of the whole world. He expected his students to have broad vision and leadership qualities so that they could improve the world. His ethical doctrine is simple: "Do not do to others what you would not wish others do to you," which preceded a similar teaching in the Bible by over 500 years. He did not consider himself blessed with divine knowledge, but only a scholar who is never tired of learning, never bored of teaching. His ethical teaching is based only on what is human. He is remembered for his reverence for life and human dignity and his emphasis on tolerance and humaneness.

Confucius emphasizes the importance of cultivating character, education for all people and respect learning and knowledge. Confucius was the first in China to advocate equal education opportunities for everyone. He says, "in education, there should be no discrimination of any kind." He accepted students regardless of their backgrounds. He established the first private school of substance in China, where he taught poetry, music, rites and civility, archery, history and mathematics. He had 72 disciples and over 3000 students. In a way, he was the founder of the first private university in China. Due to his influence, the respect for education and scholarship has been a strong Chinese tradition. This is definitely conducive to the development of a knowledge economy.

Confucius also advocates Harmony in human society as well as harmony between humans and nature. His concept of harmony as defined by his grandson in the Confucius classic *The Golden Mean* says "What God has given is called Nature; to follow nature is called Tao; to cultivate Tao is called Culture. Before joy, anger, sadness and happiness are experienced it is a state of inner self; when they are expressed to the proper degree it is called Harmony. The inner self is the correct foundation of the world and harmony is the way. When a man has achieved inner self and harmony, the heaven and earth are orderly and myriad of things are nourished and grow thereby" (translation by Lin Yu Tang, *The Importance of Living*, 1938).

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The spirit of tolerance and harmony may explain the lack of protracted religious wars in China. Buddhism, Taoism and other schools of thought co-existed with Confucianism for a long time in the history of China. They borrowed from one another, and considered themselves complementary to Confucius's teachings. One may say that a Chinese, in spirit, is a Confucianist when he conducts himself as a member of society, a Taoist when he relates to Nature, a Buddhist when he faces questions of life, death and the soul.

In 1987, a gathering of the world's Nobel laureates in Paris signed a proclamation stating that Confucius's teachings are important for human survival in the 21st century. One such teaching that has a direct bearing on the challenges for balancing development and sustainability today is:

All creatures on earth should live together without harming one another

All ways of life should run their own course without colliding.

Chinese culture represents the collective experience of a people that have survived for over five thousand years. The traditional wisdom derived from this long history will be a most valuable asset for the Chinese as well as the world in our pursuit for sustainability in the 21st century.