

What can we learn from Confucianism?

With the recent revival of Confucianism in China, Chinese scholars are examining its unique contribution to problem solving

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Over the last decade or so, there has been a revival of Confucianism in China. Popular books on Confucianism are bestsellers, and official discourse from the government often expresses traditional Confucian values such as harmony. What is less well known, however, is the resurgence in interest among academics in China.

Rigorous experiments by psychologists such as Peng Kaiping and Wu Shali show that there are striking cognitive differences between Chinese and Americans, with Chinese more likely to use contextual and dialectical approaches to solving problems. Psychologists Huang Guangguo and Yang Zhongfang from Taiwan and Hongkong advocate the use of traditional Chinese ideas like the "relationism" (*guanxizhuyi*) and "middle way" (*zhongyong zhi dao*) for psychological research. Economists such as Shen Hong take the family as the relevant unit of economic analysis and try to measure the economic effect of such values as filial piety. Feminists such as Chan Sin Yee and Li Chengyang compare care ethics and Confucian-style empathy, particularity, and the family as a school of moral education. Theorists of medical ethics such as Fan Ruiping discuss the importance of family-based decision making in medical settings. Those working in the field of business ethics such as Huang Weidong research the influence of Confucian values on business practices in China.

Political surveys by political scientists such as Shi Tianjian, Chu Yunhan and Zhang Youzong show that attachment to Confucian values has increased during the same period that China has modernized. Sociologists such as Kang Xiaoguang and Sebastien Billioud study the thousands of experiments in education and social living in China that are inspired by Confucian values.

Theorists of international relations such as Yan Xuetong and Xu Jin look to pre-Qin thinkers like Mengzi and Xunzi for foreign policy ideas. And philosophers such as Jiang Qing, Chen Lai, Bai Tongdong, and Chen Ming draw upon the ideas of great Confucian thinkers of the past for thinking about social and political reform in China. Wang Richang discusses the Confucian foundations of government slogans like "*yi ren wei ben*" ("the people as the foundation").

But academics doing research on Confucianism often work within rigid disciplinary boundaries borrowed from western academia. At a recent conference, Traditional Values in a Modern Chinese Context: An Interdisciplinary Approach, held at Renmin University of China, we tried to break away from this pattern, with academics working on Confucian values from different disciplines seeing what we could learn from each other.

Chen Lai pointed to the complexity of measuring Confucian values, which would involve tracing their origin in classic texts, their historical development, as well as evidence of contemporary influence. But most participants still felt that the research was well worth doing, given the importance

of Confucianism for understanding Chinese society and furthering social and political reform rooted in local conditions.

As one might expect, there were important areas of disagreement. For one thing, the starting points were often different. The majority sympathised with Confucian values and openly admitted that they begin with normative standpoints, just as liberal thinkers try to promote liberal values. Some claimed that they are doing purely scientific work measuring Confucian values. And some do both: most notably, Kang Xiaoguang both promotes political Confucianism and studies its development in Chinese society.

The participants also identified areas of study that could not be researched fruitfully from other perspectives. Philosophers like Jiang Qing pointed to values like *tian* (Heaven) and *liangzhi* (conscience) that could not be studied by the empirically-minded social sciences, and Confucian educators like Yang Ruqin argued that moral growth is long term and could not be measured in controlled laboratory studies.

But the workshop also led to some fruitful proposals for cross-disciplinary research. The participants noted areas of weakness in their own disciplines that could be usefully addressed from other perspectives. Philosophers and historians could help to refine the questions posed in political attitude surveys. For example, the "Confucian" attitude measured by political scientists that children should blindly obey their parents should be made more conditional if the aim is to measure attachment to Confucian values rooted in classic texts. Philosophers might also suggest questions for research inspired by less well-known Confucian values, such as the idea that listening to different types of music or believing in different views of human nature have different moral consequences during the course of one's life.

Social scientists, for their part, can help philosophers determine which Confucian values are most effective in contemporary society. For example, the claims that filial piety provides the psychological basis for extending morality to non-family members could be researched by means of longitudinal studies. Psychologists could also identify the key ages that best allow for the memorization of classical texts. Social scientists could also help to study whether morality normally improves with age and whether learning the Confucian classics really does make rulers more morally sensitive and politically effective.

The findings of social scientists might also help Confucian philosophers to determine which Confucian values are particular to societies with a Confucian heritage and which ones might be universalised. For example, the finding that collectivist attitudes are more typical of Chinese subjects in experimental settings means that there will likely be resistance to promoting those values abroad (just as there would be resistance to promoting highly adversarial and interest-based politics in China). Yan Xuetong pointed out that Confucianism won't be taken seriously abroad unless it is practiced by political leaders at home.

These research questions remain open. What is clear, however, is that academics need the freedom to discuss and publish their ideas and adequate funding to carry out research in order to pursue these questions in fruitful ways. Under the right conditions, China could well develop into a leading centre of global learning, with academics researching questions and values hitherto neglected in the west.