

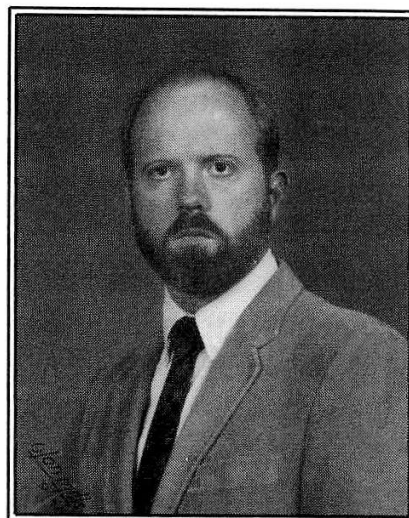
Ethics and Morality in China Today

Dr. David W. Lutz

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Introduction

According to the leaders of the People's Republic of China, making progress in ethics and morality is one of their highest priorities. Jiang Zemin's Report at the 15th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in September 1997 includes many references to the need for ethical progress, including the following:



We must uphold the leadership by the Party and the people's democratic dictatorship. We should promote material progress and cultural and ethical progress, attaching equal importance to both.

We must nurture citizens one generation after another who have high ideals, moral integrity, a good education and a strong sense of discipline, meeting the requirements of the socialist modernization drive.

We shall advocate communist ideology and ethics and combining progressiveness with extensiveness, we shall encourage all ideologies and ethics that are conducive to national unification, ethnic unity, economic development and social progress .¹

Chinese teachers are exhorted to be good moral examples for their students, and are rewarded for excellence in teaching ethics. Moreover, "China's 3.02 million college students have between four and seven obligatory classes in Marxist theory and ethics during their

two to five years of schooling.”² China also has a program of fighting corruption.

With its large population and the magnitude and growth-rate of its economy, China is poised to become the world’s dominant economic and military “superpower” in the next century. The moral practices of the Chinese have the potential to affect the lives of people in every other nation.

Virtue Ethics: Western and Eastern

One cannot begin to understand the current state of ethics in China without considering the Chinese moral tradition. And at this conference, I believe it is appropriate to compare the history of Chinese ethics and the history of Christian ethics. To simplify greatly a long and complex history, the Christian moral tradition includes as synthesis by St. Augustine of the biblical and Platonic traditions, as well as a synthesis by St. Thomas Aquinas of the Augustinian and Aristotelian traditions. To state this is not to deny that the tradition has been developed by many writers and saints since the thirteenth century. Much of great value has indeed been added since the death of St. Thomas, including, quite recently, John Paul II’s *Veritas Splendor*. But subsequent enrichment of the tradition has not changed the fact that it includes contributions from the best of pagan Greek and Roman philosophy.

Pragmatism, whether Chinese or American, cannot be sustained indefinitely, because it leads to more anarchy. Deng’s slogan, “To get rich is glorious,” has brought about serious moral problems in Chinese society.

Among the most central examples of this synthesis is the understanding of the scriptural truth that “there remain faith, hope, and charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity,”³ in terms of the Greek tradition of the virtues. While Plato spoke of four cardinal virtues and Aristotle distinguished ethical and intellectual

virtues, the Christian tradition understands faith, hope, and charity to belong to a third class, the theological virtues. This synthesis of pagan and Christian ideas was made possible by the belief that human persons can come to some knowledge of moral truth apart from special revelation, and that reason and revelation do not contradict, but rather complement one another.

Though they were developed in different cultures and expressed in different languages, there are striking similarities between the virtue ethics of Plato, Aristotle and their followers and the ethics of K'ung Fu-tzu or Confucius (551-479 B.C.) and his followers. There are, to be sure, significant differences between the two traditions, as well as disagreement within each tradition itself. But both traditions understand ethics in terms of the characteristics, or virtues, of the idea person. None of us possesses these virtues fully, and the ethical life is one moving toward acquiring them. This understanding of ethics stands in contrast to those of the European "Enlightenments." Whether one prefers Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative or John Stuart Mill's principle of utility, modern Western theories understand ethics in terms of performing actions with certain qualities and refraining from actions with other qualities. In contrast, both Eastern and Western virtue ethics understand ethics in terms of persons and the excellent and inferior qualities of their characters. In other words, where modern Western ethics takes *doing* as primary, the virtue traditions take *being* as primary.

Another feature of both Western and Confucian virtue ethics is the belief that human persons are naturally social or political beings. According to most modern Western ethical theories, one is often confronted with conflict between self-interest and ethics. The challenge of an ethical theory is to provide us with reasons to act altruistically, rather than egoistically. But when morality is understood in terms of conforming more perfectly to human nature, and when human nature is understood in terms of relationships with other persons living in community, there is no conflict between one's individual good, properly understood, and the common good.

An essential component of the Confucian tradition is the understanding of five human relationships, each of which involves mutual obligations: ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, and elder friend-younger friend. Thus Confucianism is, like the Western tradition of the virtues, both an ethical and a political tradition. It, therefore, stands in contrast to the

modern, Western understanding of ethics and politics, according to which the two have little to do with one another.

James T. Bretzke, S.J. is among the contemporary writers who note similarities between Western and Confucian virtue ethics. Bretzke identifies *jen* as one of the most important Confucian virtues. Translating the name of a moral concept from one language into another is always difficult, especially when the languages are as different as ancient Chinese and modern English. But the English words most commonly used to translate *jen* are ‘humaneness,’ ‘benevolence,’ and ‘goodness.’ Bretzke writes:

A fruitful approach to the discovery of the meaning of *jen* is to look for its manifestations within various human relationships. *Jen* expresses itself as a universal love for humankind, yet it is a love which is definitely not equal towards all. Hierarchy in relationships is fundamental to the Confucian mentality, and thus *jen* is perhaps seen best in the second of the Confucian Five Relationships, i.e., the relationship between father and son. *Jen*, however, is not restricted to the family group, but is present as well in the relationships of duty and service to one’s nation and to society.⁴

Confucius did not write a systematic treatise on moral philosophy. We have only *The Analects*, a collection of his sayings, most of them responses to questions put to him by his disciples. The following answers to questions about perfect virtue, one in terms of rules of action and the second in terms of personal characteristics, provide a glimpse of his understanding of human virtue.

Chung-king asked about perfect virtue. The Master said, ‘*It is, when you go abroad, to behave to every one as if you were receiving a great guest; to employ the people as if you were assisting at a great sacrifice; not to do to others as you would not wish done to yourself; to have no murmuring against you in the country, and none in the family.*’ Chung-kung said, ‘though I am deficient in intelligence and vigor, I will make it my business to practice this lesson.’⁵

Tze-chang asked Confucius about perfect virtue. Confucius said, ‘To be able to practice five things everywhere under heaven constitutes perfect virtue.’ He begged to ask what they were, and was told, ‘Gravity, generosity *of soul*, sincerity, earnestness, and kindness. If you are grave, you not be treated with disrespect. If you are generous, you will win all. If you are sincere, people will repose trust in you. If you are

earnest, you will accomplish much. If you are kind, this will enable you to employ the services of others.”⁶

Confucius understood the attainment of perfect virtue to require continuous progress over many years. We can see this in the following pair of contrasting observations:

The Master said about Yen Yuan, ‘Alas! I saw his constant advance. I never saw him stop in his progress.’⁷

A youth of the village of Ch’ueh was employed by *Confucius* to carry the messages between him and his visitors. Some one asked about him, saying, ‘I suppose he has made great progress.’ The Master said, “I observe that he is fond of occupying the seat *of a full-grown man*; I observe that he walks shoulder to shoulder with his elders. He is not one who is seeking to make progress *in learning*. He wishes quickly to become a man.’⁸

Confucius, like Aristotle, taught that someone who wishes to become virtuous should look to the example of persons who have already made great progress toward attaining the virtues:

Tsze-kung asked about the practice of virtue. The Master said, “The [craftsman], who wishes to do his work well, must first sharpen his tools. When you are living in any State, take service with the most worthy among its great officers, and make friends of the most virtuous among its scholars.”⁹

And, again like Aristotle, Confucius understood the virtuous man not as one who chooses altruism over egoism, but as one who simultaneously promotes both the good of others and his own good (though not necessarily his own life):

Now the man of perfect virtue, wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others.¹⁰

The determined scholar and the man of virtue will not seek to live at the expense of injuring their virtue. They will even sacrifice their lives to preserve their virtue complete.¹¹

Perhaps the most important Confucian philosopher after Master Kung himself is Meng Tzu or Mencius (c. 371-289 B.C.). Lee H. Yearly has written a book-length comparison of the virtue

theories of Mencius and St. Thomas Aquinas. While his primary focus is on the virtue of courage or *yung*, he also writes concerning the Chinese virtue of *jen*:

Few of Mencius and Aquinas's virtues seem clearly to correspond, and those that do often show dissimilarities when we examine them more closely and place them correctly within each thinker's structure. Mencius's benevolence (*jen*), for instance, seems to resemble Aquinas's benevolence (*benevolentia*), but the virtue is central to Mencius and peripheral to Aquinas. In fact, charity (*caritas*) often functions for Aquinas in the way that benevolence (*jen*) functions for Mencius, and charity differs substantially from benevolence.¹²

Without going into greater detail in understanding the Confucian virtue of *jen*, we can see that to possess this virtue fully is to be fully human, and that because human nature is what it is, to be fully human is to relate to other persons benevolently.

Legalists and Marxist-Leninists

Mencius lived during the time of a great rival to Confucianism; the *Fa Chia* or School of Law. The most prominent of the "Legalists," as members of this school are often called, was Han Fei Tzu (c.280-233 B.C.)

The Legalists believed in rule by law, but not law based upon moral law. As Arthur Waley puts it "They believed that law should replace morality." Furthermore, "hand in hand with their reliance on law, on punishments and rewards, went a number of other demands, summed up in the principle that government must be based upon 'the actual facts of the world as it now exists.'"¹³ And Waley maintains that the break from Confucianism is absolute: "With the Confucianism of Mencius Realism has nothing in common at all, such is the gulf that separates Government by Goodness [*jen*] from Government by Law."¹⁴

Liu Mu, writing for the *China Strategic Review*, makes the point by reference to different Chinese dynasties

In China's feudal history, the theory of state was a combination of Confucianism and Legalism, Confucians promoted the Western Zhou (c. 1000-771 B.C.) model, while the Legalists advocated a return to the Qin Dynasty (c. 221-207 B.C.). The main principle behind the Western

Zhou model is “worship heaven and protect men,” and it has set of codes that emphasize ethics, aesthetics, law and administration. The Qin Dynasty was mainly based on force and punishment.¹⁵

Then, skipping many centuries, he asserts that there is a relationship between Chinese Legalism and Chinese Leninism:

The CCP [Chinese Communist Party] reformed the Qin-style dictatorship by introducing Leninist dictatorship into the Chinese state structure. That is: party leader above party, party above state, and state above people. This established a governing net in which everyone is subject to his/her superior who is in turn subject to higher authorities, all the way up to a single party leader. In other words, the CCP raised autocratic dictatorship to a new level that previous monarchs were unable to achieve. The key was the introduction of a Leninist dictatorship, which the CCP’s opinion is a natural extension of Marxist political system. At the top of such a system is a “party emperor,” as some Chinese scholars have called him.¹⁶

Just as there are significant points of agreement between the Confucian and Western virtue traditions, there are also similarities between the Chinese Legalists and the liberal-democratic tradition that has largely replaced the Christian moral tradition in western Europe and the English-speaking world. Violina P. Rindova and William H. Starbuck write:

Han Fei’s version of society resembles that of Adam Smith: People are amoral, selfish, calculating and opportunistic. Competition fosters high performance. Opposing interests bring out the best in each other. High achievement comes from an effective system rather than from effective individuals. And Han Fei’s vision of organization resembles the bureaucracy of [Max] Weber in that impersonal rules and procedures bring consistency and counteract the bad effects of selfishness and ambition.¹⁷

And we find both the Anglo-American tradition of individualist materialism and the Chinese tradition of collectivist materialism leading to pragmatism.

Mao Zedong was the founder of the People’s Republic of China; Deng Xiaoping was the architect of its economic reforms. As one of his American admirers puts it: “In the field of philosophy and methodology, Deng combined the dialectics and materialism of Marx

with the methodology of pragmatism.”¹⁸ In short, Deng was an “ideological pragmatist.” His policy of “seeking truth from facts” is strikingly similar to the teaching of the School of Law twenty-two centuries earlier. It is also strikingly similar to the philosophy of twentieth-century America. We believe in a dichotomy between “facts” and “values.” We can come to knowledge of “facts” through empirical observation and mathematical reasoning. Everything else—including religion and morality—lies outside the domain of the factual. In ethics, what is “true for you” may or may not be “true for me.”

Pragmatism, whether Chinese or American, cannot be sustained indefinitely, because it leads to moral anarchy. Deng’s slogan, “To get rich is glorious,” has brought about serious moral problems in Chinese society. As one Chinese merchant puts it; “We don’t talk about politics anymore. Why should we? Who is our leader now? Money is our leader.”¹⁹ And if many of the Chinese people are no longer talking about politics, neither are they talking about ethics.

Just as Mao was the founder of the People’s Republic of China and Deng the architect of its economic reforms, Jiang Zemin is now the evangelist of its “(social) spiritual civilization.” The phrase has been around since early 1980s, but was given new life by Jiang in 1996, in reaction to his nation’s growing love of money. In his speech at Deng’s memorial meeting, Jiang said, “making a success of both material progress and ethical and cultural progress is imperative for the building of socialism with Chinese characteristics.”²⁰ But China is now at a crossroads. In which direction do ethical and cultural progress lie? Certainly not in the direction of Anglo-American individualism and moral relativism. And just as certainly, not in the direction of Marxist-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. In apparent desperation, “Jiang has spoken positively of Confucian values, once anathema to the Communists.”²¹ But he has also espoused relativism: “The theory of relativity worked out by Mr. Einstein, which is in the domain of natural science, I believe can also be applied to the political field. Both democracy and human rights are relative concepts and not absolute and general.”²²

Endnotes

- ¹ Jiang Zemin, "Hold High the Great Banner of Deng Xiaoping Theory for an All-round Advancement of the Cause of Building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics to the 21st Century." Report at the 15th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, 12 September 1997.
- ² Top Ethics Teachers to Be Given Awards," *China Daily*, 10 September 1997.
- ³ 1 Corinthians 13:13.
- ⁴ James T. Bretzke, S.J. "The *Tao* of Confucian Virtue Ethics," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 35 (1995), p. 32.
- ⁵ Confucius (K'ung Fu-tzu) *Confucian Analects*, in *The Chinese Classics*, 2nd Ed. Vol. I. Trans. James Legge, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1893, XII, 2.
- ⁶ Confucius, XVII, 6.
- ⁷ Confucius, IX, 20.
- ⁸ Confucius XIV, 47.
- ⁹ Confucius, XV, 9.
- ¹⁰ Confucius, VI, 28.
- ¹¹ Confucius, XV,8.
- ¹² Lee H. Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1990, p. 172.
- ¹³ Arthur Waley, *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China*, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1939, p. 151.
- ¹⁴ Waley, pp. 154-55.
- ¹⁵ Lin Mu, "Tradition of Chinese Culture and Sino-ized Marxism," *China Strategic Review*, 6 September 1996.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Violina P. Rindova and William H. Starbuck, "Ancient Chinese Theories of Control," *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 6 (1997), p. 156.
- ¹⁸ Sidney J. Gluck, "Deng's Genius: A Great Page in Modern History," *China Daily*, 1 May 1997.
- ¹⁹ Patrick E. Tyler, "Concerning Liberties, China is Free to prosper, but That's all," *The New York Times*, 30 May, 1997.
- ²⁰ Jiang Zemin, "Speech at Deng Xiaoping's Memorial Meeting," 25 February 1997.
- ²¹ Todd Crowell and David Hsieh, "Jiang's Agenda Deng's Heir Seeks New Reforms --- and a Move away from Communism," *Asia Week*, 24 January 1997.
- ²² Steven Mufson and Robert G. Kaiser, "Chinese Leader Urges U.S Seek 'Common Ground,'" *The Washington Post*, 19 October 1997.