

What Remains of China's Historical Hand?

For much of my life, I have heard it said, "Take one for the team." This covertly utilitarian ideal is used in the interest of the greater good -- to ask someone to incur a small amount of displeasure for the betterment of the whole. Former chairman of the People's Republic of China, Mao Tse Tung, was quite fond of this point of view. He is well remembered for his motto, "Nine fingers to one," which meant that one tenth of the population may be allowed to suffer so long as the other nine prosper. It was intended to acknowledge that people were experiencing hardships, obstacles, and setbacks, but it would lead to better circumstances for all. Just how much, though, should one "take for the team?" What if it is instead two, or three, that are forced to endure? Furthermore, how have these severed fingers warped the country that existed before? Because of twentieth-century Maoism, Chinese religious and philosophical culture was left devastated, but with hope of recovery on the horizon.

In order to discuss how China has changed, it would be prudent to first lay out how it used to be. For much of China's history, it was ruled by dynasties. Most of these dynasties would rule for a few hundred years until they were overthrown, wherein another -- usually the leader of the group that initiated the revolution -- would take its place. A major doctrine that kept this cycle in motion was known as the "Mandate of Heaven." It held that rulers were "gifts from Heaven," (the Chinese word for emperor, "Tianzi," loosely means "son of Heaven." The word 'Tian' is commonly translated as 'Heaven,' but it is not like the majority-Christian west's idea of Heaven, so scholars typically argue against its usage as such. Although I will continue to use the mistranslation for the purposes of this essay, it should be noted that Tian is more akin to some sort of grand designer and ruler of the universe rather than a post-mortem paradise.) and as such,

were expected to rule with righteousness and benevolence (Szczepanski, 2019). If at any point the ruler was deemed immoral, the people were expected to protest, if not outright remove, the ruler. Natural disasters such as drought, famine, or disease were commonly associated with heavenly anger; thus, some dynasties were overthrown after such disasters were interpreted as a sign that the ruler was corrupt, which upset the gods. The Mandate of Heaven, or Tianming, was first claimed during the Zhou dynasty circa 1050 B.C.E. King Wen of the Zhou dynasty quickly became renowned for his honor and filial piety, (A Chinese concept of respect for elders, ancestors, and family) and was seen as a deific role model by later Confucian scholars, whose discourses were extremely respected by the people of China for most of its history. Despite various imperfections in the dynastic system, it would remain in use until 1912, when the Qing empire collapsed (Cartwright, 2022).

For most of the dynastic period, three major religions were practiced in China. These were Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. Both Daoism (occasionally translated as Taoism) and Confucianism arose during a movement in ancient Chinese history known as the “Hundred Schools of Thought,” and quickly surpassed the other schools in popularity and practice. Confucius, the father of Confucianism, was a traditionalist, citing books that were considered ancient even during *his* lifetime. He believed that the secret to a good society lies in the correct actions through each of a person’s relationships – be they father and son, elder and younger friend, as well as siblings. As was mentioned previously, a staple doctrine of Confucius was known as “Filial Piety,” and a part of the practice of filial piety included certain rituals of respect. One such ritual was a minimum of three-years mourning after the death of a parent, which included wearing certain mourning garb and abstaining from drinking alcohol and eating some types of food (Jue, 2022). Additionally, one must have a similar loyalty to the ruling class which governs them. However, Confucius noted that a balance must be struck between the two;

deference for parents and elders takes hold over that of the ruler (Csikszentmihalyi, 2020). Yong Huang, a distinguished professor of philosophy at Hong Kong university, discusses filial piety in detail in his journal, *Why an Upright Son Does Not Disclose His Father Stealing a Sheep: A Neglected Aspect of the Confucian Conception of Filial Piety*. The dominant example he examines is from Confucius' principal work, *The Analects*. It included a son who, upon discovering that his father had stolen a sheep, refused to incriminate his father by claiming witness to the crime. Confucius argued that, although thievery is undoubtedly immoral and reprehensible, this was more upright a choice than if the son were to turn in his father, which would show more loyalty to the state instead (Huang, 2017). Benevolence, righteousness, ritual propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness are five other virtues that are essential to Confucius' ethical philosophy. Confucianism's focus lies primarily in ordering society in a manner that promotes harmony and dignity. Daoism, on the other hand, believes that harmony and happiness are derived from nature, and one must resign themselves from society to achieve peace. Laozi (also translated as Lao tzu or Lao-tze) was born circa 571 BCE. He is credited for being the father of Daoism; the signature book of Daoist philosophy, the *Daodejing*, is also commonly known as the *Laozi* (Brodd et. al, p. 268-269). Daoist metaphysics revolve around The Dao, which translates to "way," "road," or "path." The Dao is impossible to explain and trying to understand it is futile; the *Daodejing*, however, does have this to say about it: "Soundless and formless, it depends on nothing and does not change. It operates everywhere and does not stop. It may be regarded as the 'Mother of the world.' I do not know its name; I call it Dao" (Laozi, Chp. 25). The Dao can be said to not only pervade the universe, but also create and support it. It, however, cannot be understood nor categorized by humans. Because the Dao is everywhere and makes everything, it is best for a human to follow it and live in harmony with it, rather than oppose it. One of the ways to do this is to observe "wuwei," action without intention or action

through non-action (Brodd et. al, p. 268-269). The sage who practices wuwei manifests plainness and simplicity. They are like a young baby – moving naturally, without plan or care (Littlejohn). This practice of the Dao brings Daoists closer to nature, creating harmony for them and those around them.

Both Daoism and Confucianism were widely supported and practiced for much of China's history. Following the extreme peril of World War II as well as the cultural destruction of Chinese Communist Party movements, however, these famous schools of thought would be threatened, and nearly lost. It is theorized that China lost as many as 14 to 20 million casualties (about the population of New York State) over the course of World War II. Among other reasons, this is because of the intermittent civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists occurring in and around the time of World War II, as well as the large-scale invasion of Manchuria by the Japanese before and continuing into World War II. There is no doubt that this damaged China as a whole, and the culture of an entire generation was most assuredly damaged alongside it. Much more cultural damage was dealt after World War II, though, during the communist reign of Mao Tse Tung – particularly during the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward. Following the removal of the Chinese Nationalist Party and Chiang Kai Shek, Mao Tse Tung (alternatively Mao Zedong) took head of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 – four years after the conclusion of World War II (Cairns & Llewellyn, 2019). The country, ravaged by years of war, was in tatters both economically and physically. In an effort to advance the infrastructure and kickstart the economy of the country, Tse Tung began the Great Leap Forward in 1958. The previous eight years had been quite successful, but Tse Tung's 1958 plan was simply too ambitious, expecting a massive upscale in steel production while still producing just as much food and other goods as are necessary. In his article summarizing the events and tragedy of the Great Leap Forward, Clayton Brown, an

Associate Professor of History at Utah State University, explains, “Mao projected that by the end of the Great Leap Forward in 1962, China would be the world’s leading steel manufacturer with 100 million tons, outproducing even the US” (Brown, 2020). Mao’s plan was to outclass the least-damaged country of World War II in a matter of five years. His goal foresaw a nearly two thousand percent increase in production over that short amount of time. Unfortunately, this was a terrible miscalculation and would have dire consequences. Though debated, it is thought that about thirty million Chinese citizens died as a direct result of the famine that would ensue (Brown, 2020). That does not include the intense labor or brutal punishments for not working hard enough. With suffering of that scale, it would be near impossible to practice religion and maintain a healthy culture even if it *was* still allowed. During the Cultural Revolution though, almost all religion and culture outside of quasi-worship of Mao would be banned. Confucianism especially would be decimated. Evan Osnos, an American journalist and author with specialties in politics and foreign affairs between the United States and China, in his article “Confucius Comes Home,” recounts:

When the Cultural Revolution began, in 1966, he [Mao Tse Tung] exhorted young Red Guards to ‘Smash the Four Olds’: old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas. Zealots denounced Confucius for fostering ‘bad elements, rightists, monsters, and freaks,’ and one of Mao’s lieutenants gave the approval to dig up his grave. Hundreds of temples were destroyed. By the nineteen-eighties, Confucianism was so maligned that the historian Yu Ying-shih called it a ‘wandering soul.’ (Osnos, 2014)

Mao, hoping that citizens focus only on the state and propagating Communist beliefs, required that distractions such as religion, tradition, and philosophy be removed from the face of the Earth. Daoist culture, not to be excluded from religion, tradition, nor philosophy, did not fare any

better. An article published by Harvard discusses the damage dealt to Daoism by the Cultural Revolution: "Many Daoist temples were destroyed, and Daoist practices were outlawed" (Girardot et. al, 2021). Mao had religion almost demolished, except for a religion that worshipped him. Mao was seen as a deity, making the ground holy where he stepped and causing people to camp out in the streets knowing that he would ride through on the following day. Chairman Mao's book, the *Little Red Book*, became equal to the Holy Bible (Zuo, 1991 p. 4-7).

Mao's holy image brought other problems to the Chinese citizenry as well. The Red Guards, which were usually students that became fervent Maoist ideologues, are responsible for dozens of horror stories from the period. One such story comes from a prestigious secondary school in Beijing, wherein Bian Zhongyun was left for dead in a handcart after being beaten. Apparently, during an earthquake drill, the teacher did not sufficiently emphasize the importance of saving the chairman's portrait on the way out of the building. Xi Zhongxun, a political official, was paraded around on a truck and then beaten after having a falling out with Tse Tung. Though violence and death quickly became the most prominent and well known, the lesser punishments from the period were much more pervasive. Humiliation, shunning, and threats were commonplace. Products showing Mao's face needed to be sold at careful prices – a store owner who cheapens the items could be harassed for devaluing Mao's name, while an expensive product could label the owner a greedy capitalist. People who did not seem to support Tse Tung enough were often forced to wear dunce caps and kneel in front of crowds (Mishra, 2021). Looking to retell all the stories, an ambitious writer might sooner exhaust their paper than memoirs to discuss.

Despite all the cultural and philosophical destruction, there is a ray of hope for historians, enthusiasts, traditionalists, and practitioners of eastern religions alike. After the death of Mao Tse

Tung on September 8, 1976, Deng Xiaoping took over China and renounced many of the actions Mao had taken during his reign. Much of the cultural destruction taking place while Mao was alive has since ceased. In recent years, there has even been a resurgence of Confucianism and Daoism. In his article, which I cited earlier, Osnos tells us how Confucius is being celebrated again, especially in his hometown of Qufu. The 2008 Olympics, which took place in Beijing, even made multiple references to ancient texts like *The Analects*. Osnos also reveals later in the article, “Near the cave where Confucius was said to have been born, a five-hundred-million-dollar museum-and-park complex is under construction; it includes a statue of Confucius that is nearly as tall as the Statue of Liberty” (Osnos, 2014). The once shunned Confucius is now honored with a massive statue representing him and his teachings. Even after all that has been done – all the destruction, suppression, and what could be argued as genocide – Confucianism is still alive today. Daoism is also resurfacing, with temples being rebuilt and traditions being recovered (Girardot et al, 2021). Modern China has certainly loosened its grip on religion since the death of Mao. Article thirty-six of the Chinese Constitution, which was adopted in 1982 (six years after the death of Tse Tung), explicitly states,

No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion. The state protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state. (People's Daily Online, 1982)

In other words, the article declares religious freedom for all, but also clarifies that no religion shall disturb public safety or the interests of the state. What qualifies as disturbing public order is

nebulous, though. Even more questionable is the requirement that religion should not interfere with the education of the state. According to that doctrine, any religion could be in danger at any time, so long as the state believes that its values or rituals are misaligned with those of the state. Though religious rights are improving, they appear to remain on shaky ground. Xi Jinping, current leader of China, seems to promote religious practice, with interest in the moral strength and right-minded direction that it can bring people. However, this support, as one might fear after reading article thirty-six, seems to fall flat for certain religious sects, while remaining extant for others (Laliberté, 2020). Regardless, progress is seemingly being made. Perhaps it is only time and patience that can unwind the tension of the last hundred years and bring about freedom and harmony for the people of China.

It would be a humble understatement to describe the twentieth century as a turbulent time for China. Mao's famous phrase, "Nine fingers to one," does not seem to hold true after all that has happened to the country and its culture. Instead, it can be said that multiple fingers suffered. Starved to the bone during the Great Leap Forward, nearly cut off by force during the Cultural Revolution, and stricken by infection for the sake of Mao's narcissism, China's historical, cultural, and philosophical hand yet remains. Despite scars, calluses and fractures, China's cultural resilience proves fascinating and inspiring.

References

- Brodd, J., Little, L., Nystrom, B., Platzner, R., Shek, R., & Stiles, E. (2022). Chinese Religions: Confucianism and Daoism. In *Invitation to world religions* (3rd ed., pp. 250–300). essay, Oxford University Press.
- Brown, C. D. (2020, July 13). *China's Great Leap Forward*. Association for Asian Studies. Retrieved September 25, 2022, from <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/chinas-great-leap-forward/>
- Cairns, R., & Llewellyn, J. (2019, September 20). *The Chinese Civil War*. alphahistory.com. Retrieved September 25, 2022, from <https://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/chinese-civil-war/>
- Cartwright, M. (2022, July 11). *Mandate of Heaven*. World History Encyclopedia. Retrieved September 22, 2022, from https://www.worldhistory.org/Mandate_of_Heaven/

- People's Daily Online (December 4, 1982) Constitution of the People's Republic of China from <http://en.people.cn/constitution/constitution.html>
- Csikszentmihályi, M. (2020, March 31). *Confucius*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved September 25, 2022, from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/confucius/>
- Girardot, N. J., Miller, J., & Kohn, L. (2021, December 14). *Daoism*. The Pluralism Project. Retrieved September 25, 2022, from <https://pluralism.org/daoism>
- Huang, Y. (2017, January 30). (PDF) *why an upright son does not disclose his father stealing a sheep ... Why an Upright Son Does Not Disclose His Father Stealing a Sheep: A Neglected Aspect of the Confucian Conception of Filial Piety*. Retrieved September 24, 2022, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313120628_Why_an_Upright_Son_Does_Not_Disclose_His_Father_Stealing_a_Sheep_A_Neglected_Aspect_of_the_Confucian_Conception_of_Filial_Piety
- Jue L. The World of Chinese Ma, L. (2022, April 5). *How did ancient Chinese mourn the deceased?* The World of Chinese. Retrieved October 2, 2022, from <https://www.theworldofchinese.com/2022/04/how-did-ancient-chinese-mourn-the-deceased/>
- Laliberté, A. (2020, March 16). *The two tracks of Xi Jinping's religious policy*. Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs. Retrieved October 2, 2022, from <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/the-two-tracks-of-xi-jinping-s-religious-policy>
- Laozi, & Lau, D. C. (1982). Chap. 25. In *Tao Te Ching*. essay
- Littlejohn, R. (n.d.). *Daoist Philosophy*. Internet encyclopedia of philosophy. Retrieved September 25, 2022, from <https://iep.utm.edu/daoismdaoist-philosophy/>
- Mishra, P. *What are the Cultural Revolution's lessons for our current moment?* The New Yorker. Retrieved February 21, 2023, from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/02/01/what-are-the-cultural-revolutions-lessons-for-our-current-moment>
- Osnos, E. (2014, January 6). *Confucius comes home*. The New Yorker. Retrieved September 25, 2022, from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/13/confucius-comes-home>
- Szczepanski, K. (2019, August 1). *Do you know the four principles to China's mandate of heaven?* ThoughtCo. Retrieved September 22, 2022, from <https://www.thoughtco.com/the-mandate-of-heaven-195113>
- Zuo, J. (1991). Political religion: The case of the Cultural Revolution in China. *Sociological Analysis*, 52(1), 99. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3710718>