

Andrei Marga,

The valorisation of Confucius in the development of China and the change of the world

Contribution at the Symposium *Confucius and the Emergence of Contemporary China*, Suceava, Romania, March 18-21, 2026

Nowadays, Confucius is strengthening his position among the personalities who have profoundly influenced world history. His work is increasingly well known, and his civic-mindedness attracts attention. Today, there exists a “cultural circle of Confucianism,” which continues to expand along with China's global rise.

Confucius said that he is a "teacher" who mediates the bringing into actuality of the ancient sages (Yang Bojun, D. C. Lau, transl., *Confucius: The Analects*, II, 11). He wanted to preserve old teachings and reflected on guidance in life. He sometimes became an object of worship, but his ideas maintained the capacity to guide people in changing circumstances.

Chen Jingpan writes that Confucius represents the "Unsceptred King" of the Chinese intellectual life for over two thousand years (*Confucius as a Teacher. Philosophy of Confucius with special reference to its educational implications*, Foreign Language Press, Beijing, 1990, Introduction). While German historians consider that "it is hard to imagine another person who, like Confucius, embodied in his own person all the constitutive elements of the Chinese type of man and everything that is eternal in the existence of his people." Therefore, it is still said today that "*to understand China, one must start with Confucius*" (Richard Trappl, Foreword, in Liu Xubing, Wang Jing, *Konfuzius sagte...*, Bacopa, Schiedberg, 2013, p. 9), which once again emphasizes his significance in history.

Confucius added an original vision to the other currents in the rich tradition of the Chinese—Daoism, Mohism, Naturalism, Buddhism, Legalism. It is *the vision of an ideal society* in which “people relate to each other in a friendly and honourable way” (p. 33). Confucius’ conception is succinctly expressed in the

reflection: "if your behaviour aligns with the right guide (the great Dao), the whole world opens up to you", and "trust" and "harmony" are highly valued (p. 36). Being human is key. When asked about the essence of humanity, Confucius formulated the maxim: "What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others" (p. 43). He recommended "aligning your goals with the Dao, stopping at virtue, relying on humanity, and becoming conversant with the arts" (p. 47). Confucius was convinced that "if wealth is distributed fairly, then we will not have poverty /.../. Relationships are stable, we are not threatened by upheavals" (p. 51). He reflected a lot on governance. "If what is correct is placed above what is incorrect, the people will become obedient; if what is incorrect overrides the correct, the people become disobedient" (p. 55) and he also said that "the noble person must strive for truth, not for material gain" (p. 67). "If peace and rites prevail in a state, citizens come close to the ruler" (p. 68). Confucius underlined the importance of music: "Songs are uplifting, rites establish order, music ensures completeness" (p. 75). He advocated education for all: "in education, there should be no difference in social status" (p. 108). According to his conception, "filial piety is the root of all virtues; all learning grows from it" (p. 128). For the noble person, "loyalty and trust are the most important" (p. 133). To see broadly, far ahead, should characterize a person: "the person who does not think ahead will have to worry about what is close at hand" (p. 158).

With China's extensive efforts to rediscover its traditions, knowledge of Confucius is expanding. Editions of his writings in widely spoken languages, produced by those well-versed in the Chinese language and the era, are multiplying. I give a few examples of those I use: *Confucius, The Analects*, Penguin, New York, 1979, translated by Yang Bojun, D. C. Lau; *Getting to Know Confucius – A New Translation of The Analects*, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing 2011, translated by Lin Wusun; *Konfuzius sagte...*, Bacopa, Schiedberg, 2013, translated by Liu Xubing, Wang Jing. It is a fact that knowledge of Confucius is widening and his valorisation is constantly improving.

Sinologists are right when they say that we cannot understand Confucius without considering *the Chinese tradition of recording events in writing*. Under the Shang dynasty (1600-1010 BC), the Chinese invented writing for divination, with

ideographic characters originally intended for divinatory purposes (Leon Vandermeersch, *La conception chinoise de l'histoire*, in Anne Cheng, ed., *La pensée en Chine d'aujourd'hui*, Gallimard, Paris, 2007, p. 48). Under the following dynasty, Zhou (1050-256 BC), historical annals were created to reveal the secrets of a world under the control of a comprehensively acting force.

Confucius (551- 479 BC) intervened in this evolution roughly in the middle of the Zhou dynasty. He rewrites the annals, moving from historiography to historiology, which adds explanation to description and "converts the magico-oracular implications of the old procedures into bureaucratic-disciplinary rules" (p. 51). A disciple of Confucius, Sima Qian also established the model of historical writing, in which remarkable moments and trends of development are discussed. The Chinese thus recorded their ancient history, and it is worth noting that by 1911, there were 137,162 volumes of Chinese writings recorded just for the period 589-1911. *In this way, the Chinese gave the world both writing and history as a discipline.*

The first particularity of their historical writing was the „cosmologizing of history." The Chinese long speculated on the analogy between historical events and astronomical movements, seeing Heaven and Man as one: "*tian ren he yi.*" For instance, the human body has 360 joints, like Heaven. In any case, the Chinese opposed anthropomorphism: for them, the persons can only become moral by taking into account the requirements of Heaven, which they inevitably encounter in experience.

Chinese historical documents began to be translated in Europe, making this history accessible on our continent, starting with the translations of the Jesuit Joseph de Mailla. He published thirteen volumes between 1777 and 1785. These texts highlight that dynastic changes are related to changes in the "Mandate of Heaven." In any case, *the Duke of Zhou opposed the rebels against him by invoking the "Mandate of Heaven," which historically marks the beginning of laic legitimization in the life of states.* As a consequence, the Zhou dynasty created the state bureaucracy (Michael Schuman, *Die ewige Supermacht*, Prophyläen, Berlin, 2020, p. 57), the Duke of Zhou became a symbol of integrity, and under the Zhou dynasty the classical civilization of the Chinese was formed.

Just as Europe began in Athens, China began to take shape during the Zhou dynasty. While Socrates was conversing with young people in Athens, and Buddha was active in northern India, many thinkers stood out in China, but Confucius remained the most important. In the 4th century BC, *China also came up with the world's first history of an era.*

Confucius took the historical figure of the Duke of Zhou as a model in his reflections and developed a vision centered on the formation of the individual, with learning at its foundation. "Although later Confucius was condemned as a rigid conservative, in his time – an era of nobles and commoners – he was the creator of the idea of placing merit above the right of birth; he was convinced that people should be judged by their morality and wisdom, not by wealth, clan, or rank. It was precisely this concept that was eventually integrated into the imperial system of education and governance" (p. 63). In this way, Confucius shaped the character of the Chinese to the point of creating what came to be called the "Chinese mania for learning."

Of course, Confucius was not alone. He had disciples who followed what he recommended and recorded his sayings. Two of them, Mencius and Xunzi, philosophically stood out by starting from the belief in individual human freedom, but applying it differently in the relationship between Heaven and Earth.

Mencius proceeded from "love" (Jen), which Confucius considered the fundamental value of human life. He no longer originated it in Heaven, but in human nature, according to the maxim "who knows his own nature knows Heaven." He considers human nature to be good at its origin but affected by the surrounding environment. Mencius developed Confucianism in the direction of a psychological analysis that takes "love" as the foundation of human behaviour.

Xunzi took into account the rituals (Li), which he considered a "cosmological principle." They unite Heaven and Earth, so that even love (Jen) depends on them. That is why rituals are the primary object of learning, and human life unfolds according to them. Human nature is evil, nourished by selfish aspirations, but through rituals, history can correct it. Xunzi developed Confucianism in the direction of a historical analysis that takes rituals as the foundation of human behaviour.

The boundaries of Confucianism are not strictly defined, but we can say that *it is one of the intellectual currents that have influenced history and have been used in multiple forms*. I want to summarize this valorisation by distinguishing, during modernity: a traditional political valorisation; a philosophical valorisation; a civilizational valorisation; a political rejection under the “cultural revolution”; a valorisation within the beginnings of contemporary China; a valorisation within the pluralism of today's Chinese society; and, more recently, an application in today's international context. I will conclude by underlining the enduring contributions of Confucius and the significance of China's recourse to Confucius in the process of modernisation

The traditional political valorisation

Confucius rose from the middle aristocracy of his time. His philosophy, focused on justice, morality, and administration, called on people to respect the hierarchy of the state and society and to cultivate themselves to gain merits that would justify holding positions in the hierarchy of state. "Being good as a son and obedient as a young man is, perhaps, the root of a man's character" (*Confucius, The Analects*, Penguin, New York, 1979, Book I, 2), he said. One must start from filial kindness and obedience. You need to enter into multiple relationships, but always do everything best for others and “be trustworthy in what you say” (I, 7). Conformity with rituals is the principle of conduct (XII, 1). "Let the ruler be ruler, the subject a subject, the father a father, and the son a son" (XII, 11).

Obviously, submission here is equated with correctness. In other places, Confucius advises people to ask questions: "the asking of questions is in itself the correct rite" (III, 15). *Confucianism could not be exhausted by conservatism*. Under the dynasties that followed in China's history, it was a recognized presence. And even when, inevitably, his teachings lost ground, Confucius was honoured in museums and temples and remained a reference point (Joseph R. Levenson, *China: an interpretive history, from the beginnings to the fall of Han*, 1969) for an always significant part of the people.

Philosophical valorisation

European *Jesuits* were impressed by Confucius' teachings and translated them. *It is a good indicator of his influence to observe how the peaks of modern philosophy stay with regard to him.*

With a characteristic comprehension of universal history, but also with rigor, *Hegel* said that he had at hand only books published in Paris (Confucius, *Sinarum philosophus*, 1687, and *Memoirs concernant les Chinois*, 1776). He acknowledged that these were more of a "paraphrase than a translation" of Confucius' texts (*Prelegeri de istorie a filosofiei*, 1816, Editura Academiei, București, 1963, I, p. 113). From this probably comes his observation that with Confucius we are dealing with "good and wise moral teachings," but not with "speculative philosophy."

However, *Hegel* acknowledged that "history finds its beginning with the empire of China, because it is the oldest, as far as history informs us" (*Prelegeri de filosofia istoriei*, 1837, Editura Academiei, București, 1966, p. 113) and that this history is already documented some millennia before Christ. *Hegel* recognizes that ancient Chinese culture contains reflections on law and morality, as well as a philosophy (p. 132), and that Laozi is eminent, providing a philosophy contemporary with that of Thales, in the 6th century BC, which Confucius knew.

The pioneer of postmodernism in philosophy, who was *Nietzsche*, did not analyse Confucius, but, in essential respects, he positioned himself close to him. *Nietzsche* raised the question of the "truthfulness (*Wahrhaftigkeit*)" in the writing of history – "*das heisst jede Faktum in seiner genau geschilderten Eigentümlichkeit und Einzigartigkeit begehren*" (*Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Histoire für das Leben*, 1874, Diogenes, Zürich, 1984, p. 23). From this perspective, *Nietzsche* also viewed man as something that needs evolution: the man who must be cultivated is not in the past, no matter how much we value the past, but in the future. He said that "*der Mensch ist ein Seil, geknüpft zwischen Tier und Übermensch – ein Seil über ein Abgrund*" (*Also sprach Zarathustra*, Alfred Kröner Verlag, Leipzig, 1923, p. 11). With the "transformations of the spirit" (p. 25), *Nietzsche* moved closer to Confucius and wrote that "*es ist mehr Vernunft in deinem Liebe, als in deiner besten Weissheit*" [*There is more reason in your love, than in your best wisdom*] (p. 35).

The relationship of the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century, *Martin Heidegger*, was more with Laotzi than with Confucius. Heidegger did not relate to Confucius, but he did not reject anything from his teachings. On the contrary, *like Confucius, Heidegger placed human existence in relation to the world and sought to clarify what people actually experience, except that in Confucius, Heaven plays a role*. Both knew that the language of everyday life is not sufficient to express what happens, so Heidegger turned to poetry, while Confucius had turned to maxims. Each sought to capture the concreteness of life. Confucius took virtues as the solution, whereas Heidegger questioned, probably in relation to other approaches in the Chinese tradition, the authenticity of life.

The most prominent contemporary philosopher, *Jurgen Habermas*, shares an entirely different knowledge of Chinese philosophy and has provided the most comprehensive examination of Confucius in the Euro-American culture. In his monumental work *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2019, I-II), he starts from Karl Jaspers' observation that in the fifth century BC, with Confucius, Laozi, Buddha, Zarathustra, the Prophets Elias and Jeremiah, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, and Parmenides, the frameworks of human thought that continue to this day were shaped. On the other hand, he applies the distinctions of his philosophical system, which allow him to understand Confucius as the initiator of self-consciousness at a moment of transition from the legitimization of sovereigns through oracles, to legitimization through "mandates from Heaven." *Confucius "reconstructs popular religious traditions in the sense of a universal order of the state and society founded cosmically, which, however, places ethical duties primarily on political rulers"* (I, p. 316). Confucius achieves this reconstruction in a cultural environment where dozens of philosophical schools were active. At the beginning of our era in China, ten distinct philosophical currents were operating. Confucius provides a philosophy through which he elevates popular traditions to the level of ethical elaboration (p. 356). In fact, with him begins the "classical era of Chinese philosophy" (p. 384). Unlike his contemporaries, the Jews, who mediate contact with the Absolute through "revelation" and "prayer," and the ancient Greeks, who mediate contact with the Absolute through "rational upbringing," Confucius mediates the same contact through "learning and knowledge" and lays

the foundation for a "religion of formation (*Bildungsreligion*)" (I, p. 395). All three traditions – Jewish, Greek, Chinese – are interested in the political life and are related in this regard – each makes proposals for good governance and designs an ideal constitution (I, p. 445). The Prophets, Plato, and Confucius thus allow for extremely fruitful comparisons.

Civilizational valorisation

Confucius was considered the emblem of Chinese civilization, not only by some of the Chinese, but also by those outside his country. Here I take two examples, also among the intellectual elites.

A connoisseur of world history, the greatest sociologist of modernity, *Max Weber*, realized that the rationalization of the guiding of life can take different forms. He considered Confucianism as „*die Standesethik einer literarisch gebildeten weltlich-rationalistischen Pfründerschaft*“ (Max Weber, *Schriften 1894-1922*, Alfred Kröner, Stuttgart, 2002, p. 575). Confucianism takes a form in which “metaphysics and almost all remnants of religious anchoring are absent” (p. 606), being somewhere near utilitarianism, after having escaped the power of a priesthood, and remaining within the circle of a state bureaucracy (p. 643).

The most prolific American thinker, *John Dewey*, viewed Confucianism from the perspective of China's modernization needs at the beginning of the 20th century. He criticized what he called “Confucian paternalism” in the “old China” – an exhibition on the small scale of the schemes for the reformation of the country which were rejected on the large scale (John Dewey, *Middle Works, 1899-1924*, Volume 12, *Reconstruction in Philosophy and Essays* 1920, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, and Edwardsville, 1988, p. 75). John Dewey considered “the old Confucianism, – or what genuine Confucianism had been petrified into and the old family system, the most utopian of sentimental idealisms” (*The Middle Works 1899-1924*, Volume 13 1921-1922, p. 103). He blames the fact that “Confucian education has become aristocratic, only for a few” (p. 114) and advocates for a “rejuvenated Chinese culture”.

The Political Rejection of Confucius

In modern Chinese cultural life, the use of Confucianism for political purposes also mattered. The arguments for and against Confucianism were formulated from this perspective. For instance, in 1917, the literary renewal movement of Hu Shih and Chen Tuhsiu accused Confucius of monarchism. In 1924, Ku Chieh-keng's movement considered Confucianism a religion and opposed it with the science of the time.

Sun Yat Sen supported the valorisation of Confucius, but in the subsequent split in China between Mao Zedong and the Kuomintang, Confucianism was also drawn in. From a specific perspective Mao Zedong opposed it by seeking to revolutionize social relations under the program of "socialism with Chinese characteristics," which viewed the Confucian legacy critically.

At that time, aspects of Confucius' biography were invoked, but what mattered most in the criticism was the fact that he preserved hierarchy in the state and society. Confucius was politically rejected, being considered "conservative," even "reactionary." It was not taken into account that at the same time he demanded respect for hierarchy, Confucius was also questioning how people ascend to the top of the hierarchy and how those who reach positions of decision-making should behave. However, *it gradually became clear that a thinker like Confucius is not exhausted by premodern conservatism.*

After 1978

China had personalities who worked already during in the sixties and seventies to bring the Chinese into contact with Kant and Dewey, while taking into account the new historical experience. This trend "produced on the continent a consciousness, a habitus, even a particular identity," which gradually became "the new Confucianism" (Joel Thoraval, *La tentation pragmatiste en Chine contemporaine*, in Anne Cheng, *La pensée en Chine auhourd'hui*, Gallimard, Paris, 2007, p. 123). The trend was shaped by Li Zehou, who resumed Confucianism, but freed it from what he called "rationalized shamanism" – a combination of philosophy and religion that

culminates in giving the emperor an exaggerated role, who establishes the order of life through rituals. In this way, *Confucianism was freed from traditional constraints and set in motion again in contexts of modernization*.

It was stated on this occasion, especially as a result of the actions of Mou Zongsan and Tang Junyi, the importance of tradition; on the other hand, work was done on an *updated Confucianism*. Tu Weiming even distinguished three periods in the history of Confucianism: the first, the era of Confucius and Mencius; the second, the period of the renewal of Confucianism in contact with Buddhism, under the Song and Ming dynasties; the third, the contemporary era, when Confucianism reconciles with Western modernity. Li Zehou corrected this periodization, saying that it stopped at the study of “inner wisdom (*neisheng*)” to the detriment of the doctrine of Confucius regarding politics and society, and added, as the second period, that of the Han dynasty, when Chinese politics became durably institutionalized.

Confucianism was thus freed from its archaic aura, but a bifurcation within the movement emerged. Mou Zongsan leads the interpretation of Confucianism as a “moral metaphysics”, following the line of Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*: the Kantian moral imperative is identified with the command of Heaven and preserves moral autonomy within what he calls “wisdom”, which he adds to Kantianism. Li Zehou, wanting to remove Confucianism from elitism, responded with an interpretation of Confucius along the lines of John Dewey—more precisely, of the naturalistic conception of logic, which he views as the result of social practice.

Contemporary Valorisation

In Mao Zedong's polemics at the end of the 1960s, Lin Biao's Confucianism was accused—and Zhou Enlai was also accused of Confucianism. However, *in 1974, Mao Zedong proclaimed the need for China's stability and called on the Chinese people for unity, as proposed by Ciu Enlai*. From the “cultural revolution” remained the direction of the “criticism of bourgeois culture,” but the “proletarian tone” was abandoned (Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., London, England, 2011, p. 87). Against this background, Deng Xiaoping took the political initiative

under the circumstances of the time—the dramatic effects of the “cultural revolution” on the fate of specialists—and proclaimed “consolidation,” before moving on to implement meritocracy in personnel selection (p. 97) and to reform education. Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and many others supported him from the beginning.

The scene changed even more with President *Jiang Zemin*, under whom a '*Confucian revival*' took place. The new leaders believed that Confucius' legacy could serve the interests of present-day China, and “modernization” did not mean imitating other experiences. According to them, “the seeds of Chinese modernization could be found in Chinese history and Confucian precepts, with their emphasis on education, moral values, and community” (John K. Fairbank, Merle Goldman, *Histoire de Chine. De l'origine au present*, Texto, Paris, 2019, p.630). Observing what had happened in other countries influenced by Confucianism, it was considered that “a revival of Confucianism could provide the intellectual and cultural foundations necessary for a rapid economic development in China”.

On the other hand, an interesting change occurred globally at that time. After the financial crisis of the 1990s and other crises that followed, the invocation of "Asian values" declined on the international stage, but Confucianism continued to rise in public interest.

In fact, *Jiang Zemin* appealed to a "revisited Neo-Confucianism" that took "moral order with its canons, work, family, homeland," which also led to the "cementing of Chinese society," but he engaged in reforms within the society. With Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, reforms were implemented that led to an exit from the "arcane of the planned economy" (Caroline Puel, *Les trente glorieuses chinoises de 1980 à nos jours*, Perrin, Paris, 2011, p. 352). The most innovative element concerned the selection of officials: the criterion of competence replaced the motto "better red than expert" of the "Cultural Revolution."

In 2005, the thesis of "harmony" was launched on a larger scale – which mobilized people so much that China secured its "emergence" as a competitive society. Under President *Hu Jintao* (2002-2012), China surpassed Germany as the world's largest exporter, overtook Japan as the second-largest economy, its military

spending was double that of Japan and Russia, and it moved past the middle of countries on the income scale (Robert S. Ross, Jo Inge Bekkevold, eds., *China in the Era of Xi Jinping. Domestic and Foreign Policy Challenges*, Georgetown University Press, 2016, pp. XVII-XVIII). China quickly reached the status of an economic, political, military, and cultural superpower (Andrei Marga, *Ordinea viitoare a lumii*, Niculescu, București, 2017), so that its impressive cultural tradition was brought even more strongly into the present.

Valorisation in the context of the current pluralism

In 2012, China elected Xi Jinping as president, a personality who developed a vision of national strategy, the "China Dream," focused on "the country's prosperity, collective pride and happiness, and national rejuvenation" (Robert S. Ross, Jo Inge Bekkevold, eds., *China in the Era of Xi Jinping. Domestic and Foreign Policy Challenges*, 2016, p. 118). Xi Jinping "seeks to link domestic economic activities with an emerging global strategy to export the country's excess capital, technology, and industrial capacity to others who need the... (p. 123) and promotes a policy more oriented towards consensus (p. 124), which pragmatically addresses objectives in the service of a "rejuvenation of the nation." *This policy has achieved the broadest mobilization of the Chinese people in modern history.*

President Xi Jinping stated that "to realise the Chinese Dream, we must foster the Chinese spirit. It is the national spirit with patriotism at its core, and it is the spirit of the times with reform and innovation at its core" (Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 2014, I p. 42). The slogans are telling: "right time to innovate and make dreams come true"; "reform and opening-up is always ongoing and will never end"; "comprehensively continuing the reform"; "improve governance capability"; "economic growth must be genuine and not inflated"; "open wider to the outside world"; "transition to innovation-driven growth"; "develop a law-based country, government and society"; "promote social fairness and justice, ensure a happy life for the people"; "enhance publicity and theoretical work"; "eliminate poverty and accelerate development in impoverished areas"; "better and fairer education"; "a holistic view on national security"; "new era of ecological progress"; "one country, two systems"; "working together for

mutually beneficial cooperation”; “a new model of relationships between China and the United States”; “combating corruption and upholding integrity,” etc.

Xi Jinping took over the points about integrity made by Hu Jintao in 2006 at the consultative meeting with the two non-Communist political organizations—the China Democratic League and the China Association for Promoting Democracy (p. 435). Confucius was explicitly referred to. In 2014, at a meeting on the rule of law, Xi Jinping explicitly recalled what Confucius said: “people will obey you if you promote righteous men and suppress evil men. And they will disobey you if you do the contrary” (2017, II, p. 131). At a 2016 meeting dedicated to clarifying the concepts of development, Xi Jinping clarified the concept of “people-centred development” by referring to Confucius’ view of “shared prosperity”.

In the pluralized life of contemporary China, there is also a reaction that criticizes the market economy and calls for the development of a middle class that would lead to democracy and the revival of a certain centralism in decision-making. There are also proponents of liberalization, who support private initiative but do not oppose it to public interest. However, the project of modern China development, which ensures sustained and advanced modernization while initially eliminating corruption, is widely shared.

The thesis that three currents are in circulation in contemporary China, from which analyses and initiatives stem, is, in any case, valid. These approaches are linked to names that have entered the history of the country and world history: Mao Zedong's approach focused on equality, Deng Xiaoping's approach focused on freedom and rights, and Confucius' approach focused on civicism, education, and innovation. Today, these three approaches are instrumental in the project of a Chinese civilization with Chinese characteristics in various fields. The coexistence of these currents, moreover, forms the intellectual specificity of contemporary China (Gan Yang, *Das Verbinden der drei Traditionen in der neuen Ära: Die Verschmelzung von drei Traditionen und das Wiederstärken der chinesischen Zivilization*, 2005, in Daniel Leese, Shi Ming, Hrsg., *Chinesischen Denken der Gegenwart. Schlüsseltexzte zu Politik und Gesellschaft*, C. H. Beck, München, 2023, p. 176). No country has such a constellation of active traditions at this moment, and China takes advantage by

seeking to capitalize on them. Chinese opinions are diversifying regarding the concrete linking of these traditions.

In the process of modernization, China is putting an end to some traditions, which leads to heated discussions within the country. For example, in 2004, after 1300 years, what maintained the population's trust in the value of society's elite—the 'imperial examination system'—was replaced. For many centuries, China recruited its elite through annual exams, at any age, to obtain the title of *Jinshi*, which the emperor recognized, and the individual had access to certain positions in society. During modernization, this system was replaced with a more streamlined one, still based on the actual performance of the individual in preparation. China is modernizing its life, but seeks not to diminish motivation and the high standards of citizen training. American analysts note that in China, concern for the competitive preparation of new generations is at the forefront, with the future being carefully prepared.

It is very clear to the Chinese that history has connected them with the West and negates any temptation of isolation. China can no longer be understood even by the Chinese themselves without understanding the West. Against this background, the dominant plea in present-day China is for cooperation between China and the West by deepening each side's understanding of the other. "For us, it is not about studying China and the West in opposition to each other, but rather about studying the West more deeply and comprehensively" (p.189). This does not mean copying, as modernization does not consist of imitation, and "knowing something does not mean recognizing it as necessary for you."

Top theorists from today's China discuss the validity of the distinctions established by modern history between "the political left" and "the political right". Next, some intellectuals presented views relied on Marx and Kant and argued that it is necessary for Enlightenment to be used not only in the sphere of ideas but also in the life of China.

The key issue being discussed remains, however, the valorisation of the impressive legacy of Confucius in the context of contemporary modernity. The director of the Confucius Society, Tang Wenming (Tsinghua University, Beijing),

argues that the vision of Confucianism would be immune to the excesses of modernity and would ensure China a modernization without imitating any other country. In an alternative position, Chen Ming is of the opinion that Confucius does not advance a political theory, and that his teachings are a “cognitive filtering” of different political positions. The recent history of Confucianism is that of being “part of a mosaic in society that adopts an attitude of moderation. Unlike the Guomindang and the Communist Party, Confucianism has not had the appropriate opportunity to establish a party, and thus to articulate its own goals and political discourses” (Chen Ming, *Links und Rechts überwinden, die drei Traditionen verbinden und den Parteistaat erneuern. Ein konfuzianistische Interpretation des chinesischen Traums*, 2015, in Daliel Leese, Shi Ming, opt.cit, p. 192). Moreover, China has entered the process of globalization, so a "ideological recalibration" has become necessary. China needs to be modernized, but its modernization cannot be achieved by copying other countries. "In China, the issue arises of transforming a traditional empire into a modern form of state" (p. 193). New ideas are necessary, because adopting the ideological traditions of the nation-state from other countries does not yield results.

Copying modernization from the West, no matter how advanced it may be, does not yield results. Realistically, the starting point cannot be anything other than the "Chinese nation," and in this regard, Confucianism has much to contribute. The "Chinese Dream" of modernization can be fulfilled only with the contribution of Confucianism. This fact is also acknowledged by those who currently lead China, who have abandoned the "universal, speculative, and utopian ideal" in favour of "meeting the internal needs of the Chinese nation" (p. 195).

And Confucianism differs from Daoism. Both understand the world by admitting that Heaven is the supreme essence and that modernization involves essential values for humanity. But Confucianism considers that Heaven and Earth have to do with preserving human life, so the key concept of Confucianism is that of “humanness.” “Applied in political philosophy, it is ultimately about considering the peaceful development of life as the supreme value, or, to quote *The Book on Moderation and Measure*: ‘to fulfil oneself and to summon to life the rest’, as well as ‘to help all under Heaven to fulfil their own life’” (pp. 195-196). This is what

Aristotle expressed when he called “happiness” the supreme good of human life. “The political optimum, which Confucius called ‘holy (*sheng*)’, consisted in people becoming as comprehensively satisfied as possible and cultivating themselves, in order to ensure a peaceful life for the people” (p. 196).

This optimum is convergent with the modern principle of “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” and with the values of "nationality," "rights of peoples," "the welfare of the people" from modern constitutions. Abraham Lincoln expressed the principle most clearly in the famous *Gettysburg Address*, while Sun Yat-sen stated the three values. Confucius defended the idea of the "family-state (*Familien-Staat*)," but this does not mean that he did not understand the problem of the "foreigner," as some claim. For him, "the family-state is connected with the principle ‘*All under Heaven (Alles unter dem Himmel)*’" (p. 196). "Love," the well-known Confucian value, is included here—it begins, as Confucius required, with love of one’s neighbour.

According to the modernizing vision, the individual rises above his family, up to the level of the state, climbing steps. "Harmony" is a Confucian concept – some, even Western thinkers, consider it to be superordinate to "freedom." But what is most important is the fact that "harmony" is connected to a construction of the state in steps which the individual can ascend. Chen Ming summarizes his perspective as follows: "If we consider the Chinese dream from the viewpoint of the belief and political philosophy, then I consider the following three aspects to be particularly important. First, overcoming left and right to return to the land of our homeland. Second, linking the three traditions to restore historical wholeness. And third, renewing the party-state to move from the version based on class theory to the version of steps, which is based on the nation-state theory." In this way, the direction of a great reconsolidation of the Chinese nation will become clearer, at a steady pace” (p. 197).

Chen Ming points out that at one point even Mao Zedong said that his country, China, should follow everything that has been achieved from Confucius to Sun Yatsen (p. 209). “The concept of the Chinese nation is inclusive, not exclusive. It does not take social classes as a starting point. Paying respect to historical

continuity requires the construction of an entire historical narrative" (p. 210). For this approach, "the premise and mandatory condition consist in the fact that our territory is not broken and the community of the people is not divided" (p. 212). And the ruling party is thus rebuilt. "The party was founded to serve the state and the people" (p. 215). Confucius' postulate – "all under Heaven (*Alles unter dem Himmel*)" is still relevant, and the leadership of society has, above all, obligations towards the rest. Sun Yatsen's call, which demanded idealism, enthusiasm, responsibility, and willingness to sacrifice from the leadership (p. 215), is also relevant today. China has more political parties now, but "to preserve national unity and a medium standard of living, we have no choice but to see the good and hope for the best" (p. 218).

Modern China has highly informed intellectuals capable of providing their own solutions. Qiu Feng (pseudonym of the neo-Confucian Yao Zhongqiu, professor at the People's University of Beijing) considers Confucianism the root of Chinese culture, which immunizes it against crises, even though the evolution of modernity has affected its centrality in China's life. In response, Liu Qing says that "in present-day China Confucianism no longer represents 'the root of culture'" (Liu Qing, *Das Wiederaufleben des Konfuzianismus und die moderne Politik*, 2012, in Daniel Leese, Shi Ming, Hrsg., *Chinesischen Denken der Gegenwart. Schlüsseltexte zu Politik und Gesellschaft*, 2023, p. 228). Something else may be said: Confucius created a major tradition of human civilization, but "Chinese culture always has its own subjectivity and specificity, and Confucianism is only a part of the whole (it may even be an important part), but orthodoxy in this matter is no longer valid" (p. 229). Of course, "many Confucian ideals and teachings (especially 'the way of the noble') could help to overcome the flaws of modernity" (p. 230).

Many try to use Confucianism as a political tool. However, "plainly put, I believe that many of the ideas and plans of political Confucianism seriously underestimate the limitations to which modernity constrains politics" (p. 233). "The lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*)" of contemporary Chinese life is made up of Chinese traditions, but also of modern Chinese culture and of modern culture coming from outside China. "In cultural practices in China, the West is already inherent." "In other words, in today's China, factors that are rooted in ancient China or have

resulted from the modern era, together with ideas and concepts coming from the West, make up the horizon of our cultural praxis" (p. 237). The ideas of egalitarianism, individualism, and pluralism have taken durable root and are components of societal representations.

Confucianism cannot replace "constitutional democracy," but it can improve it (p. 240). "The Confucian moral tradition emphasizes a sense of responsibility and community spirit, which could help prevent rights-based individualism from expanding" (p. 240). Liu Qing's conclusion is that for now, the revival of Confucianism is more of an intellectual movement, whose future depends not only on Confucians, but also on the historical and social conditions of the entire situation. Confucianism will, however, continue to exert influence as a kind of "civil religion" (*Zivilreligion*).

Valorisation in International Relations

Today we are in a new historical situation. As the most prominent German journalist of our time tells us, in a well-informed, lucid, and responsible book, "humanity is meanwhile experiencing the most dramatic geopolitical, geostrategic, and geoeconomic changes in the last five hundred years. More precisely, we are living through the third historic shift of power in modern history/.../. The nineteenth century was the century of Europe, the twentieth century was the century of America. The twenty-first century – this is what most forecasts said at the turn of this century – will be the century of Asia. But something is missing in this assessment: it will be the century of China" (Theo Sommer, *China First. Die Welt auf dem Weg ins chinesischen Jahrhundert*, C. H. Beck, München, 2019, p. 11). China is no longer the China of the seventies, as many still imagine, but a China so modernized that both Europe and America "must think about the question of how they will be able to advance in the emerging Chinese century" (p. 45).

Increasingly, American, European, and Asian commentators are saying something similar. And to these assessments, the crisis of democracy is added. *The theorem according to which elections have become more dependent on lobbying and costly media coverage than on the value of the candidates can only make one pause. Practically, in many countries, there is dissatisfaction with the level of those*

who come out "victorious" from such elections, which classical democracy did not foresee, and which demand a solution.

Prominent Chinese philosophers nowadays advance Confucian alternatives for addressing contemporary crises (Zhao Tingyang, *Alle unter dem Himmel. Vergangenheit und Zukunft der Weltordnung*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2020). The author draws on the tradition of conceiving politics, "*Tianxia*", created under the Zhou dynasty. *Tianxia* is "the political ideal of a world order" which stands under the motto of integrating people beyond their differences, taking them as humans, and "aims at a world order in which the world as a whole becomes the subject of politics, at an order of coexistence that considers the entire world as a political entity. To conceive the world from the aspect of *Tianxia* means to make the world as a whole the starting point of the analysis to design a political order suitable for reality/.../ The starting point of the *Tianxia* methodology is that the world is to be considered as the subject" (p. 14)

For Zhao Tingyang, in *Tianxia*, which he considers politics in the literal sense, nothing of reality remains "external," but all parts are "internal" (p. 16). For instance, *Tianxia* is diametrically opposed to the views of Carl Schmitt, who focused politics on the distinction "friend – enemy." *Tianxia* dissolves this distinction by integrating all who exist. This concept today is an alternative to the conception of politics that operates with the "internal-external" distinction and is therefore conflictual.

The starting point of the analysis in *All Under Heaven: The Past and Future of World Order* is the observation of the world's situation: being mired in conflicts, which are resolved only to lead to other conflicts, and in short-term solutions that require further solutions. Zunzi's thesis was that human existence needs, *ab initio*, the existence of the group. From this starting point, Zhao Tingyang formulates "the ontological principle: coexistence precedes existence, in other words, coexistence is the premise of existence" (p. 18).

Zhao Tingyang does not oppose China, with the concept of Tianxia, to Europe, with the consideration of the individual as a bearer of freedoms and inalienable rights. The well-known philosopher from contemporary Beijing seeks their mutual complementarity. "The two systems together form a kind of interlocking gears,

which fit together and are structurally complete. If the individual level is missing, that is, there is no political guarantee of individual autonomy. If the *Tianxia* level is missing, the whole world system remains in the air. Overcoming anarchic states of affairs and achieving world peace becomes impossible. If an adequate world order is not created, then global politics threatens—relative to the rise of new powers which, in the course of globalization, gradually leave behind state politics and their ability to control international politics—to turn the lack of control into a dangerous game of losing control" (p. 22). Only this complementarity opens up the horizon of a different world.

The Enduring Contributions of Confucius

What was handed down to us from Confucius lends itself today to astonishing analogies. We do not have decisive evidence to speak of lineages and influences, but analogies can be made.

The first analogy pertains to Christianity – taking into account the sensitivity with which the Jesuits approached Confucius and, of course, some statements in the *Analects*. When asked about the essence of humanity, Confucius replied with the maxim: "What you do not wish for yourself, you must not do to others" (German edition p. 43). He recommended "aligning your goals with Dao, stopping at virtue, relying on humanity, and becoming familiar with the arts" (p. 47). An analogy can be made with Jesus's *Sermon on the Mount*.

The second analogy pertains to the authenticity thematized by Heidegger. According to many indications (Fabian Heubel, *Gewundene Wege nach China. Heidegger-Daoismus-Adorno*, Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 2020), the author of the masterpiece *Sein und Zeit* (1927) had come into contact, in 1919 already, with German translations of Daoism, from which he retained the questioning of the human being as "*in der Welt-sein*." In *Von Wesen der Wahrheit* (1930), Heidegger commented on passage 28 of the Daodejing, which talks about light and darkness in relation to the disclosure of human being. On the German market at that time there was *Reden und Gleichnisse des Tschuang-tse*, a book from which the German philosopher retained the question: how genuine is joy in beings? In *Letter on Humanism* (1945), Heidegger is inspired by Zhuangzi's question regarding "the

necessity of the unnecessary": the unnecessary must at least be spoken of, if it is to apply to the criteria of the necessary to it.

The third analogy pertains to the American pragmatism. Alfred Whitehead believed that to understand Dewey it is enough to read Confucius, and vice versa (Lucien Price, *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead*, Nonpareil Book, Boston, 1954). Confucius did not formulate general theses, as Kant and the American pragmatists would do, but a pragmatism is present in his conception. He considered that "asking questions is in itself the correct rite" (III, 15). His anti-dogmatism is obvious. "I can do nothing with the man who gives assent, but does not rectify himself, or the man who is pleasant, but does not reform himself" (IX, 24). Confucius was convinced that people understand the world starting from the practical solutions they provide. When a disciple asked him about death, Confucius replied: "You did not understand life. How can you understand death?" (XI, 12). It is not a merit to live in poverty, and it is right to continuously improve your situation (XI, 19). His principle was: "I do not complain against Heaven, nor do I blame Man. In my studies I start from below and get through to what is up above" (XIV, 35). A pragmatic perspective is also seen in the statement "To learn without thinking leads to deception. To think without learning is dangerous" (p. 104).

We thus have analogies that urge us to investigate. However, *we can speak with certainty of Confucius' decisive contributions to the world culture. Confucius initiated many accomplishments and he has remained a reference throughout time.*

We have from him the awareness of the need for *autonomous morality*: it is justified to seek many things in life, including profit, but morality does not result from such things. It is about *education for everyone, based on the universal curriculum*. In Confucius' conception, "in education there should be no class distinction" (XV, 38), since every person needs education. He said that for a nation, "education, population, and wealth are essential" (XII,9). Education begins with moral education – focused on love (*Jen*), good manners (*Li*), filial piety (*Hsiao*), harmony (*Chung Yung*). Subordinate to moral education are the arts (*Wen*), conduct (*Hsing*), loyalty (*Chung*), and faith (*Hsin*), and among the arts were dialectics, politics, and literature. Confucius made the transition to a "curriculum for all." Not

everyone can be an educator – only one who is up to date with new knowledge and masters enough knowledge. "A man is worthy of being a teacher who gets to know what is new by keeping fresh in his mind what he is already familiar with" (II, 11). It is about governing *through the virtues of those who lead*. The requested virtues are "gravity, generosity, sincerity, seriousness, and availability" (XVII, 6). The sovereign must be benevolent and loving, and everyone has the right to criticize and to rebel. It is about *abandoning dogmatic distinctions in favour of pragmatic considerations*. The economist who developed, under Deng Xiaoping's impetus, the 1978 reform project showed that *the reform that enabled the modernization of contemporary China was more than economic, and how important the Chinese intellectual tradition was for the reform*. It is about shaping the perspective of "creative freedom." Confucius realized that freedom understood as unlimited will needs to be complemented by freedom as the assumption of the chance for creation. *It is about meritocracy*. Confucius conditioned the state of society on the individuals who come to decide. Prepared, talented, and virtuous people are called to lead the community. After applying criteria merit and not of origin, Confucius distinguished among the members of the community: the "superior man (*the gentleman*)" – characterized by "love without anxiety, vision without perplexity, and courage without fear" (XIV, 30), who takes "righteousness" as the supreme value (VII, 125). *It is a matter of integrity*. For Confucius, this is the first characteristic a man should embody – in his words, one should not have two minds in his head. "The gentleman is easy of mind, while the small man is ever full of anxiety" (VII, 125). *It is, finally, about harmony as the horizon of actions and aspirations*. Of the things brought by rites, harmony is the most valuable" (I, 12). "Harmony" presupposes a functional "hierarchy." "He who rules must use the services of his subjects in accordance with the rites. A subject should serve his ruler by acting in accordance with them" (III, 19). "Enrichment" and "career" are worth pursuing, but only through the correct path—the path of one's own value. The gentleman "cultivates himself and thus brings peace and security to the people" (XIV, 42).

The Importance of the Contemporary Recourse to Confucius

Why is Confucius' system important today? After all, the systems we have encountered in recent decades — "Eastern European socialism," "social democracy," "neoliberalism," "technocracy," and "conservatism"—appealed to forces stronger in people's lives than civicism, moral education, and music. "Eastern European socialism" claimed that those who came to power expressed the meaning of history and therefore controlled secret services, the military, and the judiciary, thus affecting democracy and civicism. "Social-democratism" emphasized the redistribution of goods and social democratization, but it no longer cultivated civic engagement and lost the race under the historical conditions of globalization. "Neoliberalism" put everything into competition among market entrepreneurs, but it led to the ideology of globalism, which brought with it the splitting of societies, a crisis of democracy, and an international crisis. "Technocracy" promises organization and solutions based on science, however not only does the explosive development of scientific knowledge relativize it, but, at every moment, it has proven to be a mere concealment of the real difficulties experienced by people. "Conservatism" wants to restore the democratic republicanism of the beginnings of modernity, but it still does not process life experiences under the major concentrations of economic power, nor the conditions of a world entered under the "variable geometry of the superpowers."

In different proportions, of course, these systems have been converted into ideologies – and ideologies cannot meet the needs of people's lives. *Another vision has become necessary in our time – a vision capable of delineating the necessary and sufficient actions for reproducing life at evolved levels and in a humane way.* I have formulated the starting point of such a vision elsewhere (Andrei Marga, *Lumea ca acțiune*, Școala ardeleană, Cluj-Napoca, 2026). Here, I only want to draw attention to two facts.

The first fact is that a vast change awaits us from the scientific picture of the world, which has always influenced the vision of the world. In fact, Newton's principles – the principle of inertia, the principle of the dependence of force on mass and acceleration, the principle of equality of action and reaction – have

entered general consciousness. When the study of energy was undertaken – gravitational energy, with Newton, and then other energies – the principle of the conservation of force and energy, within which we actually think, was formulated. As we know, Einstein adopted relativity and showed that space and time depend on the observer's speed of motion, Niels Bohr modelled the atom, Heisenberg formulated the uncertainty principle in the description of bodies as wave or corpuscle Schrödinger gave the mathematical formula of a particle's wave over time – these and many others have entered the consciousness of physical reality formed in high schools and universities. Meanwhile, however, Max Planck's initiative to quantize energy and, with it, quantum mechanics, went far. *Today, we are not only in the era of genetics, of synthetic biology, and, in general, of the expansion of nanoscience, but also in that of technological valorisation of quantum mechanics.*

At least two concepts of the most recent formulation of quantum mechanics compel a change in both the physical picture of the world and the vision of reality: *The concept of 'superposition,'* based on the assertion that, at the quantum level, the corpuscle exists simultaneously in multiple states and that only the act of observation fixes it into one state; and *the concept of "interpenetration,"* based on the assertion that at the quantum level, particles maintain connections beyond the space and time with which we operate in current experience.

These two concepts directly lead to changes in the worldview. The concept of "superposition" forces us to consider that we, as humans, have access to reality only through "observation" – and "observation" is possible only within action. The concept of "interpenetration" forces us to accept that the space-time relationships in our current experience are far surpassed by reality, to the extent that they demand a new description.

We can intuitively illustrate in many ways what picture is being formed. Since we are in the years of computer construction expansion, I would take an example from this expansion. I have made elsewhere the inventory of premises (in symbolic logic, set theory, generative grammar, neurology, cognitive psychology, materials study, engineering) of the current computer construction (Andrei Marga, *Inteligența artificială și condiția umană*, Meteor Press, București, 2025). The

computers we operate with are built on the convention of reducing values to 0 and 1, a particular formula of information, and a particular computation. Now, with the change of this computation, the computer changes, but more than that – the vision of reality changes. The transition to quantum computers is accompanied by such changes as well. *Nowadays, not only the physical picture of reality, but even technology drives shifts in vision.*

The second fact is that one cannot emerge from crises without reaffirming civicism – without civic humanism. The Confucius-Kant-John Dewey – John Rawls – Habermas line is the one that rises in an era of crises, not only economic, but also of legitimacy and motivation, not only of administration, but also of democracy, not only of creativity, but also of meritocracy, not only of morality, but also of great sentiments. Philosophically returning to the human origin of the world and to the actional origin of society is the step that conditions any normalization.

The significance of the valorisation of Confucius in the contemporary emergence of China is deeper than is commonly believed. *On the one hand, in China, the need was perceived to renew the vision in order to face his own history, unusually rich in experiences, but also the recognition that the civic life of societies is an unavoidable environment, the depreciation of which comes at a cost. On the other hand, in China, it is recognized that the very experiences of knowledge and technological modernity lead us to seek updated visions, focused on the role of the people in the construction of their world.*