

The Confucian roots of Xi Jinping's policies

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Commentators have been quick to observe that the recent Chinese Communist Party Congress guaranteed President Xi Jinping's firm grip on power for years to come. However, few have noted the Confucian roots of Mr Xi's world view.

Mr Xi himself has himself been very candid about his admiration for traditional Chinese thought and his view that Chinese socialism is consistent with it. As I point out in my recent book, *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*, Mr Xi's appropriations of traditional Chinese thought are sometimes opportunistic. But the same can be said of the way many US politicians appeal to the Bible. In addition, there are at least four points on which Mr Xi is genuinely Confucian in spirit.

First, Mr Xi's term as president has seen a resolute anti-corruption drive. Although there is some truth to the cynical claim that this is partially motivated by his desire to consolidate power, it is also true that corruption has increasingly become a serious problem in the Chinese Communist Party, and needed to be addressed. In a speech to Communist Party members, Mr Xi quoted the *Analects*, the sayings of Confucius, in order to encourage them to show probity in public office: "The rule of Virtue may be compared to the Pole Star, which stays in its place while the myriad stars pay it homage" (*Analects* 2.1).

Mr Xi's point is both good policy and faithful to the Confucian tradition: If government officials expect the common people to "pay homage" to the government, it must be evident that they are trustworthy and are working for the well-being of the community as a whole. In other words, they must manifest the Confucian virtues of righteousness and benevolence.

Although Confucians believe that rulers must govern for the benefit of the common people, they do not assume that the common people are good judges of policy. Confucius expressed his scepticism about the discernment of the common people when he said: "If the masses dislike someone, you must examine him; if the masses are fond of someone, you must examine him" (*Analects* 15.28).

This is in line with a second aspect of Mr Xi's reign, his opposition to "Western values", which often amounts to opposition to Western liberal democracy. Countries like the United States take it for granted that direct democracy is the best form of government, and that the more active a role the common people play in government, the better. However, events like Brexit, the rise of neo-fascist parties in countries like France and Austria, and the mud-slinging and misinformation characteristic of the last US presidential election seem to many in China like reductio ad absurdum of popular rule.

Thinkers like Jiang Qing have gone even further than Mr Xi by suggesting that "constitutional Confucianism" is a more appropriate government system for China than Western liberal democracy.

Although Confucians question the political savvy of the common people, they regard the people's happiness and satisfaction as the ultimate test of government success. This is very much in line with Mr Xi's vision of the "Chinese dream," which aims to produce a *xiaokang shehui*.

This ancient phrase, which has its origin in the Confucian classics, is much more inspiring than its standard English translation of "moderately prosperous society". It presents a vision in which the average person is comfortable without needing decadent amounts of consumption. To use the American idiom, there is "a chicken in every pot", but not a Porsche in every parking space.

A final aspect of Mr Xi's policy that is surprisingly Confucian is his approach to economics. In the West, neoliberalism has increasingly replaced the Keynesian consensus that dominated immediate post-World War II economic policy.

Ironically, Francois Quesnay, an adviser to King Louis XV of France who was one of the fathers of *laissez-faire* economic theory, found inspiration in the ideal of "non-action" (*wuwei*) as practised by Sage King Shun (*Analects* 15.5). Former US president Ronald Reagan similarly quoted a line about *wuwei* from the *Daodejing* of Laozi in support of *laissez-faire* policies in his 1988 State of the Union Address.

However, the Confucian consensus has always been that the accumulation of wealth, whether at the personal or societal level, must



It is important to understand the Confucian roots of Mr Xi Jinping's thought as the global situation is well suited for China's rise, says the writer. PHOTO: REUTERS

always be subordinated to the pursuit of moral values. Confucius explained that "the petty person is conversant with profit, while the noble person is conversant with righteousness" (*Analects* 4.16) and he warned that "if you are motivated (solely) by profit, you will end up producing much resentment" (*Analects* 4.12).

The Chinese billionaires who have been swept up in Mr Xi's anti-corruption campaign have no doubt come to learn that they are in a country with values closer to Confucius than to those of Adam Smith.

It is especially important for the world to understand these Confucian roots of Mr Xi's thought because the international situation is particularly well suited for China's rise. The US has often been an effective counterbalance to Chinese power, but President Donald Trump's inexperience in foreign affairs has become painfully evident. In July, the White House press office referred to Mr Xi as President of the Republic of China (not the People's Republic of China), and Mr Trump sounded genuinely

awestruck back in April after a brief conversation in which Mr Xi gently explained to him the geopolitical situation in the Korean peninsula.

The 20th century was the era of the victory of *laissez-faire* economics and populist democracy over economic and political totalitarianism. With the fall of the Soviet Union, commentators like Francis Fukuyama precipitately declared that we had reached the end of history, in the sense that we had discovered the best form of social organisation, which would remain dominant for all time. This turned out to be as parochial as Hegel's claim that the Prussian state of the 19th century was the culmination of human progress.

Perhaps the 21st century will see the victory of Confucian societies, in which economic growth is guided for the public good by a meritocracy.

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