

Book review

Daniel A. Bell, *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, USA, 2008, hardback, \$26.95, £15.95, 240 pp.

The Olympic Games of August 2008 brought the new China into the media limelight. By all accounts, it was a great success, at least as seen through a Chinese prism. There were some diplomatic embarrassments but billions viewed a new and more confident nation striding on to the global scene.

Now, as China's economy is beginning to experience the "credit crunch" of 2008, with a stock market dive, negative housing equity, firms going bust in the Southern coastal provinces and unemployment coming to the fore, what follows on? Where is Chinese society, its economy and management going? Are we seeing a sea-change in how the Middle Kingdom is responding the changing China of the twenty-first century? Is a new form of Human Systems Management "with Chinese characteristics" emerging?

As China gets richer, it now looks both forward in time but at the same time takes more than a side-glance backwards. Although it is emerging as an influential G9 nation, it has stood back and pondered its past. The weight of tradition has long been a major influence on Chinese society. The re-emergence of *Confucius* (*Kung Fuzi*), born 551–died 479 BC, as a mentor is, therefore, no surprise as, the role of *Mao Zedong* wanes.

Why has all this come to pass? The main reason one might argue for this has been the reaction of the Chinese leadership to the stresses of reconciling modernity with traditional values in the flux of social and economic turbulence. The current regime now faced with the contradictions of a form of state capitalism "with Chinese characteristics" as the new system might be called has sought a new ideological bridge to the past in order to boost its legitimacy in these troubled times. How far the Party has abandoned Marxist ideology is moot but it has steered the ship of state on a new course.

The Party has now adopted the ideology of what the leaders call the "harmonious society". A CCP Resolution in late 2006 proclaimed social harmony as "the intrinsic element of socialism with Chinese characteris-

tics and an important guarantee of the country's prosperity, the nation's rejuvenation and the people's happiness". There is now an eclectic mixture of socialism, capitalism and Confucianism afoot in the first decade of the new millennium.

China is now an emerging economic superpower. But the regime has a serious dilemma – how to reconcile the vast income and wealth inequalities that the economic reforms have brought about with its official goals of, if not the egalitarianism of the past ideology, a form of acceptable social justice for its citizens. Contradictions abound but how has the Chinese leadership confronted the dilemma?

There is a useful book at hand which this reviewer can recommend to those who want to get to grips with the new super-power, whether in terms of economics, politics or ideology. The shibboleths of the last half century have now gone out of the window. Dr. Daniel A. Bell's book *China's New Confucianism*, seeks to guide us through the newly emerging *Zeitgeist*. He does it all very well and the result is perhaps one of the more original books on contemporary China in the bookstores currently – as we write. Prof. Bell (unrelated to his namesake the renowned US sociologist), is a Canadian national and a political theorist who speaks Mandarin. He was invited to teach political theory, always a thorny subject in communist countries, at China's prestigious *Tsinghua University* in Beijing. He claims he has been able to do his job unhindered by the authorities. He makes a convincing case for the new social "space" Chinese elite students, if not all citizens, enjoy. He is not afraid to speak his mind, whether to his hosts or the readers he anticipates will read his book.

Bell expands very clearly on what he sees at the regime's attempt to revive Confucianism in the new circumstances of the post-Maoist, even post-Dengist society. His book is subtitled *Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* which explains what he sets out in this well-written volume on how this new ideological shift affects matters at street-level.

Like the *Economist* magazine in May 2007 and Prof. Jonathan Spence in his opening *BBC 2008 Reith Lecture*, Bell uses as his focus the apparent paradoxical reversion to Confucianism to China. Today, books on *Confucius* are actually best-sellers in China, like

Prof. *Yu Dan*'s, which reportedly sold around ten million copies. Bell (p. 166ff) thinks that she, as a popularizer, makes Confucian thought relevant to today's society, even if contemporary China is a different and more complex place than the ancient kingdom where the Master originally formulated his ideas.

Bell views Confucianism, like most ideologies as a "double-edged sword". Although many intellectuals in today's China like Prof. *Jiang Qing*, have taken up the sword, he notes that they have not always interpreted the message in the same way as President *Hu Jintao* and Premier *Wen Jibao* and their fellow Party ideologues. This is not an outright dissent agenda but it seems to represent independent thought. The former would like to see Confucianism as a "state religion" in the PRC.

Bell sees: "Confucian scholars such as *Jiang Qing* openly acknowledge that their interpretation of Confucianism most closely parallels socialist ideals: not the "actually existing socialism" in today's China, but

the socialist ideals defended by Karl Marx and others. This Confucian tradition aims to influence contemporary politics, but it also remains separate from state power and orthodoxy, always ready to point to the gap between ideals and reality" (Project Syndicate, 2008, p. 1).

Bell, himself, is an optimist at heart and thinks that a living Confucianism can actually contribute to a more equitable China, rather being a outdated philosophy. He also sees it as intrinsically linked to the Chinese language (p. 161ff). But how far the "Harmonious Society" ideology will square the circle in today's changing world, especially as the 2008 Asian Crisis negatively impacts on China's society and economy, is yet to be seen!

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