Why Is Confucius Still Relevant Today? His Sound Bites Hold Up

**The Chinese philosopher still affects the lives of nearly a quarter of humanity.**

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HE WAS HAILED after his death as “The Uncrowned King,” a philosopher whose sound bites of wisdom became China’s handbook on government and its code of personal morality for thousands of years. But little is known about Confucius, and what is known is full of contradiction and myth.

Speaking from Washington, D.C, during a break on his book tour, [Michael Schuman](http://business.time.com/author/michaeljschuman/), author of [*Confucius and the World He Created*](http://www.amazon.com/Confucius-And-World-He-Created/dp/046502551X), teases out fact from fiction; explains why he had to take bowing lessons before his wedding; and tells us why the influence of a scholar who died nearly 3,000 years ago is still felt in the boardrooms, bedrooms, and classrooms of nearly a quarter of humanity.

**You say**[**Mao**](http://www.biography.com/people/mao-tse-tung-9398142)**’s Red Guards dubbed Confucius “The Number One Hooligan Old Kong.” But today Confucius is being ardently embraced by the Communist Party. What’s going on?**

The Communist Party has realized Confucius might be useful for them again. But the version of Confucius they use isn’t the same as the one in [*The Analects*](http://classics.mit.edu/Confucius/analects.html), his most famous collection of ideas and sayings. Beijing focuses on the imperial Confucius who was all about obedience to the emperor, hierarchy, and loyalty.

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Fast forward to today. The Communist Party has overseen an incredible surge of wealth in China in the past 35 years through old-fashioned capitalism. But the old Marxist rhetoric of the Mao years doesn’t fit anymore. So they went scouring about for a new ideology to justify their government.

And they’ve come back to Confucius, for many of the same reasons the old emperors did. Here is a political tradition that is uniquely Chinese and can support their type of authoritarian rule. At the same time, it can be used to fend off all those awful ideas they don’t want from the West, like democracy and human rights.

By reviving Confucius, they are making the case that China has its own political culture based on its own political and philosophical history. China therefore does not have to head toward democracy in the way that Western advocates would like to see happen. It can have a political future based on what it sees as its philosophical past.

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They like using the word “harmony” and harmonious society a lot, concepts the Confucians also like to use. But what the Communists mean by harmony is a society where there’s no dissent of party rule. In Confucian thinking, it means something very different. It’s about a society where everyone fulfills their responsibilities and creates a harmonious situation where the whole country prospers.

What the Chinese Communist Party is doing is taking a very narrowly defined, carefully selected version of Confucianism to push ideas they think can help convince the public that the system they’re running is an extension of a political system that China has always had.

At the same time, ordinary people are returning to Confucian ideas in search of the spiritual nourishment they feel is missing in their lives. One Confucian scholar said to me that China is having a moral crisis, and it’s the worst crisis China has ever had. There are incredibly high levels of corruption, widespread fraud, and counterfeiting. There are incredible problems with pollution and environmental degradation. People look around and say, “OK, we’ve gotten rich, but look at everything we’ve lost.”

**Confucius is also being used to project China’s “soft power.” Should we be worried about the rapidly expanding,**[**global network of Confucius Institutes**](http://confuciusinstitute.unl.edu/institutes.shtml)**?**

The [Confucius Institutes](http://www.chinesecio.com/) have been a tremendously successful program for China. What makes them controversial is that, when a Confucius Institute shows up at a university, the university is effectively outsourcing its Chinese studies to the Chinese government. Confucius Institutes are funded by and to a certain extent overseen by an agency of the Chinese state. In a way, Confucius’s name is employed as a brand.

In academia, this is sometimes seen as an attempt by the Chinese government to control the discourse about China. The Chinese insist all they are doing is promoting Chinese language and Chinese culture. But because of the controversies these institutes have provoked, you have to wonder whether this is actually intensifying the distrust between the West and China? Some very prominent universities in the United States, like the University of Chicago and Pennsylvania State University, have [dropped their relationship](http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2014/10/02/another-u-s-university-drops-chinas-confucius-institute/) with Confucius Institutes. It’s going to be interesting how it plays out.

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**The book starts with Confucius “gate-crashing” your wedding. Set the scene for us.**

My wife is Korean American, born in the United States and as American as anybody can be. But for our wedding she wanted to add in a traditional Korean ceremony called a [*paebaek*](http://wiki.weddingbee.com/Paebaek), when we would bow in front of her parents, and afterward they would give us their blessing and toss walnuts and dates into the skirt of her dress to encourage fertility.

**This bow is not just a little nod of the head, is it?**

[Laughs] No, it’s the full forehead-to-the-boards kowtow. I found this a little uncomfortable. I grew up in a Jewish tradition where we’re told to have self-respect and not bow down before anybody. So I decided to raise my concerns with my wife. Her response was, “Get over it. You’re bowing to my parents, and that’s that!”

The reason this was so important to her is that filial piety, respect for your parents, is one of the most basic Confucian virtues. So, on my wedding day, I had to get a bowing lesson from my brother-in-law. A few hours later, I found myself with my forehead pressed to the floor with all my friends looking on. [Laughs]

It shows the continuing power of Confucian ideas. That’s why it’s so important for us to know about Confucius. He still has a dramatic effect on the lives of nearly a quarter of humanity.

**Let’s scroll back now to 551 B.C. What do we know about Confucius, the man?**

What we know is in bits and pieces scattered across various historical records of somewhat suspect quality. What we think we know is that he was born to a family of low-level officials. His father died when he was quite young, and he was raised by a single mother. There’s some speculation among modern historians that he might have been illegitimate. But we know very little about his childhood.

What we do know is that he turned himself into an expert on the literature and history and poetry of an earlier age in China, and with that he created his own doctrine. The purpose of the doctrine was to restore peace and order. The time in which he lived was a time of war and conflict in China between numerous feudal states, and he believed he had devised a doctrine of virtue that could bring prosperity back to China.

In his own life, unfortunately, he failed in that vision, because he could not find the dukes and kings to adhere to his ideas. But where he did succeed was as a very successful teacher. He had very loyal students who became his disciples, and they carried on his mission and his teachings until Confucianism eventually became China’s dominant philosophy.

**Confucius regarded the family as the cornerstone of society. Yet he divorced his wife and spent most of his life living with a group of young, male acolytes. Is there any evidence to suggest he was gay?**

[Laughs] Not that I know of. But it is interesting that, even though he considered the family to be so important, we know so little about his own family. There are a few mentions in *The Analects* of a son and a daughter. But we don’t know much about his wife.

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Part of the reason may be the way the records were left. *The Analects* is really a collection of snippets of conversation that Confucius had with his disciples. So it’s not surprising that the texts focus more on his relationship with his disciples than his family. But it is odd that a guy who thought the family was the foundation of society spent most of his time with his students, whom he was clearly very close with.

**You write that the political consequence of filial piety was to create “a nation of obedient subjects.” Is Confucianism compatible with Western, democratic values?**

If you listen to [President Xi Jinping](http://time.com/3547467/china-beijing-xi-jinping-confucius-communism/) and the Chinese government, they would say you’re exactly right: It’s not compatible. However, there’s a counter-argument where pro-democracy advocates in Asia have looked back at the same texts and seen in them the seeds of democracy in Asia. The most famous was the former president of South Korea, [Kim Dae Jung](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/317874/Kim-Dae-Jung), who spent decades as a democracy advocate in Korea and believed that Confucius gave people the right to choose their leadership and also overthrow a leader who was immoral or tyrannical.

Today there are several societies that are highly influenced by Confucianism but are also democratic, like South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. So I think history is telling us that you can be both Confucian and democratic.

**You say, “The inferior position of women in East Asia is the most damaging legacy of Confucius.” Tell us about the *Analects for Women* and how they continue to make it hard for women to break through the Asian glass ceiling.**

Confucius himself did not say a lot about women, though what he said wasn’t all that positive. Later, during the Tang dynasty, two female scholars created a text based on his ideas, which became known as the [*Analects for Women*](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/song_ruozhao_analects.pdf). It enshrined the idea that the roles of men and women should be highly separated. The outer realm of politics, business, and civic life was for men. The inner realm of caring for children and managing the home was for women.

This became deeply entrenched in Chinese society, and unfortunately lingers to this day. The International Monetary Fund did a study in 2012 that showed that only 9 percent of corporate management positions in Japan and South Korea were held by women, compared with 43 percent in the United States. This is demeaning for women and a national problem. In an age where you want to make your economies as competitive as possible, these societies are [marginalizing a lot of their best talent](http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2012/09/steinberg.htm).

**You say everyone has his or her own Confucius. Who is your Confucius? And what have you learned from writing this book that is useful in your own life?**

That’s a great question. When I started this project, I’ll be honest, I didn’t know very much about Confucius. I started by walking around with a copy of *The Analects* in my bag. But I had an image of Confucius in my head that was quite negative, which I think many people in modern times hold: that he was arch-conservative, anti-women, and pro-autocracy.

But in the course of doing this book and reading the Confucian writings, I had a change of heart. If you go back and read *The Analects* and some of the early writings, you realize the way we see Confucius today is really not the Confucius who lived 2,500 years ago. A lot of his ideas are universal and timeless. He believed that people should do the right thing because it was the right thing to do. And that trying to do the right thing would have a ripple effect through society.

When you read this positive message, you realize that Confucius has value for us today, even though he first uttered these ideas thousands of years ago. There are things in the Bible that we don’t agree with today, like owning slaves. But that doesn’t mean we throw it in the garbage. We interpret it for our needs today and continue to find value in it. That’s what we should be doing with Confucius and Confucian ideas.