

Confucius & Ancient History's Impact on the Modern Age

By George B. Du Bois, Jr.

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When Marco Polo spent 17 years in China in the +13th Century, he was amazed that the Chinese burned black rocks for fuel—what we now call coal—and that they exchanged goods for mere pieces of paper—what we now call banknotes. Above all, he was amazed by the great populous cities of a prosperous empire. Marco Polo, of course, had but a glimpse of China at a single moment in time, but what he saw was reasonably representative of almost 2,000 years of Chinese history. Five hundred years after Polo, European nobles and wealthy bourgeois, especially the French, were proudly decorating their manor houses in Chinese style, a style that art historians call chinoiserie. Five hundred years before Polo, an expanding, confident China was trading along the Silk Road, welcoming new religions—Judaism, Nestorian Christianity, and Islam—and inventing printing, the magnetic compass and gunpowder to name but three inventions of this most technologically innovative of all ancient civilizations.

To a large extent, one may attribute the longevity of this great civilization to a choice made by the Chinese between competing political philosophies in the –2nd and –3rd Centuries. Though the choice that gave birth to the 2000 years of Confucian civilization may seem long, long ago, its consequences reverberated through the +20th Century, for the disintegration of that civilization led to decades of chaos in China, to an era of warlords, to struggles between Nationalists and Communists to fill the void, to the economic chaos of the Great Leap Forward, and to the political anarchism of the Cultural Revolution. In short, the choice made by the ancient Chinese led to that

glacial stability whose breakdown affected our own age. If ever the roots of great modern events can be found in the long-ago past, they can be found in ancient China.

To establish a context for China's choice between Confucius and the Lord of Shang, we must begin our story during the Chou dynasty in the -8th Century at a moment when China was organized as a feudal society, socially and politically much like medieval Europe. Chinese culture already exhibited many features which would endure until modern times. The Chinese practiced ancestor worship; each rural family farmed by hand relatively tiny plots of land, a few scattered acres or so; and families were organized with authority concentrated in the father.

Some time around the year -771, the Chou kings lost effective control over the feudal nobility and became figureheads. Ensuing centuries witnessed a gradual decrease in the vigor of the feudal system and a gradual increase in social instability. The Chou period, in fact, stands out as the most chaotic period in Chinese history, the most outstanding general characteristic of which was a profound social stability.

Two factors, appeared to have played an important role in the decline of feudalism in China. First, as coins came into general use at an ever-accelerating rate, the Chinese developed a money economy. The nobility began to demand coins for the use of their land instead of the feudal rents of labor and crops. As money payments replaced feudal payments, the nobles became mere landlords, and all the other incidental rights and duties which in their entirety constitute the feudal system--a distinctive politico-economic system--slowly disappeared.

Second, the introduction of iron changed China from a bronze-age society into an iron-age society. The introduction of iron-working techniques is believed to have occurred in the -5th century. Its significance was to give greater military power to those states which possessed the technical secrets of extraction, casting, etc. Superimposed upon an already-moribund feudalism,

the Iron Age led to the final collapse of social stability. War, previously sporadic, became the order of the day among all states.

The instability of the Chou period, of course, stimulated various thinkers to propose solutions to the problems of disunity and increasing conflict. Born in –551, Confucius was ultimately the most important. Before examining his thought, however, we must first look at the then-most-important of the philosophic schools of the Chou period: Legalism, a school associated with a –4th Century thinker known as the Lord of Shang. The Legalist school argued that to depend upon human good will for the harmony of society was an absurdity since history showed that little good will, in fact, existed among men. The Lord of Shang advocated a stern system of laws and punishments. In a way reminiscent of the modern scientific concept of conditioned reflexes, he believed that men, if punished often and severely enough, would ultimately become peaceful and law-abiding, at which point harsh penalties would no longer be necessary to maintain social harmony.

The historical significance of Legalism is primarily that its theories were put into practice by the state of Ch'in, most powerful of the states which vied for supremacy in the last two centuries of the Chou period, a time that historians call the Period of the Warring States.

Let us now trace briefly the course of political and military events during the late Chou dynasty. By the –400s only a few of the former feudal fiefs had not been absorbed by more powerful neighbors. Of the surviving states, Ch'in in the west, under an ambitious dynasty had achieved a degree of political and military efficiency previously unknown in China. The rulers of this aggressive state were the first to establish a central bureaucracy—based on merit rather than birth--primarily for the purpose of constructing and administering the extensive irrigation systems critically needed in the parched western lands. Always militant, the Ch'in were among the first to

organize armies in which foot soldiers and cavalry predominated, a development rendering obsolete the chariot armies of the feudal nobility. Reluctant to permit a diffusion of power, the Ch'in rulers moved to abolish the remnants of a moribund feudalism by permitting the alienation of land holdings. In accordance with the Legalist philosophy of the Lord of Shang, they established an "identity card" system, maintained a police force and punished even slight transgressions of the law brutally.

A critical moment in Chinese history came in when Cheng mounted the throne of Ch'in. Better known as Shih Huang-ti, the name he adopted when he had extended his rule from Ch'in to all China, this vigorous, energetic, Legalist ruler is one of the most remarkable men in history. Reaching his maturity in the -230s, he reunified China in a swift and stunning career of conquest. His victories from -230 to -222 stamp him as one of the world's great conquerors.

After consolidating his power, Shih Huang-ti undertook a series of vast public works to protect the frontiers from Mongol and Turkish nomads and to broaden the agricultural base of the empire. The construction of the irrigation system which renders a large part of the western province of Szechwan fertile to this day and the construction of the Great Wall of China by joining together smaller pre-existing walls, are both attributed to Shih Huang-ti. Additionally, an extensive system of roads--lined with trees--of a width of "fifty paces" was built leading to the capital, and the canal system throughout north China was improved. All this was accomplished in the mere twelve years before Shih Huang-ti's death in -209. Needless to say, these public works required onerous taxation. It is recorded that Shih Huang-ti received a tax amounting to "the greater half". Moreover, Shih Huang-ti was no greater respecter of persons than pocket books. No other Chinese ruler in history ever exacted so much forced labor from his people. The very scope of the dynasty's public works projects required an effort never surpassed in all pre-modern history,

not even in building the Egyptian pyramids. Then to secure his empire, Shih huang-ti sought to break down the regional loyalties that had developed during the Chou period. To this end, he required mass exchanges of population from region to region, another policy which must not have endeared him to his long-suffering subjects

Nor did he satisfy himself with provoking the enmity of the defeated feudal nobility and the common people; his order to burn the books of all the schools of thought that opposed Legalism earned him the opposition of most of China's intellectuals and the opprobrium of history as the first of the book burners. Finally, this Legalist ruler kindled popular resentment by the brutality and severity of punishments meted out to those who opposed his policies of heavy taxation, forced labor, forced migration and suppression of freedom. Common punishments included branding, having one's nose or feet cut off, being buried alive, and being torn apart by chariots.

As a result, Legalism came to an early end as a school of thought. The excesses of Shih huang-ti served to discredit that philosophy, and it perished with his dynasty. Upon his death in – 210, his incompetent son lost his father's iron grip on the country. Within three years rebellion broke out and the Ch'in dynasty ended in –206.

Let us pause to do justice to Shih huang-ti. Balancing his excesses is much merit. His construction of the Great Wall did in future centuries contribute to the peace of China. His final suppression of feudalism and serfdom opened the way for the Confucian society based on freehold land tenure that succeeded the Legalist society of the Ch'in. Shih huang-ti's standardization of the characters of the Chinese script made the written language a powerful force for Chinese unity at a time when at least 8 different languages and many dialects impeded communication. He further contributed to imperial unity and the suppression of regional differences by standardizing weights and measures, coinage, and even the axle widths of

vehicles. His further conquests extended Chinese control to the southeast coast for the first time. He maintained an efficient central bureaucracy— based on merit rather than high birth--which was the ideal always and the practice usually of imperial government thereafter. Finally, he reunified China after the troubles of the Period of the Warring States. In terms of enduring accomplishments that affected billions of people, Shih huang-ti was probably the most important political leader who ever lived.

The Han dynasty, one of the most beloved in Chinese history, succeeded the Ch'in. The Han endured some 400 years, but the most important event of that long span of time occurred sometime after -141 when the Han Emperor Wu Ti adopted Confucianism as the official creed of China. Thereafter, admission to the governing class depended upon mastering the Confucian classics

Let us examine now a few excerpts from the writings of Confucius, of his principal follower, Mencius, and others of the Confucian school.

Confucius said, "The mind of the superior man is conversant with righteousness; the mind of the mean man is conversant with gain."

Confucianism holds in high esteem those virtues which the great religions of the world have valued. The "superior man" despises the pursuit of gain and prizes sincerity, humility, kindness, courage, generosity and justice. Such a moral content is unusual for a political philosophy---for Confucianism is not a religion but rather a political philosophy.

Mencius said, "If (a ruler) give honor to men of talents and virtue and employ the able, so that offices shall all be filled by individuals of the highest distinction, then all the scholars of the kingdom will be pleased, and wish to stand in his court."

Like Socrates, but unlike the majority of religious thinkers, Confucianists found knowledge a principal virtue, and the highest knowledge was, of course, an understanding of the Confucian classics. The scholars of China who monopolized political posts both in the imperial bureaucracy and in the provinces, immersed themselves in those works. The Chinese actually approached the ideal of government by philosophers expounded by Plato in *The Republic*.

Confucius said, "A transmitter and not a maker, believing in and loving the ancients, I venture to compare myself to old P'ang."

One of the most profoundly conservative thinkers in all history, Confucius found his model for an orderly society in the past. He pointed to the benevolent, prosperous reigns of the legendary emperors, Yao, Shun and Yu. These legendary rulers supposedly gave the Chinese people eras of peace, prosperity and good government two millenia or so before the time of Confucius himself. Utopia was in the past. Men did not turn their thoughts to innovation in order to realize some perfect society in the future; men studied the ancient ways to imitate the best of the past. Confucius, thus, stamped the Chinese people with one of their outstanding premodern characteristics: a tendency to judge the propriety of future action by reference to the precedents of the past. The ideas of progress and evolution found in modern Western thought were absent in China.

It should be noted, however, that Confucius was incorrect in claiming to be merely a transmitter of ancient knowledge. The hereditary aspect of Chinese feudal society is conspicuously absent from Confucian thought. In this respect and this alone, Confucius was revolutionary rather than conservative.

Confucius said, "He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn toward it."

The most important positive duty imposed upon the ruler by the Confucianists—other than the obligation to follow the precedents of past ages—was to lead an exemplary life, thus stirring the people to the exercise of the ancient virtues in their own lives. And since the peace and prosperity of the empire theoretically rested in large part on the emperor's own virtue, he, of course, surrounded himself with Confucian scholars who could best advise him as to his proper conduct. Any Emperor who wished to act in what we may term an "un-Confucian manner" usually elicited some form of protest from the officials of his bureaucracy.

The Confucian scholars' advice, of course, was usually based on interpretations of the classics or precedents from either the ancient ways or the Emperor's own ancestors. The Emperor, thus, did little more than present a role model of virtue to the people in his personal life, and in his public life punish crimes, defend the empire militarily and build or maintain public works--all fields of governmental endeavor legitimated by long-standing precedents. An Emperor or official who tried to do more than these limited, albeit important tasks, was very rare in Confucian China. A striking statistic from the year +1815 toward the end of the long Confucian era illustrates the limited functions of the central government. In that year when the population of

China was perhaps more than 300 million people, the number of provincial officials was 3,631 or about one per eighty thousand of population.

Mencius [said], "There are five things which in the common parlance of the age are said to be unfilial. The first is laziness in the use of one's four limbs, so as not to attend to the maintenance of his parents. The second is gambling and chess-playing...so as not to attend to the maintenance of one's parents. The third is being fond of goods and money, and being selfishly attached to one's wife and children, so as not to attend to the maintenance of one's parents..."

Mencius said, "There are three things which are unfilial, and to have no posterity is the greatest of them."

We must now examine the Chinese family—including deceased ancestors and unborn generations—an institution far more important than the imperial government. Of all the institutions of the Utopian past, the Confucianists attributed highest value to the family and made it the framework of Confucian morality and society. It was the context within which the "superior man" exercised the ancient virtues.

"Now filial piety is seen in the skillful carrying out of the wishes of our forefathers, and the skillful carrying forward of their undertakings:"

Here let us note another thread of continuity with the past, for ancestor worship was already firmly established hundreds of years before the time of Confucius himself. The Confucianists did not limit their admonition to follow ancient ways to the emperors of China. They also urged even the ordinary farmer to follow the old ways—in this case the ways of his own direct ancestors

rather than those of the legendary emperors Yao, Shun and Yu. Thus, the conservative Confucian love of the past was reinforced by the incorporation of ancestor worship since it too required men to look backwards, to take into account the wishes of the deceased.

Someone addressed Confucius, saying, "Sir, why are you not engaged in the government" Confucius said, "What does the Shû-ching say of filial piety? 'You are filial, you discharge your brotherly duties. These qualities are displayed in government.' This then also constitutes the exercise of government..."

Two other aspects of Confucian culture militating for conservatism may be gleaned from this saying of Confucius concerning the discharge of filial and brotherly duties.

First, one of the distinguishing features of that political philosophy is its constant stress on duties. While it may be true that for every duty there is a corresponding right, the Confucianists conspicuously failed to accord rights any great significance. A society conceived of in terms of duties rather than rights must necessarily be conservative.

Second, the statement that the discharge of one's family obligations constitutes an exercise of government reflects the Confucian concept of society as a whole, as a single extended family. The emperor was, in fact, not merely the ruler of the state. He was, in a sense that George Washington could never hope to be, the father of his people. Thus, the discharge of obligations—from subordinate to superior and vice versa—within the hierarchical family was of the same nature as the discharge of obligations politically on the larger scene of hierarchical Chinese society. The distinction between matters for private consideration or for governmental consideration, so readily comprehended in the West, was for the most part alien to Chinese thinking.

"The duties of universal obligation ... are those between sovereign and subject, between father and son, between husband and wife, between elder brother and younger, and those belonging to the intercourse of friends. Those five are the duties of universal obligation."

Nowhere is the interrelation between the individual, the family, and the central government more clearly seen than in the famous Five Relationships: emperor-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, and friend-friend. Their major characteristics serve to summarize Confucian society. First, four of the five were relationships which the West conceives of as private and the remaining one was considered analogous by the Chinese. Second, three of the five were actually family relationships and the remaining two by analogy to father-son and elder brother-younger brother can be conceived of in terms of the family. Finally, four of the five were relationships of superior to inferior. Such was Chinese society: private, familial, and hierarchical. So long as China remained isolated and agricultural, the profoundly conservative Confucian organization of society worked admirably for more than a score of centuries.

In conclusion, I would to make a few observations. First, I think that the key to Confucianism's success in creating that advanced civilization which dazzled Marco Polo over a thousand years after its inception lies in the nature of Chinese agriculture. Western agriculture has always been extensive—a relatively large acreage cultivated by animal power or machines. Chinese agriculture, in contrast, was intensive, small plots cultivated by hand labor. The Western peasant has always been a farmer; the Chinese peasant was really a gardener. Offsetting the Western farmer's advantage from his hundred or more acres to some extent was the Chinese peasant's ability to achieve a higher yield from his own ten or so scattered acres. The Chinese family could give greater attention to its crops and achieve a yield per acre that the Western

farmer could not match. Achieving that yield required a high degree of cooperation and discipline within the Chinese family. Unless all attempted to maximize the yield of each square foot of ground, there might not be enough food for that family's own needs, let alone a surplus that might be exchanged for salt, cooking oil, cloth, tools, or other foodstuffs not grown by that family. This unity and discipline was especially necessary at those times in Chinese history when great landlords acquired huge holdings and many peasants became tenants paying part of their crops to their landlords. In traditional China a family that worked together survived and even prospered; a family that quarreled starved.

The small size of landholdings and the minimal surplus of intensive farming were the key factors—little noted by historians—in Chinese history. The family system was their direct consequence, and Confucianism was their philosophic rationalization. The history of China would probably have been quite different had extensive farming been adopted. It was not, however, and by adopting a system of farming by hand, the Chinese committed themselves to an economic system which Confucius buttressed with moral content and a compelling sense of duty. Rarely in human history has a political philosophy so well matched an underlying economic system.

And never in human history have events in ancient times so directly affected the modern era. The creation of Confucian civilization led to 2,000 years of an extraordinary stability, the collapse of which grievously impacted China in the +20th Century. Even the greatest inventions of the ancient Greeks—drama, philosophy, and democracy—passed through many filters before affecting our modern age.

My final observation concerning China's choice between the philosophies of Confucius and the Lord of Shang is brief. I think that in ancient times China under the Legalists engaged in one of history's greatest experiments in centralization followed shortly under the Confucianists by one

of history's greatest experiments in decentralization. The Legalists wanted to control all; the Confucianists wanted to control only what they absolutely had to, what the black-haired people absolutely could not do for themselves. Such an extreme back-to-back contrast is perhaps unique in human experience.

Excerpts from Various of the Confucian Classics

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