Confucianism in Chinese Politics: Comparing Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping

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Abstract

China's recent and dramatic rise has both led to concerns in many democratic countries about its authoritarian leanings and increased interest in Chinese politics. This paper explores one aspect of modern China's political landscape by investigating how Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping have used Confucianism in their politics and whether this corresponds to how each leader claims to view Confucianism. It concludes that Mao's policies and the values he promoted were almost always antithetical to the fundamental principles of Confucianism, which is consistent with his habit of condemning the philosophy. On the other hand, Xi is consistent in his support of Confucianism, both praising it verbally and enacting many of its tenets in policy. Overall, the actions of each man correspond surprisingly well to the positions they claim to hold on Confucianism.

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Introduction

For centuries, Confucianism was a defining feature of Chinese politics. It legitimized emperors, shaped bureaucracy, and informed the sensibilities and morality of Chinese citizens (Guo 2019). However, since the collapse of the last Chinese dynasty in the early twentieth century, Confucianism's influence on Chinese politics has decreased dramatically, particularly as more modern and western philosophies, such as Marxism, have risen to prominence. The extent to which Confucianism has played a part in the politics of twentieth and twenty-first century China is debated among experts, but the current leader of China—Xi Jinping—has made the matter more relevant than ever over the past decade with his frequent references to the teachings of Confucius and his disciples. This suggests that Confucianism may be taking up a more prominent role in Chinese politics once again.

Besides Xi, the other actor most pertinent to this topic is Mao Zedong, the founder of the People's Republic of China (PRC). During his time as chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and effective leader of China, Mao had a conflicted relationship with Confucianism. Although he occasionally praised Confucianism, particularly early in his career, later on his prevailing attitude was condemnation. This is despite the fact that some researchers suggest that the structure of the early PRC borrowed from Confucian ideas (Álvarez and Castrillon 2019; Guo 2019; Ko 1999).

In this paper I explore in further detail the ways that both men used Confucianism in their politics. Furthermore, rather than approaching this topic as most research up to this point had done (i.e. by looking for explicit references to Confucianism or closely related concepts in the rhetoric of Chinese officials) I instead build upon the strategy of

Álvarez and Castrillón, Guo, and Ko who all suggest that Mao incorporated Confucian concepts into his policies and even the structure of the CCP and Chinese government itself. To do this, I break Confucianism down into six distinct values and look for the promotion or enactment of each of these values in the politics of each leader.

The advantage of this approach is that it enables the comparison of what each leader *says* about Confucianism with its actual presence in their policies and the values they promote. For instance, Mao typically spoke poorly of Confucianism (with some exceptions), while Xi frequently praises the philosophy, which most scholars read as a bid for legitimacy. But importantly these interpretations depend entirely on the claims of each leader. By instead comparing the presence of Confucian concepts and values in their actions and rhetoric—especially in instances where the words "Confucius" and "Confucian" do not feature—a more nuanced understanding of the influence of Confucianism on the two politicians can emerge.

The results are unexpected. I find that the claims of both Mao and Xi about Confucianism match surprisingly well with their enactment and promotion of its principles, especially given China's reputation for propaganda. Specifically, Mao's policies and the values which he encouraged are almost always either antithetical to Confucianism or destructive to its principles, which aligns with the majority of his rhetoric. Even in instances where he uses Confucian ideas or structures these ideas are used in ways that serve to attack the core values of Confucianism. On the other hand, Xi famously claims to be aligned with Confucianism and references it regularly to increase his legitimacy. And indeed, I find that his policies and the values he promotes are typically well aligned with Confucianism. In conclusion, the two leaders claim opposite

allegiances to Confucianism, but both their claims share a surprising alignment with reality: Mao is opposed to Confucianism while Xi is aligned with it.

Below I will survey the existing literature on Mao and Xi's attitudes towards Confucianism, and afterwards I will elaborate on my methods and on the basics of Confucianism. I will then introduce the six specific Confucian values which are examined in this paper and explain their selection. This is followed by two sections: in the first I explain how Mao has or has not enacted each of the six values, and in the second I do the same for Xi. The paper concludes with a comparison of the two leaders and a summary of my findings.

The Existing Literature

In the case of Mao there is a wealth of resources on his attitudes towards Confucianism. The consensus is that Mao usually condemned Confucianism. The primary scholar to make this case is Boer (Boer 2015), who breaks down Mao's remarks into two camps: favorable to Confucianism and unfavorable. As he points out, the latter is far more common and it is widely known. Because of this, Boer chooses to dedicate much of the paper to the exceptions when Mao made positive remarks about Confucianism. Other scholars study Mao's remarks in light of the anti-Confucianism campaign (now more commonly referred to as the Criticize Lin, Criticize Confucius campaign) of the latter portion of the Cultural Revolution. These scholars (Goldman 1975; Gregor and Chang 1979) point out that despite some positive remarks early in his career, by the time the anti-Confucianism campaign was underway, the Maoist position was solidly opposed to both Confucianism and Confucius. The overall consensus from

this type of approach—that of using Mao's own words to infer his relationship with Confucianism—is that Mao was largely against Confucianism and regarded it as anti-communist, with some deviations from this main stance early in his career.

A second group of researchers approaches Mao's position more on a structural level, similar to the approach of this paper. One scholar of this camp is Guo, who points out that Mao strongly identified politics with morality which indicates Confucian influence even if the philosophy itself was spurned (Guo 2019). In the same vein Ko argues that the early CCP (inevitably highly influenced by Mao) showed signs of Confucian influence when it instituted Marxist-Leninism as the governing ideology and demanded fluency in its precepts for leadership (Ko 1999). This was a simple swapping out of philosophies—Marxist-Leninism for Confucianism—but the very concept that leadership should be thoroughly acquainted with a certain system of state endorsed thought bears the fingerprints of Confucianism. Similarly, Álvarez and Castrillón point out in their study of the economics of China that Mao benefited greatly from a society which prized deference to authority because it encouraged loyalty and obedience to the CCP and Mao (Álvarez and Castrillon 2019). These findings each indicate that Mao was using Confucianism in his politics in some way. I will argue a similar point later in this paper, while also pointing out that in most of these instances Mao was turning Confucianism against itself.

Finally, in a camp of his own Solomon argues that the specific way in which children were reared in traditional China was designed to encourage obedience. Further, Solomon connects this style of childrearing to Confucianism. According to him, the

Cultural Revolution—famous for its radical repudiation of authority—was an attempt by Mao to stamp out the Confucian culture of obedience in China (Solomon 1971).

Less research is to be found for Xi Jinping. However, on the bases of CCP documents and their mentions of the phrase "excellent Chinese culture," Kubat concludes that the CCP, headed by Xi Jinping, has changed tactics with regards to traditional Chinese culture (including Confucianism). Rather than view it as a threat as it did in the 20th century, the CCP now draws on traditional China as a source of legitimacy (Kubat 2018).

In *Ideology in the Era of Xi Jinping* Brown approaches the matter from a different angle. One of her methods involves picking prominent keywords out of Xi Jinping's speeches, as examples of his most frequent or emblematic themes. One of these, "hexie" meaning "harmonious" relates directly to traditional Chinese values by hearkening back to Confucius's emphasis on harmony. In the context of modern China, however, Brown argues it is used to encourage unity in an increasingly fragmented society, and collective focus on the goals of the CCP (national wealth and power). Lastly, Brown suggests "harmony" is a kind of veiled threat to those who resist the CCP and refuse to accept its precepts. Brown thus sees Confucianism, or at the very least language associated with Confucianism, as a means for the CCP to promote a unified society, collective striving towards the national goals, and a warning to those who would resist the CCP (Brown 2018).

Álvarez and Castrillón, although not looking directly at Xi Jinping, corroborate the above research by arguing that under Hu Jintao (general secretary of the CCP from 2002-2012) the CCP introduced two new interpretations of Confucianism: 1) they

suggest that the new economic developments in China represent a right relationship (a key concept in confucian thought) between the people and the government and 2) they introduced the concept of a harmonious socialist society, again capitalizing on "harmonious" as a reference to Confucianism. Both these new lines of thinking were an attempt to boost the legitimacy of the Chinese government. Thus, Álvarez and Castrillón are in agreement with both Kubat, who argued the CCP is using Confucianism for legitimacy, and Brown who noted its use of the word "harmony." Although Álvarez and Castrillón are not specifically looking at the years under Xi Jinping in their research, they make the point that Xi Jinping has continued with these policies, and even passed a law requiring that children visit their parents, which implies an emphasis on the confucian value of filial piety (Álvarez and Castrillon 2019).

In sum, research on Confucius and Mao tends to either look at his writings (the consensus being that he largely condemned Confucius) or at the way in which the politics Mao participated in reflected confucian values. For Xi there is less literature, but what there is emphasizes the use of the concept of "harmony" and attempts by Xi Jinping and the CCP to use Confucianism as a source of legitimacy.

Methods

My basic methodology for this paper lies in comparing the tenets of Confucianism with the policies, behavior, and the values promoted by both Mao and Xi. To operationalize Confucianism I first read both primary and secondary sources on the topic and then compared aspects of Confucianism with the politics of each leader. I then selected six Confucian values that were both indicative of Confucianism and relevant to

governance and specifically both Mao and Xi. Subsequently, I scoured available sources for information on Mao and Xi and expanded upon how each man enacted (or failed to enact) each value.

Below is a summary of Confucianism, accompanied by an explanation of the six values I chose to examine. This in turn is followed by an explanation of how Mao and then Xi use these values in their rhetoric and policies.

Confucianism

I. An Overview

Confucianism is misleadingly named. Although Confucius, who lived around the sixth century BCE (Gardner 2014, 1), crystallized the philosophy and gave it his name, he was building upon a traditional mode of thought far more ancient than himself (Liu 1998, 1). Furthermore, certain writings of Confucius's followers, such as Mencius, are considered to be Confucian classics alongside the sayings of Confucius himself (collected in *The Analects of Confucius* or *The Analects* for short) (Gardner 2014. 48–51). Confucianism is therefore tied to Confucius but not limited to him. This of course means that, like most philosophies, Confucianism is sprawling in scope and breadth, making it difficult to summarize.

However, some generalizations can be made. It is a system of thought characterized by careful attention to morality, hierarchy, and especially harmony. In *The Analects,* these values are applied on three levels: to the individual, to the family, and to the society. Importantly, Confucius did not see these three levels as independent of one another but rather deeply interconnected. Therefore, although I focus primarily on the political aspects of Confucianism (i.e. his ideas relating to the societal level) it is

important to remember that Confucius almost always emphasized the utility of any given value in each level of society. Harmony, for example, was important within individuals, within families, *and* within society, and all three levels depended upon one another.

Below is quoted an excerpt from Gardner which hits upon the major points of Confucianism.

> A moral vanguard of individuals is called for by Confucius and his followers. These individuals move others to proper behavior through the power of their example. By practicing the rituals and respecting the mutual responsibilities required to sustain the so-called five relationships—father–son, ruler–subject, husband–wife, older brother–younger brother, and friend– friend—they provide a model for those around them to follow and thereby bring harmony to family, community, and empire (Gardner 2014, 16).

As the last line indicates and as previously mentioned, Confucianism is a philosophy concerned with bringing about harmony in all levels of the world. Additionally, Confucianism emphasizes the idea that through upright behavior and virtue individuals can change society, especially if they are leaders. Finally, order and hierarchy are important, as seen in the five relationships, four of which are hierarchical.

In operationalizing Confucianism I have chosen to concentrate on the values that are functionally relevant to this paper, mostly due to constraints of space, time, and expertise. Some important values, such as *ren* (true goodness) or filial piety, have therefore been excluded. This is not because they are not important aspects of Confucianism, but rather because they are not directly related to political philosophy and therefore do not pertain to the governance of either Mao or Xi. However, the values I

have chosen to examine often encompass other aspects of Confucianism. For example, *ren* is important to the Confucian ideal of rulership which is also addressed in this paper and filial piety factors into the Confucian concept of the family as a political microcosm. Therefore, although the six values I have chosen are not exhaustive, they do address many key elements of Confucianism and relate to other values which are also important to the philosophy.

Below is an explanation of my selection of each of the six values and their importance, meaning, and significance to Confucianism.

II. The Six Values

1. Harmony

As with any big concept, Confucian harmony is multifaceted. In human relationships it is achieved through honoring elders and parents, reverence for the past, adherence to ritual, and submission to one's social role (Gardner 2014, 10, 32). Although not directly referencing harmony, this passage is a good example of Confucius's expectations: "A young man should be be filial within his home and respectful of elders when outside, should be careful and trustworthy, broadly caring of people at large, and should cleave to those who are *ren* [truly good]" (Analects 1.6). Note the emphasis on reverence and dutiful care for others.

However, harmony was more than a social expectation. In fact it extended beyond the social realm into the fabric of reality. Kubat puts it this way: "Harmony… represents a holistic approach to human relationships *as well as to man's interaction with nature*" (Kubat 2018). Gardner uses the term frequently, often as he is describing Confucius'

social views, but also in the context of the cosmos itself: "...the realm of heaven and earth has an inherent rhythm and harmony that maintain—spontaneously—a perfect balance among its parts" (Gardner 2014, 13). In sum, Confucianism understands harmony as important to human relationships but also extending into the natural world.

Finally, according to some scholars, harmony is the most important concept in traditional Chinese culture (Kubat 2018, 56). Certainly it appears with frequency in *The Analects,* both by name and in the message of the sayings themselves. Because of this central role it is included as the first of the six Confucian values.

2. Family as a Political Microcosm

The confucian concept of the family as a political microcosm proposes that the society is like a family "scaled up." If the ruler behaves as a good father to his subjects (who, in this analogy, are akin to his children) then the state will have peace and be free of *luan* (chaos). Furthermore, if children learn proper behavior at home then they will grow up to exhibit proper political behavior as well.

In *Confucianism: A Very Short Introduction* Gardner summarizes the concept in these words:

> Family clothes and shelters us, but its most important function in Confucian teachings is to set us on the path to virtue. *Family is a microcosm of society*, the locus for learning about human relationships and the norms that govern them. It is here that, ideally, we are inculcated in those values and practices that make a harmonious Confucian society possible: obedience and respect for authority, deference to seniority, affection and kindness toward the young and infirm, and so forth. (Gardner 2014, 29 emphasis added).

This idea is more succinctly expressed in Mencius, a Confucian classic. “Mencius said, ‘Among the people there is the common saying, “The empire, the state, the family.” The empire has its basis in the state; the state has its basis in the family, the family has its basis in oneself.’” (Mencius and Philip J. Ivanhoe 2009, v. 4A5). And *Analects* 1.2 states, “A man filial to his parents, a good brother, yet apt to go against his superiors—few are like that! The man who doesn’t like to go against his superiors but likes to plot rebellion —no such kind exists!” (Burton Watson 2007)**.**

To summarize all of the above, Confucianism views the state in terms of the family with the rulers as parents and subjects as the children. By learning to obey their parents, children are training to later obey their rulers. According to this model, if one wants to avoid *luan* and produce harmony then children and subjects should be obedient to authority and parents and rulers should care for those in their charge.

This concept—that of the family as a building block of society—is included in this list because it is crucial to the Confucian view of politics and because it highlights the importance of the family in Chinese culture. Furthermore the use of the family in politics by Mao and Xi is of note, as I will expand upon later.

3. Authoritarian Rule

The traditional Chinese approach to government was strongly authoritarian by today’s standards and, as in most of the ancient world, monarchy was the default political structure of Confucius’s China. Furthermore, Confucius had little faith in the ability of the masses to make their own decisions, and most of his perspective on governance is centered on creating virtuous rulers who can then lead virtuous countries (Gardner 2014, 33).

There is one caveat to this, which is the mandate of heaven. Should the emperor become so despotic that the people groan and cry out to heaven, the tradition goes, then heaven will hear their cry and withdraw its mandate (Gardner 2014, 46). Subsequently the dynasty will collapse into chaos, the emperor having lost his approval from heaven. This idea balanced the power a little bit by asserting that fundamentally the emperor had a responsibility to the people, as the people had a responsibility to him.

However, aside from this aberration, Confucius' writings assume a political system with one ruler and the masses subservient to him. This value warrants inclusion in the list first because it was a fundamental assumption of Confucius and his followers but also because it is in opposition to a popular modern form of government—democracy—and therefore it is relevant to modern China, especially because Mao claimed to be founding the People's Republic of China as a "democratic dictatorship"(Karl 2010, 74).

4. Leadership Through Virtue

Despite his emphasis on the moral responsibility of individuals, Confucius had a surprising interest in aspects of public life, such as the role of rulers. For instance, Gardner summarizes the matter in this way:

> The picture of the ideal ruler that emerges from the Analects is of a man whose inner virtue radiates outward as a powerful, charismatic, moral force that moves people toward true goodness and the practice of ritual propriety, thus producing social harmony. This force is non-coercive, and its effects seem natural, like grass bending in the direction of the blowing wind (Gardner 2014, 39).

The ruler's virtue was strongly reliant upon *li* (ritual or, in this context, proper conduct). Gardner also summarizing this matter, saying:

> In leading by ritual [i.e., *li*], the ruler assumes the role as standard-bearer of the culture, thus enhancing his legitimacy; at the same time, he serves as instructor, exemplifying for the people the beliefs and practices they are expected to embrace as well… But ritual is effective only if the ruler's practice of it is informed by the proper feeling, the spirit of humility or deference" (Gardner 2014, 38).

Confucius' idea of the ruler might thus be summarized as one whose virtue—especially his adherence to *li*—is so upright that his very example is sufficiently persuasive to produce peace and virtue amongst his subjects. Gardner describes him as the standard-bearer of the culture, one who embodies all the *li* (ritual) proper to the ideals of the society he rules.

The idea of the virtuous leader who governs by the power of his righteous example is included because it is important to Confucian political thought in that most of Confucius' opinions about correct governance in *The Analects* boil down to this singular idea.

5. Reverence for the Past

A perusal of *The Analects* of Confucius may leave a variety of impressions upon the reader, but one will certainly be his reverence for the past. Although Confucius lived before the common era and thus belongs to ancient history, he himself frequently hearkened back to a past when men were upright and virtuous, and society was harmonious. Illustrating this point, the very first chapter of Gardner's book opens with these lines:

> Confucius lived in the sixth century BCE. Given a choice, however, he would have preferred to live five hundred years earlier, at the dawn of the Zhou dynasty

(1045?-221 BCE). It was, he imagined, a golden age, a time when rulers governed through moral example, people practiced time-honored rituals, and social harmony prevailed throughout the land (Gardner 2014, 1).

This reverence for the past permeated Chinese society, so much so that in some parts of China when CCP officers gave Chinese peasants the opportunity to seize the land of the upper class, they met resistance from the peasants themselves (Solomon 1971, 81). In similar contexts, the peasants refused communist rhetoric and instead articulated ancient ideas such as the mandate of heaven, again rejecting marxist thought (Solomon 1971, 192).

Reverence for the past is included in this list both because it is fundamental to Confucianism (as stated above, Confucius himself had great respect for tradition and ritual and most of his teachings were derived from prior thought) and because it is particularly pertinent to modern China which has struggled mightily with its own past over the last century.

6. Philosophy as a Guide to Governance

An aspect of Confucianism somewhat distinct from the other five values is its connection to politics, especially as a guiding philosophy. At first glance this might appear to be a mere historical aberration rather than a principle, but it is important to note that both Confucius and Mencius spent their lives attempting to convince rulers to adopt their philosophy as a guide to governance, seeing this as its principle aim (Gardner 2014, 1; Liu 1998, 33). Furthermore, *The Analects* itself frequently addresses Confucius' ideas about correct governance. Therefore, in addition to being a historical reality, Confucianism's ties to government is also a Confucian value in and of itself.

This bore itself out in the history of imperial China. In fact, Confucianism became so thoroughly enmeshed with the Chinese state that practically every public official was guaranteed to be steeped in its tenets from early childhood. As Gardner puts it:

> Confucianism served as the essential ideological prop of the imperial Chinese state. Rulers would rely on Confucian teachings for guidance and legitimacy, and recruit their bureaucracy through Confucian-based examinations. And, as a consequence of the ideological dominance of Confucianism in government, education in imperial China would center on mastery of Confucian writings. The great prestige—and economic rewards—associated with government service ensured that those who could afford schooling devoted their efforts to the mastery of those texts that would earn them examination success and thus official position (Gardner 2014, 7).

Furthermore, Gardner goes on to describe how even boys of six or seven years were "expected to devote themselves to the study and memorization of primers incorporating Confucian values and then the Confucian Classics." (Gardner 2014, 7).

Essentially, in classical China the ability to climb the bureaucratic ladder was predicated on thorough knowledge of the teachings of Confucius and his disciples. Oddly, then, one of the distinguishing characteristics of Confucianism was its thorough infiltration of imperial China as a legitimating philosophy and a way to filter potential officials.

This concept was included in the six partly because of prior research indicating that the use of communist ideologies throughout Mao's career may have been a mere swapping out of Confucianism for another philosophy (Ko 1999). Additionally, from its

very conception, Confucianism was meant to aid governance, and therefore it is entirely consistent to understand its relationship with politics as fundamental to Confucianism itself.

Mao Zedong and Confucianism

I. Introduction

As alluded to previously, there is a literature of reasonable size addressing how Chairman Mao spoke about Confucianism. For example, Boer, in an overview of most of his statements on the matter, found that Mao usually spoke poorly of Confucianism but, at times, allowed that it had some merits (Boer 2015). Overall, scholars tend to agree that his stance was conflicted, and some also have found that Mao used elements of Confucianism in the structure of the state he constructed.

Interestingly, after reading Mao's *The Little Red Book* (Mao 1972) I found that Confucius is not mentioned even once. Additionally, it is rarely addressed in his published speeches and essays. In contrast to Xi Jinping, the topic does not seem to have been particularly important to him, except in so much as Confucius represented the traditional China which needed to be eliminated. The natural conclusion from all these sources and the relative scarcity of references to Confucius by Mao is that he did not particularly care for the philosopher, and in fact frequently criticized him, but that on occasion he explored the possibility of Confucianism being brought into alignment with communist ideas.

However, an examination of his political exploits and especially relevant portions of the philosophy of his own making—Mao Zedong Thought—actually illuminates a consistent but unexpected pattern: either the introduction of values in direct opposition to Confucianism or else the *inversion* of Confucianism, where inversion means retaining some elements of Confucian concepts or structures but using them to ends that are antithetical to Confucianism, In either case, the result is that Confucianism is not simply abandoned but attacked. In the first case the opposition comes from without, in the second from within, but the effect is the same.

This pattern of opposition is striking in its consistency and strength. It also casts prior research (Álvarez and Castrillon 2019; Guo 2019; Ko 1999) in a new light: although it is true he used some Confucian structures to govern, his approach is arguably more destructive to Confucianism than if it had been abandoned altogether. This will become more clear as each of the values is explored in detail in the following section.

II. The Values

1. Harmony

Recall that within a Confucian framework harmony is concord between person and person in human relationships, between rulers and the ruled, and even between humanity and nature itself. Mao's philosophy could not have been farther from this ideal. Continuous revolution, one of the hallmarks of post-1949 Maoism, presented the idea that the revolution was never over but was instead a permanent struggle for socialist purity (Karl 2010, 101).

Out of this idea came the Cultural Revolution, a decade in which order broke down at every level of society in an attempt to purge it of traditionalism. This included a

radical disregard for every authority that wasn't Mao and certainly a lack of decorum and restraint, all Confucian values (Karl 2010, 124–25). In some instances the fervor of the Cultural Revolution led children to turn in their parents to be executed (Branigan 2013) and frequently students publicly humiliated and beat their teachers and professors (Karl 2010, 125). Mao introduced a decade of chaos in order to bring China closer to a socialist purity.

Mao framed this socialist purity as akin to the traditional idea of harmony. Traditional China even had a concept called "The Great Unity" which was considered a utopian time of ultimate harmony (Solomon 1971, 152–53). Mao compared the Marxist China which he hoped to achieve through revolution to The Great Unity (Mao 1949). However, this highlights the central discrepancy between Mao's vision of the Great Unity versus the traditional understanding: they depend on opposite values. Confucianism rests utopia on the foundation of peace, goodwill, and the free cooperation and obedience of every individual to his designated role. Quite the opposite, Mao's utopia depended upon turmoil. He even said as much in a letter from 1966, writing that he wished to, "'create a great disorder under heaven' so as finally to achieve, 'great order under heaven'" (Karl 2010, 125).

Finally, Mao was also in opposition to harmony with nature, another aspect of Confucian harmony. Indeed, he explicitly set out to wage a "war against nature" and the devastating environmental results of this policy only served to increase the chaos and human suffering of his time in power (Shapiro, xii).

Essentially, Mao injected society with the very opposite of harmony for ten years straight on the premise that it would eventually bring about harmony again, even citing in

some instances the traditional Chinese utopia. In the process he managed to destroy not only the environment but also bulwarks of Confucian harmony such as reverence for authority, the past, ritual, and traditionalism.

Thus, in the case of harmony it is true that Mao has incorporated Confucian ideas into his philosophy and governance style (this is expected, since other researchers have demonstrated similar instances—see "Existing Literature" for more details), however their use served to undermine Confucianism itself. The value of harmony was used to justify chaos, its opposite. I therefore argue that Mao's actions, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, were directly opposed to harmony and even worked to destroy it.

2. **The Family as a Political Microcosm**

Within Confucianism, the family was understood as a tiny state, with the father as the ruler and the children as subjects. Recall also that within Confucian society harmony, and especially filial devotion to one's parents, were of immense importance and that these postures were designed to carry over into adult life when dealing with authority of any kind.

With this in mind, one of Mao's interviews becomes immensely interesting. In it, Mao draws a direct connection between his politics and his early family life. According to Mao, when he was about thirteen a dispute arose between himself and his father. In the course of the argument he fled to a nearby pond and threatened to drown himself in it if his father pursued him further. Mao continues the story by saying,

> In this situation demands and counter-demands were presented for cessation of the civil war. My father insisted that I apologize and *k'ou-t'ou* as a sign of submission. I agreed to give a one knee *k'ou-t'ou* if he would promise not to beat

me. Thus the war ended, and from it I learned that when I defended my rights by open rebellion my father relented, but when I remained meek and submissive he only cursed and beat me the more.

(Snow, 1937 as cited in Solomon 1971, 177).

By comparing a domestic argument to a civil war (pertinent to the civil war he himself helped the CCP win) Mao directly relates family to politics and roots himself in the Confucian tradition. But with his last line "when I defended my rights by open rebellion my father relented" he draws a conclusion at odds with the essence of Confucianism, which emphasizes reverence and obedience. By accepting Confucian terms but replacing submission with revolution, he completely inverts its meaning.

Furthermore, as discussed previously, Mao instigated the Cultural Revolution, a large element of which was breaking down family structures and promoting loyalty to Mao himself over loyalty to relatives. As mentioned earlier, this sometimes culminated in children turning over their parents to be executed (Branigan 2013). Mao was promoting this revolution within the family and using it in service of a revolution of the entire society; again he made use of the Confucian concept of the familial microcosm, and again it was to ends which were fundamentally anti-Confucian.

This is another instance in which both the rhetoric that Mao used and his policies were united in being anti-Confucian, despite the fact that he actually used elements of Confucianism in his argumentation—in this case, he described the family as analogous to the state, but promoted revolution rather than harmony.

3. **Authoritarian Rule**

An obvious inversion is the way in which Mao replaced the absolute rule of the emperor with the (in theory) absolute rule of the people. It is easy to forget that, although China is now an authoritarian state governed by an elect minority, the promise at the outset of its founding was a state led by “the people.” (Karl 2010, 74–75). The very name of the state—The *People’s* Republic of China—belies this fact. Furthermore the 1954 Constitution, article 2, makes this crystal clear by opening with: “All power in the People's Republic of China belongs to the people” (Constitution of the People’s Republic of China 1954).

Mao even developed the concept of the mass line to articulate this value. He explained it thus:

> In all the practical work of our Party, all correct leadership is necessarily "from the masses, to the masses." This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them, and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action (Mao 1943).

Specifically, “from the masses, to the masses” implies a great respect and emphasis on the value of the opinion of the people, one which Confucius would have eschewed. Mao was also willing to put this idea into practice. To again return to the Cultural Revolution, it was founded on an idea that the masses could take control of the establishment and impose revolution, to the point that Mao undermined his own party when he felt that it had strayed too far from revolutionary ideals (Karl 2010, 117).

Therefore, Mao flatly rejected the Confucian idea of a wise ruler who governs the people and whom the people obey. It could be argued that his doctrine of the mass line resembles the mandate of heaven, and later in this paper I argue that Xi has used the mass line in a way that does indeed resemble the mandate. However, Mao's mass line is so steeped in a radical repudiation of authority outside of the people, while the mandate of heaven assumes authority beyond the people, that the comparison is rather weak.

The only real way in which Mao retains the idea of a strong central leader is, ironically, in himself. Despite his emphasis on putting the people in control of China, he himself became the most powerful figure in the history of modern China and, by most accounts, a tyrant. This ironic twist is explored in further detail below.

4. **Leadership Through Virtue**

Despite his apparent genuine belief in the doctrine of the mass line, Mao was an authoritarian leader, growing ever more erratic later in life. Even when setting off the deadliest events in the Cultural Revolution Mao led the way. In fact, a cult of personality developed around him to the point that into the modern era taxi drivers hung him from their mirrors for good luck (Karl 2010, 182). Mao, then, was functionally a ruler of China especially late in his career.

Characteristically, Mao fulfilled his role of leader to ends that would have horrified Confucius. In Confucianism virtue consisted of reverence, adherence to ritual, refinement, and *ren* [true goodness]. Good rulers were virtuous rulers and served as an example to the people (Gardner 2014, 33). Mao continued to emphasize virtue of a sort, and to pass it on to his people, but it was his own conception of virtue and not at all what Confucius had promoted. Even more importantly, he used his own adherence to this new

virtue to legitimize his rule, much as traditional Chinese leaders did with traditional virtue.

For example, in contrast to the traditional refinement of Confucian scholars Mao encouraged physical fitness combined with what many would call crude habits. In his first published essay, Mao explicitly connects physical fitness to virtue when he writes,

> Those whose bodies are small and frail are flippant in their behavior. Those whose skin is flabby are soft and dull in will. Thus does the body influence the mind. The purpose of physical education is to strengthen: the muscles and the bones; as a result, knowledge is enhanced, the sentiments are harmonized, and the will is strengthened (Mao 1917).

As previously mentioned, his own strict adherence to these standards were crucial for maintaining his legitimacy. Karl writes, "Taking his own advice, Mao cultivated a lifelong passion for swimming, for long explorative hikes in the countryside, and for physical activity in general," (Karl 2010, 12). Furthermore, much later in his life when he was aging, the population were encouraged by his displays of physical fitness, such as when he swam the Yangzi after the public had feared his physical health was failing (Karl 2010, 126). Mao also emphasized his connection to the peasantry, keeping rustic habits which connected him to the people all his life (Karl 2010, 79–80). In combination, this illustrates Mao's reliance on his physical prowess and rustic habits both as a kind of virtue and as an example to the people, whom he encouraged to imitate him. These were, of course, sharply distinct from Confucian virtue.

Beyond this, there is the simple fact that Mao failed to embody classical Cofucian virtues. As previously mentioned, late in his life he began to operate erratically and

tyrannically, and he was responsible for both the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, both of which left scars on the Chinese psyche. Importantly, he led both of these initiatives on the power of his own cult of personality, i.e. by inspiring enough loyalty to lead the Chinese people into these catastrophes. Within the Confucian framework, this could not happen under a truly good leader and virtuous leader, because the country which a good ruler governs is also good (Gardner 2014, 34).

His example, then, was not virtuous by Confucian standards or, indeed, modern ones. And, as Confucius would have predicted, this had negative implications for the people. In sum, leadership through virtue was thoroughly present in Mao's politics, but his concept of virtue was not in alignment with Confucius' and his ultimate impact on China—chaos, the opposite of Confucian harmony—bore this out.

5. **Reverence for the Past**

Recall that in Confucianism the past was greatly revered. This manifested itself both in Confucius's appeals to the Zhou dynasty and in his disciples' later preservation and celebration of his own writings.

Mao could not have been farther from upholding this value (Karl 2010, 127). Far from seeing the past as a golden and enlightened age, he frequently characterized it as feudal and backwards (Guo 2019). This reached a head during the Cultural Revolution with the determination to destroy the "four olds," (Karl 2010, 127) which represented China's past. This effort was so determined that the red guards—young people devoted to Mao during the Cultural Revolution—took to destroying treasures of the past, even sacking the homes of private citizens in their fervor (Kraus 2012, 44).

Mao's disdain for the past is so explicit and obviously antithetical to Confucianism that there is little more to be said. This was simply yet another way that Mao showed himself in action, not just word, to be thoroughly opposed to Confucianism.

6. **Philosophy as a Guide to Governance**

For centuries, Confucianism was closely tied to the Chinese state. In fact, a byzantine system of examinations ensured that government administrators were thoroughly familiar with Confucian teachings (Gardner 2014, 7). It is striking, then, that not long into the history of the PRC "Mao Zedong Thought" began to play a similar role in China. This is of particular importance given the role of *The Little Red Book* (Mao 1972), a collection of Mao's teachings which was ubiquitous among Chinese, particularly during the Cultural Revolution. Xing Lu writes in *The Rhetoric of Mao Zedong* of her experience as a schoolchild during the Cultural Revolution,

> [In 1966] we ceased our usual studies and started reading Chairman Mao's quotations from "The Red Treasured Book" (known more widely perhaps as the *Little Red Book* compiled in 1966). We recited them every morning. Our teacher told us how to interpret Mao's words and instructed us how to apply them to our everyday lives… During the Cultural Revolution, I carried Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book* in my pocket every day and everywhere I went, just like everyone else. (Lu 2017, xi–xii).

This is an eerily similar strategy to the traditional Chinese education program which, as described earlier, featured rigorous education on Confucian texts from a very early age. The situation during the Cultural Revolution differed only in that it centered around Mao's writings, rather than Confucius's. Furthermore, Mao Zedong Thought was

enshrined into the constitution from at least 1975 (The Constitution of the People's Republic of China 1975) and later on Xi Jinping (examined in more detail later) cited him together with Marx and Lenin when calling upon the history of the party and its central ideas (Xi 2014, 410). By the end of the Cultural Revolution Mao Zedong Thought was playing such a central role in China that it functioned in a similar way to that of Confucianism in imperial China.

However, at the risk of stating the obvious, Maoism is very unlike Confucianism and although they resembled one another in role, their goals were very different. For example, rather than being a stabilizing force, as Confucianism had been for centuries, Mao Zedong Thought plunged China into turmoil. Furthermore, aspects of Maoism such as the destruction of the "four olds" explicitly took aim at Confucianism itself. Towards the end of the Cultural Revolution there was even an anti-Confucianism campaign (Goldman 1975; Gregor and Chang 1979).

In summary, Mao introduced his own ideology into the society and allowed it to play a role similar to Confucianism. Despite these parallels, Maoism contained not only rhetoric which fueled chaos, but also anti-Confucian messages. Yet again, Mao adopted some aspects of Confucianism, but used these against Confucianism itself.

III. Discussion

The combined implication of the above examples is that in almost every respect Mao was practically and ideologically opposed to Confucianism. This is an unexpected level of congruence with his claimed alignment to Confucianism, given the CCP's lackluster reputation for truthful self-representation. However, the ways in which Mao opposed Confucianism went far beyond mere verbal condemnation. For example, it is

unlikely that Mao predicated his use of the family as a microcosm of society on his desire to appropriate a Confucian idea and subvert it to his own disparate ends. Furthermore, it is not obvious that his elevation of Mao Zedong thought to a status akin to Confucian philosophy was a deliberate attempt to subvert traditional Chinese practice. Nevertheless, Maoist policies did frequently appropriate originally Confucian ideas, usually in a subversive way. Constraints of space and concern over redundancy have limited the scope of the preceding list, but many more examples of this opposition can be found in the writings and life of Mao Zedong.

Xi Jinping and Confucianism

I. Introduction

The literature on Xi Jinping in general is scarce compared to Mao, especially when assessing his views on Confucianism. However, what literature there is on the subject is surprisingly conclusive: Xi is using traditional Chinese culture—of which Confucianism makes up a significant part—to legitimize the CCP.

Kubat methodically proves this in a comprehensive assessment of the rhetoric of CCP officials, headed by Xi Jinping, noting that of the traditional Chinese philosophers Confucius is cited most often, and often to back up policies or steps that Xi or other officials are taking (Kubat 2018). This is corroborated by Brown, who finds that the word "harmony" (a key concept in Confucianism, as already noted), is being used as a veiled threat which is backed up by the weight of Chinese tradition (Brown 2018). And Álvarez and Castrillón, writing not specifically of Xi Jinping's China but just before he came to

power, also conclude that the CCP at that time was using Confucian terms and concepts to legitimize its policies (Álvarez and Castrillon 2019).

This literature is, of course, rather scant. However, a quick survey of Xi Jinping's writings serves to corroborate it. In contrast to Mao, whose *Little Red Book* (Mao 1972) contains not a single reference to Confucius, Xi Jinping's *On the Governance of China Volume I* (a comparable work in some, though not all, respects) references Confucius or a Confucian work roughly once every ten pages. Furthermore, these references are usually used—as expected—for legitimizing the modern day Chinese government (Xi 2014).

For example, after listing over a dozen quotes from classical Chinese works—many of them Confucian—Xi writes, "These thoughts and ideas all displayed and still demonstrate distinctive national features, and have the indelible values of the times. We have updated them in keeping abreast of the times, while carrying them forward in an unbroken line." (Xi 2014, 204). In essence, just as Kubat found, he is using Confucianism to ground the modern Chinese government in history.

Furthermore, Confucius's name is often used in association with projects that are explicitly oriented towards branding. For example, a soft power tactic of China has been the establishment of Confucius institutes around the world (Volodzko 2015), indicating that the CCP sees Confucianism as a means to achieving legitimacy. Although these institutes were founded before Xi Jinping came to power, he explicitly spoke about expanding China's soft power in 2013 (Xi 2014, 192) and Alvarez and Castillon convincingly pointed out that many of Xi's tactics with regards to legitimation began before he took office (Álvarez and Castrillon 2019).

Finally, a quick look not just at Xi's speeches but also at the propaganda machine surrounding him, again indicates that Xi uses Confucianism primarily for legitimacy. CGTN (a Chinese government funded news network) released a video in 2018 in which Xi compared Shanghai Spirit to Confucianism (CGTN 2018). And as recently as February 2022, a Chinese news source reported on Xi quoting *The Analects* of Confucius at the Beijing Olympics (Chinese Wisdom in Xi's Words: "Friends coming from afar" 2022). All of the above makes clear that Xi is happy to be associated with Confucianism and makes an effort to do so often. But that does not answer the question: do his actions and the values he encourages actually reflect Confucianism?

In examining the six Confucian values alluded to previously, this paper will come to the conclusion that Xi is surprisingly consistent in his adherence to Confucianism. He sometimes tweaks the values to his own ends, and his alignment is not absolute, but it is marked enough to be a strong pattern. Confounding this assessment, of course, is the fact that Xi is so thoroughly acquainted with Confucianism that he may deliberately associate himself with its keywords without mentioning their source. This certainly must be taken into account and attempts have been made to mitigate this risk by looking at his policies and patterns of thought holistically. But overall, the conclusion is that, to a larger degree than might be expected, Xi is in-line with Confucianism.

II. The Values

1. Harmony

Xi's government is notable for its use of the word harmony. As mentioned previously, Brown found that a word that characterizes Xi's speech pattern is harmony, although in her estimation he means it more as a threat than an enticement (Brown 2018,

333). Kubat, in examining traditional Chinese culture in Xi's China and finding that it is playing a significant legitimizing role, also acknowledges the emphasis on harmony. She even goes so far as to point out that some scholars consider harmony to be the core value associated with traditional Chinese culture (Kubat 2018, 56). This has bearing on Xi's politics given that as already established he is relying heavily on traditional Chinese culture in general.

A good example of his usage is the following passage: "The construction of a strong, democratic and *harmonious* modern socialist country is our goal and responsibility – for the nation, for our forefathers and for our future generations (Xi 2014, 202).

Here it should be acknowledged that although Xi frequently uses the *word* harmony, this could easily be nothing more than the grab for legitimacy that Kubat describes, and have no reality beyond the use of the word itself. However, Xi employs other rhetoric that is emblematic of harmony without being so obvious.

For example, in a speech from 2014 he exhorted children to virtue by giving them this list of questions: "You can ask yourself every day: Do I love my country?... Do I care about my classmates? *Do I respect my teachers? Do I honor my parents? Do I conform to social morality?* Do I admire good people and good deeds?" (Xi 2014, 214), emphasis added). These values map very well onto the Confucian recipe for harmony, which emphasized filial piety, social morality, and respect for authority. Furthermore, they reflect a concern for social cohesion which is particularly notable given that in Xi's own youth the very country he now governs was gripped by revolutionary fervor which had absolutely no interest in respecting teachers, honoring parents, or conforming to social

morality. In that light, Xi's harmony-oriented rhetoric is a deliberate choice and certainly not inevitable.

Finally, his environmental policies reflect a return to harmony as well. Where Mao Zedong's conception of environmentalism had to do with domination (Shapiro 2001, xii), Xi has approached the issue from a different angle, stressing the need for stewarding nature in ways that are strongly evocative of the Confucian idea that all of reality, both humans and nature, should ideally be in harmony. For example, in a report delivered to the 19th party congress, and under a subheading titled "ensuring harmony between human and nature," Xi said,

> We must realize that lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets and act on this understanding, implement our fundamental national policy of conserving resources and protecting the environment, and cherish the environment as we cherish our own lives. We will adopt a holistic approach to conserving our mountains, rivers, forests, farmlands, lakes, and grasslands, implement the strictest possible systems for environmental protection, and develop eco-friendly growth models and ways of life (Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress 2017).

This language, especially where he emphasizes the idea of cherishing the natural world, firmly situate his ideas about the environment within a Confucian and harmony-oriented context.

Furthermore, Xi has enacted this rhetoric in practice. Of this topic Elizabeth Economy writes,

> ...the new Chinese leadership [led by Xi Jinping] has put in place a set of institutional changes that are likely to yield long term benefits, such as removing oversight for local environmental bureaus from local governments, working to ensure the independence of the environmental impact assessment process, strengthening the legal system regarding environmental protection, and raising the limit on the amount of pollution fines that an enterprise pays (Economy 2018, 184).

This suggests that Xi Jinping's designs on improving China's environmental impact are more than empty promises, but rather are shaping party policy in meaningful ways. This, together with his use of the word "harmony" when discussing this topic, is strongly suggestive that his perspective on environmentalism is rooted and shaped by Confucian thinking.

In sum, Xi has embraced harmony on a number of levels. First through the very word itself which he uses frequently, secondly through the values he is encouraging in the people themselves, and lastly through his approach to environmentalism, which resembles the Confucian idea that nature and humanity should be in harmony with one another.

2. The Family as a Political Microcosm

Recall that Confucian philosophy contained the idea that a nation is akin to a scaled up family, and that the family—since it is a microcosm of society—is a training ground for the broader world.

Xi embraces this concept in a speech he gave on childhood education: "The family is the first classroom, and a parent is the child's first teacher. Parents should

always set a good example for their children, and guide them with correct actions, ideas and methods" (Xi 2014, 215). In this passage Xi clearly identifies the family as a microcosm of the broader society and encourages parents to facilitate the virtuous upbringing of their children. This example is especially notable because it resembles Confucian passages on the same topic, and because it is in line with Solomon's perspective on traditional (and Confucian influenced) Chinese society, which used the family as a political training ground (Solomon 1971).

Xi also approaches the matter of family from a different direction which still borrows heavily from Confucianism. This is most starkly clear when he speaks on Taiwan, though it is also present in some of his speeches on Africa and Asia in general. This excerpt from a speech specifically about Taiwan is typical of the relevant trend:

> First, we [China and Taiwan] are one family, and no one can ever cut the veins that connect us…The closeness between us is rooted in our blood, our history and culture. We all believe that Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Straits are members of one Chinese nation, and we all inherit and pass on Chinese culture (Xi 2014, 264).

Setting aside his unpalatable assertions about Taiwan and focusing only on Xi's word choice, it is notable that in this particular speech the word "family" is used six times, in each instance referring to China and Taiwan as bound by bonds of kinship. In another speech, delivered in Tanzania, Xi said "Africa is a big family of shared destiny" (Xi 2014, 329). And he began still another speech with the words, "China and the ASEAN countries are close neighbors sharing kinship." (Xi 2014, 316). There are more

examples, but the point is that Xi frequently uses familial imagery to express unity between states.

Xi has expanded the Confucian analogy such that now the family corresponds to a group of states, rather than one state. Nevertheless, in this framework the family is still a microcosm of something, in this case of a community of states. Or, to express the same idea in a different way, communities of states are a macrocosm of the family. In either case the analogy retains its bones.

The important thing is that Xi is using the family to understand politics in accordance with the Confucian tradition and furthermore, unlike Mao, Xi uses the analogy to promote unity rather than disunity. Again, this is in accordance with Confucianism.

3. Authoritarianism

As previously noted, Confucianism prescribes a strong role for rulers; democracy as a concept probably wouldn't have made much sense to Confucius. And by all accounts, Xi has embraced this perspective. In 2016 he was declared "core leader," ending the collective leadership which had governed the CCP for several decades (Guo 2019, 11–12). Furthermore, in 2018 he famously abolished term limits for his own position, (Doubek 2018) effectively making himself leader for life. And in *The Third Revolution* Elizabeth Economy notes that in contrast to Deng Xiaoping, Xi has "launched an aggressive set of reforms which augments rather than diminishes the party's role in political, social, and economic life." (Economy 2018, 11). In all these instances he is concentrating more and more power in his own hands and that of the party, not in those of the people, bringing him in line with the Confucian ideal of governance.

There is another aspect to this issue, however. In addition to embracing autocracy as just, Confucianism also includes the mandate of heaven. This mandate dictates that if the emperor loses the will of the people he has also lost the approval of heaven, and his overthrow is legitimate. Embedded in this concept is the idea that the emperor's responsibility is to care for the people and that on some level he is subject to their will. This also finds body in Xi's approach to governance, though through an unexpected channel: the Maoist mass line. In a speech addressed to CCP members Xi wrote:

> Adhering to the mass line is recognizing that the people are the fundamental force in deciding our future and destiny. The strong foundation keeping the Party invincible lies in our adhering to the people's principal position in the country, and bringing their initiative into full play. Before the people, we are always students (Xi 2014, 51).

He therefore appears to be in favor of a people centric state which the party serves. This parallels the mandate of heaven and again, combined with an emphasis on his own authority, exemplifies an adherence to Confucianism that goes beyond lip service into the very structure of Xi's thinking.

4. Leadership Through Virtue

Xi has publicly quoted this line from *The Analects*: "The Master said, conduct government in accordance with virtue, and it will be like the North Star standing in its place, with all the other stars paying court to it," (Burton Watson 2007, 2.1; Gracie 2017). Confucius' broader point, elaborated elsewhere in *The Analects* is that if a ruler is truly virtuous then the people will also become virtuous and peace will spread throughout the land. For example, Analects 13.11 reads, "The Master said, They say that if good men

were to govern the domain for a hundred years, they could wipe out violence and put an end to killing. How true those words!" (Burton Watson 2007).

As discussed previously, Mao led by example, but his example was not of anything Confucius would have recognized as virtue. Rather, he attempted to embody revolutionary values. On the other hand, Xi is wholly devoted to the Confuician concept of leadership through virtue, perhaps more than any other Confucian concept besides harmony.

This manifests itself in a few ways. On a superficial level, in contrast with Mao, Xi actually takes pains to play the part of an upright and respectable world leader. As mentioned previously, Mao retained his rural peasant habits all throughout his life and refused modern conveniences, clothing, and even toilets on all but the most august occasions (Karl 2010, 79–80). Mao sets a low bar, but it is still worth noting that Xi is clearly aiming to project something decidedly different from the peasant-turned-chairman image which Mao embraced. Additionally, in one of his speeches Xi instructed party officials by saying, "... the current requirements for studying and practicing the Party's mass line have been clearly defined: examine oneself in the mirror, straighten one's clothes and hat, take a bath, and treat one's disease" (Xi 2014, 412). To be sure he is speaking figuratively to some degree, but the fact that he deems the analogy of self grooming relevant to his ideal of leadership is notable in contrast to Mao. It is a clear embrace of the *li* which Mao rejected.

Xi is also known for his unusually prolonged and intensive anticorruption campaign. According to Economy:

> The all-encompassing nature of the anticorruption campaign Xi has undertaken also distinguished his effort from those that preceded it. With more than 800,000 full and part-time officials committed to working on the campaign, Xi has sought to eliminate through regulation even the smallest opportunity for officials to abuse their position… Nor has the campaign waned after the first year or two. Anticorruption campaigns directed by previous Chinese leaders typically concluded within a year or two of their inception and then relaunched after a period of a year or more. Xi signaled a different intent almost immediately upon assuming office (Economy 2018, 30).

This significant emphasis on anticorruption is notable in that it plays directly into the Confucian idea that leaders should primarily be virtuous and lead by example.

Finally, Xi described a good party official as, "firm in their ideals and convictions, willing to serve the people, diligent in work, ready to take on responsibilities, honest and upright" (Xi 2014, 452). The resemblance to Confucius's moral idealism is striking, especially given that Xi is speaking of the leaders of the people and that Confucius placed such emphasis on the upright moral character of rulers in particular.

In sum, Xi is committed to leadership through virtue much in the way that Confucius describes it. He has explicitly made this connection by quoting Confucius, but he also signals it through his mannerisms, his prolonged anti-corruption campaign, and the perspective on governance which he presents to party members themselves.

5. **Revering versus Destroying the Past**

By now it will probably be apparent to the reader that Xi Jinping is firmly devoted to reverencing the past, as can be seen by his frequent and continuous use of classical Chinese values, philosophies, and virtues. According to Kubat:

> …since his selection as Party leader, Xi Jinping has shown an ongoing commitment to advocating China's cultural and philosophical heritage as a meaningful resource for improving the performance of the CCP…Following his instructions, the CCP has drawn on classical philosophical notions to revamp its governance model. Despite the Party's programmatic anti-traditionalism in the past, Xi now symbolically depicts the CCP as the rightful beneficiary of and successor to China's cultural traditions. (Kubat 2018, 48).

It would thus appear clear that Xi is firmly rooted in the Confucian tradition as regards how to understand the past. However, for Xi to completely disregard Marxism and Maoism—with all their disdain for the past—and instead fully embrace traditional Chinese thought would naturally delegitimize the party, particularly because Maoism is officially enshrined in the constitution (The Constitution of the People's Republic of China 1975, 8). This creates a dilemma for the CCP.

Xi has solved it in part by embracing not only China's classical past but also—in part—its 20th century. He therefore frequently promotes Maoism, Marxism, and even the reforms of Deng Xiaoping. In essence, Xi is positively inclined towards *all* of China's past, or at least much of it. This plants him firmly in the Confucian tradition which, as previously noted, respects the past greatly and imitates it where possible.

6. Philosophy as a Guide to Governance

In the section addressing Mao's position on this topic it was noted that just as Confucianism became the official philosophy of the state in imperial China, so Mao Zedong Thought became akin to a religion during the Cultural Revolution, with his collected sayings making a strong parallel with *The Analects* of Confucius.

Xi Jinping has continued in this tradition in more or less the same way. His thought, too, has been enshrined in the PRC's constitution, under the heading of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" (Constitution of the People's Republic of China 1982). He too has published books of his collected works and sayings, and his thought also is a structuring force in the CCP. The significant deviation is largely that Xi's philosophy has not become monolithic as did Confucianism and Maoism. Xi frequently cites Marx, Lenin, Mao, and Deng Xiaoping when exhorting party officials to take the CCP's roots seriously, indicating that his own thought, though elevated, is one among other philosophies. Nevertheless, Xi follows in Mao's footsteps in that he has guiding ideologies.

More powerfully, however, there is the simple fact that Xi has also begun to use Confucianism itself as a guiding philosophy. To reiterate the resounding consensus of all the prior literature on Xi Jinping and Confucianism: he is using it for legitimacy, just as it was once used in imperial China for legitimacy. Whereas Mao kept the idea of a guiding philosophy but replaced Confucianism with something else, Xi has reached backwards in time and rekindled the original. It is difficult to imagine an action more explicitly aligned with this aspect of Confucianism. Xi is using the philosophy as it has always been used and as Confucius and Mencius themselves intended (Gardner 2014, 1; Liu 1998, 33). The only caveat to this point is that he has retained Marxism and Maoism as co-philosophies.

To conclude, Xi has not disregarded Mao's approach and continues to reference and respect classical communist ideologies. However he has also re-introduced Confucianism into its former role as a guide to Chinese governance, thereby planting himself once again firmly in a Confucian tradition.

III. Discussion

In sum, Xi Jinping largely upholds Confucianism with both his words and policies. There is some variation: for example, he has adapted the idea of the family as a social microcosm to also use it as a social microcosm when speaking about groups of states. Furthermore, sometimes he combines philosophies, or maneuvers one to resemble the other, as when he uses Mao's doctrine of the mass line to similar ends as the Mandate of Heaven or when he joins many philosophies together under the umbrella of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics."

However, on the whole Xi Jinping is startlingly consistent. Even in situations when he is not specifically citing Confucian philosophers, he is very often still promoting their values and even embodying them in policy, as with his prolonged anti-corruption campaign and his moves to make leadership in China more authoritarian.

This leads one to the unexpected conclusion that Xi's bid for legitimacy from Confucianism extends below the surface. He has gone further than spicing his speeches with palatable references to traditional philosophy: his policies are flavored with their ideas too. To what extent this holds true is unclear; it is entirely possible that Xi does not personally believe in the merit of Confucian values but merely finds them politically expedient. More research would be needed to make any such determination. However, Xi

is certainly serious about reviving Confucianism, and he is clearly making an effort to conform his politics to its teachings.

Conclusion

To summarize, Mao is unexpectedly and thoroughly hostile to Confucianism, while Xi is unexpectedly and thoroughly aligned with Confucianism. To be sure, both men claimed to hold these positions, but there were good reasons to doubt these claims. In the case of Mao, he occasionally deviated from his main line and spoke well of Confucianism, weakening his overall stance. Additionally, some prior research suggested that he borrowed Confucian structures and concepts and used them in his own rule, suggesting an affiliation with Confucianism. In the case of Xi, his bid for legitimacy through Confucianism is so blatant that it might have easily been mere propaganda, and furthermore the CCP does not currently enjoy a reputation for honesty. However, after a thorough examination of the overall rhetoric and policies of each man, I conclude that both spoke the truth about themselves and Confucianism: Mao's policies were almost universally designed to harm Confucianism, while Xi's are designed to restore it.

To take a closer look, on the one hand Mao's politics were characterized by radical anti-traditionalism. This meant that when Mao did bring up Confucius it was usually (though not always) in a negative context. Later in life he even waged a campaign titled the "anti-Confucianism" campaign (Goldman 1975; Gregor and Chang 1979). If Mao's opposition had been in name only this would have been interesting but not particularly significant. However, upon examination of Mao's other ideas and

characterizing policies a striking pattern emerges. At almost every level and on every topic Mao either directly opposes Confucianism or else uses its own values against itself.

For example, Confucianism emphasizes the importance of harmony and social cohesion. Mao, on the other hand, instigated The Cultural Revolution, an unbelievably tumultuous and conflict-ridden decade in which traditional China in all its manifestations was dismantled. That is to say, he created conditions that, far from harmonious and unifying, were chaotic and divisive.

In contrast, Xi has done the opposite of Mao. For one thing, Xi mentions Confucianism frequently as opposed to Mao who did so significantly less often. For another, Xi almost always speaks positively of Confucianism. Because the party is at a juncture where it needs legitimacy from China's traditional past, Xi Jinping is working hard to draw a connection between classical China and the CCP's China. Xi Jinping Thought—now enshrined in the constitution along with Mao Zedong Thought—centers around Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, a combination of communism with traditional China and philosophers like Confucius.

Overall, both men adhered to the position they purported to hold. These results, especially in cases such as Mao's Cultural Revolution, suggest that rhetoric and action are more linked than might be expected. Similarly, Xi's strong affiliation with Confucianism even sans its mention again implies a strong link between his official philosophy and his policies.

Significantly, this analysis has shown that Mao and Xi have both delivered in policy and politics exactly what they have promised with regard to Confucianism. As Xi continues to hold power and adjusts to a post-pandemic world, it will be interesting to see

whether his actions continue to align with Confucianism. As for Mao, there are many other ways in which he subverted Confucianism which have not been explored here. Further research, especially on other dictators and their relationship to the traditional values of their own cultures, would be of great interest.

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