



Confucian Pacifism or Confucian Confusion?¹

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INTRODUCTION

Using force and pretending to benevolence is the hegemon. (Mencius)

I started leafing through a history book [S]crawled this way and that across every page were the words benevolence, righteousness and morality.... I read that history very carefully ... and finally I began to make out what was written between the lines: the whole volume was filled with a single phrase – eat people. (*Diary of a Madman*)

Mencius (2009: 2A3), one of the early Confucian classics attributed to Mencius (372–289 BCE), warns that the most powerful state could be ‘using force and pretending to benevolence.’ The *Diary of a Madman* (Lu, 1990: 32), written in 1918 by the New Culture writer Lu Xun (1881–1936), sees through millennia of Confucian pretensions and finds ‘cannibalism’ rather than humanism in the family, the village, and the classics.² This cynicism about Confucian benevolence serves as a cautionary reminder

for scholars of International Relations (IR) who are interested in Asian lenses.

IR has witnessed a wave of critical works that fault mainstream theories for falsely universalizing the American lens (e.g., Acharya and Buzan, 2010; Kang, 2010; Tickner and Wæver, 2009). The agenda to develop non-American IR has naturally turned toward the Asian lens. Journals and presses in Asian studies have published mountains of works that argue that American-centric theories are alien to Asian philosophy and traditions. Such works have injected fresh ideas into IR theorizing. Nevertheless, the search for ‘perspectives on and beyond Asia’ (Acharya and Buzan, 2010: book subtitle) has essentialized Asia. The first misstep is to take China as the representative of *all* of East Asia (a step Ling and Chen correct in this volume). While China does, arguably, have so deep a philosophical and historical heritage that even the Chinese lens could yield valuable insights, scholars cannot make the second misstep – taking Confucian

pacifism as the entirety of China's philosophy and history. This chapter addresses the confusion of Confucianism in the literature.

Confucianism has long been (mis)taken to be *the* Chinese tradition. Max Weber (1951: 169) spoke of 'the pacifist character of Confucianism.' John K. Fairbank (1974: 7) developed 'the pacifist bias of the Chinese tradition.' Recent works have largely followed the footsteps of the early giants. For instance, David Kang (2010: 2) contends that the China-centered 'tribute system emphasized formal inequality between states' and was 'marked by centuries of stability,' in contrast to the Western system which 'emphasized formal equality between states' and was 'marked by incessant interstate conflicts.' Robert Kelly (2012: 408) agrees that Chinese hierarchy produced a 'Long Peace' 'rooted in shared, war-reducing Confucian ideals.' Xin Li and Verner Worm (2011: 70) concur that 'Chinese culture advocates moral strength instead of military power, worships kingly rule instead of hegemonic rule, and emphasizes persuasion by virtue.' David Shambaugh (2004/05: 95) maintains that 'China does not have a significant history of ... coercion or territorial expansionism.' Yongnian Zheng (2010: 304) believes that the Chinese Empire was unlike any Western empire in that it was 'formed by the "natural" expansion of the Middle Kingdom, not by conquest.'

Prompted by the volume's focus on philosophy, history, and sociology, this chapter questions the argument about Confucian pacifism in China's philosophical and historical context. It cautions against confusing Confucian pacifism as the entirety of Chinese philosophy, or even the equivalent of the Chinese tradition. Like other world civilizations, the Chinese civilization is not homogeneous; rather, it undeniably contains heterogeneous traditions that act in contention with one another. Works that essentialize Confucian pacifism are vulnerable to the problem of selection bias – it is as if Western history were to be represented by Immanuel Kant's perpetual peace.

When we examine the philosophical context, Confucianism was not as internally consistent as the suffix '-ism' suggests. Bruce and Taeko Brooks (2015: 12) observe that Classical texts were written by different groups of people at different times who were not necessarily in full agreement. Moreover, Confucianism had to compete with many contradictory traditions. While some Confucian principles did champion pacifism and benevolence, Legalist and military schools advocated power and interest. Iain Johnston (1995: 164–5, 170, 172) argues that the *parabellum* strategic culture prevailed over the idealized Confucian–Mencian moral norms in practice.³ Yet, the recent wave of IR scholarship through the Asian lens has zoomed in on Confucian pacifism. Even the famous dictum in the *Sunzi's Art of War* – 'to bring the enemy's army to submit without combat is the highest skill' – is reinterpreted to conform to Confucian peace (Feng, 2007: 22). (More on this below.)

Given the diversity of philosophical doctrines, scholars who wish to establish a causal role for Confucian pacifism must examine its historical context. Just as IR scholars who argue that norms matter have the burden to trace how a particular normative idea shaped foreign policy, those who study China should likewise examine how Confucian pacifism shaped the actual conduct of Chinese foreign relations. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for arguments about Confucian peace to treat philosophy and history as synonyms. Many articles and books outline Confucian concepts such as 'benevolence' (*ren*), 'virtue' (*de*), 'great harmony under heaven' (*tianxia datong*), 'kingly authority' (*wangdao*), and so on, and then conclude that China's historical IR was based on Confucian pacifism. It is, of course, legitimate for scholars to study philosophy or the history of thought for its own sake. However, IR scholars normally aim for theory-building and testing. As such, it is imperative not to repeat the same mistake Paul Schroeder (1994: 148) complains about: Waltzian balance of power theory is

‘unhistorical, perhaps anti-historical.’ Efforts to bring in the Asian or Chinese lens could present a credible challenge to American-centric IR theory only when relevant works scrutinize political philosophy in practice as opposed to political philosophy divorced from history.

This chapter situates Confucianism with the philosophical and historical contexts of, first, the Classical era (770–221 BCE) and then the Imperial era (221 BCE to 1911 CE). The next section introduces the multitude of philosophical traditions in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (or collectively the Classical era). While a set of pacifist doctrines indeed emerged, they were largely irrelevant to the competition for military victories and territorial gains. The ensuing section traces Confucianism in practice in the Imperial era. While dynastic founders continued to build their empires on strength, they turned to Confucian principles for legitimation. Confucian doctrines that supported righteous war were readily deployed to legitimize conquest and expansion. If the Son of Heaven was presumed to embody Heavenly virtue and anyone who challenged his authority was supposed to lack virtue, then any use of force could be justified as punishment rather than aggression. Given that philosophical principles were malleable enough to support both peace and war, it is imperative to examine Confucianism in historical practice beyond abstract philosophy.

CONFUCIANISM IN PHILOSOPHICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE CLASSICAL ERA

The presumption of Confucian pacifism is based on the teachings of the two most renowned Confucian masters: Confucius (549–479 BC) and Mencius (372–289 BC). According to *The Analects of Confucius* (the sayings of Confucius), when the state of Wei’s ruler Lingong asked Confucius about

military tactics, he replied, ‘If it is matters of sacrificial vessels, I have heard of them; if it is matters of armies and campaigns, I have never studied them’ (2007: book 15, 1). Confucius is reported to be so offended that he left Wei the next day. In addition to this dramatic instance, the *Analects* (book 13, 16) generally develops the argument that the test of good governance is the happiness of the people – if the people are happy, then ‘the distant will come.’ Any resort to violence by a ruler counts as ‘an admission that he had failed in his own conduct as a sage pursuing the art of government’ (Fairbank, 1974: 7). The *Mencius*, a collection of dialogues attributed to Mencius but compiled over time, pushes Confucian pacifism further. It accuses those who say ‘I am skilled in making formations’ or ‘I am skilled in making war’ as ‘criminals’ (2009: book 7B4). Echoing the *Analects*, the *Mencius* stresses the superiority of winning the support of the people by benevolent governance. If a ruler implements enlightened policies that benefit the people,

people of neighboring kingdoms would treat him as their parent. Should the rulers of neighboring kingdoms try to get their people to invade, it would be like asking children to attack their parents, and it would never succeed. In this way, he would be invincible in the world. (Book 2A5)

In addition, Mohism, though distinctive from Confucianism, may also be said to advocate pacifism. The *Mozi*, attributed to the founder Mozi, argues in the chapter ‘Against Aggressive War’ that aggressive war is ‘the most heinous of all crimes.’ The *Mozi* (2003: book 4) also advocates ‘universal love’: ‘If everyone loves others as he loves himself – there will be ... no conflicts, and no war.’

The first and foremost contextual consideration of Confucianism is that it was born in the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States periods (770–221 BCE). Fierce interstate competition gave rise to ‘hundred [meaning many] schools of thought.’ While it is true that Confucian classics preached peace, benevolence, virtue, and harmony,

they contested with other schools that emphasized military power and victories. Legalist texts such as the *Guanzi*, *Shang jun shu* (*The Book of Lord Shang*), and the *Hanfeizi* prescribed military, economic, and administrative reforms to enhance capabilities. Military texts such as the *Sunzi's Art of War*, *Sun Bin's Art of War*, *Wuzi's Art of War* offered strategies and stratagems to win victories on the battlefield.

In an environment where 'warfare is the greatest affair of the state, the basis of life and death, the Way to survival or extinction' (Sun-tzu [Sunzi], 1994: ch. 13), Confucian masters had a hard time turning their ideas into policies. Confucius served Lu's Dinggong (r. 509–495 BCE) and Aigong (r. 494–68 BCE) in very 'modest' ways (Brooks and Brooks, 2015: 123). Li Ling (2007) of Peking University titles his volume on Confucius's 'Stray Dog' to highlight that Confucius was a homeless wanderer who could not persuade any rulers to follow his policy recommendations. Mencius was the only Confucian to serve as a minister to a major state – Qi in the northeast (Brooks and Brooks, 2015: 135). But the sole opportunity for a Confucian master to direct foreign policy resulted in 'an abrupt and ignominious end' (Brooks and Brooks, 2015: 135; more below).

If Confucian masters were on the margins of the policy world, then what talent was promoted to high positions? Exactly those the *Mencius* (4A14, 6B9) denounces: 'those skilled in war,' 'those who secure alliances with other nobles,' and 'those who open up wasteland and increase the yield of the soil.' That is, those who knew how to promote power and wealth: military strategists who scored victories on the battlefield; diplomatic strategists who deployed cunning stratagems to maximize advantages over adversaries; and Legalist administrators and economists who established hierarchical administration to enhance state capacity, registered populations to impose national taxation and conscription, and promoted agricultural productivity to raise revenues (Hui, 2005: ch. 2).

In an anarchic system of incessant warfare, military talent was of the utmost importance. Two millennia before the Napoleonic Wars,

China had already perfected numerous formations and methods of deployment, as well as an underlying hierarchical organization based upon the squad of five that, when coupled with precise training methods, allowed articulation, segmentation, and the execution of both orthodox and unorthodox tactics. (Sawyer, 1999)

Scholars – who believe that the *Sunzi's* dictum of winning without fighting signifies pacifism – fail to appreciate the extent to which Classical strategists and administrators understood the political economy of war. As the *Sunzi* calculates,

when you send forth an army of a hundred thousand on a campaign, marching them out a thousand *li*,⁴ the expenditures ... will be one thousand pieces of gold per day. Those inconvenienced and troubled both within and without the border, who are exhausted on the road or are unable to pursue their agricultural work, will be seven hundred thousand families. (Sun-tzu, 1994: ch. 13)

How could states seek victory without war? The *Sunzi* (ch. 1) argues that 'warfare is the Way of deception.' Given the high costs of war, the superior strategy was to undermine the enemy's ability to wage war by 'unorthodox' tactics or techniques of surprise and deceit (ch. 5). In diplomatic exchanges, the ideal diplomat should be an 'archetypal figure of the realm of stratagem and cunning' (Lewis, 1999: 632). Stratagems included 'sowing doubts and rumors, bribing and corrupting officials, and executing estrangement techniques' (Sawyer, 1998: 4). If fighting was unavoidable, the ideal commander should be 'a master of maneuver, illusion, and deception' who was able 'to disguise his intentions while penetrating the schemes of his adversary and to manipulate appearances so that the enemy would march to its doom' (Sawyer, 1998: 632).

It may be said that military and Legalist texts are 'Confucian' as they promote good governance. However, effective governance

was designed to enhance the foundation of national power and wealth for Classical thinkers of all persuasions. One passage in the *Mencius* (2009: book 1A5) argues that the people of a generic small state that enjoys benevolent government ‘can be made to inflict defeat on the strong armor and sharp weapons of Qin and Chu, armed with nothing but staves.’ Another passage (book 1B13) advises the actual small state of Teng (which was wedged between the powerful states of Qi and Chu) to ‘dig deeper moats and build higher walls,’ and expresses doubt that it could survive at all. The latter passage explicitly acknowledges that ‘small states, notwithstanding virtuous conduct, cannot hope to resist aggression’ (Brooks, Warring States Work Group communication, February 10, 2004). Thus, even the *Mencius* understands that good governance involves more than Confucian pacifism.

Although *Mencius* (2009: book 1A6) urged that the unifier should be ‘the one who has no proclivity toward killing,’ the Qin state (as opposed to the Qin dynasty later) eventually vanquished all other warring states through violence and cunning. It introduced the most comprehensive military, administrative, and economic ‘self-strengthening reforms’ to facilitate total mobilization for war (Hui, 2005: ch. 2). The Qin also pursued relentless divide-and-conquer strategies to break up balancing alliances, and employed ruthless stratagems of bribery and deception to enhance its chances for victory. Qin’s commanders not only seized territory by force, but also brutally killed defeated enemy soldiers en masse to demoralize and incapacitate losing states (Hui, 2005: ch. 2). Yinhong Shi (2011: 9–10, 14) of People’s University calls the Qin dynasty’s founder (r. 246–10 BC) an imperialist who disregarded all moral considerations in swallowing up the other six states. Shi further argues that Qin’s general Bai Qi pioneered a tradition of total conquest that was ‘more Napoleonic than Napoleon and more Clausewitzian than Clausewitz’ (p. 6). Shi wonders: ‘What if the Qin empire had lasted for much longer than

two generations? Then what kind of Chinese would we have become, and what kind of strategic tradition and culture would we have inherited?’ (p. 17).

CONFUCIANISM IN PHILOSOPHY VERSUS HISTORY

Given this philosophical and historical context, why, then, do IR scholars single out Confucian pacifism? Such arguments not only bracket other philosophical schools, but also conflate philosophy with history. Xuetong Yan’s *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (2011), probably the most prominent work in the genre, provides an instructive example. The volume vacillates between philosophy and history throughout. Yan sets out to ‘grasp the true picture’ of ancient Chinese thought so as ‘to develop a new theory based on combining pre-Qin thought and contemporary international relations theory’ (pp. 201, 211). He argues that the key insight is the concept of ‘political power’ defined as ‘humane authority’ or ‘morally informed leadership’ (*wangdao*) (p. 115). He criticizes American-centric IR theories for their emphasis on economic and military capabilities, which are ‘secondary to political leaders who act (at least partly) in accordance with moral norms’ (p. 78).

Is Yan’s a philosophical or a historical argument? The book title suggests that the analysis is about thought instead of history. Moreover, ‘A note on the translation’ points out that the term ‘*wangdao*’ represents ‘the political *ideal* of pre-Qin thinkers’ (Yan, 2011: no page number; italics added). At the same time, Yan contends in the chapter ‘Yan Xuetong: A realist scholar clinging to scientific prediction’ that ‘theory must be based on reality’ (p. 242). He does ‘not like what cannot be verified, because there is no way of knowing if its conclusions are valid’ (p. 241). To continue with the contradiction,

Yan argues both that the accuracy of events discussed in Classical texts ‘has no bearing on our ability to draw lessons from them’ and that ‘[s]tudy of pre-Qin thought is of assistance to us in understanding history correctly’ (pp. 202, 218). The tension between thought and history is most obvious in the chapter ‘Hegemony in *The Stratagems of the Warring States*’ coauthored with Yuxing Huang. On the one hand, Yan and Huang claim that the *Stratagems* ‘records the history of the Warring States’ (2011: 107). On the other hand, they believe that ‘it does not matter for our analysis whether the facts recorded actually took place or what the speakers’ aims were’ (pp. 108–9). Despite the dubious historicity of events, the authors conclude that ‘[w]ithout the support of norms and relying only on power, the strategists of the Warring States period could not have attained hegemony’ (2011: 110–11).

If Yan and his coauthors are interested in theory-building beyond philosophy, they should carefully track how the ideal of ‘*wangdao*’ in fact shaped actual policies of the time. Instead, Yan and Huang (2011: 125) quote the Qin general Bai Qi as support: ‘Console those that are fearful; punish those that are arrogant; punish and destroy those without the Way. Thus you can order the feudal lords and all under heaven can be put in order.’ Curiously, Bai Qi was the most brutal among Qin’s commanders. He is recorded to have killed more than 1.5 million soldiers of defeated states between 356 and 236 BC, so many that Yinhong Shi (2011: 15) calls him ‘the super butcher.’ By the same token, Yan should back up his dismissal of material power by offering an explanation for why the ancient era is well known for Legalist reforms aimed at strengthening the military and enriching the treasury. As quoted in Yan’s volume, the *Hanfeizi* observes that ‘today, conflict is decided by strength’ (2011: 29). Likewise, the *Guanzi* suggests that ‘if war is not won and defense is not firm, then the state will not be secure’ (cited in Yan, 2011: 38). When the ‘*wangdao*’ ideal is not anchored with historical analysis, it is difficult

to rule out the likelihood that the discussion of moral norms in the *Stratagems* involved nothing more than an enlightened reaction against a disagreeable reality. Significantly, this text was written in the early Han rather than the Warring States period (Brooks and Brooks, 2015: 116). Significantly, according to Brooks and Brooks (2015: 116), this text was written in the early Han rather than the Warring States period, representing the what-might-have-been perspective and expressing regret that the six states had not combined against Qin. As Yang Qianru, one of the critics whose comments are included in the volume, puts it, Yan

abstracts from concrete historical contexts and then chooses part of the works of the pre-Qin masters and expounds these texts Is the reading of pre-Qin history and the exposition of the thought of the pre-Qin masters a matter of amassing evidence or engaging in hermeneutics? If it is a matter of evidence, then it must be grounded in accurate and strict historical testimony. (Yang, 2011: 155)

CONFUCIAN JUST WAR?

Unlike lesser works in the genre, Yan has an easy response to the prevalence of violence in the Classical era. Most of all, he does not equate Confucianism with pacifism but highlights that Confucianism sanctions the just use of force. As he puts it, ‘Some claim that Confucius and Mencius advocate “no war” and are opposed to all war. In fact, they ... support just wars’ (Yan, 2011: 35). Yan adds that ‘Confucius ... thinks that the way of war should be employed to punish the princes who go against benevolence and justice,’ and that ‘Mencius thinks that using just war to uphold the norms of benevolence and justice between states is lawful’ (p. 41). In the chapter on the *Stratagems*, Su Qin (who is, it should be pointed out, a fictitious rather than historical figure) is quoted as suggesting that ‘a hegemonic state worthy of the name will certainly want to use military force to destroy violent states, to restructure chaotic states, to

obliterate evil states, and to attack states with violent rulers' (Yan and Huang, 2011: 125). Citing the *Xunzi* (writings of Zun Kuang, a Confucian philosopher of the 3rd century BCE), Yan (2011: 41) argues that 'talking about morality does not exclude using military force to annex other states,' and that '[o]ne who uses virtue to annex others will attain humane authority.'

It is true that Confucian philosophers were not naively pacifist or unambiguously anti-war. As Sungmoon Kim (2010: 33) argues, 'Confucian moralpolitik' allows for morally justifiable war. Confucius himself was raised in the late feudal military ethos because his father was a lower aristocrat who 'had earned a landholding by his valor in battle' (Brooks and Brooks, 2015: 123). Mencius, although labeled 'the most forthright pacifist' (Lewis, 1990: 129), was not unequivocal in denouncing war. Not entirely inconsistent with the virtue ideal, the *Mencius* supports punitive campaigns against those who lack virtue. Presuming that the 'Son of Heaven' (referring to the idealized Zhou king) possesses virtue while 'feudal lords' (rulers of the warring states) do not, the *Mencius* (books 6B7, 7B2) makes this double-standard argument: 'The son of heaven punishes – he does not attack; a feudal lord attacks – he does not punish.' Moreover, benevolent governance could be turned into 'a form of weapon' (Lewis, 1990: 130) to 'enlist the sympathies of the people of the other states, making them willing to be conquered' (Brooks and Brooks, 2001: 260). As mentioned earlier, Mencius (371–289 BC) was appointed to a ministerial position in the powerful Qi state. In 315 BC, the king of the neighboring Yan experimented with meritocratic succession and abdicated in favor of his minister. The heir's supporters resisted, resulting in internal turmoil. When consulted if Qi should intervene, Mencius (book 1B10) suggested, in words that are remarkably similar to US rhetoric on the eve of the Iraq War, that a righteous invading force that relieved the occupied people of 'fire and water' would be welcomed with 'baskets of food and jugs

of gruel.' Qi's annexation of Yan, however, was violent. Moreover, Qi's aggression provoked a balancing coalition which expelled Qi from Yan. Mencius left Qi in disgrace in 313 BC, thus ending the Confucians' tenuous link to the policy world (Brooks and Brooks, 2015: 135).

The Mohists' anti-war position was no stricter. Brooks and Brooks (1997: 22) suggest that, while *Mozi* chapter 17, written by Mozi himself, characterizes aggressive wars as crimes against humanity, other chapters and passages written by later followers show a softening attitude towards war. Thus, *Mozi* 3:19 suggests that punitive wars are often necessary. *Mozi* 49:12 and 50 discuss the training of young men for military service. And *Mozi* chapters 51–71 advocate the Mohists' famous art of defensive warfare (Brooks and Brooks, 1997: 22).

Did Classical thinkers consider the wars of their time just? The *Mencius* (7B2) remarks that there are no righteous wars in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* which records the state of Lu's (Confucius's home state) major events from 722 to 481 BCE. Brooks (Warring States Work Group communication, December 6, 2007) adds that 'there was never any appeal to harmony, nor any evidence that *de facto* interstate harmony actually obtained Nor was there any reference to peace as such, save as a state of non-war imposed on small states by larger states.' The *Mencius*, as quoted in Yan's volume, also suggests that 'using force and pretending to benevolence is the hegemon' (2011: 49). The *Mozi* (chapter 5; 2003: 54) is similarly scornful of the 'gentlemen of the world' who claim righteous war:

If someone kills one man, he is condemned as unrighteous and must pay for his crime with his own life. According to this reasoning, if someone ... kills a hundred men he is a hundred times as unrighteous and should pay for his crime with a hundred lives.

Now all the gentlemen in the world know enough to condemn such crimes and brand them as unrighteous. And yet when it comes to the even greater unrighteousness of offensive warfare

against other states, they do not know enough to condemn it. On the contrary, they praise it and call it righteous.

Yan (2011: 42) relays a similar judgment in the *Mozi*: ‘What is big and wrong – such as attacking states – is not known to be wrong and so people go along with it and praise it, saying that it is just.’ Most of all, in Yan and Huang’s (2011: 131) account, the ‘strategy of annexation’ in the *Stratagems* involved not just annexing territory, but also ‘annihilating the inhabitants’; otherwise, ‘the survivors will seek to restore their state and annex you in turn.’ It is difficult to square population annihilation – that is, ‘genocide’ – with moral authority.

Just-war arguments must address the question: Who has the authority to judge the justness or legitimacy of specific military actions? Scholars of Christian just war point out that ‘the vagueness and indeterminacy of the standards’ largely render just war as ‘little more than a pretext and a cover for arbitrary violence’ (Smock, 2002: xxxii). The most powerful state is the most tempted to abuse just war. In Yan’s account, the United States is a prime example of a superpower losing its ‘humane authority’ over time (2011: 87). Was China exceptional? The Confucian doctrine of punitive war in fact made it very easy to justify any attacks as punishment rather than aggression. Luke Glanville (2010: 343) points out that ‘[w]hile Mencius did frame his cautious justification for punitive war so as to limit the possibility for abuse by those who were not benevolent,’ powerful states of the time abused his arguments to legitimize aggression against weaker states. Johnston (1995: 68) observes that the rhetoric of righteous war ‘shifts the responsibility for war-like behavior onto the enemy’ so that ‘one’s use of force is ... never illegitimate.’ Indeed, Yan and Huang (2011: 140) note that the *Stratagems* argues that ‘[h]egemony can of itself generate legitimacy for the use of military force.’

The sleight of hand from just war to justifications for war was further aided by the

concept of the Mandate of Heaven. When the Zhou conquered Shang (c. 1045 BC), Zhou rulers claimed to take over the Heaven’s Mandate as the last Shang ruler had been brutal and licentious in conduct. Even though future Confucians would uphold the Zhou as the paragon of virtue, Zhou kings clearly did not seize the Mandate by virtue alone. The takeover was a joint civil–military venture, with King Wen (‘wen’ means the civil) embodying exemplary virtue and King Wu (‘wu’ means the military) representing sanctioned violence. Even though the Mandate of Heaven required a righteous cause, it unambiguously justified the use of force. In Zhou’s formulation and the Confucian tradition, moral virtue was upheld to be as important as military prowess. But the two aspects were merged into one by late Warring States thinkers, so that the Mandate of Heaven could be gained by one whose “virtue” consist[ed] only in the fact of military conquest’ (Books and Brooks, 2015: 69).

Just when the Qin state was eliminating other Warring States, Legalist texts associated with Qin would take over the Confucian ideal of virtue. A passage from *The Book of Lord Shang* (ch. 13), attributed to the architect of Qin’s self-strengthening reforms, Shang Yang, illustrates how an argument for virtue could be easily twisted to justify conquest:

The sage ruler, in ordering others, should first attain their hearts; hence, he is able to use force. Force gives birth to strength; strength gives birth to awesomeness; awesomeness gives birth to virtue; virtue is born of force. The sage ruler alone possesses it; hence he is able to implement benevolence and righteousness in All-under-Heaven. (2017: 192)

As Yuri Pines laments:

What most thinkers might not have anticipated is that their ideal of the sage monarch would be appropriated by one of the most powerful – but also one of the most ruthless – rulers of China: the First Emperor of the unifying Qin dynasty His propaganda efforts focused on stressing his identity with the True Monarch, both in terms of his

individual features, such as sagacity and morality, and in terms of his achievements – most prominently, peace, perfect sociopolitical order, universal prosperity, and the populace's total compliance with the emperor's will. (2012: 53–4)

CONFUCIANISM IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE IMPERIAL ERA

Conventional wisdom holds that, while Legalist and militarist ideas dominated the Classical era, Confucius's ideas on war and violence became the mainstream in the millennia-long Imperial period. This chapter argues that Chinese rulers in fact became conflicted. While kings in the Classical era had few qualms about brutal aggression and cunning stratagems, emperors in the Imperial era sought Confucian justifications. Even Qin's ruthless First Emperor, after he unified 'All under Heaven,' adopted Confucian rituals and claimed the blessings of Heaven. Nevertheless, the Qin dynasty quickly collapsed in 206 BC. The ensuing Han dynasty (202 BC – AD 220) upgraded the statecraft of legitimation. In 136 BC, Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BC) elevated Confucianism as the state's official ideology, generating the confusion that China's tradition was Confucian.

Imperial Confucianism deviated significantly from the Classical version. While Classical Confucianism prescribed to benevolent governance, the criminal codes of the Han and subsequent dynasties followed the harsh Qin Code. This is not to mention that the promotion of Confucianism came with the banning of all other schools of thought, thus stifling freedom of thought once characteristic of the Warring States era. Moreover, while Classical Confucianism puts the 'Mandate of Heaven' in the hands of the people – because, as the *Mencius* (book 5A5) argues, 'Heaven does not speak; it sees and hears as the people see and hear,' Imperial Confucianism invests the Mandate with the emperor as the Son of Heaven. As John K. Fairbank pointed out (1974: 11), 'Han emperors took great

pains to claim that their rule was based on the Confucian teachings of social order, even while they used the methods of the Legalists as the basis for their institutions and policy decisions.' Kung-chuan Hsiao (1977: 137) called Emperor Wu's policy 'Legalism with a Confucian façade.' He added that the label 'Confucian state' 'would have puzzled Confucius himself, horrified Mencius, and failed even to please Xunzi [the most authoritarian of all Classical Confucian philosophers]' (p. 137).

One may thus characterize Emperor Wu's (r. 141–87 BC) foreign policy as 'militarism with a Confucian façade.' Although Emperor Wu championed Confucianism as a philosophy, he in fact followed, and surpassed, Qin's conquest in practice. He not only expanded to what is today's southern China as Qin's First Emperor did, but also launched unprecedented large-scale, long-distance expeditions to the Inner Asian steppes as well as northern Korea and northern Vietnam. After Han's Emperor Wu, subsequent 'glorious emperors' followed suit. This created what Yinhong Shi (2011: 18, 22) calls the tradition of total conquest, which was passed down from the Qin through Han's Emperor Wu, Tang's Emperor Taizong (r. AD 626–49), Ming's Emperors Hongwu (r. 1368–98) and Yongle (r. 1402–24) to Mao Zedong.

How, then, did Chinese emperors and scholar-officials reconcile expansionist campaigns with Confucian pacifist doctrines? As mentioned above, Classical Confucians had already worked out justifications for war. They explicitly sanctioned 'punitive campaigns' by the Son of Heaven. The Son of Heaven was, by definition, the possessor and arbiter of Heavenly standards embodying benevolence, righteousness, fairness, and kindness. It followed that those who did not submit to the Son of Heaven along with the China-centered hierarchy and the superior Chinese civilization were 'bandits' and 'sub-humans' lacking virtue and deserving punishment (Wade, 2010: 3). Campaigns against them would be justified, and even

mandated, as acts of benevolence. Emperors and officials schooled in Confucian classics saw no contradiction in ‘advocat[ing] aggressive policies to “exterminate” the barbarians who had violated the way of Heaven’ (Wang, 2011: 138). This is not unlike the modern practice of labeling rebellious individuals and groups as thugs and terrorists.

From the Han on, ‘warfare was considered to be a special application of justified punishment of ... those who refused to acknowledge the authority of the legitimate emperor’ (Yates, 2009: 25). Han’s Emperor Wu depicted the Xiongnu as sub-humans to which Confucian benevolence did not apply: The Xiongnu, ‘with their human faces and animal hearts, are not of our kind. When strong, they are certain to rob and pillage; when weak, they come to submit. But their nature is such that they have no sense of gratitude or righteousness’ (*Jiu Tang shu [Old Tang History]*, 194A, 5162, reprinted in Liu, 1975). As the Xiongnu were defined as ‘enem[ies] of virtue and humanity,’ it was thus the duty of the virtuous emperor to teach them a lesson (Zhu and Wang, 2008: 273). The Qing (the last dynasty) was the most successful in ‘exterminating’ the Zunghar Mongols who ‘turned their back on civilization’ (Perdue, 2005: 431–2). Qing’s Kangxi Emperor (r. 1662–1722) announced that ‘to repress bandits is the way to give rest to the people. To sweep away barbarians is the way to bring stability to the interior’ (Perdue, 2005: 431–2). When his successor Emperor Qianlong (r. 1735–94) continued the conquest, it was because ‘the emperor, having compassion for the people’s suffering, sent the Great Army to relieve them’ (p. 434). He declared that ‘I do not approve of war, or see it as a virtue, but it was unavoidable’ (p. 434).

CONFUCIANIZATION AND PEACE?

It may be countered that even though China launched ‘punitive wars’ against ‘barbarians,’

it maintained peace with Confucianized states. David Kang (2010: 9) offers a more sophisticated account of Confucian pacifism by distinguishing between a ‘Confucian society’ between China and Sinicized states, and a ‘parabellum society’ between China and ‘nomads.’ Because ‘nomads had vastly different worldviews, political structures, and cultures than the Sinicized states,’ they naturally ‘resisted Confucian cultural ideas’ (p. 10).⁵ In contrast, shared civilization created a peaceful ‘Confucian society’ among China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan in 1368–1841 (pp. 8–9). While China had no desire to use its military and economic capabilities to seek ‘expansion against its established neighboring states’ (p. 2), the neighbors admired and emulated China’s Confucian civilization and voluntarily submitted to its hegemonic status. That is, shared Confucian civilization produced peace; clash of Confucian–nomadic civilizations produced war.

However, such a civilization-based argument is vulnerable to the same critique (Sen, 2006) made of Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ (1993) – that civilizational fault lines are reasonably fluid on the ground. Imperial China had a long tradition of showering favors on anyone who submitted, and threatening ‘punitive campaigns’ against anyone who resisted. The Ming’s Emperor Yongle, for example, did not refrain from bestowing lavish gifts on friendly Mongol leaders or invading Confucianized Vietnam in 1406–27. As he sent out armies to occupy Vietnam, he proclaimed that ‘I manifest the love of the “One on High” for all living things’ (Wade, 2010: 3), and that the key ‘concern was only that rebellious bandits not go unpunished and that the suffering of the people not go unrelieved’ (*Ming Shilu*, Taizong 80: 1070, quoted in Wang, 2011: 154).

It is particularly difficult to make sense of the Confucianization and peace argument when China was divided and when it was ruled by Inner Asian regimes. If a unified China could practice peace with Confucianized neighbors, then why did competing Chinese

states – which were, by definition, culturally Chinese – repeatedly engage in wars of mutual conquest? And why did Inner Asian regimes that controlled part or all of China act like Chinese regimes? In addition to the Mongols who established the Yuan dynasty and the Manchus who established the Qing dynasty, other Inner Asian regimes controlled northern China at different periods. If the response is that Inner Asian regimes that succeeded at conquering China became Confucianized like Korea and Vietnam, one has to further ask why some originally ‘uncivilized nomads’ adopted Chinese civilization while others rejected it, and why the same ethnic groups (especially the Mongols and the Jurchens/Manchus) would accept Chinese civilization when they controlled China and rejected it when they were driven out. In the end, we are left with the argument that there was peace only when other states publicly submitted to China’s superior status. Kang makes precisely this point when he quotes Truong Buu Lam in agreement: ‘The Vietnamese kings clearly realized that they had to acknowledge China’s suzerainty and become tributaries in order to avoid active intervention by China in their internal affairs’ (Lam, 1968: 178; Kang, 2010: 102).

It is telling that, in diplomatic exchanges, the Chinese court would be worried enough from time to time to include Classical texts in their gifts to neighboring states. For instance, at a time when the Tibetan Empire was the equal of the Tang dynasty (c. 730), a court official memorialized against granting the Tibetan request for Confucian texts because, ‘When versed in the *Odes* they will know the use of armies; when versed in the *Rites* they will know the times of disbanding and enlisting troops; when versed in the *Zuo’s tradition* they will learn measures of deceit and treachery’ (*Jiu Tang shu* [*Old Tang History*], 196A, quoted in Smith, 1996: 69). The request was granted. However, the Song, which felt besieged by powerful neighbors, was far less generous. The Song banned the passing on of statecraft texts to foreigners,

including ‘Confucianized’ Koreans and Vietnamese as well as ‘barbarian’ Khitans and Jurchens. These incidences demonstrate that Chinese officials understood that even non-military texts taught as much about war as peace. Johnston (1995: 45) is right that ‘there is ... very little difference between the content of ... military classics and other texts on statecraft.’

CONCLUSION

The IR turn to Asia is a welcome trend with the potential to correct biases in American-centric theorizing. However, the literature has so far ironically produced confusion about Confucianism. Confucian pacifism, peace, morality, virtue, and benevolence played, at most, a minor role in Chinese philosophy and history. Confucianism was only one among China’s multiple philosophical schools. While Confucian classics championed norms, Legalist and military texts advocated power. Even Confucianism was not unequivocally anti-war. Given this mixed heritage, IR scholars who aim at theory-building and theory-testing must disentangle history from philosophy. It is not enough just to comb what Confucius or Mencius said, but also to trace the impacts of their ideas on concrete policy. And given that Confucian ideals could be used to justify war against those who lacked virtue, it is also imperative to broaden analyses to Asian lenses beyond Chinese lenses.

Unfortunately, the unhistorical works on Confucian pacifism have been used to support Beijing’s claim to ‘peaceful rise’ in a ‘harmonious world.’ This has caused skeptics to worry about an ideological preparation for a new hegemonic world order (Callahan, 2008: 749). Xuetong Yan (2011: 39, 62, 65, 115), for instance, contends that the concept of ‘humane authority’ based on ‘virtue, benevolence, the Way, justice, law, worthies, and sages’ should form the basis of ‘China’s

theory of harmonious world diplomacy.' Xiao Ren (2010: 114) of Fudan University reckons that Beijing's policy of harmony 'has its deep origin in Chinese philosophy and culture.' Yet Yan (2011: 218) acknowledges that the most critical determinant to China's ability to command 'humane authority' is history: 'A nation that cannot face historical events correctly is one that cannot win over the hearts of other states.' This echoes what former Chinese Premier Jiabao Wen said: 'Only a country that respects history, takes responsibility for history and wins over the trust of peoples in Asia and the world at large can take greater responsibilities in the international community' (quoted in Kahn, 2005). Today's Chinese leaders and scholars should learn from Mencius and Lu Xun and see through the pretension to Confucian pacifism.

Notes

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- 2 I owe this quote to Wade (2010: 27).
- 3 The Confucian–Mencian paradigm 'assumes essentially that conflict is aberrant or at least avoidable through the promotion of good government and the coopting or enculturation of external threats. When force is used, it should be applied defensively, minimally, only under unavoidable conditions, and then only in the name of the righteous tradition of a moral-political order' (Johnston, 1995: 249).
- 4 One *li* is about 0.415 kilometres or 0.258 miles.
- 5 Many steppe populations were in fact settled agriculturalists with advanced civilizations. The Mongol Empire employed Central Asians rather than Chinese to fill its bureaucracy.

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