Chapter 1

China and Europe from Confucius and Aristotle to Now: Old Histories, New Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Confucius and Aristotle have provided much of the bedrock of Chinese and European thought respectively about how individuals relate to others and to the natural order. They have in common a this-worldly focus and some strikingly similar elements in their understanding of what makes for the good life. China’s Confucian ethos has contributed to a strong sense of the Chinese identity: but it found it difficult to come to terms with the pressures of social modernisation. Europe by contrast has had a theologically based culture, into which Aristotle was integrated, but which fragmented under the impact of reformation and renaissance. In the twenty first century, a modernised Europe and a rapidly modernising China face a shared dilemma: the need for an understanding of the good life which does not reduce it to materialist self-centredness. Both have seen renewed use of Aristotelian and Confucian themes in response. Time will tell, however, whether this response is sufficient.

INTRODUCTION

Confucius and Aristotle were not the only thinkers of importance in the centuries shortly before Christ which were so influential in the cultural formation of both China and Europe. But for China none became as important as Confucius: and for Europe none became more important than Aristotle. They were born within two hundred years of each other (Confucius in 551BCE and Aristotle in 384BCE). Their thought became foundational in Chinese and European culture respectively, and has remained quietly influential to this day, despite many upheavals and huge evolutionary – and sometimes revolutionary – change in both.

There are of course obvious and profound differences between the two: Confucius focused almost entirely on human relationships as part of the natural order - what made for benevolence, wisdom, righteousness and propriety, both in the family and in the state. Aristotle was, by contrast, an extraordinarily


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prolific thinker and writer on everything from logic to physics and biology, to aesthetics, politics and ethics. Yet despite obvious and important differences, they have some intriguing commonalities which mean that the China and the Europe of the new millennium have more in common than we usually recognise.

THE GOOD LIFE IN CONFUCIUS AND ARISTOTLE

Confucius was active at a time of intellectual ferment in China – the so-called Warring States period which preceded the first successful unification of China by the Qin emperor in 221BCE. What Chinese historians subsequently called ‘a hundred schools of thought’ blossomed in this era of turmoil. Much of it succumbed to the Qin government’s totalitarian clampdown on philosophical and religious diversity, which saw what was perhaps the world’s first experience of thought control through book burning. Indeed, had the Qin empire successfully become a dynasty – which it did not, collapsing almost immediately after the death of its founder – Confucian ideas might have been not just banned but forgotten. Instead, the new empire of the Han dynasty – which was to last for four hundred years, and which was roughly contemporary with the Roman Empire in its heyday – solidified the Chinese identity (something the Roman Empire did not achieve for Europe). A revived Confucianism played an essential role in this. Its texts were rewritten and republished, and through much of China’s subsequent history those texts were to become the bedrock of a bureaucratic system which made China the most sophisticated society in the world.

The Qin ideology of governance had been based on rule by law (not to be confused with the rule of law, as required for any meaningful governmental accountability). Nothing could be more alien to the spirit of Confucius than this. Confucian thought was well aware of the risks of social disorder. But instead of seeking stability through social repression, it saw the ruler who is given the Mandate of Heaven as having the responsibility to rule justly and benevolently, at the apex of a social order which depended on ancestor veneration and filial piety within the family, and on clearly defined relationships and responsibilities in society.

Confucian ethics are based on three concepts which are interlocking and which apply to every level of society from the emperor downwards:  

- **li** – which embraces the rituals of veneration for relevant divinities and, crucially, for ancestors, as well as the requirements of social behaviour (either to build or to support the functioning of the ideal society);  
- **yi** – which can be roughly understood as the principle of reciprocity as the basis for the moral life; and  
- **ren** – which is typically translated as ‘benevolence’ and encompasses the virtues (such as seriousness, generosity, fidelity and empathy) which Confucianism sees as underlying the good life.¹

Aristotle’s ethics are similarly practical rather than theoretical. Eudaimonia – the human wellbeing which is the highest good that the rational soul can aspire to – is achieved through virtuous action. It will also depend in part on circumstance – family, status (free or slave), friendships. And his doctrine of the mean cannot help remind us of Confucius’ emphasis on ren. Balance and harmony in pursuit of individual happiness and of the ideal society (even if he defines that differently from Confucius) are as much his themes as they are those of Confucius. Aristotle rejects Platonic essentialism and makes no attempt to argue his ethics from first principles. Rather, he argues as if the well educated and thoughtful person would naturally recognise the truth in what he says – which is more or less what Confucius does.²