



Revival and adaptation: The role of Confucianism in contemporary China

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Abstract

Chinese society has received influence from Confucianism since the time of Confucius (551–479 BCE), when he first taught his philosophy. As China's ethical and political base since antiquity, Confucianism shaped the governance system and education system as well as the social framework of Chinese civilization. The twentieth century brought communist and modernization movements, which resulted in decreased popularity of Confucianism. Since the recent two decades, China's political system, together with its economy and cultural environment, has experienced significant growth of Confucian teachings. The analysis investigates the position of Confucianism throughout China into the twenty-first century and its recent transformation and resurgence. Studying this topic demonstrates how Chinese authorities apply Confucian values to their governing system while educational organizations teach Confucian ethics, and business organizations adapt these principles into their corporate settings. Researchers use a qualitative investigation method to evaluate scholarly content and official government decisions and modern Confucianism revival discussions. Scientists demonstrate that China strategically revives Confucianism to create social unity while developing a strong national consciousness and expanding its worldwide diplomatic influence. Modern individualism and human rights create ongoing problems with the relationship between China and Confucianism. According to this study, Confucianism represents China's broader strategy to unite traditional values with modern progress, which determines the nation's cultural and political development within a globalized world.

Keywords: Revival, adaptation, confucianism, contemporary china, governance, education, cultural identity, neo-confucianism, moral leadership, political strategy

Introduction

Over two millennia, Confucianism ended its origins in the teachings of Confucius (551–479 BCE) to form the central driving principle that shaped Chinese civilization. During the Han Dynasty, Confucianism became the state doctrine because it focused on moral teachings alongside social order and hierarchical systems, which influenced governance structures, education programs, and cultural development. Confucianism entered a period of rapid decline through the 20th century because modernists criticized its beliefs while the May Fourth Movement evolved and the Communists rejected traditional ideologies throughout the Cultural Revolution. An adaptation and revival of Confucian thought emerged in contemporary China because of cultural nationalism and national identity coalescence as well as political advantage. (Wu, 2014) The research investigates how Confucianism has experienced revival and modification in twenty-first-century China, especially within its governmental structures, educational institutions, corporate practices, and diplomatic activities. The understanding of this revival matters because it shows China's approach to uniting contemporary development with cultural traditions while protecting national pride through international relations. The government encourages Confucian values to establish better social unity and strengthen political authority while creating new globally recognized cultural power bases. China continues to draw meaning from Confucian values through their integration into corporate standards and educational platforms as part of the ongoing development of their political system. (Wang & Billioud, 2022) ^[2] Apart from these difficulties, Confucianism's return to prominence faces obstacles from

contradictions between its traditional group-based structure and modern concepts associated with personal freedom combined with democratic systems. This paper is structured into several sections: first, a literature review examining the historical role of Confucianism and its decline; second, an analysis of its revival through state policies, education, and corporate practices; third, an exploration of its adaptation to modern contexts, including governance and foreign policy; fourth, a critical discussion of its challenges and critiques; and finally, a conclusion assessing whether its resurgence represents a genuine cultural renaissance or a state-driven ideological tool. The research explores various elements to provide more insight into modern-day Confucianism's Chinese presence and future predictions.

Historical evolution of Confucianism

The teachings of Confucius (551–479 BCE) originated Confucianism, which has experienced different transformations throughout Chinese history to become a fundamental shaping force of the nation's moral social structure and political system. The Han Dynasty officialized Confucianism as their national doctrine, which focused on official ranks and family duty alongside moral administration strategies. The doctrine evolved through Buddhist and Daoist integration to reach its peak as Neo-Confucianism under the Ming and Qing dynasties after maintaining dominance during the Tang and Song periods. Political changes during the late 19th century and early 20th century, coupled with Western influence, led to the decline of Confucianism because Maoists considered it a stagnant feudal ideology. (Yu, 2008) During the post-Mao era, Deng Xiaoping initiated reforms that brought Confucian values

back into selective use to strengthen national unity and create social peace. New studies about Confucianism in modern China demonstrate its comeback as an instrument to strengthen both national cultural projection and government authority as well as teaching morals. Various studies reveal how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adopts Confucian values as part of its strategic plan to improve governmental control and foster moral ethical leadership while protecting against Western liberal philosophical concepts. The modern world witnesses Confucian institutes and educational curricula together with public communications that actively promote Confucian ethics. The discussions about Confucianism remain active regarding its positions in political administration and academic learning along with social interactions. Scholars divide in their interpretation of Confucianism because some view it as authoritarian enabling hierarchy, yet others believe its moral leadership builds ethical governance alongside citizen duty. (Deng & Smith, 2018) ^[4] The educational community supports Confucian moral learning because it creates disciplined students who share common values, yet opponents fear learning will become limited. The social discourse about Confucianism seeks an answer to whether its principles enable equality and modernism between genders or preserve establishment-based power structures. The adaptation of Confucianism plays an essential role in the socio-political landscape of China as the nation faces challenges from globalization alongside ideological change.

Theories related to cultural revival and adaptation

Multiple theoretical models explain cultural adaptation and revival by defining how traditions modify themselves to react to modernization and globalization alongside political changes. According to cultural resilience theory, traditional elements evolve by changing their form to meet present demands instead of enduring in unchanged ways. As systems cultures actively reform their basic principles to preserve their original identity. The revival of Confucianism in China shows how traditional values evolve through modern governance efforts and economic development as well as worldwide discourse. Societies implement the neo-traditionalism approach to carefully choose traditional features that support national identity and political legitimacy through reactions to outside factors and social cleavages. The Chinese Communist Party supports Confucian values because this support serves the dual purpose of strengthening Chinese society through traditional principles while fighting Western liberal ideals. According to modernization theory, standard theories used to suggest that developing societies would usually replace their traditional beliefs with rational and secular governance systems. (Lizhu & Na, 2015) ^[5] Present-day researchers challenge this perspective by demonstrating that modernization practices do not result in cultural decay because traditional customs transform to fulfill new modern requirements. China implements Confucian principles of harmony together with meritorious governance and ethical leadership within its contemporary socio-political order. Hybridization theory shows how cultures evolve through selective borrowing of multiple traditions to form new hybrid cultural identities instead of performing complete resistance or complete assimilation. The blend between Confucianism and Marxist principles, along with capitalist economic practices, exists within Chinese society. (Wang,

2022) ^[2] As a result of hegemonic preservation theory, ruling elites keep control through cultural revival by reinforcing shared historical values to reach social stability. All these theories demonstrate that cultural revival functions as a present-day strategic modification that avoids being reduced to historical relics.

Neo-Confucianism and its modern interpretations

Neo-Confucianism, which emerged during the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE) as a response to Under the influence of Buddhist and Daoist philosophy, thinkers made efforts to reinvigorate Confucian teachings through the combination of metaphysical systems and ethical doctrine alongside rationalist constructs. Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming led the Neo-Confucian movement, which reinterpreted traditional philosophy through teaching both moral improvement and knowledge exploration and linking individual political roles. China's governance, together with its educational institutions and social behavior, became governed by Neo-Confucian philosophy until the beginning of the 20th century. (Jiang-Fu, 2021) ^[7] The combination of Western ideologies and the May Fourth Movement alongside the Communist Revolution resulted in the marginalization of Confucianism together with its Neo-Confucian version because Westerners regarded the teachings as outdated and opposed to modern developmental needs. Modern China witnesses an increasing popularity of Neo-Confucianism after its adoption into present-day political and social frameworks. The Chinese government chooses specific Neo-Confucian principles to support social peacefulness and national unity as well as ethical government administration. The modern understanding of Confucian ethics supports Chinese educational and business practices and foreign policy advancement as the country showcases itself as an ideological civilization-state. Neo-Confucian moral leadership serves as an ethical approach that counters perceived moral deterioration from modernization rates. (Wang, 2012) ^[8] Modern scholars use Wang Yangming's concept of "innate knowledge" to develop theories about self-discipline and civic responsibility for the modern world. Neo-Confucian concepts spread to East Asian countries like Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, through which Confucian ethics became connected to their work ethic and economic success. The contemporary schools of thought in Confucianism promote "New Confucianism," which combines traditional values with democratic principles alongside human rights practice and global ethical standards. Neo Confucianism faces criticism about its potential to preserve hierarchical systems and authoritarian regimes, yet defenders believe its adaptability makes it possible for modern societies to draw moral structure for their governance and social community structure.

Relationship between Confucianism and political ideology

Through centuries, Confucianism has developed a deep connection with Chinese political ideology, thereby forging governance systems while establishing state legitimacy and maintaining social order. The imperial rule relied on Confucian principles to uphold its authority through hierarchical structures and moral leadership, while the Mandate of Heaven used virtue instead of coercion to grant rulers' power. Political philosophy in China evolved its core

concept to focus on leaders who manage with benevolent example instead of using force. China established a bureaucratic system through their merit-based civil service examination system, which followed a governance model of excellence. The collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, together with the ascent of Communist principles, led to Confucianism becoming seen as an outdated feudal system that did not match revolutionary goals. (Jin, 2021) ^[9] The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) currently integrates Confucianism strategically into their political framework as part of their contemporary Chinese ideology despite previous declines of acceptance. The Communist Party of China supports Marxist-Leninist principles yet integrates Confucian ethics of harmony along with stability and ethical leadership to boost its governance credibility. Through its promotion of Confucian principles, the government aims to establish two goals: first, it defends national identity, and second, it fights off Western liberal ideals, and it justifies its mixture of authoritarian control with cultural traditions. As part of his leadership approach, Xi Jinping stresses Confucian moral governance, which demands ethical direction from rulers through disciplined and people-oriented behavior. Infrastructure created by Confucian institutes, together with Chinese state narratives, spreads Confucian ethics across educational institutions, diplomatic functions, and administrative systems. State authority benefits from Confucianism, yet this religious doctrine presents obstacles to its functioning. (Payette, 2016) ^[10] The communications around Confucianism remain in dispute because supporters contend that its hierarchical system reinforces authoritarian control, yet defenders maintain that its moral teachings develop ethical leadership. Confucianism maintains influence over China's political approach because it acts as a governmental control mechanism alongside providing ethical frameworks for governance.

Confucianism in Contemporary China

The Chinese government undertakes deliberate Confucian value promotion through different policies that work to achieve social harmony, maintain national identity, and validate its administrative system. Initiatives from China's governmental authorities since the early phase of the 2000s ^[1] view Confucianism as the vital cultural foundation that has become essential in political dialogues and public school curricula. According to Chinese government policy, the Confucius Institutes based around the globe function as tools of soft power that transmit Confucian teachings worldwide. Chinese policies through the Core Socialist Values campaign structure society using harmonious (he) values and filial (xiao) duties and loyal (zhong) ethics together with Communist doctrine. The CCP's leaders, led by Xi Jinping, routinely use their official speeches to connect good governance with traditional Chinese ethical wisdom through Confucian values. Programs that advocate family-centered values and elder respect and community-centered well-being serve as secondary indicators of Confucian ethical implementation by the Chinese government to combat increasing individuality and social discord in contemporary Chinese society. (MLaw, 2021) ^[7]

Influence on education and moral values

Confucian moral values play a prominent role in teaching institutions throughout China. The government has updated

school syllabuses to teach classical Confucian works such as the Analects while implementing Confucian ethics as a part of students' moral education curriculum. At present educational institutions are teaching students to value authority, demonstrate diligence, and embrace collectivism, which merges with official state principles. Throughout China, Confucian academies (Shuyuan) exist again to provide traditional ethical classes and self-cultivation courses. The government uses state media platforms alongside public initiatives to present moral examples for inspiring citizens toward virtuous behavior, including honesty combined with humility and maintaining family bonds. The implementation of Confucianism for social cohesion goals remains controversial because some observers believe it restricts important intellectual pursuits and strengthens authoritarian government direction. China's moral framework keeps its roots in Confucian principles that guide national leadership and classroom learning and traditional societal standards. (He, C 2018)

Role in governance and public administration

The contemporary Chinese governance system depends heavily on Confucianism, through which important leadership principles function together with bureaucratic ethical principles while influencing state legitimacy. Chinese imperial bureaucracy developed historically through Confucian values, which established both moral governance standards and ruling responsibilities to serve citizens. The present Chinese government applies Confucian teachings to boost public administration performance and enhance ethical leadership. The Chinese Communist Party adopts the "people-centered approach," which echoes the Confucian notion of "renzheng," thus making clear that the government must establish social harmony as its top priority. (Morgado & Druhalóczki, 2024) ^[13] The principles of public administration under Confucianism demand civil servants to demonstrate disciplined service toward the state through their loyalty. Government official training includes Confucian ethics lessons about duty and moral standards in order to develop public servants with authoritarian leadership skills and moral obligation. Confucianism matches the administrative framework of China by prioritizing hierarchical order and group responsibility as well as obedience to authority above individualistic behavior. The CCP has used cultural linkages to present Confucian ethics as an authentic domestically developed choice instead of Western democratic principles for governance.

Confucianism and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

Through strategic support of Confucianism, the CCP builds its legitimacy by combining Confucian principles with Marxist-Leninist doctrine to create an original Chinese governing system. The post-Mao administration under Deng Xiaoping began to slowly value traditional cultural concepts after Mao Zedong, alongside other Communist Party leaders, initially dismissed Confucian ideology as feudal remnants. (Kim, 2025) ^[14] Xi Jinping supports a renewed Confucianism by using Confucian principles in his political speeches to elevate ethical leadership and social harmony and national rejuvenation. The government utilizes Confucian values to achieve three goals: preserving public order, fighting against Western political ideas, and creating an ideological framework based on state doctrine. The

Confucius Institutes, along with state-backed Confucianism research, demonstrate this pattern because these institutions make Confucian thought fundamental to contemporary Chinese cultural identity. The Chinese Communist Party adopts some Confucian principles but refuses aspects that would contest their state power, including ruler moral criticism practices. Some experts maintain that the government propagates Confucianism for strategic purposes because it helps maintain authority rather than establishing ethical rule through cultural foundations. (Tu, 1998) The present-day Chinese political system remains under the influence of Confucian values, which play dual roles as instruments of government oversight and fundamental moral principles in governing public administration.

Adaptation and Challenges

The integration of Confucianism into modern China requires an equilibrium between traditional beliefs and current social and political structures. Confucianism exists within modern China because the rising economic changes combine with globalization along with social shifts, yet integration remains selective, enabling ongoing cultural cohesion alongside strong ideological structures. Through official policy, Confucian values have been adopted as a response to perceived modernization-related moral degeneration, and emphasis exists on the principles of *he*, *xiao*, and communal responsibility. The principles form the basis of state policies and educational standards and government operational models, which direct both official doctrine and public conduct. Corporate organizations have embraced Confucian ethics as they adopt business principles that combine organizational respect for hierarchy and moral leadership with loyal team dynamics. The adaptation integrates Marxist philosophy with nationalist views and economic practicality along with traditional Confucian beliefs. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is using selective Confucian revival to enhance social unity nationwide while claiming independence against Western values and preserving centralized power through Confucian teachings as the alternative against Western democracy. The renewed interest in Confucianism encounters widespread domestic and international opposition because of its resurfacing popularity. The recent revival of Confucianism functions primarily as a political instrument since state officials choose to highlight doctrines that bolster their power but avoid aspects that present moral critiques about ruler behavior. According to feminist critics, Confucian values served in the past to maintain patriarchal systems, thus creating barriers to gender equality and personal independence. Students whose knowledge comes from Western education and who use digital tools mostly reject Confucian traditions because their beliefs oppose contemporary goals linked to personal liberation and innovative progress. The political opposition criticizes CCP utilization of Confucian language for political reasons because they claim its focus on hierarchy antagonizes democratic progress while quelling opposition. The Confucian emphasis on social harmony functions as a method to control public dialogue and limit activism and preserve stability even though it stops short of promoting political engagement. The revival of Confucianism faces skepticism across different strata of society because some people neither endorse this doctrine nor agree about its modern-day applicability in the face of present-day social transformation. Western philosophies show how political

beliefs within Confucianism differ completely from Western ideological schools of thought in both ethical principles and political organization. Confucianism rejects Western liberalism by prioritizing group obligations while stressing both authority structures and responsibility to serve rather than focusing on Western concepts like personal rights, political democracy, and self-rule. The Western political framework centers around separate governing departments while enforcing both constitutional principles and individual freedoms, but Confucian governance systems base societal stability on ethical reform of leaders and citizens. Western existentialist and postmodernist traditions prefer moral diversity and subjectivism, yet Confucianism maintains structured moral teachings to guide social position responsibilities. A few academic voices suggest Confucian principles should back democratic administration through ethical executive leadership and public duty combined with social unity between people. Modern Confucian scholars strive for harmony through their proposal of "New Confucianism," which merges traditional ethics with contemporary democratic principles. The ongoing adaptation of Confucianism marks China as a religion that exerts a strong influence on political governance and national identity despite potential differences when compared with Western philosophies.

Globalization and Confucian ethics

The process of globalization transforms Confucian ethics since it affects their transmission and evolution, which determines traditional value systems' response to global modern challenges. Chinese economic expansion together with cultural growth has sparked new global interpretations of traditional Confucian principles including harmony (*he*) and filial piety (*xiao*) along with moral leadership. The Chinese government supports Confucian ethics through its soft power initiatives by operating Confucius Institutes, which showcase Chinese cultural elements as universal wisdom for global morality. The diplomatic approach of China, reflected in its international relations, contains Confucian values that support its philosophical aim of a multipolar world order through mutual respect combined with hierarchical order and stability principles. East Asian economic success in worldwide markets can be attributed to the Confucian work values of discipline alongside authority respect and collective stakeholder duty, which have influenced corporate practices throughout these economies. The worldwide growth of Chinese companies adjusts their leadership patterns and business decision-making methods and staff relations through Confucian ethical standards to form unique business ethics practices worldwide. The challenges exist for Confucian ethics because they face opposition from Western cultural beliefs about individualism coupled with human rights principles and liberal democratic beliefs. Some observers suggest Confucian beliefs regarding hierarchy and loyalty create problems because they oppose contemporary standards for equality rights along with freedom of speech and blurred gender distinctions. China will need to bridge its traditional cultural values with international business standards, especially when implementing corporate transparency measures as well as labor ethics and corporate governance practices. Youth generations in Confucian societies face conflicts due to the increasing impact of Western digital cultures and education around the world, which sparks debates regarding Confucian ethics' capabilities to adapt and sustain its relevance during this modernization period.

Conclusion and Future Prospects

The revival and adaptation of Confucianism in contemporary China highlight its enduring influence on governance, education, moral values, and national identity. Through history, Confucianism has guided China's political system and social framework by establishing vertical linkages of authority while stressing moral governance together with unity among people. State ideology reintroduced Confucian ideas, and these ideas returned to public administration and education systems after facing decline through the early 20th century Communist Revolution. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has chosen Confucian principles to enhance social steadiness while creating ethical governance structures along with national identities for both political legitimization and opposition against Western political movements. The Chinese government uses Confucian values to shape different aspects of social life, which include national education initiatives and leadership behavior in enterprise sectors and government bodies. The modern revival of Confucianism encounters multiple obstacles since critics argue that its practices maintain social status distinctions and restrict human autonomy through political manipulation of the philosophy. This resurgence has extensive effects on the development of both Chinese society and governance systems. The Communist Party of China uses Confucian ethics to build an ideological system that unites Marxist-Leninist governance with traditional principles within its political discourse and social policies. Through this approach, the government achieves both strengthened social unity and national pride alongside the establishment of political control and cultural representation abroad. A persistent conflict exists between Confucian traditional group values and contemporary demands for personal freedoms together with sex equality and democratic inclusion. Chinese leaders must find ways to harmonize traditional Confucian beliefs with advancements in economics along with technology and social practices while their country evolves into a global power. The ethical principles of Confucianism influence China's foreign policy while impacting its international business practices, so they will continue to shape global interactions among East Asian nations and the countries involved in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Additional research regarding Confucianism in present-day China must focus on three primary areas. Academic research should examine Confucian ethics to reveal their impact on creating national policies alongside administrative operations and managerial systems across organizations that operate under globalization and digital transformations. The influence of Confucian moral education on the younger generation will show how well Confucian revival can persist when society undergoes rapid modernization. Comparative investigations between Confucianism and Western democratic principles would produce research on cooperative and contrasting aspects that will guide discussions about alternate government systems and moral leadership methods. Researchers must study the function of Confucian beliefs in Chinese diplomatic activities and international economic trade as well as cross-cultural exchanges. Future relevance of Confucianism depends on its capacity to embrace contemporary conditions and maintain its essential ethical principles, which positions it as critical academic material for policymakers and worldwide observers.

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