

Confucianism

(A short note written for the Asymmetric Threats Contingency Alliance (ATCA) dated 7 June, 2006)

As a Chinese person who received an early part of his education in Chinese in a traditional ‘Confucius Middle School’ (in Macao) in the 1950’s, perhaps I could ‘throw in a brick to induce a piece of jade’ in a discussion on Professor Gupta’s illuminating piece on Ethics across Cultures and their Impact on Business.

While throughout China’s history, Confucius has widely been regarded as the doyen of a body of thought bearing his name, obedience to authority is by no means all what it was all about. Confucianism is but a shorthand for ‘Ru Jia’ or ‘Classical Scholarism’ underpinned by the Four Books (Si Shu) (‘The Great Learning’, ‘The Golden Mean’, ‘The Analects’ and ‘Mencius’) together with the Five Classics (Wu Jing). Running through them all are other forceful parts of Chinese traditional ethics.

One part is ‘Dao’ or ‘The Way’ which embodies ‘the Mandate of Heaven’. There are numerous Chinese classical writings depicting how dynasties rose or fell according to how well they followed ‘Dao’, manifested in achieving the greatest good for most of the people.

I still remember learning the classical text of ‘The Grand Way’ whose ideal is ‘a society where governance is only for the public good, the sage and the able selected to lead, such that the people are not caring only their own parents or children. And the widowed and the disabled are all looked after

‘Dao’ also denotes the objective laws of Nature, not so much in a physical but philosophical sense, so that things happen or do not happen according to Nature’s own way. It may be counter-productive, for example, to ‘Pull up the sprout to make it grow faster’.

The other is ‘ren’, or Compassion, translated into ‘Compassionate governance’ especially by Mencius.

Another is ‘The Golden Mean’. As competition and conflicts are bound to arise in human affairs as in Nature, finding the equilibrium (not necessarily the exact ‘Middle’) is considered essential.

Then there is of course ‘Harmony’, which echoes all of the above: harmony within oneself, within the family, within the society, with other nations, and with Nature.

Much of the above thinking also bears the hallmark of ‘Taoism’.

Ethics in all societies, China included, are not always successfully followed. But they represent the roots of a Culture.

Whether any particular historical event in China, especially one of seismic proportions, was dictated by these ethics or rather immediate realities is debatable. Equally, one may well ask whether these ethics are behind the current Chinese leadership’s emphasis on ‘Government for (though not yet ‘of’ or ‘by’) the People’. Or whether some strands could be applied to the other

concurrent ATCA discussion on philanthropy. Or indeed to the debate on Climate Change.

Andrew K.P.Leung, SBS, FRSA

www.andrewleunginternationalconsultants.com

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1A Vincent House,
Vincent Square,
London, SW1P 2SN
United Kingdom

Tel (44) (20) 7821 6177
Mobile (44) 7838 161 668