

A Contemporary Confucian business governance approach

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This article is based on an academic essay made for the International Academy of Chinese Thought and Culture (IACTC (<http://gala.network/beijing-foreign-studies-university/2018/11/21/43/>)) summer 2019 China study trip sponsored by Bath Spa University.

My experiences and exposure to academic lectures in the PRC (People's Republic of China) at Fudan University (<https://www.fudan.edu.cn/en/>), Shanghai; Peking University (<http://english.pku.edu.cn/>), Beijing; and the Nishan Institute (http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/global/2019-08/26/content_37505497.htm), QuFu; convinced me that modern Confucianism could be relevant in a technology-based Western society.

Summary

In the context of Future of Work (<https://www.blooresearch.com/2019/10/people-strategies-in-the-automation-age/>), I want to suggest that a Confucian-inspired governance framework within global technology-based organisations can facilitate effective self-regulation – and that this can facilitate the building of public trust, whilst still allowing for technological innovation. I include an account of how its introduction might be facilitated, a reflection on what might be good, bad or ugly about the approach; and suggestions for future research avenues.

My intended audience is typified by the IT-savvy internal control manager of a large technology company facing the issue of adequate governance for the global introduction of a large scale social collaboration solution. I've added a partly-annotated Bibliography at the end, for people interested in taking this topic further.

My thesis is that self-regulation is necessary during periods of innovation, but that governance is still needed. Confucian ethical approaches (as exemplified, for instance, in Book II of the Analects. An economical translation is available on Amazon ([Kongzi 2019](#))), where the Master (Kongzi, or Confucius) said: "*If the people be led by laws and uniformity sought to be given to them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame. If they be led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rites, they will have the sense of shame, and moreover become good*" have good applications in such situations.



Figure 1.
Confucianism can be a secular journey towards a practical resolution of life's issues in the real world. It doesn't have a transcendent goal.

A contemporary Confucian Framework

In the spirit of persona-based requirements management, which is being increasingly used in software design and testing ([Owen, 2015](#)) this paper is written for a notional persona, a "James T. Abercrombie". James is an invented, exemplar, IT-savvy internal control manager for a large technology company that is introducing FaceForward, a Social Media Facebook alternative, across the company worldwide, and then to new customers, as a demonstrably safer alternative to Facebook.

In consequence, James has been tasked with evaluating a Confucian-based approach to the governance of large IT software-driven environments and facilities and then producing and implanting the same, if the approach is useful. He has commissioned this paper in order to understand the relevant aspects of Confucianism, its practical use in the 20th/21st cent in serious business

environment, and the possible consequences, good and bad, of the approach.

This blog will not move much beyond a sample Social Media example, but has potential applications far wider than this. It will NOT deal with the actual and detailed implementation of a Confucian governance approach, except at a high level.

The fundamental issue is that the governance of modern hi-tech companies is problematic. See, for example, this article in Fortune Magazine, “*These Are the Challenges Tech Giants Will Face in 2019*” (George, 2019):

- They often have charismatic leaders that react to issues on a personal basis.
- They are, on some metrics, as large as small countries.
- They are dealing with intellectual-property-based businesses with privacy, automation, human relations and legal issues orders of magnitude greater than society is used to handling. These businesses are technology-enabled, with their primary value residing outside of bricks-and-mortar and inventory.

According to Fortune magazine (op. cit.):

“Entering 2019, tech companies have five major issues they must address – or governments and the public will do it for them:

1. Privacy;
2. Antitrust;
3. Employee revolts;
4. Device addiction;
5. Leadership and governance.”

In response to this issue, some populist politicians are proposing legalistic approaches out of kilter with the evolution of innovation in modern technology. The high-tech industries themselves often prefer to adopt a self-regulatory approach but although this can facilitate innovation – see (Singleton, 2019) – it involves more trust in high-tech industries than many would be happy with – see, for instance (Gonzalez et al, 2019).

Traditionally, business governance has been based, ultimately, on God-given religious rules of acceptable behaviour. As societies become more secular, and business or technology leaders are increasingly likely to have no particular religious beliefs (at least as far as business is concerned), a religion-based moral governance code for business is increasingly hard to take seriously.

What might be more effective, these days, is the engendering of a Contemporary Confucian approach

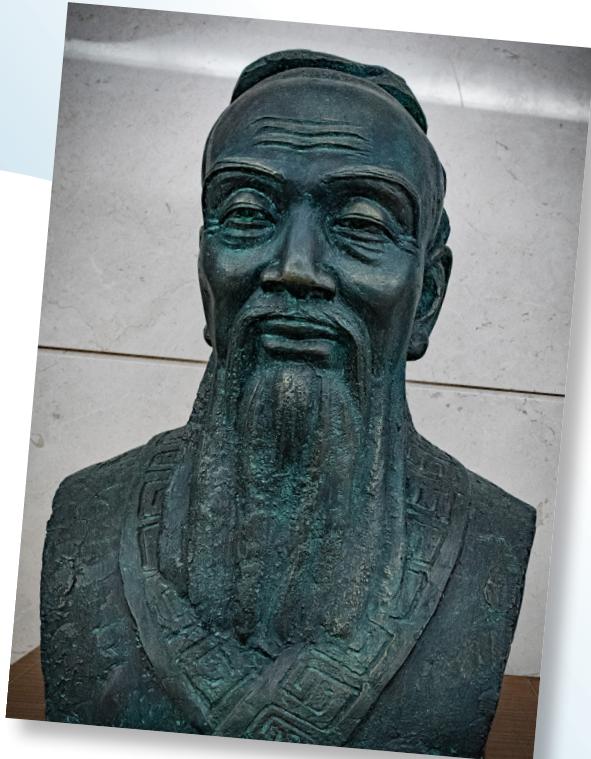


Figure 2.
Kongzi at Fudan University.

(secular, but incorporating aspects of Buddhism, Daoism and western Kantian philosophy), without religious baggage, which provides a generally accessible ethical framework for effective self-regulation, with a strong provenance in thousands of years of philosophical thought. Self-regulation may well be more acceptable to regulators and the general public in a democratic state if it is in the context of an ethical framework that is clearly being promoted by an organisation, in a way that allows the effectiveness of this to be assessed.

In this blog, I explore the advantages and issues, associated with such an approach; and consider whether, if it does work, it is sufficient, or only necessary. Note that I talk about Confucianism separate from Master Kong (Kongzi, Confucius) himself. We have no writings from Kongzi; even the Analects are second-hand reports of what the Master actually said. What we do have is thousands of years of philosophical, ethical, argument and discussion, conveniently associated with Master Kong.

So, the Master is supposed to have said, “*If the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame. If they be led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame, and moreover will become*



Figure 3.
Mao Zedong is considered a philosopher in China and still watches over Fudan University in Shanghai.

good” (*Analects Book 2, Practice of Government, Chapter 3 (Kongzi, 2019)*). Several millennia after this was first said, it is still true, albeit translated into modern management-speak: “buy in”; “cultural transformation”; “ethical corporation”; “high maturity” and so on – see, for instance, (*EY Global, 2017*).

The history of Confucianism is a long and complex one, too long to go into here. If you are interested, I attended Master Bai’s lectures on the IACTC 2019 China study trip and his book (*Bai, 2012*) on China deals with it well, from a modern PoV, and in the context of other Chinese philosophies. It is still alive today, although in the PRC, Confucianism was repressed as one of the “Four Olds” during the Cultural Revolution – see here (*Durdin, 1971*); and here (*Contributors to the Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019*). This has been followed by a resurgence, both as secular philosophy and as a religion/tourist attraction; see (*China Central Television, 2019*) and (*Keegan, 2018*).

The terminology of contemporary Confucianism today is very confusing. New Confucianism is 20th century and incorporates aspects of Buddhism, Daoism and western philosophy (Kant); neo-Confucianism is half a century old and incorporates aspects of Buddhism (and some Daoism); Contemporary Confucianism, or Contemporary neo-Confucianism, or Contemporary New Confucianism is whatever (probably personal) mixture of influences we choose to work with today. Which is fine, as it



Figure 4.
The Shanghai Museum, where students combined to protect cultural artefacts from Mao’s Red Guards, during the Cultural Revolution.

shows that Confucianism is very adaptive and flexible and focussed on the practical world; but it is still confusing. My apologies if I get the terminology wrong on occasion.

At least as far as the intellectual classes in the PRC are concerned, Confucianism is largely secular. We still, however, have a Confucian religion competing with a secular philosophy – visit Qufu and you will hear fairy tales in which the baby Kongzi is suckled by a tiger and so on (personal experience). Our notional Western manager isn’t much interested in the religious side of Contemporary Confucianism and the rather unfortunately named (in the present context) “last Confucian”, Liang Shuming, who lived through the founding of the PRC and disputed with Mao, had (according to his biographer (*Alitto, 1986*), Guy Alitto, no respect for K’ang Yu-wei, who wanted to safeguard Confucianism as an institutionalised state religion; the Confucian Church made him nauseous. On the other hand, the current government of the PRC seems happy to build a Confucian theme-park, with rather good production values, around the “world’s tallest statue of Confucius” – but perhaps that is mostly about tourism (and many of the tourists are Chinese).

But the essentials of Confucianism still survive, enriched by aspects of chan-Buddhism, and it is demonstrating a practical flexibility and receptiveness to new ideas. Its assumption that people are basically altruistic and that we are



Figure 5.
The world's tallest statue of Kongzi at Nishan – the Confucian religion is still alive.

all working together for the good of the whole has application today, when businesses may consist mostly of intellectual property and are innovating by pushing the intellectual boundaries beyond the limits of any regulators. In such a situation some form of self-regulation seems to be a necessity; a legalistic approach will either be inadequate (because those formulating it do not really know what needs to be regulated) or will stifle innovation by forbidding what it does not understand. On the other hand, when something does really go wrong (the publication on social media of filmed murders or executions, for example), a purely self-regulated “*just trust us, OK*” is unlikely to be acceptable to regulators, politicians or the general public.

A key Confucian idea, the “*leadership by exemplary persons*” is a defacto practice even in Western organisations today. Even though this has aspects of “*hero culture*”, which is generally distrusted as a governance mechanism, it seems to me that the moral attributes of a Mark Zuckerberg or Philip Green are questioned by the authorities, by the press and even by the general public; and that his contributes to the high-level governance of their organisation’s activities. Similarly, “*virtuous behaviour*” is prized, and contributes the achievement of corporate good behaviour, and corresponding trust in the corporation. This is essentially a “*shame culture*” (typical of the Far East) where people (and thus companies) behave according to the norms of social behaviour; the risk is that people might concentrate more on not being caught out in shameful actions than

in avoiding them in the first place. In contrast, with a guilt culture (Christian culture is a typical example) one can transgress and be forgiven “*hate the sin, love the sinner*”, with the risk that one feels OK about transgressing as long as one can buy the necessary forgiveness. The difference between the two is explored in a NY Times opinion piece by David Brooks (*Brooks, 2016*) and in Ruth Benedict’s entertaining and interesting analysis of Japanese behaviour post WWII, “*The chrysanthemum and the sword*” (*Benedict, 1946*). Brooks suggests that the modern online world is, indeed, evolving a shame culture, but one where the opposite of “*shame*” is “*celebrity*”; I am proposing a Confucian approach where the opposite of “*shame*” is the recognition one as an “*exemplary person*”, which is usually far from the concept of celebrity.

Which leaves us with the key Confucian idea of “*ritual*”. What this means in a Chinese context is a bit foreign to the West, but it encompasses such virtues as respectfulness, carefulness, courage, and forthrightness (*Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1988*). Kongzi says (*Kongzi, 2019*) things like: “*When those above love ritual, none of the common people will dare be irreverent*”; “*Guide them by virtue, keep them in line with ritual, and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves*”. I would like to re-interpret it in terms of process and recognised “*good practice*”. So, when those above love and understand “*good practice*” and embody it in effective training, none of the workers will dare to follow bad practice. Moreover, the “*good practices*” and their management will be good evidence that the organisation is, in fact, well governed

for third parties (who, potentially, could verify this). The Haidilao use case, below, illustrates how following Confucian ethical culture encourages both managers and employees to behave well, as a community, without recourse to sanctions and restrictive practices.

A Confucian business model in practice: The Haidilao Company

The Haidilao Hot Pot Restaurant (*McFarlan et al., 2019*) is an exemplar for the use of Confucian-inspired management practices in modern times. The issue it faces is the high employee turnover typical of Chinese restaurants and the possible impact of this on customer satisfaction.

Haidilao is a success:

1. “Founded with 10,000 RMB in 1994 in the small city of Jian yang, Hai Di Lao, whose name roughly translates to “scooping treasure from the bottom of the sea”, has since become the dominant hot pot restaurant chain in a country obsessed with hot pot. In 2014, the Hai Di Lao directly owned 91 chains across the nation, and 1 in Singapore and 1 in United Stated with over 14,000 employees. With turnover approaching \$6.6 billion, and net profit reached 3.3 billion Yuan (\$500 million) in 2012.” – op. cit.
2. According to Forbes (*Ambler, 2018*) Zhang Yong, Haidilao’s owner says that: “*Putting faith in my staff has paid off for me. Giving them responsibility and autonomy is how you show trust*”. Basically, he is treating his staff as a family unit, just as Kongzi would treat his village back in his day. Haidilao promotes from its existing staff and its managers are incentivised with about 3% of the restaurants’ profits. A manager brings a third of his restaurant’s staff with him when he/she opens a new restaurant, and leaves his/her apprentice behind to run the old restaurant – or, an apprentice can open a new location, with his/her previous manager taking a percentage of the new location’s profit.
3. Zhang’s approach delivers happy staff, which in turn delivers happy – and returning – customers.

Our notional Social Media manager, Abercrombie, can see immediate applications for an adaption of this approach in his High Tech industry application. High-tech companies like Facebook are famous for treating staff more like cult-members than family (*Rodriguez, 2019*) which means that they will do the

minimum possible to stay employed and, he thinks, probably has impacts on staff loyalty and behaviour. This, in turn, makes achieving security and good customer service harder – and, if something does go wrong, makes it harder to convince the authorities (or public opinion) that things are fundamentally well-governed.

Facilitating a contemporary Confucian approach to business ethics

The essence of the approach espoused in this paper is concern for the good of the whole over the good of the individual and the idea that ethical behaviour can be relied on if it is “*baked into*” the organisational culture, so it becomes simply “*how we behave here*”. Such a culture cannot be inculcated effectively by fear, in a “*command and control*” structure (to repeat Kongzi in Chapter 2 of the Analects (*Kongzi, 2019*): ‘*If the people be led by laws and uniformity sought to be given to them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame. If they be led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rites, they will have the sense of shame, and moreover become good*’).

Introducing an ethical framework, in my experience (based on introducing system development “good practice” standards in an international bank), cannot just be done top-down. True, the active support of the top management team is essential (more to the point, if the top team treat the framework as optional, only for lesser mortals, mere lip-service to the framework will result). Nevertheless, buy-in must be bottom-up as well as top-down, to ensure success.

This means (in the context of this essay) that:

- Training in Contemporary Confucian philosophy and ethics, emphasising “family values” in the company and placing it (probably using role-playing games) in the context of the business-as-it-is, must be freely available. “*Go and read the Analects*” will not be enough.
- Easily-accessible mentors, with good people skills, and versed in both new Confucian philosophy and the business context of the organisation affected, must be provided.
- Working/discussion groups and change champions for the Contemporary Confucian initiative must be encouraged. It is better that people who “*don’t get it*” can argue with the mentors in the open than that they mutter amongst themselves around the water-cooler.

- An experienced change manager/evangelist is leading the Contemporary Confucian initiative – contrary to popular opinion, people don't mind change but they hate being changed by fiat. Effective change is collaborative and consensual; and imposed change seldom lasts (people revert to the old ways once management attention moves on) – but this implies that the change is being managed effectively. As the Master said (in Analects, Book 2): "*Let him preside over them with gravity; then they will reverence him. Let him be final and kind to all, then they will be faithful to him. Let him advance the good and teach the incompetent; then they will eagerly seek to be virtuous.*"
- Identification of goals and review points for the Contemporary Confucian initiative is important. We don't want a "*blame culture*", based around scoring Confucian brownie points, we want to be a mature organisation that says what it is going to do and what it aspires to achieve, does it, and then analyses the gap between aspiration and achievement, so it can do better next time. As the Master said (in book 2 of the Analects) "*things that are done it is needless to speak about; things that have had their course, it is needless to remonstrate about; things that are past, it is needless to blame*" although I don't think that that should mean not reviewing what you did, in the interests of improvement (in Analects Book 1, the Master said: "*Isn't it pleasant to learn and review constantly?*").
- Finally, and most importantly, resources for this cultural change initiative must be included in the company budget. Significant cultural change cannot be introduced in a business in people's spare time; and I don't think they should be expected to buy their own copies of the Analects!

If an organisation wants to be allowed to self-regulate as it experiments and innovates, all of its stakeholders must see a culture that they can have confidence in, no matter who they talk to in the organisation. This implies, not only top-management sponsorship but also, fully-informed buy-in at the lowest levels. A blame culture will not help; but a shame culture, where people feel shame if they are involved in actions that their society doesn't approve of, might. There is a view that everything one does one should be prepared to do in the public gaze; if one feels an overwhelming need to keep an action secret, then one shouldn't be doing it – Ruth Benedict explores the idea of shame culture (in a Japanese context) in her book "*The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*" (Benedict, 1946).

Reflection, the good, the bad and the ugly.

- The good: what should work: self-regulation within broadly-spaced guide rails; family values; a shame culture rather than a guilt culture. What people do in public sight and for the "family" is usually ethically sound (the book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword (op cit)*) – provides an illustration of what a shame culture is like, in the context of post-WWII Japan. It is necessary to invest in order to achieve. Self-regulation needs guide rails, and the design of these is important.
- The bad: what probably can't work. Treating Confucianism as some sort of magic-bullet or get-out-of-gaol-free card just for use when the regulators and press come knocking; mandating a Confucian business litany based on some published external use case (which usually doesn't fit the internal situation well).
- The ugly: what might work, in the short-term at least but which might be clumsy/risky. Too much concentration on the religious aspects of Confucianism; a happy-clappy "*let's all sing the company song*" approach; trying to operate without guide rails or some sort of independent oversight. Such approaches are unlikely to achieve bottom-up buy-in and may well have unexpected and dysfunctional consequences.

Nothing will work unless management provides adequate resources; and monitors – and nurtures – progress. In Book 5 of the Analects, "*The Master said, 'it is all over. I have not yet seen one who could perceive his thoughts, and inwardly accuse himself'*" Self-awareness and empathy are useful for effective self-regulation but they are not that common and may need supplementing, with supportive monitoring systems.

Future opportunities

There are, currently, many exciting, potential avenues for investigating the applicability of Contemporary Confucian approaches to the ethical issues surrounding, amongst others:

- AI or Augmented Intelligence (and, later, when it truly arrives, Artificial Intelligence). Augmented Intelligence is a computer that can mimic human thought processes but is faster than a human would be; Artificial Intelligence adds autonomic capabilities and self-awareness or self-determination. AI is invading the world of

Art (*Cutler et al, 2018*) and Christie's has recently sold an AI-generated painting for \$432,500 (*Leiber, 2018*) and where large sums of money are involved, ethics become seen to be necessary: did the proceeds of this sale belong to the technician who supplied and built this AI, the team that discovered it as a service and thought up the application; Christie's, as without their marketing and PR, the painting might never have sold (let alone for nearly half a million dollars); the owners of the huge computing service the AI runs on. People such as Yanisky-Ravid are already looking (*Yanisky-Ravid, 2017*) at artificial intelligence, copyright, and accountability in the new era and Confucian ideas of "*what would the exemplary person do*" could be extremely relevant (spoiler alert, Yanisky-Ravid sees the AI as "*employed*" by the human selling the artwork, with the human owner holding the copyright).

- Quantum Computing (*Norfolk, 2018*) as an emerging enabling technology. It is going to revolutionise computing, probably in the reasonably near future. It makes solving some (but not all) algorithms orders of magnitude faster than classical computers can manage – which makes computerised operations that are infeasible today, easy and fast. Operations like defeating "*strong*" computer encryption and looking for patterns in data representing huge human populations. As we say elsewhere, over-regulation will stifle innovation, but there are no existing controls for systems doing things which, in the past, no-one thought possible. The developers in this exciting new field will need to be "*exemplary people*", in the Confucian sense, if we are not to find ourselves mired in unanticipated ethical issues.

- The "*mutable business*" or "*mutable enterprise*" (*Norfolk, 2016*) – a Bloor Research enthusiasm – is in a constant state of evolutionary change and, potentially, changing faster than the regulations surrounding it can keep up with. It needs the sort of "*good practice*" ethical culture, which is ideally suited to Confucian ethics: "*The Mutable Enterprise is constantly changing and evolving. The trick is to maintain constant service levels to all of its stakeholders, while change is happening, at the same time as you maintain constant levels of governance*" – here (*op cit*).
- "*Big Data*" ubiquitous analytics are an enabling technology for the Mutable Enterprise. But just because one can do something, there is still the ethical issue of whether one should, and "*good practices*" and the Confucian "*exemplary person*" could have a part to play.

Conclusion

Confucianism has always been thought of as conservative, but perhaps originally it was a case of presenting radical ideas with a reassuringly conservative face. “*Confucius represented his teachings as lessons transmitted from antiquity... But we should not regard the contents of the Analects as consisting of old ideas. Much of what Confucius taught appears to have been original to him and to have represented a radical departure from the ideas and practices of his day*” – (Reigel, 2013).

It has survived for thousands of years by incorporating ideas from competing philosophical systems such as Buddhism and Daoism (see, for example, the neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi here (Thompson, 2017) and Wang Yangming, here (Youngmin, 2019). Neo-Confucian ideas were adopted in Edo Japan and were fundamental to the Meiji restoration (through the influence of Yoshida Shoin and his pupils (Li, 2017). Confucian ethics are still used to analyse modern Japanese business ethics – see, for example, here (Dollinger, 1988) – and they could be a strong basis for ethics in global high-tech businesses, especially as such businesses are increasingly “*global*” rather than “*western*” or “*eastern*”.

Confucian ethics (Wong, 2018) are based around the way an exemplary person follows the way that a person ought to behave, supported by ritual. The Confucian belief is that human beings are basically good and perfectible, in an appropriate framework. In the context of a modern high-tech innovative business, this would correspond to a “*good practice*” culture, with “*ritual*” represented by formal training and mentoring.

This would allow the business to adopt a largely self-regulating approach (within broad regulatory guard-rails), that would facilitate innovation, without arousing the suspicions of third-party stakeholders in the business, including the general public. Moreover, this can be an entirely secular approach, and fits well with current secular Western ideas of good business behaviour.

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