

# A grand ceremony for Confucius: Beijing turns to the old imperial ideology

John Chan

12 November 2005

A grand ceremony hosted by the Beijing government in late September to honour the 2556th anniversary of the birth of China's ancient philosopher Confucius (551-479 BC) is one more sign of the putrifaction of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As they seek to fashion an ideology to justify their autocratic rule and open embrace of the capitalist market the CCP leaders are resurrecting the philosophy of the long-dead Confucius.

The 2005 International Confucius Cultural Festival was held in Qufu, Confucius's hometown in eastern Shangdong Province. The Chinese government declared September to be "Confucius Cultural Month". Some 2,500 people, many of them top government officials and academics, attended the celebrations at the Temple of Confucius.

Religious rituals previously practiced by Chinese emperors were carefully reconstructed and carried out by performers dressed like court officials and priests to pay homage to the "master".

With Beijing's sponsorship, ceremonies marking Confucius's birthday were also held in the US, Germany, South Korea and Japan as well as Taiwan and Hong Kong. So far the Chinese government has provided \$10 billion for a "Chinese Bridge" program to encourage "traditional cultures", centred on the promotion of Confucianism through academic activities and Confucian societies at home and overseas.

Even 20 years ago, such a program would have been denounced as promoting "feudal idiocy". In 2005, however, the official Xinhua news agency enthused: "Once thought to be a dead doctrine, Confucianism has made an astonishing comeback ..." The state-controlled media has hailed the celebration of Confucius's birthday as an important element of President Hu Jintao's campaign to create a "harmonious society".

Kang Xiaoguang, a leading proponent of Confucianism in the Beijing-based Peoples University, argued that the Chinese Communist Party should adopt Confucianism as the official state ideology. He told *Scotland on Sunday* on October 2 that China needed a new ethical basis to survive in the face of growing crime rates, unemployment, official corruption, social polarisation between rich and poor and the lack of social welfare.

"Chinese society today is at its worst ever ... a mixture of capitalism and Marxism-Leninism. As a result, there are no more standards to regulate how people should treat each other, their business partners, their friends and families. We have no way of judging what makes a happy life. Confucius offers traditional values that can help rebuild our moral and social standards," Kang

said.

Kang's list of social problems underscores the fact that after 25 years of "market reform", Beijing's claim to represent socialism is so absurd that something else is needed to fill the ideological vacuum amid deepening social tensions and growing protests.

The latest figures show that China's richest 100 individuals increased their wealth by 40 percent last year. The top 400 have a combined fortune of \$75 billion, equivalent to 7 percent of China's GDP. About a fifth of them are members of the Communist Party. In comparison, average urban wage levels amount to just \$1,100 a year and the poorest farmers receive \$100 or less a year.

Beijing has few ideological options. Few people believe the regime's empty "socialist" rhetoric. Moreover, some protesting workers have seized on the Marxist literature still publicly available to justify their demands and to criticise the Stalinist leadership for betraying socialism. Chinese leaders also fear any appeal to "democracy" will only encourage the already mounting protests by workers and peasants, or unleash mass demonstrations as happened in May-June 1989 in Tiananmen Square.

While the CCP is unlikely to formally become a Chinese Confucian Party, the revival of Confucianism, which encourages unquestioning obedience to authority, does fit Beijing's ideological needs. In doing so, the CCP is directly repudiating its own origins, which lie in the May Fourth Movement of 1919. At that time, students and intellectuals carried out a relentless ideological struggle against Confucianism, which they regarded as a major obstacle to the democratic awakening of the Chinese masses.

There is nothing mythical about Confucius, who over the centuries has been elevated to the status of a god. He was one of many philosophers who flourished during the Eastern Zhou period (770-221 BC), following the introduction of iron tools that significantly increased productivity in agriculture. Old forms of collective farming run by the hereditary nobility were dismantled, cities expanded and a large-scale irrigation system was established.

This was a progressive era known for the flowering of a "Hundred Schools". An educated elite emerged who had time to study the Chinese classics and to master the skills of reading and writing. The Confucian idea that "those who work intellectually should be the rulers, and physical toilers to be ruled" expressed the interests of a new class of landowning gentry who formed the basis of the imperial bureaucracy.

Three hundred years after the death of Confucius, his doctrine was adopted as the official ideology of the imperial government of Han dynasty. In relation to social life, Confucianism was a strict code of behaviour that placed everyone in a hierarchy of personal dependence and subordination: son to father, wife to husband, servant to master and above all, everyone to the emperor. Anyone who revolted against his or her superior could be punished without mercy. In later centuries, Confucian dogmas justified barbaric practices, such as the foot binding of women, an element of their subservience to men.

Under Oriental despotism, the productive forces stagnated. Despite the rise and fall of dynasties over 2,000 years, China's social structure remained substantially unchanged. Under these conditions, Confucius's ideology enjoyed a privileged existence. With its idealist and even mythical conceptions of a divine social order, Confucianism acted as a bulwark against the development of scientific thought.

In the nineteenth century, as capitalist relations began to penetrate into China following its subjugation by the European powers, the emerging intelligentsia regarded Confucianism as an obstacle to social progress, science and modern culture in general.

Sun Yat-sen, the leader of the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) and the 1911 revolution, advocated the abolition of Confucianism as part of his program to overthrow the Manchu dynasty and establish a democratic republic. But the Chinese bourgeoisie was incapable of destroying Confucianism, just as it was incapable of carrying out land reform to eliminate semi-feudal relations or of establishing genuine democratic rights.

More radical Chinese intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu, who later founded the Communist Party, were critical of the 1911 revolution. They led a "new cultural" movement that declared war on Confucianism amid an explosion of interest in Western literature, political and economic theories and the natural sciences. Old customs, such as the cue or pigtail for men, the foot binding of women, and the practice of keeping concubines, were all denounced and abandoned for a "new life".

Chen and his colleagues also championed literary reforms to "overthrow the painted, powdered, and obsequious literature of the aristocratic few, and to create the plain, simple, and expressive literature of the people." This laid the basis for the modern Chinese language and made advanced ideas accessible to the Chinese masses.

The decisive turning point was the Russian Revolution in 1917. Then, in May 1919, at the conclusion of World War I, the victorious imperialist powers decided at Versailles to hand over Germany's colonial possessions in China to Japan. The decision triggered widespread anti-imperialist protests by Chinese students and workers, the most advanced of whom turned to Bolshevism and founded the Communist Party two years later.

British philosopher Bertrand Russell, who was in China in the aftermath of the May Fourth movement, later recalled: "All of them [his students in China] were Bolsheviks, except one, who was the nephew of the Emperor. They were charming youths, ingenuous and intelligent at the same time, eager to know the world and to escape from the trammels of Chinese traditions.... There was no limit to the sacrifices that they were prepared to

make for their country. The atmosphere was electric with hope of a great awakening. After centuries of slumber, China was becoming aware of the modern world."

However, during the Second Chinese Revolution of 1925-27, the emerging Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union criminally betrayed the socialist and internationalist aspirations on which the CCP was founded, with tragic consequences. In the 1930s and 40s, under the Kuomintang dictatorship of Chiang Kai-shek, the worship of Confucius was restored as part of the political reaction against communism. It has been preserved to this day on Taiwan, where the defeated armies of Chiang Kai-shek fled in 1949.

The new regime in Beijing was not based on Marxism, but the reactionary nationalist dogmas of Stalinism. To suppress critical ideas among workers and intellectuals, the leadership encouraged a personality cult around Mao Zedong and peasant backwardness, along with prejudices against science and "bourgeois" culture. This found its most devastating expression in the so-called "Cultural Revolution" between 1966 and 1976.

Although he denounced Confucianism, along with other Chinese and Western cultural heritages, Mao promoted values that were, essentially, Confucian—such as self-sacrifice, moral etiquette and the suppression of desire—to prop up the regime. On the other hand, the Stalinist bureaucracy had its own ethic, which, with the turn to the capitalist market in the late 1970s, was soon translated into endemic corruption and profiteering summed up in Deng Xiaoping's slogan: "to get rich is glorious".

China's integration into the global capitalist economy undermined Beijing's claim to be socialist. Consequently, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Chinese Stalinist bureaucracy consciously sought to establish a new ideological base that would rally the support of sections of the middle classes. An internal document published in 1991, entitled "Realistic Responses and Strategic Choices for China After the Soviet Upheaval", openly called for a new framework based on an appeal to nationalism and to "traditional Chinese cultures".

After the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989, a flood of international capital began pouring into China in recognition of Beijing's determination to crack down on any sign of opposition by the working class. Over the last 15 years, social tensions have vastly heightened as the gulf between rich and poor has widened. All the old social evils of "Old China" have returned on a grand scale: sweatshop labour, including bonded workers, drug addiction, the oppression of woman, including prostitution and the keeping of concubines, as well as official corruption and rural poverty.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Beijing leadership has mounted a campaign for the revival of the old ideology of Confucianism. In so doing, it is repudiating even its former nominal adherence to the CCP's past.



To contact the WSWP and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**