

China Images

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Volume 3, Number 2

March 2006

The Confucian Thread

“Where should I meet you?” “At Confucius.” “You don’t mind walking down all those stairs?” “No, no. We meet at Confucius. 10 o’clock,” asserted my 80-year-old colleague. For several years we had been meeting at the Confucius statue, her university’s centerpiece of a small park and lily pond. As a sprinkling of students practiced language dialogues, we would chat on the narrow concrete benches along the pond before heading indoors to work. “Hong Kong donors gave the statue to the college,” Huang Ren Song explained to my question of where it had come from and my comment that I thought Confucius was in disrepute. “He’s okay now.” I was used to constant change in China, but the reconstitution of Confucius somehow surprised me. From my perspective many of his ideas are antiquated—at least as they have been passed down through 2500 years. Rigidly structured social relationships, elaborate rituals, the domination of women by their fathers, their husbands and then their sons have fallen away. As we sat in his shadow, I suspected the great master would have been horrified at the uppity women before him, especially at my elderly friend who shares her opinions even when her colleagues find them annoying.

I puzzled then, and still do, about whether Confucian values permeate China’s fast-paced changes and its citizens’ lives. Says one Chinese website, “Although Confucianism is condemned for some of its views, it has branded us Chinese and our

life.” And a lackadaisical Masters student, who was much more interested in his girlfriend and computers than studying, unhesitatingly observed, “Confucian thought is reflected everywhere today.” Struggling for words in his newly acquired English, he added, “It’s pervasive.” He pointed to the importance of education, of relationships with family, and of how modern Chinese think about government. Confucius’s teachings are said to underlie much that is at the core of Chinese culture, but I find this difficult to grasp from my outsider’s perspective.

Along my slow journey to understanding, I visited Qufu [choo-foo] Teachers’ University in Confucius’s hometown, 450 kilometers south of Beijing. I’d been invited by Li Tianchen [lee tee-en chen] whom I had met in Pasadena while he was translating my Ph.D. thesis into Chinese. It seemed a golden opportunity to see another corner of China and also to further my research by observing in an off-the-beaten-track nursery school. I barely processed the fact that Professor Li was deputy director of the Confucius Cultural Institute. Confucius was low on my interest list.

“I’ll be arriving at 11:00 p.m. Thursday night,” I reported to Professor Li, as my friend, Meiyun, and I juggled address books, notes, and a flashlight in a dark phone booth in Nanjing. “And I will need to leave at 10 p.m. Monday.” “You can’t stay longer and take earlier trains,” he asked. There was no

way. Qufu lies mid-way between Beijing and Shanghai, serviced by the main north-south rail line, yet it turned out to be inordinately difficult to reach from Nanjing. The university department chair finally had to get her sister who worked for the railway to get me a ticket.

As my train pulled into the station in the dead of night I was more than a little relieved to see Li Tianchen's kindly face looking up from the platform. On the drive into Qufu we chatted about inconvenient train schedules and the time and topic for my talk. I mentioned the nursery school visit to make sure it didn't slip out of sight. At the campus hotel we awoke the night attendant for my room key and Prof. Li headed home. Settling into my comfortable room, I made a cup of tea from the hot water thermos, organized my the lecture for the next day, checked the tape recorder for a nursery school visit, and burrowed under the generous bed quilts.

The next morning as I walked with Professor Li to his home for breakfast, residents hurried along the dusty lanes of the large, semi-rural campus carrying thermoses or small bags of groceries—a couple of eggs, a tomato. Children were hustled along by parents, packs jouncing against their small backs. Students and staff pedaled to early classes. The sun warmed the front yard garden as we entered Professor Li's modest first floor apartment. His wife, a gentle and humble woman, greeted me shyly and served up an enormous meal, beginning with two fried eggs. I ate as much as I could, not knowing how to politely turn off the food spigot, and we were off to tour the campus. Unlike urban universities, large fields, walkways, and park areas spread in all directions interrupted by occasional building clusters. Beyond the campus edge, Professor Li pointed out the prosperous-looking structure of the Kung family liquor factory, owned and operated by Confucius's

descendants. They seemed to be doing all right, but I found it disorienting to connect a liquor factory with the venerable sage.

Into the Confucian Cultural Institute we went, to a collection of basement hallways. "Ancient Confucian texts," said Professor Li as we entered a large room of raised, ventilated wooden cabinets. Peering through their glass doors I saw small stacks of stitch-bound volumes. I was awed, but did not know enough about Confucius's writings to ask questions. I still don't know exactly what these were, except they were valuable enough to have been hidden by local farmers during the Cultural Revolution. This room was also where Professor Li followed his passion of translating Confucian texts from ancient Chinese to modern Chinese and then to English. "It sometimes takes days or a week to translate a line," he mused. Later I learned from an erudite friend that he admired people such as Professor Li enormously because it is so excruciatingly difficult to tease modern words out of ancient texts and come close to accurate interpretation.

We continued our walking tour of the campus during which I probably mentioned a nursery school visit a few too many times—to which Li Tianchen never really responded. The rest of the day streamed by with an overly abundant lunch at his home, a talk to a class of 50 teaching candidates whose English probably didn't allow them to understand much of what I said, and a cheerful English department banquet. As we left the banquet room, Li Tianchen instructed, "Breakfast at 6:30. We need an early start so we can get to the Confucian Temple when it opens."

Back in my room, unwinding, I sensed I was floating in a set of events that I didn't quite grasp and which seemed beyond my control. The weekend was upon us and I obviously wasn't going to see nursery schools on Saturday or Sunday, so I might

as well enjoy exploring Qufu. I imagined the temple to be a few buildings like those I'd seen at the Buddhist temples elsewhere, with incense burning before the main hall and a few outbuildings for the monks.

Saturday morning I pedaled behind Li Tianchen through wide, dust-scattered streets leading from the campus into the heart of Qufu. Within half a mile of the Confucian Temple and Kung family mansion new construction began to co-mingle with mid-20th century shops. A faux ancient hotel, a city administrative building, and a planted parkway were almost completed. We parked in front of a massive stone gate and wall. While Li Tianchen went to a nearby office, I watched tour groups wind out of buses, following the yellow pennants of their guides through the gate. It was just 9 a.m., and this was obviously the Confucian Temple. He returned, checked our bicycle locks, chatted with the entrance guard, showing him my shiny gold entrance ticket, and we stepped into another world. The cool of the courtyard reached out to us while middle-aged factory employees, young couples, grandparents, and students continued to file through the gate behind us, here to enjoy the spring Saturday in the presence of the great master and philosopher. Stone-engraved tributes and monuments rose on either side as we wove our way through clusters of families waiting their turn to snap photos in front of the *bixi*, a turtle-like mythical creature associated with dragons and long life.

Kungzi, known as Confucius in the West, lived poor and taught in Qufu most of his life (551-479 B.C.). A passionate learner and natural teacher, he devoted himself to teaching others how to follow a virtuous life that would keep the empire in balance. Although historical records suggest he craved political recognition so he could test his ideas, he had little success. His idealism

and out-spoken criticism were not popular among the powerful. He insisted that leaders should govern for the welfare of the state and its people at a time when local rulers preferred to war against their neighbors for personal gain. Realizing little success in his home province, Confucius and his disciples traveled for several years trying to influence politicians in other provinces. But in the end chaotic political instability and provincial leaders who continued their greedy ways led him and his disciples to return to Qufu, where he taught for the rest of his life.

After his death devoted disciples continued his teachings and recorded them in *The Analects* in the form of brief paragraphs that begin, "The Master said," and which have now been translated into many languages. A century later Mencius, a respected philosopher/scholar, spread and adapted his ideas. From then on they seem to have taken on a life of their own. Although Confucius never intended his moral teachings to be a religion, Confucianism was declared the official religion of China a few centuries later, and temples were built for worshipping him and his disciples. Ruler after ruler performed rituals in his honor. Although he stressed the fact that all men, not just the rich, could be important government officials, the powerful over millennia codified his teachings into rigid rules governing all relationships. Over successive generations his ideas were used to promote the subservience of women to their husbands or sons, to assert the power of civil administrators over citizens, to assure the emperor's power over everyone, and to narrow the civil service exams to the regurgitation of Confucian codes. His detractors recognized the power of Confucianism. Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China, is reported to have buried Confucian scholars alive and ordered all of their writings burned. More recently Mao

Zedong's Red Guards tried to scour Confucian concepts and practices from Chinese consciousness and attacked Qufu monuments and graves.

We stepped into the next courtyard and paused. As I stood rooted in place surrounded by Chinese, I wondered if we all felt the awe, the hush of that place. In its center was the Apricot Pavilion (*Xintan*) built where it is believed Confucius instructed his disciples under apricot trees. A small, triple-roofed structure surrounded by paving stone courtyards and gnarled pines, it is the oldest in the temple complex, dating to 1018 with only one major renovation in the 16th century. I imagined Confucius here in 500 B.C., his disciples sitting on raised platforms, listening to his teachings on morality and virtue, or walking along these very paving stones deep in thought. I began for the first time to sense his importance as a passionate educator. While I stood there with only my Western book knowledge, I began wondering how his teachings might be imbued in daily details of the Chinese visitors. Ancient and modern China are woven together into a complex fabric never to be unraveled. Just as Confucius reached back through a thousand years of tradition to gather his ideas, so bustling, modern Chinese carry his influences that have threaded across two millennia to the present.

Often the center of imperial worship, emperor after emperor came here to honor Confucius. The halls, pavilions, and courtyards were continuously enlarged, renovated, destroyed, and reconstructed, growing into a kilometer-long complex. As we walked farther, the interlaced tree-lined courtyards juxtaposed against the intricate building designs began to work their magic, drawing me toward the long history of the ancient sage. I had never been to a place so old that held so much meaning for others.

Unlike more popular historical sites such as the famous terracotta warriors near Xi'an [shee-ahn], Qufu carried the power of the unexpected. It seemed to be peeling away one more layer of my ignorance.

Sauntering among the pavilions and temples, the roof structures and curving eaves compelled my attention. The red-tiled roofs curved upward with ceramic, animal-like guardians parading along the lower ridges. Looking up under the expansive eaves Li Tianchen pointed out the complex wooden structure that holds up the heavy tiled roofs. The unnailed, interwoven systems spread weight load among many small curved supports, each piece painted with primary-color designs edged in gold. The designs, I learned, are specified in building regulation books beginning in the 11th century.

In the main temple courtyard stood *Dancheng Dian* (the Hall of Great Achievement), a massive building for performing rites to honor Confucius and his disciples and that symbolizes the importance given his teachings. Passing ceremonial drums four-feet across, I ran my hand over the intricate carvings of one of the near-white pillars. My fingers traced the lines of the dragon images coiled around them. *Dancheng Dian* was a sensory feast of small and large carvings, painted eaves, marble balustrades, and areas for sacrificial offerings. I snapped photo upon photo trying to gobble up the sensations. "When Mr. Jensen, my Pasadena host, visited he took five rolls of film here in two days," Professor Li chortled as I photographed yet another angle of the intricate and colorful roof beams. I could have spent much longer.

Scores of other buildings and memorial gates in the temple complex led us north, and then northeast to the adjoining Kung family mansion, passing the empty space believed to be the location of Confucius's small home. The heads of the Kung family

resided in the mansion from the 4th century on, developing it into a labyrinth of over 400 rooms and buildings. Here they carried out their roles assigned by governmental decree until the mid-20th century when Mao Zedong's attacks drove them out.

As we rode back to campus for lunch, the morning impressions pressed against my other experiences in China. Where did all this antiquity fit into the lives of the people around me? I spent my afternoon and evening alone, feeling at loose ends and somehow abandoned. Professor Li and his wife went off to a nephew's wedding, while I foraged for supper in the small campus shops, wondering about Confucianism, China, and my stalled school visit. Shaking off my sulking, I meandered out to explore the expansive university. It was alive with families soaking up the spring warmth and breezes, chatting with friends and watching their children play. The bolder young people tried their English with me and friendly, weathered grandmothers sat beside me on the concrete ledge, watching their grandchildren as they explored sidewalk universes. We shared gestured conversations, their animated rough hands and smiles leading me to nod and smile as I imagined what they were saying. I had the luxury of time to think, to observe, wonder and process. I was beginning to sense that Qufu was still Confucius's hometown.

Sunday morning brought another early breakfast and another bicycle ride—this time heading north away from the crowds to the Kung Family Forest and Cemetery with the tombs of over 76 generations of Kung family members, from Confucius to current generations. Large trees spread in every direction from the entrance, a respite from the dust and growing heat of city streets. We meandered over a bridge and along a walkway crowded with umbrella-shaded vendors selling portraits to be drawn while you wait, special polished stones to bring

goodness into your life, fans with ancient scenes, and Confucian icons. A round-faced woman called to Professor Li good-naturedly, "Buy this book, buy this book of Confucian sayings. Your foreign friend will enjoy it too." She suggested an exorbitant price for this slim paperback of Confucian sayings rendered in their original ancient Chinese, the modern Chinese translation, and English. They volleyed back and forth for a selling price. Then Li Tianchen turned the book over, pointed to the author's photo on the back, and pointed to himself. A smile slowly crept into her business acumen as she realized she was trying to sell him a pirated edition of his own book. She bowed slightly, chuckled, touching the tip of her nose with her fingers in self deprecation. As we continued on he explained that he received a few hundred yuan from the first printing (about 8 yuan equals a US dollar). Then, as is common in China, the book was taken up by other publishers who copied and sold it—no longer paying the author anything.

We walked on to Confucius's simple grave site, and then rode into the 500-acre cemetery and forest. The transition from the rich, elaborate detail and paving stone courtyards of the temple to these untrammelled woods, wild grasses and informally-placed monuments was remarkable. The few tourists who had come to this part of the woods wandered in different directions and a solitude seldom found in China took over as we rode along the curving roads. The informality and tranquility of the woods soaked into every pore. The grave markers and occasional monuments were scattered among the old trees said to have been brought here from their hometowns and planted by Confucius's disciples.

Granite scholars and imperial rank officials stood watch, serene and inner-directed, their stone robes etched with the barest of lines. Simple, yet powerful stone

animals enjoyed the dappled sunlight. A mythical catlike creature with stylized markings sat among the trees, its large eyes making me smile; a ram of elegant modern lines and gracefully curving horns rested among the grasses. I climbed onto a thick-bodied horse with its stone reins for a photo. And on and on it went, acre upon acre of monuments, animals, granite sentries, and gravestones, sprinkled among the open woods and dating back millenia. We pedaled back home in silence for a late lunch and, for me, another vacant afternoon and evening of thinking and wandering the campus.

The next morning I walked to breakfast through heavy rain. As we ate Li Tianchin explained that the day was free for me. Depressed by the realization that there was obviously not going to be a nursery school visit in Qufu, I returned to my room to watch dripping parents deposit their bundled children into the adjacent elementary school. The campus community was tucked away in homes, offices, and dormitory rooms. No grandmothers and two-year-olds to share the afternoon warmth. We were all relegated to the in-doors. I reluctantly dragged out research tape-recordings from Nanjing and began the tedious transcription work. But within an hour the previous days began to intrude. How little I knew of Confucius and Confucianism. In previous travels I had been taken to a few Buddhist temples and had been fascinated in my naïve way that so many people in an officially atheist state prayed to Buddha and burned incense at the temples. But Buddhism was quite different from the moral teachings of Confucianism.

As the rain slid down my window, I pulled out the slim volumes Professor Li had autographed for me. “The Master said, ‘Only when someone bursts with eagerness of learning do I instruct; only when someone bubbles to speak but fails to express himself, do I enlighten. If I show a man one corner of

a subject, and he can not by himself deduce the other three, I will not repeat the lesson.’” This was one demanding teacher, driven it seemed by an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. “The Master said, ‘In any hamlet of ten households, you may be sure of finding someone who is quite as loyal and true as I, but I doubt if you could find anyone who equals my love of learning.’” He stressed that a person’s—that is, a man’s—ability to learn was more important than his wealth, saying that “instruction recognizes no castes” at a time when only the privileged were thought to be capable of education. He took in disciples because they exhibited an insatiable desire for knowledge. He also devoted immense energies to compiling several of the works that have become known as the Confucian classics, including *The Book of Odes (Shijing)* and *The Classic of Changes (Yijing)*, valued by both the Confucian and Daoist traditions.

Here in Qufu the ancient and the modern were both palpable. I walked the paving stones that Confucius may have paced, while down the road a few kilometers the Kung family liquor factory turned a handsome profit, and one whole volume of the city phone book was devoted to the Kung family, direct descendents of Kungzi. One-fifth of the city was absorbed by the Confucian Temple and the adjoining family home.

Though a simplistic idea, I began thinking that 2500 years of Confucianism seemed embodied in the two sites. They provided a means for touching the heart of Chinese history that still affects the lives of over a billion people on the planet. The intricate formulaic temples and the lush expansive forest when juxtaposed against each other seemed to symbolize the complex ways that Confucianism entwines with this long history. The rich but meticulous and detailed buildings of the temple and mansion complex seemed to emphasize the moral

codes, the rules for correct relationships, and rituals that could help keep the world in balance. The meticulous Confucian structuring of society seemed to be mirrored in the myriad buildings and monuments of the temple and the labyrinthine rooms and passageways of the adjoining family mansion, century upon century of intricate construction.

The forest, on the other hand, seemed to draw me toward the essence of Confucius himself. The woods provided a time to think, to sit, to look at the thousands of trees, listen to the birds, and imagine the layers of history here. Exploring these tranquil woods in a leisurely manner had provided me the possibility to think about the spirit of Confucius's teaching, of the importance he gave moral virtue and its essence, *ren* (benevolence). When asked to describe the perfect man, his disciples reported that he said, "There are nine things of which Man must be mindful: to see when he looks, to hear when he listens, to be gentle in his looks, to be respectful in his manners, to be faithful in words, to be earnest in service, to inquire when in doubt, to think of consequences when in anger, to think of justice when he sees an advantage." Radical words in his time—and also in ours. Where is *ren* in commercial China; in what subtle ways does it reveal itself? How does it influence decisions and the way people interact? Confucius urged his disciples to study the Book of Odes, a compilation he made from thousands of ancient poems, in order to arouse their sensibilities, to strengthen their powers of observation, to enhance their ability to get along with others, and to sharpen their critical skills.

The power of his careful thinking and emphasis on honoring family, though found in texts much earlier than his, were given enormous impetus by his careful, focused

teaching and compiling of texts. Now that the anti-Confucian days of the 20th century have passed, Chinese freely describe Confucianism as entwined throughout their everyday lives, and many believe it influences modern China.

"The concern for honoring our parents, of never disgracing them, is in every fabric of society," said a good friend recently as we were chatting between meetings at her national research institute. "Even those who have no schooling are imbued with Confucian thinking, with respect for their parents, and with the need and duty to honor the family." A high school teacher from the middle of China recently wrote me, "His thoughts of kindness and compromise have most deeply influenced the characters of most Chinese people over all of Chinese written history. The hospitality and diligence of Chinese people are to some degree from his thoughts." And so it seems, Confucius's teachings have threaded through 2500 years to guide Chinese people today. My U.S. colleague Robin Wang, who was brought up in China, summed it up this way in the introduction to her book of ancient Chinese writings, "I have a special attachment to these texts. Many...are, in fact, a part of public education as well as the way of life. They have been integrated into the language we speak, the code of conduct we follow, and the living ideal we strive for."

Although my trip to Qufu certainly did not produce what I had expected, it gave me the chance to slip off a little of my ignorance. Not only were the Confucian sites at the heart of Qufu; Qufu and Confucius seemed to be central to present-day Chinese. Confucianism, in ways that I still don't recognize, is in the pulse of modern China and the dynamics that are reshaping our worlds.

Resources

Plenty of books and websites exist about Confucius, and *The Analects* have been translated a number of times. However, they are difficult to understand without contextual information. I have found the most helpful book to be that of Robin R. Wang, (ed.) *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period through the Song Dynasty*. Hackett Publishing Co., 2003. She begins with anecdotal and divination inscriptions from the oracle bones, which date to 1200 B.C.E. and are the first extant Chinese writing, and ends in 1279 C.E., at the fall of the Song dynasty “before the oppression of women was fully implemented.” The collection is fascinating, including the remarkable poems she has selected from the Book of Odes that was compiled by Confucius from about 3000 poems probably dating from 1000 to 600 B.C.E. Each part of the book has a brief, helpful contextual description.

The best children’s book I have found so far is by Russell Freedman, *Confucius: The Golden Rule*. Arthur A. Levine Books (an imprint of Scholastic Books), 2002.

Please let me know if you come across any particularly helpful books, websites, or other media about Confucius—or anything else.

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