

China's thriving Confucian schools

By Jill McGivering
BBC News

As soon as they walk into the tiny school, a converted apartment in a tower block, the children are bundled into grey cotton wraparound robes, fastened at the back with modern Velcro.

Flowing sleeves flap round their wrists, square black hats wedged on to their heads - some, too big, slip down over the eyes.

The children, from three to six years old, have come to special weekend classes to learn the teachings of China's ancient sage, Confucius.

Every room here has a large portrait of Confucius.

" It is very good for my son and very good for Chinese society as well "
Yu Fang, mother

The teacher shows the children how to put their hands together and bow to him before the start of each lesson.

In some classes, they sing and play chasing games. In others, the teacher holds up complex Chinese characters on white cards and the children recite the sayings of the great teacher.

"In a group of three people, one of them will become my teacher," they chant in high voices.

Many of the sayings extol the virtues of harmony, humility and courtesy to others.

Bringing balance

This small private school, in the city of Wuhan in the central Chinese province of Hubei, was set up last year. Since then, more than 100 children have enrolled for classes.

" People want a higher standard of living and they are focused on material things, not spiritual ones "
Wang Ching, mother

"Traditional culture has many advantages that cannot be learned by modern education," says Yu Fang, the mother of a three-year-old pupil.

"It emphasises virtues like kindness and self-discipline. It is very good for my son and very good for Chinese society as well."

Another mother, Wang Ching, agrees: "This is a material world, people want a higher standard of living and they are focused on material things, not spiritual ones."

Modern China, with its headlong rush for growth, needs more balance and more of the social order and courtesy extolled by Confucius, she says.

" We should combine our Chinese traditional culture with the best from the West "
Teacher Li Guang-bing

All this may seem innocuous, but in modern China it is breaking new ground.

Confucianism and Communism have never been happy bedfellows.

In the 1960s, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, Confucius was vilified.

Mao Zedong and his followers criticised him, calling him feudal and old-fashioned and part of the bourgeois hierarchical thinking of the past.

All that traditionalism should be swept away, they argued.

The communists were also threatened by the reverence accorded to Confucius by his followers, which could be akin to religious worship.

Even today, the authorities are watching closely.

Some new, full-time Confucian schools have opened in recent years, only to be closed down soon afterwards.

Best-seller

But in the chaos and change of modern China, there is clearly a market for his old-fashioned wisdom.

It is seen by some as a much-needed antidote to globalisation and the growing influence of Western culture on China's young generation.

A modern book of Confucian thought, simplified to make it accessible to the mainstream market, has become a surprise best-seller in China, selling about four million copies.

The founder of the weekend Confucian school in Wuhan, Li Guang-bing, has already opened seven schools nationwide. But his vision does not stop there.

He wants to open 100 schools in the future, both in China and further afield, in Sydney and Singapore.

"Students today have a great passion for Western culture," he says.

"We should combine our Chinese traditional culture with the best from the West."

He accepts that it might take time to rehabilitate Confucius after some difficult decades.

The understanding of Confucianism was lost in the 1960s, he says, but gradually China is now rediscovering its traditional culture, including his teachings.

"I think the government's attitude is more and more positive. The movement to embrace and spread Confucianism is growing."

But he expects the sage's rehabilitation in Chinese culture to take time.

"It is a process, something we can do not all at once but slowly, step by step."

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