

To what extent did Maoism redefine Confucianism's concept of the Chinese 'self'?

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Abstract

Altruism became an almost innate characteristic of Chinese people with the influence of Confucius and Mao Tse-Tung. Confucius solved the problem of individualism that existed in China through deliberate tradition and a code of ethics (which eventually became Confucianism). With selflessness as a goal, the core of Confucianism became the concept of 'self' as the convergence of its relationship with others— not as an individual or autonomous entity. More than two thousand years after Confucius molded the Chinese mindset, Mao, leader of the 20th century communist revolution, continued (although not admittedly) Confucianism's ideal of altruism. Since communism and religion are considered polar opposites, the argument of this essay deals with a striking paradox: Maoism (the belief system inspired by Mao) co-opted the status of the individual that Confucianism had until then maintained. Thus, the question becomes: to what extent did Maoism redefine Confucianism's status of the Chinese individual? Was Maoism's concept of the Chinese self really a shift from Confucianism, as Mao himself claimed, or was it fundamentally the same?

Both Confucius and Mao advocated a "pervasive hostility to the notion of personal autonomy and individualism" (Hook 77). Confucianism's idea of a superior person is that of an ideal host who sacrifices his personal desires for those of the greater whole. Similarly, Maoism's concept of the perfect communist is one who undertakes absolute selflessness, with which "he is already noble-minded and pure, a man of moral integrity and above vulgar interests" (Tse-Tung 95).

There exists, however, in both belief systems, an important contradiction: while the believer is expected to self-sacrifice for the general whole, he is also expected to individually self-improve. Although self-enhancement is kin to self-centeredness, the conclusion of this essay is that the individual (in Confucianism and Maoism's eyes) nonetheless remained superimposed by the collective force.

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I. Introduction

If 'self' refers to the characteristics that distinguish one person from the next, then it is generally agreed upon that traditional Chinese ethics, molded mainly by Confucian thought, not only promote a lack of self, but regard any blatant expression of individuality as immoral. Thus, by advocating "the ideal of depressing self-interest and glorifying self-sacrifice for the collectivity," Confucianism established the status of the Chinese individual for thousands of years (Hook 17). More interesting than simply the idea of *selflessness*, however, is that a pure conviction to altruism became so inherent to Chinese culture that the denial of a 'self' fundamentals two Chinese belief systems that would seem, by definition, opposites: Confucianism and Maoism, the Chinese version of Marxism-Leninism. Although Mao Tse-Tung, leader of China's communist revolution of the 20th century, allegedly sought to destroy China's ancient moral framework, there exists an undeniable – and paradoxical – similarity regarding this basic concept of a 'self.'

The purpose of this essay is to explore this contradictory parallelism between Confucianism and Maoism: to what extent did the People's Republic of China (established in 1949, with Mao as Chairman) redefine the status of the individual that Confucianism had until then molded in China? The argument to be debated henceforth, in response to this research question, is that Mao indeed co-opted— whether admittedly or not— Confucius' general guidelines regarding the concept of a 'self.' It seems logical, chronology-wise, to begin with Confucianism and then Maoism, with the finality of drawing conclusions regarding their definitions of the Chinese individual and signaling the ambivalent nature of their altruistic pursuits.

II. The problem of individualism

Confucius (or Kong Fuzi), born to a humble family in 551 B.C., hoped to solve the lack of social cohesion that existed after the collapse of the Chou dynasty, which had brought a chaotic anarchist sentiment and a degrading morality in the people. The most eminent threat of perpetuating anarchism, however, more than the state of almost continuous warfare, became the rapid convergence from group-conscious to self-conscious individuals. “Reason was replacing social conventions, and self-interest outdistancing the expectations of the group;” what would later be coined ‘Western individualism’ was beginning to corrupt China’s ancient altruism (Smith 162). Kong Fuzi had no divine insight and taught no profound metaphysical philosophies, but was simply a man who provided an earthly solution to a human temptation – egotism.

Confucius’ ideas on government and society, which would later become the basis for the beliefs of roughly one fourth of the world’s population, fundamentally sought to end the threat posed by individualism through a shift from spontaneous to deliberate tradition. Conscious or intentional tradition, Confucius argued, would solve the current calamities in China— “the attacking of small states by large states, [...], the plundering of the weak by the strong, the oppression of the few by the many, [...] the disdain of the noble towards the humble”— by infiltrating all aspects of life and expanding morality beyond only what the law observed (Roberts 16). Tradition’s phenomenal ability to internalize a rigorous code of ethics to ultimately become second nature accounted for Confucius’ success over alternative solutions to the lack of social cohesion. So, by providing “a collection of sayings so patently didactic, so pedestrian that they often appear commonplace,” Kong Fuzi created the basis for what would become Chinese civilization as we know it almost three thousand years later (Smith 159).

Parallel to this shift towards deliberate tradition, Confucius shifted the traditional emphasis on heaven to man (with heaven still important). This new attention on humans, with the idea that “we have first to know how to serve mankind, then we shall understand about serving the spirits,” leads one to the false assumption that Confucianism, by turning towards mankind, advocates individualism (Martin and Chien-tung 7). The Enlightenment of 18th century Europe provides an interesting comparison: the movement's pioneers shifted the Renaissance's focus on heaven to individuals as the center of all knowledge and reason. Contrastingly, Confucius focused on man *not* as having individual potential, but rather as having potential in the collective sense. So, while the Enlightenment left self-centeredness as one of its legacies, Confucianism left the exact opposite.

III. 'Self' in Confucianism

Simply stated, there is no 'I' in Confucianism; an almost complete lack of self is an essential characteristic of the deliberate tradition with which Confucius hoped to solve China's calamities. The self is an abstract figure molded entirely by others to the extent that “apart from human relationships there is no self. The self is a center of relationships. It is constructed through its interactions with others and is defined by the sum of its social roles” (Smith 180). In other words, the definition of the Chinese 'I' is the convergence of its interactions, as opposed to a separate entity, which leads almost invariably to an idealization of selflessness. In order to achieve altruism, Confucius preached, one's *hsin* (character for empathy and sympathy) must expand so that the self as defined by its relationships eventually transcends one's family, one's state, one's country, and finally, the world. The epitome of the Confucian 'self' and humanity at its best is characterized as *Chun tzu*: a Superior Person whose approach is that of the perfect host, one who voluntarily and energetically turns his or her attention to others (Smith 174).

Confucius established the status of the individual “so that a Chinese cannot think of himself as a separate individual apart from his family” (Martin and Chien-tung 8). Not only does the group define one's self-identity, but all ‘selves’ are expected to sacrifice their individuality for the benefit of the larger whole; the mathematical axiom *the sum is greater than the parts* is a suitable metaphor. So important is self-sacrifice, that Confucianism is even explicit as to which relationships conform the individual (i.e. ‘Five Constant Relationships’): parent-child, husband-wife, older-younger sibling, friends, and ruler-subject (Smith 176). Of these, filial piety is of utmost importance, which not only demands loyalty and admiration towards one's parents, but moreover invests the collective family, as opposed to the individual, “with quasi-religious significance through the practice of ‘ancestor worship’” (Hook 178).

Confucius drafted the blue print for a generally disciplined, hard-working, devoted, and selfless society by relinquishing the Chinese self and weighing relationships over the individual— precisely what he had intended would solve China's calamities and despotism. In the words of Kung Fuzi himself as presented by the *Analects*, a compilation of his thoughts and sayings, the Chinese people's greatest challenge became serving not oneself but others:

To serve my father as I would expect my son to serve me.
 To serve my ruler as I would expect my ministers to serve me.
 To serve my elder brother as I would expect my younger brother to serve me.
 To be the first to treat friends as I would expect them to treat me (Smith 157).

By establishing the ultimate sin as selfishness, Confucianism set the stage for great tolerance and passive participation regarding the decisions of the larger whole— namely, the state. A key example of this tolerance was the pacifist incorporation of Taoism and Buddhism into China's religious scheme. Brian Hook, who made a study on the lack of individuality in contemporary China, argues that participation in the political arena was passive, even conformist because it was not justified, much less moral, to stand up as an individual against

the state. Since collective decisions belittled individual demands, the typical response to a government's failures was to call for an *improved* government (Confucius' 'right of revolution'), instead of calling for a different *type* of government. Sun Yat-Sen, the first president of the Republic of China in 1912, described the Chinese as "a plate of sand" precisely because they lacked the individuality to form voluntary associations to critique the government (Hook 26).

IV. 'Self' in Maoism

The limited individual initiative that Confucianism developed remained during Mao's rise as Chairman of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Although Mao encouraged mass participation for the creation of a Communist China, people still had collective – not personal – initiative. In other words, the strong remnants of Confucianism's altruism made it easy (or easier than it would have otherwise been) for the Party to succeed in taking over China and ending the dynastic period.

And indeed, the very essence of mass movements is supported by the Confucian status of the individual. Eric Hoffer, who published *The True Believer* (on the nature of mass movements) two years after Mao's rise to power, claims that joining a mass movement inevitably renounces one's freedom and individuality in order to form part of a bigger whole (Hoffer 59). The individual is outweighed against the collective power so that "his only source of strength is in not being himself but part of something mighty, glorious and indestructible" (Hoffer 64). It is not surprising, then, to find that Confucius' description of the Perfect Person (*Chun tzu*), is fundamentally the same as Mao's own definition of the Perfect Communist: one who can "grasp the principle of subordinating the needs of the part to the needs of the whole. If a proposal appears feasible for a partial situation but not for the situation as a whole, then the part must give away to the whole" (Tse-Tung 137).

If selflessness was a Confucian goal, then Maoist mass movements satisfied the same passion for self-sacrifice, but with a different focus. Confucius' emphasis on the family as the pivotal unit for society is analogous to Mao's emphasis on the state (more precisely the PRC) as the basis for a collective identity. Mao targeted the family unit and replaced it with the state; in the words of Sung Yat-Sen, "the nation must come before family loyalty or individual rights" (Martin and Chien-tung 211). Instead of looking up to one's family, the Chinese were brought up to look to Mao as their new inspiration, to the point of considering him a demigod or a prophet-leader who "at all times stands higher and sees farther than anyone else [...] Each path, each turn, each curve comes into his view" (Cohen 202).

The Communist Party attacked filial piety by shifting responsibilities from families to work units (*danwei*), similar to the Soviet Union's communes (Hook 16). Michael M. Sheng, author of *Battling Western Imperialism*, claims that such was the power of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) that the Chinese had no concept of a 'nation,' but only of a 'party-state.' He writes that "the CCP locates individual identity and loyalty not within the 'Chinese nation' as a 'homogeneous people,' nor even the 'unitary state'; it was with the Party" (189). Thus, although the state was invested with the moral absolutism that Confucius had once attributed to Chinese families, the ancient ideal of selflessness was nonetheless enforced.

Not only did Mao relinquish the importance of the family unit, he went a step further and targeted it for destruction. Children were taught to accuse their parents of any 'unlawful' behavior— an attitude that Confucius would have certainly found inexcusable. In this sense, Mao applied Confucius' concept of deliberate tradition with a shifted focus towards the Party; all the while, the ideal of selflessness was maintained intact. Thus, there was a continuation of the imbalance of power between the individual and the state which had existed with Confucianism.

V. Imbalance of power between the individual and the state

Ancient Chinese emperors were chosen through a 'Mandate of Heaven,' which gave no opportunity to stand against an unjust emperor because "heaven sees as the people see, heaven will as the people will" (Smith 182). Confucius' revolutionary idea was to give people the freedom to revolt against an unjust emperor, which was supposed to narrow the immense abyss that had previously existed between the individual and the state in China. *Te*, Confucianism's term for expressing the moral power by which men are ruled, stated that a ruler must prove to be worthy of governing, which might have diminished the imbalance of power between the individual and the state. It is important to mention, however, that the 'Mandate of Heaven' was rarely questioned, and that the ruler was nonetheless given absolute power. The fact that the people neglected their right to protest reinforces the argument that Confucianism advocated selflessness, and with it, subjugation to the state.

As with Confucianism, there remained a great imbalance of power between the individual and the state after the Communist takeover of China. So much so, that

"it could be that no people have ever outdone the Chinese in ascribing moral virtues to the state or in depreciating the worth of the individual. First Confucianism and then the Chinese version of Leninism went all out in extolling the importance of rulers and society and minimizing the rights of individuals" (Hook 16).

Mao continued the traditional form of government control on taxes and other citizen responsibilities by binding individuals to a collective group or clan so that only the delegated leader of each clan responded to the state directly (Hook 27). This system served as a positive feedback mechanism because not only did the group's leader ensure that the other members fulfilled their duties, but by not dealing directly with the people, the gap between the individual and the state stretched.

In addition, tolerance as a result of selflessness extends from Confucianism to Maoism. Although private societies participated in politics, their participation was usually

passive. Besides this passivity being result of Confucius' moral teachings, Hook argues that the individual submitted passively to the state because the Marxist –Leninist idea of a communal identity helped advance Confucius' legacy of selflessness. In sum, the relationship of the individual towards the state “has all along been one of dependency and not one based on the rights of individuals” (Hook 18).

When Mao called for a reform of the Communist Party (i.e. the ‘Cultural Revolution’), he described people as a giant mass, not ever as separate entities: “several hundred million peasants will rise like a mighty storm, like a hurricane, a force so swift and violent that no power, however great, will be able to hold it back” (Tse-Tung 68). The state's task, as assigned by Mao himself, was to collect scattered thoughts from these masses, change them into systematic propositions, and then deliver them back to the masses until they assimilated them as their own. So, not only was there an imbalance of power between the individual and the state, but the state even controlled the power of the collective force.

VI. State vs. Intellectuals

The relationship between the state and intellectuals in particular is worthy of analyzing because it is logical to assume that Chinese intellectuals might have mitigated the imbalance of power between the state and the individual, by giving more weight to the individuals through culture and intellect. *Shih*, the class composed of intellectuals and scholars, had always been, and remained so with Confucius, at the top of the Chinese social hierarchy. The function of intellectuals in Confucianism was to advise and criticize the state, while submitting to state power. ‘The Reminders’ were the top civil intellectual servants who were appointed for nine years to criticize the emperor publicly, whenever Confucian ideals were corrupted. Thus, scholars and intellectuals served as a bridge between society and the government, as well as a bridge to the modern world (Hook 151). Nonetheless, the culture of

education was not for the enhancement of the individual 'self', but rather the enhancement of the community, to "bring home the duty of serving one's parents and one's prince" (Smith 179).

Similarly, intellectuals in the Maoist framework did not do much to narrow the gap, and were not "able to act as a sustained counter-force to the Chinese state" (Hook 17). The relationship between the Communist State and intellectuals is sketchy because the educated elite were welcomed into the Communist Party in the early years, but later persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. Some have even accused Mao of "treacherously encouraging intellectuals to criticize the Party and then siding with the Party in persecuting them" (Roberts 266). Regardless, by absorbing into the Communist State and becoming an equal part of the 'masses,' intellectuals lost the autonomous social base they had been able to build thus far.

The objectives of 'The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,' Mao's campaign for purifying the Party of capitalism and self-centeredness from 1966 - 1969, further led the intellectual individualism "into a trap" (Hook 152). Mao's *Red Guards* were trained to destroy China's 'Four Olds': ideas, culture, customs, and habits, which led to the humiliation and violent criticism of intellectuals. Scholars were to be oppressed, Mao claimed, because they "tend to be subjective and individualistic, impractical in their thinking and irresolute in action" (Tse-Tung 167). The renowned poet Hu Feng, for example, was persecuted for having openly criticized the Communist Party. *Shih*, the social class composed of scholars, was ranked lower than ever in Maoism, which replaced them with *Nung*, the farmer proletariat.

Even though the Communist Party created a hegemony that suppressed the individualism of intellectuals, Mao always advocated education, as did Confucius. From 1969 - 1977, primary school enrollment in China rose from 100 million to 146 million students, and expenditure on higher education between 1952 and 1957 tripled (Roberts 262, 284). This vehement focus on education implies that both Confucianism and Maoism were keen on the

attainment of or enrichment by knowledge, and thus, encouraging of self-improvement through scholarly triumphs. This presents an important counterargument to the original thesis, which will be explained in detail further on: while people were expected to neglect their 'self', they were contradictorily also expected to self-enhance.

VII. State vs. Youth

The relationship between the state and youth is also worthy of study because in the Confucian mindset, similar to what Mao would preach later, children and young adults were considered even less as separate entities than others. In Confucianism's hierarchy of importance, youth always remained the lesser, and was superimposed by the dictates of older family members.

Much like intellectuals and individuals in general, youth was likewise submitted to the greater communist whole since "the Chinese communists did not define youth as a time for the individual's autonomous quest for self-identity and meaning as in the West; youth's challenge was to submit and to accept the official definition of these things in the fashion of the selfless, unquestioning soldier" (Hook 182). It was especially important for the Communist Party to oppress the individuality of youth because new generations could not compare 'old' China to 'new' China, and therefore cultivating them would prevent old traditions from coming back—"our hope is placed on you," as Mao asserted (Tse-Tung 165).

Young students were taught to think according to what the Party wanted, and regarded that those "wedded to the doctrine of 'me first' are generally wrong on the question of the relationship between the individual and the Party" (Tse-Tung 136). During the Cultural Revolution, for example, students sought to prove their loyalty to the state by doing things that would normally go against their morals (humiliating intellectuals, burning books, oppressing liberal arts, etc.) (Hook 180). In sum, young generations, raised completely under

communism, were taught “collectivism, redness and expertise, glorification of Mao, altruism and unquestioning acceptance of Party leadership” (Hook 181). Thus, the lack of ‘self’ remains in both cases: children under Confucianism were defined completely by their elders, which is analogous to youth being defined by the Communist Party under Mao.

VIII. Conclusion

It is clear that Maoism co-opted the existing Confucian framework of selflessness; “Confucianism and Maoism denied the autonomy of the individual and made self-sacrifice [...] the highest ideal of citizenship” (Hook 16). It is no coincidence, then, that Confucius’ utopia shares many of the characteristics of Maoism’s communist utopia. The following passage, in which Confucius describes his ideal Chinese society, sheds light on the similarity between the two supposedly opposing systems of belief: “...the state existed for the good of the people. [...] The people [...], were not forgetful of the interests of others. [...] Thus there was not room for the development of egoism...” (Martin and Chien-tung 11).

The arguments developed in this essay clearly show that Maoism did not redefine the general status of the individual that Confucianism had until then molded (of being superimposed by a collective, more powerful, force), but merely redefined the specific focus and functions of altruism.

It is important to note, however, that although both Confucianism and Maoism appear to completely deny individuality, there is a significant ambivalence in the nature of their focus on selflessness. For while the Chinese is expected to submit to the larger whole, self-achievement (albeit for the good of the masses) is also required. In other words, the great imbalance of individual power does not at all relinquish the need for individual self-advancement. Confucius’ goal, for example, paradoxically stressed self-cultivation as much as it did self-sacrifice; although “Confucius saw the self as the sum of its social roles, that

overstates the case if it suggests that he denied that the self has an internal, subjective center” (Smith 182). Confucianism taught children to act according to collective morals, but at the same time expected them to gain recognition through achievements.

The status of the individual is, then, lost in a limbo between a ‘greater’ and a ‘lesser’ self, like a troubled scholar describes: “nobody could ever explain to me where natural self-interest ends and selfishness begins” (Hook 22). *Chun tzu*, the Confucian hero, also presents this same paradox: his self-improvement generates respect and admiration from others, but he devotes these individual improvements for the good of others (hence the analogy with an ‘ideal host’, one who serves others over oneself).

Maoism’s philosophies show precisely the same problem: the masses are supposed to subordinate to the needs of the whole while at the same time committing to personal achievements (Tse-Tung 144). Mao himself admitted this contradiction, and justified it by arguing that “sacrifice and self-preservation are both opposite and complementary to each other. For such sacrifice is essential not only for destroying the enemy but also for preserving oneself” (Tse-Tung 51). Hoffer, who wrote on the nature of mass movements like those in Communist China, affirms that self-sacrifice for the good of the whole is less romantic than it seems; self-sacrifice, he says, is “the burning conviction that we have a holy duty toward others [but] is often a way of attaching our drowning selves to a passing raft. What looks like a giving hand is often a holding on for dear life” (Hoffer 15). Are Confucian and Maoist essential philosophies hidden under a selfless façade?

The ambivalent nature of the status of the individual in China incites new research questions: are modern-day Chinese ethics replacing the traditional altruism with a Western adaptation of individualism? Can there be ‘pure selflessness,’ as Confucius and Mao idealized? How far should systems of belief (like Confucianism and Maoism) advocate self-sacrifice, or how far should they advocate self-improvement?

If it is as Hoffer says, and a longing for individual achievement is the truth behind China's altruistic façade, then the argument that edifices this essay (that the core of Chinese ethics has always been the ideal of selflessness) remains debatable. However, the surreptitious revelation of egocentrism behind the supposed Chinese lack of self advances—not denies—the original thesis. For, if there were no opportunity cost to self-sacrifice, or nothing to be lost from selflessness, it would not be sacrifice to begin with. In other words, the Chinese self, as defined by Confucianism and Maoism, is doubly altruistic—the Chinese first self-enhances for a collective, anonymous force.

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