

Interview

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Tu Weiming

Tu Weiming is a philosophy professor at Harvard University and Chair of the Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies at Peking University. He is an ethicist and is one of the leading lights of New Confucianism. David Volodzko asked him about the relevance of Confucius today.

In her 1982 book Child Abuse and Neglect: Cross-Cultural Perspectives, the anthropologist Jill Korbin wrote that in classical China “children, according to the ethic of ‘filial piety,’ were considered the sole property of their parents. As such, they could be dealt with in whatever manner their parents chose, with little or no interference from outsiders. Severe beatings, infanticide, child slavery, the selling of young girls as prostitutes, child betrothal, and foot-binding were not uncommon.” Is it true that Confucian ideas of filial piety say children are the property of their parents? Doesn’t the Classic of Filial Piety teach that the basis of filial piety is love?



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Korbin's view is distorted, and I would say erroneous, for a number of reasons. In the *Classic of Filial Piety*, Confucius makes filial piety the root of all virtue, starting with the piety of the Emperor towards his parents and the good consequences of that for all his decisions. A disciple asks the Master (Confucius) whether simple obedience to a father can be called filial piety. Confucius reacts strongly ("What words are these?") and replies that the Emperor who had ministers willing to argue with him would not lose his state and "the father who had a son that would remonstrate with him would not sink into the gulf of unrighteous deeds. Therefore when a case of unrighteous conduct is concerned, a son must by no means keep from remonstrating with his father, nor a minister from remonstrating with his ruler." So the son's responsibility is to help the father to become more fatherly. The father disciplines the son, of course, but the son is obligated to see to it that the father acts according to the fatherly principle.

According to Confucius' approach to the Rectification of Names [i.e. Chinese philosophy of language] if you occupy the position of *father*, then that very concept implies that you act in certain ways. The father acts fatherly so that the son will be able to act in filial reverence. So the notion of obeying an abusive father is totally distorted and, I would say, against basic Confucian principles. The principle of reciprocity, *shu*, is important in governing this relationship. The abuse of authoritarian power [in Chinese politics] occurred from time to time, and sometimes it became an excuse for the father to behave in an unfatherly way, but according to the rules of behavior (we call it 'regulatory behavior'), the whole idea of property itself is, again, quite distorted. However, there are limits. For example, if the son kills the father, then normally the son would not be excused! The most important value in Confucianism is self-actualization, so the son cultivating the father is part of the game. The son should not be rebellious, but the father, like the son, has to improve. So in that connection, the reciprocal relationship is very much emphasized.

The Confucian philosopher Mencius once explained that it's not a good idea for a junzi [Confucian gentleman displaying moral nobility] to teach his son, because if the student doesn't do his work, the teacher may become angry, which a father shouldn't do. Do we know why this is the case?

This is a very famous, yet sometimes overlooked, aspect of the Confucian tradition. The father-son relationship should always be cordial. Well, that's not the right term. Loving and caring. So, for example, I would teach my friend's children and my friend teaches my children. This is because the discipline of the teacher is incompatible with the caring of the father. A teacher-student relationship should be able to endure a great deal of pressure because of the discipline involved. But this is not desirable in the father-son relationship. It's all right for the teacher to have indignation if the student doesn't obey the rules, but between a father and son, anger is counterproductive.

In the Analects, Mang Wubo asks Confucius about filial piety, and Confucius talks about parents who worry if their children are sick. Can you talk about this?

There are 109 references to humanity, or *ren*, in the *Analects*, so in this one case, Confucius says that in filial piety it's difficult to have the right attitude. Amy Chua, the 'tiger mother' [author of the bestselling book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*], who teaches at Yale, made a few comments, after she became a celebrity, that her older daughter is very amenable to this kind of pressure, while her second daughter is diametrically opposed to it, so sometimes she would have to compromise. So even though on the surface, the emphasis is on imposing one's will, I think there are underlying issues that need to be explored. If you're very stringent, and the child is aware that this is for their own good, and the learning time is appreciated, it turns out to be efficacious for the relationship. On the other hand, I think many parents in China misunderstand this, and overexercise their parental power, and we don't need to discuss the psychology of it, but quite often the children rebel. The parents' willingness to sacrifice their own self-interest for the well-being of their children, and not the outmoded idea that they will rely upon the children to take care of them, has now become a civil religion in China. Especially the education of the children. As soon as a child is born, the parents begin to work extremely hard in order to save some money so that the child will have a proper education. Especially when they themselves never had a chance to go to school. Of course, there are benefits for them: they feel proud; they can be praised if their children excel. That's certainly part of the story. But it's extraordinary in many cases, I noticed, that parents in China or even in Taiwan decide to leave an adequate job at home in order to eke out a living in, for example the

United States, by running a coffee shop, so that their children can go to a better school. That happens quite a lot. Even in my own personal experience, I have encountered quite a few stories like this, and I think it has to do with the culture and ethos of the people. Filial piety is not just to one's parents, but to one's clan. And also, in the Great Learning, they say self-cultivation has to be extended to the family, and to the nation, and eventually, heaven. That is each person's role in the network of self-cultivation.

What do you mean by one's clan?

Not just one's parents, but one's relatives. It's patriarchal, but it's also quite broad. To support your parents, that's good, but that's a minimum. Even animals can do that. But to make your parents happy, respected in the community, that's considered a higher level of filial piety. The highest level is, that because of your own merit, your own achievement, your parents will be remembered. For example, Mencius' mother is remembered as an ideal of motherhood. Both Mencius and Confucius were raised by their mothers, so the role of the mother is extremely critical in Confucianism. A soldier who shows bravery on the battlefield can also be a demonstration of filial piety. So it has much broader significance than simply a family ethic. It has to be cultivated publicly. One thing that I just learned is that in Singapore, which is not necessarily a Confucian society, there's been a survey run for the last 30 years or more of the views of different generations, and different sectors, businesspeople, academics, and so forth. And the single value mentioned most often is always filial piety. This is probably not true in China now. I don't know whether it's true in Taiwan.

Why isn't it true in China now?

In China, Confucianism was devastated by the Cultural Revolution, which was very much anti-Confucian, even though now they try to restore some Confucian values. I don't think *xiao* [filial piety] is included in socialist core values. But it is coming back in civil society in terms of parental relationships.

In your view then, it's not a case of Orientalist thinking to attribute Chinese behavior to Confucianism?

If we look at the world in terms of value orientations, then not only China but also the rest of that region has been characterized as the Confucian world. Although in Japan, the idea of loyalty is much more pronounced than that of filial piety.

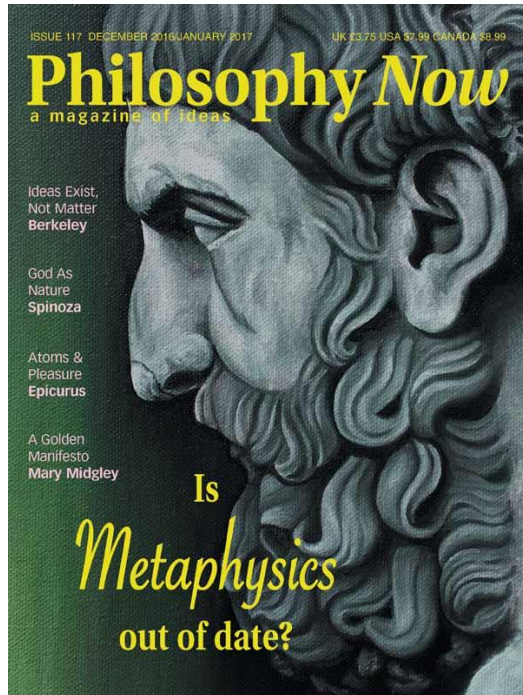
Precisely because China was obsessed with the idea of being overwhelmed by Japan aggressiveness, China wanted to become wealthy and powerful, and many believed that getting rid of Confucian tradition was a precondition for becoming powerful. The discourse was that Confucianism is incompatible with modern ideas of ethics or the dignity of individuals. And the revolutionary Red Guards attacked Confucianism time and time again, though it continued to be developed in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, Japan, Korea. But this has all changed now, and we're entering a new era where many of the positive Confucian values can be underscored. Right now, there's this new view that China is going through a kind of Confucian revival. A revival is a double-edged sword that can very easily be politicized by the government as a method of political control, but it also has much broader implications as well.

Why do some people think Confucianism is incompatible with progress?

That is a tradition that started in 1919, with the New Cultural Movement, and what I call all these Enlightenment values of the West, even though there's a lot of debate about the abusive use of some of these values. We have Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and Confucian values, and the argument was that religious forms are not compatible. But I think that phase is already over, and people today have more sophisticated ideas about human development, that it's not just a matter of having a higher GDP. So right now in China, very few insist that the Confucian tradition is incompatible with progress. As properly understood and properly practiced, Confucian values become even more congenial to human development. Some narrow and nationalistic ideas have also surfaced based on this. My view is that Confucianism must adapt itself to human values, and that the abusive use of power by neoliberal economies could be corrected by a much broader vision of human flourishing. Issues of proper governance, moral order, and the financial regulatory system are all a part of the story. The role of government, for example, the role of leadership, all these are relevant issues.

Thank you for your time.

• *David Volodzko is the national editor of the Korea JoongAng Daily, the sister paper of The New York Times in South Korea, and a contributing author for the South China Morning Post and The Diplomat, where he writes about Chinese politics and society.*



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