Confucianism in China Today

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Confucianism, Confucius, and his mission

Confucius (Kongzi), 551-479 BCE)

My topic is Confucianism in China today. But I believe that it is always helpful, and perhaps necessary, to understand the present in the context of the past. And since most people have only a cursory knowledge of Confucianism, I will begin with a survey of the development of the tradition.

Confucianism is a religious and philosophical tradition dating back 2500 years in China, which later spread throughout East Asia. Although the man we know as Confucius said he was not a creator but rather a transmitter of older values and traditions, it is fair to consider him the founder. His actual name was Kong Qiu, and he was generally known as Master Kong (Kongzi). A more honorific variant of that name, Kong Fuzi, was Latinized by 17th-century Jesuit missionaries as Confucius.

Master Kong was born in 551 BCE in eastern China, during the period known as the Eastern Zhou dynasty. The Zhou political structure had been disintegrating for over 200 years during his lifetime, and Confucius' mission was to restore social and political harmony by reviving the moral character of the ruling class and the literate elite. The three major virtues he felt were the basis of morality were humanity/humaneness (*ren*), ritual propriety (*li*), and filial respect (*xiao*). Humanity/humaneness, he said, was the essential goodness and love for others that

distinguishes us from other animal species. As his later follower, Mencius, put it, "To be human is to be humane." Ritual propriety (*li*) is the necessary outward expression in behavior of that humanity, and must be consistent with culturally specific norms. Filial respect (*xiao*), or respect for elders, is a naturally-occuring virtue that is the building block of the other virtues. In later centuries filial respect would become by far the best-known Confucian virtue, with both good and bad results.

Confucius' followers were known as *ru* or "scholars," because they came to be the experts in the rituals and arts thought to be necessary for good governance and a cultured life. There was never until modern times a Chinese equivalent for the term "Confucianism;" the tradition was called the "teaching of the *ru*" (*rujiao*) or the learning of the *ru* (*ruxue*). After Confucius' death, three or four generations of his followers compiled his oral teachings into a book called the *Lunyu*, or *Analects* of Confucius.

Confucius and disciples

Opening page of the *Lunyu* , or *Analects* of Confucius
(with interlinear commentary)

Mencius

The second great sage in this tradition after Confucius was Mencius – another Latinized name, for Master Meng (Mengzi) – who lived in the 4th century BCE. He made explicit certain ideas that were only implicit in the teachings of Confucius. The most important of these was the claim that human nature is inherently good; goodness is a natural human instinct, as natural as our four limbs and our desires for food and sex. And this natural, moral inclination is given to us by Heaven (actually Confucius had also explicitly said that our "virtue" was given by Heaven). "Heaven" (*tian*) in Confucian thought is a semi-naturalistic, semi-personalistic ultimate reality whose will is for moral virtue to regulate human life. Mencius was later considered the "orthodox" interpreter of Confucius, and the teachings of these two sages today constitute the core of "classical Confucianism."

Mencius (Mengzi), 4th c. BCE

In the 2nd century BCE, during the Han dynasty, Confucianism was adopted as the official ideology of government – analogous to democracy and capitalism in the United States. This proved to have unfortunate results, both for China and for Confucianism. Since governments have a strong interest in maintaining social stability, the most socially conservative interpretations of Confucian teachings were encouraged, such as age- and gender-based hierarchy. The resulting "politicized Confucianism" would be harshly rejected in the 20th century, as we shall see.

Confucianism as a religious tradition

At this point it might be useful to raise the question: What is religious about Confucianism? Isn't it really just a social-political system of ethics? One hears this often, both from scholars and from others who have only a passing familiarity with Confucianism. It is a good question, because it compels us to think more deeply about the nature of religion. The answer depends, of course, on how we define "religion." If religion is defined according to the Judeo-Christian model, one might be justified in saying that Confucianism is not a religion. It is not based on worship of a single, all-powerful creator god; its ideas about life after death are incidental to its central message; and it does not have an organized priesthood.

But why should our familiar Western religions automatically be used as the standard for what any real religion must be? There have been many attempts to define religion in more culturally-

neutral ways. My view is that we need not settle on a single definition, because religion is a multi-dimensional *set* of phenomena that can be viewed from a variety of perspectives; different definitions might shed light on different aspects of this set of phenomena. For example, Frederick Streng has proposed that religion is "a means to ultimate transformation." This implies (a) that the human condition is viewed as in some way flawed, and therefore in need of transformation; (b) that there is a goal of that transformation that depends on the nature of the inherent flaw; and (c) that there is a means of attaining that goal. The definition also implies that this process of transformation be considered in some sense "ultimate."

Confucianism clearly fits this definition. The problem with the human condition is that we are not aware of our Heaven-endowed moral potential and/or lack the will to cultivate it. The goal is just that: to actualize our moral potential, to become fully humane beings, or "sages" (*shengren*). The means of attaining sagehood is "self-cultivation," which requires both self-reflection to distinguish our good inclinations from our bad ones and learning from the moral examples of past sages and teachers. The "ultimacy" factor is seen in the two central elements of Heaven (*tian*) and the Sage. "Heaven," as already mentioned, is the ultimate reality that is the source of moral value and the source of the innate goodness of human nature. The Sage is the symbol of the ideal human being who has fully internalized the will of Heaven. The word *shengren* or Sage has clear religious overtones. For example, it is the Chinese translation of "saint," and the Chinese word for the Bible is *sheng jing*, or Holy Scriptures. And *jing* (scriptures), by the way, is also the word used for what is usually called the "Confucian Classics." The same word was used to translate the Sanskrit word *sutra* after Buddhism entered China from India in the 1st century CE.[1]

The Neo-Confucian revival

After the fall of the Han dynasty in 220 CE, Confucianism fell into decline. Both Buddhism and Daoism were developing and gaining popularity. (This was the full-fledged Daoist religion, which began in the 2nd century CE – not the "classical" Daoism of the *Dao de jing* attributed to Laozi.) It was not until the Song dynasty (950-1279) that there was a major revival of Confucianism. This, the second great epoch of Confucianism, has also been given a name by Westerners that did not

[1] See Joseph A. Adler, "Confucianism as a Religious Tradition: Linguistic and Methodological Problems."

exist in China: "Neo-Confucianism." This Confucian revival was strongly influenced by Buddhism, and to a lesser extent, Daoism.

朱熹

Zhu Xi (1130-1200)

The most dominant figure of "Neo-Confucianism" was the 12th-century scholar Zhu Xi, who synthesized the teachings of his 11th-century forebears into a coherent system of philosophy and religious practice (focused on "self-cultivation," the process of becoming a Sage), that became the dominant religio-philosophical worldview of the literate elite until the 20th century. Zhu Xi systematized a curriculum of education extending from what we would call elementary school to the Ph.D. level. He also wrote a popular book on "Family Rituals," which was widely circulated for centuries as the standard for such rituals as "capping" of young men and "pinning" of young women (both puberty rituals), marriage rituals, treatment of elders, funerals, and ancestor worship.

Increasing conservatism

Although Zhu Xi's system was motivated by his sincere desire to help people achieve or approach Sagehood, it quickly became co-opted by the state, and therefore politicized. In the early 14th century it became the basis of the civil service examination system, which was the most important avenue of social mobility in China. Memorization of Zhu Xi's interpretations of the Confucian tradition therefore became the goal of those hoping to get government jobs, ignoring the moral purpose of the whole system. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, politicized Confucianism was used to support increasingly conservative agendas, such as absolute obedience of elders and strict subjugation of women to men.

Anti-Confucian movements of the early and mid-20th century

This brings us to the 19th and 20th centuries. The last imperial dynasty was the Qing (1644-1911), which was ruled by a non-Chinese ethnic group, the Manchus (who are today pretty much blended into the Han Chinese population). At the end of the 18th century the Qing emperor had rejected a request by King George III of Great Britain (our old friend from colonial days in America) to establish trade relations. Britian needed markets for the products of its new industrial revolution. It responded to the Chinese cold shoulder by growing opium in India and selling it illegally in China.

The Opium Wars of the 1840s began a long series of catastrophes for China, including internal rebellions. Meanwhile Japan, which opened its doors to the West after over 200 years of self-imposed isolation, was becoming a modern industrial power, and defeated China in the 1895 Sino-Japanese War.

Chinese reformers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries tried various means of bringing China back to its feet, to no avail. The dynasty fell in 1911 and was replaced by the Republic of China (ROC), which continues today in Taiwan. But the early republic was rife with corruption and very weak. In the 1920s the Chinese Communist Party arose and began a long civil war with the ruling Nationalist Party (Guomindang, or KMT) of the Republic, led by Chiang Kai-shek. Mao Zedong rose to prominence in the Communist party and became its leader. After the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in northeast China in the 1930s, the Nationalists and Communists temporarily joined forces against the Japanese. This continued through World War II until the Japanese defeat in 1945. The Nationalists and Communists then resumed their civil war, and in 1949 the Communists won, driving the Nationalist government offshore to the island of Taiwan. On October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong stood on the reviewing stand of the Gate of Heavenly Peace (Tiananmen) in Beijing and declared, "China has stood up" – alluding of course to the century and a half of decline, humiliation, and subjugation. This was the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), which today governs the Chinese mainland.

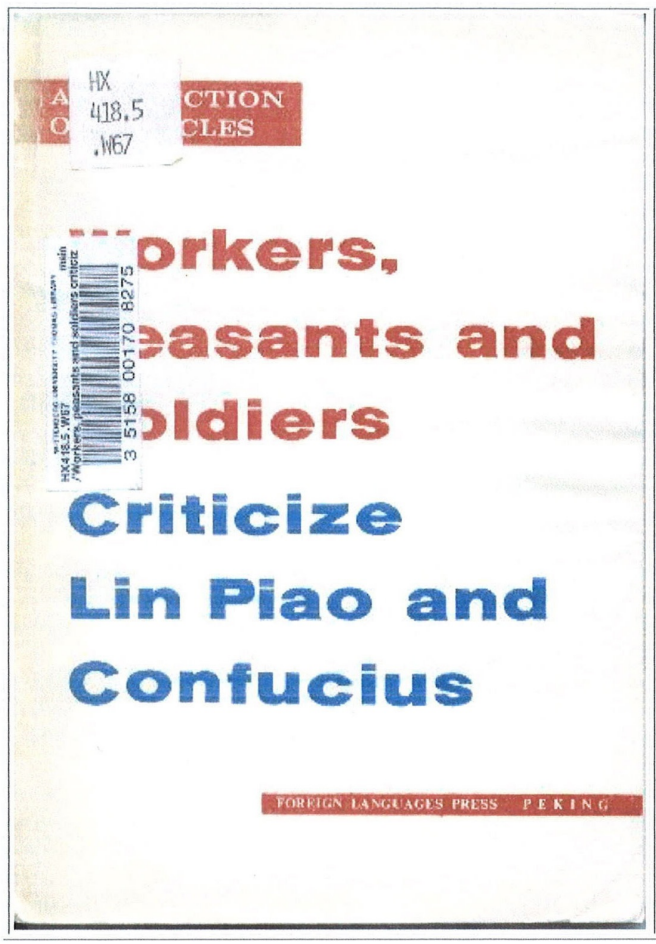
Mao Zedong (1893-1976), leader of the Communist Party

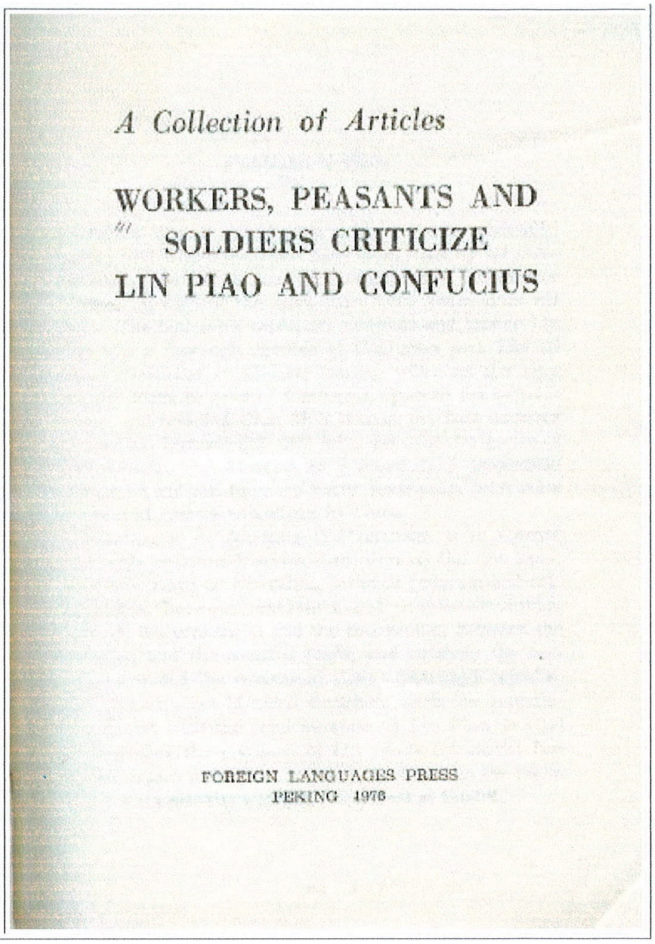
Chiang Kai-shek (1872-1975), leader of the Nationalist Party.

Gate of Heavenly Peace (Tiananmen)

This quick run through of Chinese history is the context of the story of Confucianism in China today. In the early 20th century, both before and after the fall of the Qing, Confucianism was harshly criticized by the New Culture Movement. The premise of this movement was that vitually everything about China's traditional culture was holding it back from becoming a modern nation-state. High on the list of culprits in this blanket rejection of traditional China was Confucianism. Under the banner of science and democracy, the reformers felt that there was nothing worth salvaging in Confucianism. At the

same time, some intellectuals felt that Confucianism, too, could be reformed, especially by engaging in dialogue with Buddhism and Western philosophy. These thinkers were sowing the seeds of what later became known as "New Confucianism." But the tide in the first few decades of the 20th century was clearly against them. The New Culture Movement, also known as the May 4th Movement (they're not exactly the same, but close enough), criticized Confucianism for its age and gender-based hierarchies, which had become quite rigid during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Communist thinkers also joined this anti-Confucian trend, so by the time of the Communist victory in 1949 Confucianism in mainland China seemed virtually dead.





Publisher's Note

Confucius was a reactionary who doggedly defended slavery and whose doctrines have been used by all reactionaries, whether ancient or contemporary, Chinese or foreign, throughout the more than 2,000 years since his time. The bourgeois careerist, renegade and traitor Lin Piao was a thorough devotee of Confucius and, like all the reactionaries in Chinese history when on the road to their doom, he revered Confucius, opposed the Legalist School and attacked Chin Shih Huang, the first emperor of the Chin Dynasty (221-207 B.C.). He used the doctrines of Confucius and Mencius as a reactionary ideological weapon in his plot to usurp Party leadership, seize state power and restore capitalism in China.

After the Communists took power their anti-Confucian rhetoric only increased (see above[2]). In addition to their professed opposition to social hierarchies, they viewed Confucianism as a "feudal ideology" – despite the fact that the Chinese socio-political system hadn't been feudal since the Zhou dynasty. "Feudalism," according to the Marxist theory of history, is an inevitable stage prior to capitalism, which in turn will inevitably be replaced by socialism. China had not even entered the capitalist stage, but the Maoist program of radical social reform attempted to leap-frog into the socialist stage. For example, they reorganized society into rural communes and other "work units" (*danwei*), which essentially replaced the extended family as the basic social unit. Confucian ethics had been based on the family, so any remnants of Confucian thought were, obviously, regarded as a millstone around the neck of the "New China." All traces of it had to be ruthlessly eliminated, along with all forms of religion. (They drew a sharp and simplistic distinction between "ideologies" and "religions.")

The harshest repression came during the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" of 1966-1976. This was instigated by Mao Zedong in order to purge the party of potential opposition to Mao. Schools and universities were closed and young people were urged to join the roving bands of "Red Guards" who destroyed temples and other cultural artifacts of traditional China, harrassed and violently punished anyone suspected of being sympathetic to Western or traditional Chinese culture. This was part of Mao's theory of "continuing revolution," aimed at maintaining the ideological purity of the party and the country. Another feature of the Cultural Revolution was the staging of mass rallies in the newly-cleared Tiananmen Square (the largest public open square in the world, cleared specifically to accomodate these rallies). At these rallies, up to a million Red Guards and others would wave their "little red books" of quotations from Chairman Mao, many of them swooning in their love and reverence for the Chairman. Mao was treated very much like the founder of a new religion. Overall, the ten years of the Cultural Revolution were a nightmare, which virtually all Chinese today deeply regret.

Revival since 1980

After Mao died in 1976, his chief henchmen who supported the Cultural Revolution – called the Gang of Four, one of whom was Mao's wife, Jiang Qing – were quickly arrested and thrown in prison. Jiang Qing later committed suicide there. In 1979, leadership of the party and state fell to Deng Xiaoping,

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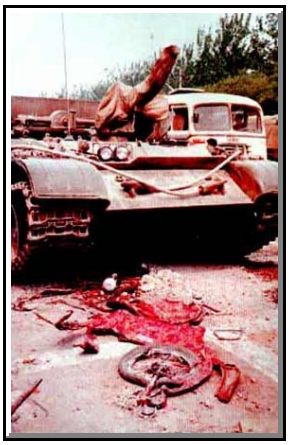
[2] Lin Piao had been Mao's heir apparent, but his son was involved in a plot to overthrow Mao. The plot was discovered, and the whole family died in a mysterious plane crash while trying to flee the country.

who began a process of liberalization and opening to the West. This included the gradual rehabilitation of temples and monasteries, and gave permission to scholars to study Confucianism again not as a feudal ideology but as a legitimate philosophical system that was an essential part of traditional Chinese culture. This loosening of restrictions on thought and scholarship was a gradual process that is still continuing. In 1982 a new constitution was adopted that recognized freedom of religious belief, although it placed limits on religious practice. Only five religions have a legal standing: Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Protestant Christianity, and Catholicism. Confucianism is still not officially regarded as a religion.

The 1980s began the period of astounding economic growth that continues in China today. Private enterprise was permitted for the first time since 1949; the central planning that was one of the hallmarks of Communist rule was relaxed; and the government divested itself of many state-owned industries. Social restrictions were likewise relaxed; for example, people could travel around China and even overseas without permission from their work units. People began to imagine the possibility of being ruled by a government that was less insular and more accountable to its citizens than ever before. These hopes came to a violent end in the Tiananmen "pro-democracy" demonstrations and massacre in May and June of 1989, when government tanks ruthlessly cleared the demonstrators from the square and hundreds of unarmed civilians were shot in the streets surrounding the square. The Chinese people for the most gave up their hopes for political reform, at least for the time being, and concentrated on economic development.

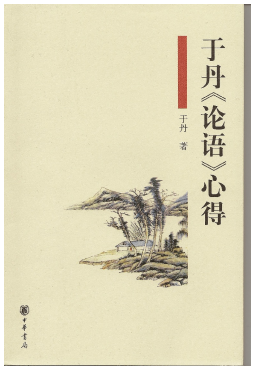


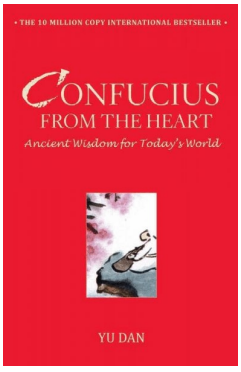
The Tiananmen massacre put the nail in the coffin of Communist ideology among the great majority of people. Since they had been so deeply indoctrinated with this ideology since 1949, many Chinese began to experience a moral vacuum in Chinese society. This stimulated renewed interest in Confucianism. In the 1990s, with China undergoing astounding economic growth, there arose what was called "Confucius fever." Hundreds of books, both scholarly and popular, were written on Confucius and

the Confucian tradition. On the scholarly side, beginning in the 1980s, mainland Chinese academics were finally able to pursue research that was not forced into the narrow ideological mold of the Marxist theory of history and "dialectical materialism." As a graduate student in 1982, I was fortunate to be able to participate in the first International Conference on Zhu Xi in Hawaii, which included scholars from Europe, America, Taiwan, Japan, and the People's Republic – one of the first of such conferences. As this was quite early in the opening of Chinese scholarship to the West, the mainland scholars there were still somewhat influenced by Communist ideology, but there was a sincere exchange of ideas and they made valuable contributions to the conference and the resulting volume of essays. Today Chinese scholarship on Confucianism is fully up to the standards of Western scholarship. By this I don't mean to imply that Western scholarship is completely free of bias; my point is that now we are at least playing the same ball game.

In terms of popular culture, "Confucius fever" is likewise going strong. The most dramatic example of it actually crosses the boundary between the scholarly and popular realms. A professor at Beijing Normal University (Beijing Shifan Daxue), Yu Dan, gave a very popular series of TV lectures on the *Analects* of Confucius. She then published them in a book called *Lunyu xinde*, or *Reflections on the Analects.* This book, published in 2006, became a huge best-seller in China, a real publishing phenomenon, with over three million copies sold in its first four months in print. In 2009 it was translated into English as *Confucius from the Heart*. The book has been described as a kind of *Chicken Soup for the Soul* (or *Wonton Soup for the Soul*); that is, a comforting, non-challenging collection of bland moral clichés, carefully avoiding any political implications that might encourage dissent. This is unfortunate, because Confucians throughout Chinese history saw themselves as moral critics of the status quo. Still, it demonstrates that people are searching for something, and that they now regard Confucius and Confucianism with some admiration and pride.

Yu Dan





The government's political agenda

Even the PRC government has gotten into the act. High government officials have attended conferences celebrating the birthday of Confucius, and have acknowledged him proudly as a great contributor to a glorious Chinese tradition – exactly the opposite of the harsh anti-Confucian rhetoric of the early 20th century and the recent past. But this explicit government support must be understood in a political context. The ruling party has, over the past twenty years or so, been strongly promoting Chinese patriotism or nationalism. This occasionally gets away from them, for instance when people have taken to the streets to demonstrate against some perceived insult to China by Japan or the West. The 2008 Olympics in Beijing were an opportunity for them to strut their stuff on the world stage, and they certainly took advantage of it.

In this context, it seems clear that the PRC government's support of Confucianism is politically – even geo-politically – motivated. First, they are reclaiming traditional Chinese culture as one of the world's great civilizations. In fact there is a wide-ranging strategy of claiming that Chinese civilization was the world's *first* great civilization. Second, they are claiming Confucius, the world-renowned philosopher whose ideas permeated traditional Chinese culture, as their own. For the past ten years or so the government has sponsored the establishment of "Confucius Institutes" all over the world, including the United States. Along the lines of Germany's Goethe Institutes and France's Alliance Francaise, the Confucius Institutes are educational centers for the study of Chinese language and culture. This is part of China's "soft diplomacy" to gain stature on the world stage. Third, China's current president, Hu Jintao, has made "a harmonious society" his signature socio-political slogan. This is clearly an attempt to stifle dissent, which is constantly boiling up in local demonstrations against government confiscation of property and other local issues. The fact that "harmony" has been a Confucian watchword since the earliest times suggests that the government views Confucianism as a potential ally in their attempt to maintain "social stability."

The latest manifestation of this agenda is actually quite startling. In January of this year, a 31-foot tall bronze statue of Confucius (left) was erected *in Tiananmen Square*. Actually it is on the edge of the square, in front of China's newly renovated National Museum. The irony of this is hard to beat. When I was in

college Tiananmen Square was the site of those mass rallies at which Mao Zedong was worshipped and Confucius was cursed. That very Confucius, who not so long ago was Public Enemy Number One in China, is now regarded as a symbol of China's greatness.

There still remains the question: if Confucianism is being revived as either a philosophy or a religion in China, who are the Confucians? Is it the scholars who, like the *ru* of pre-modern China, are engaged in the study of the Confucian Classics, and may or may not engage in Confucian-inspired moral cultivation? Is it the millions of Chinese people who find guidance in Yu Dan's watered-down interpretations of Confucius' *Analects*? Is it those many millions more who take it for granted that the individual is inextricable from the family, and that it is their obligation to support their parents in old age?

These are some of the questions that I will leave you with. And one more: returning to the new statue of Confucius in Tiananmen Square, let's look more closely at him. He seems to be smiling, but are his eyes actually closed? I haven't seen the statue in person yet, so I cannot say for certain. Is it possible that Confucius is ambivalent about his rehabilitation in China? I would be if I were him.[3]

[3] Postscript: Four months after the statue was erected, it was mysteriously removed in the middle of the night. See "Confucius Statue Vanishes Near Tiananmen Square" (*New York Times*, 4/22/11). It is now located inside the museum.