Politics

Confucius says, Xi does

The Communist Party turns to ancient philosophy for support

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TWO emerging cults are on display in Qufu, a city in eastern China where Confucius was born. One surrounds the ancient sage himself. At a temple in his honour, visitors take turns to bow and prostrate themselves before a large statue of Confucius seated on a throne. For each obeisance, a master of ceremonies chants a wish, such as for "success in exams" or "peace of the country". On the other side of the city the tomb of Confucius is the scene of similar adoration—flowers adorn it as if he were a loved one recently lost.

The other cult in Qufu surrounds the country's president, Xi Jinping. People still recall with excitement the trip he made to the city in 2013. It was the first by a Communist Party chief in more than two decades; in fact, though Mr Xi has visited Qufu he has not, since becoming China's leader, paid respects at the birthplace of Mao Zedong at Shaoshan in Hunan province. Today plates decorated with Mr Xi's image are for sale in Qufu's trinket shops. His beaming face is on display on a large billboard outside the Confucius Research Institute, together with a quotation from the modern sage: "In the spread of Confucianism around the world, China must fully protect its right to speak up," it begins.

Since he came to power in 2012, Mr Xi has sought to elevate Confucius—whom Mao vilified—as the grand progenitor of Chinese culture. He did not go so far as to pay homage at the Confucius temple in Qufu, where Mao's Red Guard mobs once wrought havoc (one of their slogans,

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"Revolution is not a crime", still survives daubed on a stone tablet). Neither did his few published remarks include explicit praise for Confucian philosophy, which still raises hackles among party hacks brought up to regard it as the underpinning of "feudal" rule in premodern China.

To emperors, who were regular visitors to Qufu, Confucianism was practically a state religion. "Uncle Xi", for all the mini-cult surrounding him, does not seem keen to be viewed as a latter-day emperor. But like leaders of old, he evidently sees Confucianism as a powerful ideological tool, with its stress on order, hierarchy, and duty to ruler and to family. Unlike the party's imported, indigestible Marxist dogma, Confucianism has the advantage of being home-grown. It appeals to a yearning for ancient values among those listering pace of change.

quietly been rehabilitating Confucius for some time, under Mr Xi the n February 2014 he convened a "collective study" session of the ch he said that traditional culture should act as a "wellspring" values. Official accounts of the session made no mention of erature made it clear that the values Mr Xi spoke of—such as and righteousness—were those espoused by the philosopher. In me the first party chief to attend a birthday party for Confucius (who turned 2,565). China, he told assembled scholars from around the world, had always been peace-loving—a trait, he said, that had "very deep origins in Confucian thinking". In May state media reported that the link between Marxism and Confucianism, which some might consider rather tenuous, was the "hottest topic" in the study of humanities in 2014.

Add plenty of sage

Under Mr Xi the party has tweaked its ideological mantras to sound more Confucian. At the party congress in 2012 that marked Mr Xi's assumption of power, slogans about "core socialist values" were distilled into 12 words, each formed by two Chinese characters and plastered all over Beijing and other cities. The ideas are a hotch-potch. Some are strikingly Western, such as democracy, freedom and equality. There is a nod to socialism with "dedication to work". Others, such as harmony and sincerity, look more Confucian. Zhang Yiwu of Peking University notes a similarity with the "shared values" adopted by Singapore's government in 1991. Authoritarian Singapore, where officials hold Confucianism in high regard, has been an inspiration to China, Mr Zhang says.

There is certainly a competitive streak in the party's growing fondness for the sage. China is surrounded by countries that think of themselves as Confucian, including Japan, which China sees as a rival, as well as South Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam. When, a decade ago, China began setting up language schools abroad to enhance its soft power, it called them Confucius Institutes. That was partly an effort to gain control of the Confucian brand (and partly because "Mao Institutes" would somehow have lacked appeal). There are now 475 such institutes in 120 countries.

A few scholars would like Mr Xi to go much further, by setting up a new form of government based on Confucianism. Prominent in this camp is Jiang Qing, who runs a Confucian academy in the south-western city of Guiyang. In a co-written article published by the *New York Times* in 2012 Mr Jiang proposed that China set up a tricameral parliament. One of the chambers would be led by a descendant of Confucius. (There are plenty of them, including roughly a quarter of Qufu's population. This correspondent's taxi driver boasted that he was a 77th-generation descendant.) Another chamber would be made up of "exemplary persons" nominated by scholars steeped in Confucian classics.

Mr Xi, a staunch defender of the party's monopoly on power, would never agree to Mr Jiang's plan. Yet there is an open-ended tone to another slogan now draped across bridges in Beijing: "The people have faith, the nation has hope and the country has strength." Faith in what, it does not say—but Confucianism, it can be guessed, would have the party's blessing. The two cults are now entwined.

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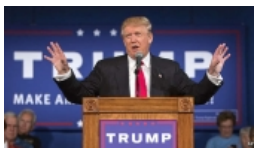

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