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# Confucian Revival and School Culture

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

Richard Worsman  
Melon Grant Response  
10/7/11

This summer used the Melon Grant to complete research in Anqing, Anhui, China. This research was combined with an internship teaching English at Anqing Number 1 Middle School, and will include in an Honors Thesis in the history department, which I am currently working on regarding the Confucian Revival and school culture in China today.

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution in China in 1976, the country has undergone a series of economic, social, and cultural reform movements. Reforms such as the “Four Modernizations” was made official state policy by Deng Xiaoping, and began the economic opening of China. Other reforms and movements have not been made official state policy. The Confucian Revival is one such movement. On Mainland China, the Confucian Revival began during the Deng Xiaoping era, as Deng met with modern Confucian thinkers such as Du Wei-ming. Since the 1980’s the People’s Republic of China has revived Confucius as a state figure in a number of ways. Most notably, the 2008 Beijing Olympics, as well as numerous speeches by current President Hu Jintao on creating a ‘harmonious society’ demonstrate the prominence of Confucianism in political circles.

The phrase Confucian Revival is misleading. In fact, Confucianism has remained prominent in East Asia throughout the 20th century. In Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and other parts of East Asia, Confucianism continued to operate in education and philosophy. Therefore Confucianism did not end with the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911.

Contemporary scholars such as Daniel Bell, a comparative philosopher at Tsinghua University in Beijing, and William Theodore De Barry, Neo-Confucian scholar from Columbia University, have studied this contemporary phenomenon in Chinese society. Bell, De Barry, and others have examined the educative dimensions of the Confucian Revival. Education is central to the Confucian tradition. Also, popular news sources and blogs have commented on the need for Confucian morals in contemporary education. Most importantly, the PRC has sponsored the Confucius Institute across the globe, and modern Confucians in China, such as Jiang Qing and Kang Xiaoguang, have established private Confucian learning academies within China. This illustrates the Confucian Revival is an educative project, but this raises numerous questions regarding public education in China.

With this background in the Confucian tradition I attempted to answer a few of those questions in my research. First, I wanted to examine how Confucianism is discussed in a small, developing city in China today. While Daniel Bell asserts the growth of Confucianism, Bell's focus is largely on the growing prominence of Confucianism in political and philosophical circles. This excludes an on-the-ground reality of the Confucian Revival. Furthermore, De Barry argues that globalization, as well as the growth of technology and consumerism presents a current crisis for education around the world, including China. Anqing, a small but developing city in Southern China represents such a context of globalization, technology, and consumerism. Second, I decided to examine how Confucianism affects moral education and other aspects of public education within such a City. Were Confucian morals prominent in curriculum? Were Confucian morals viewed as priorities for school administrators and educators?

Over the course of June and July of 2011 I attempted to answer such questions. I interviewed one of the principals of the school, Shen Bo, and collected two of his published books, which were reflections of his education experiences and beliefs during his career at Anqing Number 1 and Number 2 middle schools. Also, I taught English everyday in various settings at the school. During the course of my teaching, I conducted informal questions about Confucianism with other teachers and students. I also collected books on the history of Anqing, and the school.

While this research will take me the remaining two semesters at Connecticut College to theorize and analyze more closely, I will describe the key observations of my research.

First, in many instances the Confucian Revival is not explicit, but more tacit. For instance, many of the teachers, school administrators, and students could not comment at length about Confucianism, or the revival for that matter. Instead Confucianism in many cases seemed more a part of traditional culture, which is treasured but not practiced in day-to-day life. However, there are ways in which the Confucian revival is tacitly at play. While many teachers and students would not identify as practicing Confucians, they spoke with pride regarding Confucius. In addition to this pride, I observed many parks in China feature statues of Confucius, and I visited a park in Anhui province that celebrates China's five-thousand year history. In all of these experiences Confucius symbolized Chinese cultural identity. These observations are part of the national, and inherently political, discourse that makes Confucius synonymous with Chinese culture.

Second, the curriculum in Anqing Number 1 Middle School reflects devotion to 'modernization' and 'globalize.' Being a key provincial school, Anqing No. 1 Middle

School's students consistently test the highest in the Anhui province and many students continue to attend the best colleges in the country. This curriculum involves one of two tracks, sciences or humanities. In either track students are taught to the test, and are pressured from high competition to achieve academic success. This curriculum excludes the area's rich history and prides itself on being 'global.' However, 'global' is synonymous with 'western.' For instance, not only do educational systems in China constantly compare each other to western schools, Anqing No. 1 Middle School prides itself on teaching English as a foreign language, enjoys an exchange programs with Australian and American school teachers, and boasts the best scores in English in Anhui Province. Success in schools in China means productivity in a global economy, dominated by the English language.

Anqing is a prime example of a fundamental crisis in Chinese education that has occurred for the last two decades. Max Weber argued that Confucianism would hold China back from progress in form of liberal government and economics. In the last twenty years China, and other East Asian countries such as Singapore, have grappled with Weber's thesis. Anqing's curriculum is one example of such unfettered modernization in education. This fact is also reflected in the school's history as it was established in response to the abolition of Confucian academies more than 100 years ago. In this way Anqing reflects the two sides to the Confucian Revival and global education; competition on the world stage placing pressure on rapid growth and modernization, and the use of Confucius to embody the Chinese spirit and cultural identity. This tension is apparent in Anqing No.1 Middle School from curriculum to school history, and is an

example of China historical national discourse surround tradition, modernity, and identity.

My thesis over the next two semesters will examine these issues in greater detail in the following ways. First, presenting a historiography and literature review presenting the positions of scholars in the fields of Confucianism and Chinese educational systems, such as William De Barry and Daniel Bell. Second, I will write and in depth historical background discussing the changes of the Confucian tradition in 20th century Chinese society. In this discussion I will present the current political context of the Confucian Revival. Next, I will present and analyze the debate between current Confucian philosophers. Lastly, I will further analyze my experiences and research in Anqing and locate such observations and research within the discourse of the Confucian Revival.