

Can we learn from China?

by Moritz Nestor

In the 2009 German edition of Yu Dan's book "Confucius in the Heart. Ancient Wisdom for the Modern World" says:

"To be poor, but still happy and content, in today's world easily smacks of a lack of ambition. There is huge competitive pressure, and everyone is trying their best to get ahead in their profession. The level of income and the prestige of the particular position have apparently become the only criteria for judging a person's success. But the fiercer the competition, the more important is it for us to rethink our attitude and also become open in our interaction with other people. So how can we still behave in a truly human way in the twenty-first century?" (S. 34)

The book by Yu Dan, born in 1965, Professor of Chinese Literature and Dean of the Department of Film and Television at Beijing Normal University, attempts to provide solid answers for conduct of life from the perspective of Chinese philosophy – for today's selfconfident China. And for "us humans." More than 10 million copies of her Confucius book have already been sold to an enthusiastic audience. The German edition was published in 2009, generously supported by the Translation Fund of the Press and Publication Office of the People's Republic of China. Chinese television also delights millions of viewers with Yu Dan's broadcasts of the Conversations of Confucius' (Lun Yu).

For Yu Dan, the 2,500-year-old teachings of Confucius are like a healing hot spring.

"What I can do is to go into the water myself and - like countless people before me - to feel in my own body the beneficial effect of this spring, which has been giving us its warmth for over two thousand years. The benevolent one recognizes the benevolence of others, the wise one also a foreign wisdom". (p. 10f.)

Between these and similar lines, one feels as if one can read out what it meant that Yu Dan became familiar with the 2,500-year-old teachings of Confucius at the age of six at the hand of her grandfather, a literary scholar and philosopher. [1]

Classics like Confucius evoke awe in us humans, says Yu Dan. But even more: It is their

"openness and adaptability that has made us seek their closeness for thousands of years. Through them, each of us can gain individual and very personal insights, because as different as the paths of life may be, they are based on the same common values. 'Real truth is close to us', this phrase probably sums it up best. I believe that the truly wise people of this world do not scare people away."(p. 11) When Yu Dan says "in us as human beings" and that our individual lives are "based on the same common values," she is emphasizing the

natural law content of Confucianist doctrine, to put it in Western terms. Then the European reader can further reflect on this for himself and compare with his own cultural development when, where and how the basic principles of the Confucianist doctrine appear under other conditions and on other mental paths and in another language also in the European natural law philosophy, in Christianity and in the personal psychology and anthropology. And he finds for himself today a precious wisdom that elevates him above the populist chatter of the day: That natural law is not just a "particular Catholic doctrine", but that it has been established especially in the thousand-year-old advanced civilizations, such as China with its 5000 years and "old Europe" with its 2500 years: Expression of humane thinking and feeling: that man is born with an "intention to walk upright, with human dignity", as Ernst Bloch once wrote.

To give just one example: Confucius taught in China 2,500 years ago. In ancient Europe, the statesmen and philosophers of the Greek Enlightenment created the first great works of democratic and natural law thinking in somewhat the same time. Although they followed different paths than Confucius, they arrived at the same goal as the great Chinese master: that all cultures have "the same underlying common values" because, despite their individual differences, they are human beings: the *zoon politikon*, as Aristotle says. In political terms, this meant that there is something supra-temporal in human nature against which the actions of the state must be measured, so that justice can be achieved. Confucius and the ancient Greeks recognized that power alone does not create justice. Peace alone is not enough. It must be a just peace. The Confucianist-educated Chinese ruler had to act for the good of the people, otherwise the people had a right to resist.

The European reader will be humbled by the reading, because he sees how in China 2 500 years ago a moral-philosophical and state-political thinking emerges, with which China was far ahead of Europe.

"Time is precious"

Yu Dan dresses her answer to the question How can one still be truly human in the twentyfirst century? in a kind of parable:

Scientists once wanted to find out the life energy of pumpkins. To do this, they put different weights on them, in each case just enough so that the fruit was not crushed but could continue to grow. All of them except one could be cut with a knife without any problems when they were ripe. One, however, had been particularly long and heavy. When it was ripe and one wanted to cut it open, the knife and the axe slipped off and one had to fetch a chain saw. Its flesh had become as firm as a tree trunk.

For Yu Dan this is a picture

"about life itself, a splendid metaphor for the world we modern people live in and for the inner vitality we should develop. [...] 'Time is precious' - this is true today more than ever. To wait until the age of seventy, that takes too long. Let's rather start here and now. The talks of Confucius and the other Confucian classics - in general, all the insights and learnings that the sages of old days left us - have only one true purpose: their study should help us to make better use of our own lifetime. It should save us from detours and let us become faster people with noble character and human love in our hearts. ... This way we do justice to our own heart as well as to our place in society. ... therein lies the significance of the wise men of antiquity: that they pointed out with simple words a path that their followers could follow over the centuries ... Thus they have become saints and for the Chinese the soul of a nation." (p 218)

In addition to his biological age, man always has a "spiritual and social age. There is nothing to be said against reaching one of the higher stages of the path of life even at the age of twenty or thirty. Yu Dan translates the image of the pumpkin as follows: "We should learn at an early age to transform the external pressure that weighs on us into internal resistance." (p. 217)

"At age fifteen, my will was focused on learning."

What does the Chinese classic tell us Europeans about learning? The path of man's life begins with learning, says Confucius: "At fifteen, my will was directed toward learning." "Learning without thinking is useless. Thinking without learning is dangerous." And: "Too much is just as wrong as too little." (p. 196) Other countries act on the assumption, Yu Dan points out, „that successful learning must bring about a change in action," i.e., an increase in efficiency, a change in the value system, and better adaptation to the demands of society.

In China, on the other hand, she writes, "it was always believed that a change in thinking marked the success of learning. Learning, therefore, consisted of making a foreign point of view [...] one's own and in turn being able to pass on what one had heard to others." (p. 196) Independent thinking and applying what has been learned in a "relaxed way of learning" is an inseparable part of learning.

"By the time I was thirty, I was independent."

In his early twenties, a person begins to become an independent part of society. By the time he is thirty, he should be "autonomous," says Confucius, meaning above all an inner autonomy with which one finds one's place in society: No longer blue-eyed, but also no longer lost or rebellious. At the heart of "truly enriching learning" is thus the development of personality and the applicability of what has been learned, which also means: having selfconfidence.

A mature personality, in Western terms, "controls heaven and earth equally". Yu Dan explains that this formulation comes from the Chinese creation myth and encompasses

"the ideal of personality of the Chinese people: a person who, on the one hand, floats completely freely above things in his idealism and imagination and does not care about the rules and obstacles of the material world in this space, but who, at the same time, stands with both feet on the ground and influences things through his actions in this world. Thus, the one who is only driven by idealism and is without 'grounding' is not an idealist, but a dreamer. On the other hand, he who is too 'earthy,' that is, without thinking of heaven, has only the worldly in mind, is not a realist, but a pragmatist." (p. 22f.)

"At forty, I became free of doubt."

Between thirty and forty there are the best years of life: one learns to limit oneself and to find a „proper measure", says Confucius, as if he had read Aristotle, who said in his doctrine of virtue that man could reach something around forty, the stage where he had integrated the "measure of the middle" into his way of life by doing. "Not to yield to joy, anger, sorrow, and cheerfulness - that is the middle; to yield to them, but at the same time to preserve the right measure, that is harmony." (p. 206) Thus, according to Confucius, a state of harmony arises in us that makes possible a life of peace. Man radiates serenity and peace of heart and has become a useful member of the community who, as Yu Dan puts it, "stands with both feet on the ground and influences things by his deeds in this world. Thus, one who is only driven by idealism and lacks 'grounding' is not an idealist but a dreamer."

We today in the West would do better to learn to listen to other countries and cultures. Because we have forgotten that, if we ever had it. Open colonialism was not long ago. But in our not being able to listen, it's still living on internally. But we could learn a lot from Confucius.

[1] China Daily [2009-06-09 16:10:31].

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