

Xi Jinping and the Commemoration of the 2565th Birth Anniversary of Confucius: A Political Message

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In a departure from earlier times, a large scale international symposium to mark the 2565th birth anniversary of Confucius was held in Beijing in September 2014 and also celebrations were held at Qufu, the birthplace of Confucius. The aspect that grabbed eyeballs was the presence of Chinese President Xi Jinping at the opening ceremony who delivered the keynote speech. The speaker, Poonam Surie, was invited to participate in this important symposium where she delivered a lecture on ‘Confucius in Contemporary Culture: Dialogue among Civilisations’. She informed that the symposium was sponsored by International Confucius Association, China Confucius Association and UNESCO.



Surie's presentation at the Institute of Chinese Studies was an attempt to share details about the symposium, as well as familiarise the audience with some of the current debates about the possible reasons behind the resurrection of Confucius in the context of the current political

and socio-economic situation in China. She did this by analysing, among others, aspects of Xi's speech at the symposium. This, she proffered, was important for he had been promoting the philosophy of Confucius for quite some time now. It would help to answer a number of related questions: What are the reasons behind it? Is the commemoration, with Xi's patronage, a political message? What are its fallouts? Does the CCP endorse Xi's views?

About the symposium

The symposium was held from 23-27 September 2014, in Beijing and attended by 300 scholars and eminent Sinologists from 50 countries. Xi Jinping gave the keynote address at the Great Hall of the People. It coincided with the Fifth Congress of the International Confucian Association. . It received wide media coverage in China. The symposium discussed many themes such as Confucianism and economic development, politics, international relations, school education, ecology, environment, regional global peace, rule by virtue, rule by law, etc. For Surie, the inclusion of a topic on Confucian and Islam titled 'imagining a Confucian Islamism' was interesting for it came up repeatedly during the symposium.

In her own discussions with officials, they informed her that the Confucius institutes were not a part of party's ideology and were meant for language teaching. She was also informed that many of the people invited were asked to be on the Board. The Board had members from many countries.

Among the presenters were people from Finland, Turkey, UK, Singapore, Bahrain, Latin America, Thailand, Japan, South Africa, etc. While some did not make any mention about Confucius, many others criticised Confucius Institutes. According to Surie, it was a combination of propaganda and scholarly debate. There were many eminent Chinese speakers as well.

There was also an award instituted to mark the occasion. South African, Algerian and Spanish organisations were the recipients of the award.

The participants were also taken to Qufu to visit the temple of Confucius where they again saw dances, made offerings and also were read the Analects. She shared some interesting insights about provincial leaders and officials 'bowing deep' at the Confucian temple. They also visited the graveyard of Kong family that had grey and black tombstones. The Qufu town was basically dominated by Confucius related sights and tourists.

After giving details about the symposium, Surie went on to briefly discuss the socio-political situation in China. She explained that the Chinese society was generally facing many challenges pertaining to relations between humans and nature, man with himself and ideologically as well.

Xi's speech at the symposium

Referring to Xi's speech, she mentioned that he praised Confucius' teachings as important records of rational thinking which morphed with times and evolved in accordance with the nation's struggle. Further, quoting Mencius, he elaborated that, all things are indeed different from one another, and therefore unique. Given the diversified human civilisation, he called for rational thinking and not disparage or attempt to assimilate. Rather, learn from each other's culture and tradition as that would reflect the strength of one's native culture. That no matter its origins, culture is always fluid and spreading. Xi referred to the opening of Silk Road as an important sign of China's rich civilisation and its exchanges with the world. Xi called on all to look at traditions in a scientific way while developing current ones.

Manufacture of Confucius

While Xi promoted harmony and non-confrontational values of Confucius, Surie mentioned that it actually depends on how one interprets Confucius. Therefore, one cannot rule out the fact of interpreting Confucian philosophy as favouring benevolent imperialism.

Confucian philosophy has become important to deal with problems such as increasing income gaps, declining honesty and social integration, and threats to party legitimacy. She felt that authorities and party leaders were eager to promote Confucius with view to build social values and increase social harmony, as also to counter western values of individualism. The propping of Confucius Institutes as soft power was aimed in this direction. There are about 400 Confucius Institutes in 123 countries. Resurrecting Confucius may also help Xi in his anti-graft campaign, as also to bolster his own standing. Analysts see Xi's approach of gradually trimming China's bureaucracy/ government as an attempt to centralise power and perhaps emerge as a 'new-fangled Communist Chinese sage'.

Turn to Confucius – a risky endeavour

Surie however pointed out that some critics have pointed out that the strategy of turning to Confucius may prove risky for Xi. Some say that he has amassed a lot of power in his hands. But the fact is, according to Surie, that the era of a strongman leading China is over as there are many leadership factions. She mentioned about suggestions by scholars for bicameral legislature in China and an economy with a much smaller role for government.

According to her, Xi was taking the resurrection of Confucius that began in the 1990s to a whole new level. She recalled that Xi had visited Qufu in 2013 and praised Confucius and pledged to follow his tenets. She mentioned that it is important to remember that Confucius also said that ‘do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire’. The principle ‘rule by virtue’ and about righteousness raises the standard or bar for Chinese leadership’s conduct. According to Confucius, laws or jails are unnecessary as people would willingly follow the leader’s orders.

Rationalising the debate

Having said that, Surie attempted to understand the context of China’s turn to Confucius in more depth. Across China, the number of protests were going up, so was China’s search for spirituality. There were a number of books on self-help emerging in China. It is also about helping China evolve towards a more stable future. Also, the talk about spirituality gave Xi an edge as far as the growing current problems are concerned .For her, Confucius was here to stay as he was symbolic vis-à-vis China’s many social, political and environmental problems.

For her, it would also help to adjust the earlier anomaly where China tended to see itself as the centre of Buddhist world. With the renaissance, now China could see itself as the centre of the Confucius world. An interesting point she made was that, this could result in a makeover of the Chinese adage ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’. So that when democracy does come to China, the CCP could come back in some form.

Another important point she made was that reviving Confucianism suited Chinese identity (that is also targeted at the Chinese diaspora) as it, touted as a home grown tradition, helped to keep a check on other religions such as Buddhism, Islam and Christianity.

Discussions

The Chair, Professor Alka Acharya, while summing up the lecture, mentioned about a book in which an interesting dialogue takes place between Marx and Confucius. In the end, Marx runs away as he realises that Confucius is too radical for him.

The questions that were raised after the lecture proved to be equally edifying.

It is understood that the event/symposium was a propaganda exercise. However, were there any controversial or contra-viewpoints presented, such as the anti-Confucius campaigns?

A similar question was raised about whether there was any official interpretation of Confucius presented at the symposium? This question was asked in the context of the fact that even Hu Jintao's 'harmonious society' always sought to clarify that though the discourse had a Confucius strand, but there were other strands too. It is important to note the heuristic usage of Confucius in China wherein it was constantly refreshed and brought up to date throughout history, right from May 4th movement onwards. In early reform era, the official discourse was that there were many interpretations. In that sense, Confucianism or tradition was adapted to suit political strategy. Hence, there was nothing surprising about it. Therefore, now, the question is was there an attempt to focus on any singular or main aspects of Confucius?

Surie responded to these questions by stating that Confucius' teachings were taken as a whole and she did not find mention about any different schools. It seems that Chinese scholars at the symposium had 'rehearsed' their discussions. Therefore, it was 'well-staged' and had no contrarian views. But she did point out that there were many different ideological adherents in the CCP who were treading carefully in endorsing Confucianism.

What was really discussed in the session was on Confucianism and Islam and what aspects did the organisers try to emphasise. She mentioned that it was merely a sub-topic. And while it was not visible in the programme sent to her, it was included in the ones sent to participants of Islamic countries. This threw up an altogether qualitative discussion over similarities between Islam and Confucianism, especially on questions of centralised power and authority. While a few may have agreed, many others did not. For the fact that all religions are prone to some sort of authoritarianism.

To a remark that Buddhism seemed to be flourishing in China, she mentioned that Buddhist temples were being closely monitored. Even so, in China there was no one religion; people kept shifting. Some became Christians to learn about west and it was deemed fashionable.

To a question, if North Korea is a part of the International Confucius Association, she was not sure. But she informed that the ICA was set up by China with funding from nine countries.

An audience member pointed out that very often the Confucian understanding about rule of law was misunderstood to mean rule by law in very legalistic terms. Contrarily, rule of law in Confucianism means rule with law or according to law. The former would lead to punishments whereas, the latter, in self-correction.

How would one reconcile two developments – Chinese government allowing its people to rediscover Confucius on the one and China's imperial ambitions to stretch beyond its traditional area of influence on the other? She answered that China has various objectives with self-interest and sovereignty always superseding all others.

Does China reflect how others can see through its propaganda? An audience member pointed out that while Indians may be able to see through, others from Bahrain, for example, may actually have been very impressed.

Was there an attempt to connect Confucius teachings at the recent APEC meeting in Beijing where they touched upon important issue of anti-corruption? She said that she had not followed the APEC meeting so closely.

There was a speech made by Xi in Paris at a UNESCO function where, among others, he alluded to Buddhism positively. Many people saw this as the advent of a more tolerant and open-minded Chinese leader. Especially, the Dalai Lama has referred to this speech by Xi as an optimistic development. Would Surie make a similar assessment about Xi? She responded that it definitely was positive and she was optimistic about the Tibet issue.

Can the turn to Confucianism be seen as an attempt to check the growing unrest and materialism in China? Yes, she answered. She reiterated that Confucius is important as a Chinese identity. To a remark that the Hans already had an identity, Surie responded with the qualification that there was basically no Han identity. And therefore, it made sense to refurbish it with a touch of Confucianism thrown in.

An audience member argued that the emphasis on Confucianism must also be seen as a reaction to the pervasiveness of FalungDafa, even among CCP members.

Another member recalled Daniel A Bell's statement about Chinese search for Confucius as being an alternative to liberalism. Further, he asked the house to note that the ultimate question is whether Confucius is being revived for the sake of the ruler or for the ruled. Surie said that it was for both the ruler and the ruled.

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About the speaker

Poonam Surie is an economist by training and an Educator by profession. She is currently Adjunct Fellow at the Institute of Chinese Studies and Visiting Fellow at the Indian Council of World Affairs. Her areas of interest are diaspora and cross cultural studies and she is especially interested in the ancient links between India and China, Buddhism, the return of religion to China and the evolution of Chinese society. Her new book deals with the evolving political situation in China today and whether it can be said that there is a Confucian renaissance, as many Western political analysts have stated.

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