

Confucianism in the Era of Globalization

(By Mary Kwang, The Straits Times, 2002)

BEIJING - A developer wishes to build a 500,000-sq-m commercial complex but submits blueprints to the local authority for a 200,000-sq-m building instead.

Once the official green light is given, he sets about constructing the 500,000-sq-m edifice.

Such a strategy is easier on his cash flow and allows him to receive approval for construction more speedily than if he had sent in plans for the bigger floor area.

He then undertakes intensive public relations efforts to persuade the authorities to approve the bigger building.

This example reflects how some business dealings in China are influenced by Confucianism, a phenomenon that a senior Chinese academic has said is incompatible with the rules-based business climate that China must foster as a member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Professor Zheng Nanning, a member of the Chinese Academy of Engineering and deputy head of the Xian Communications University, said at a recent forum that the Confucianist influence had made some Chinese officials and businessmen take the 'middle road'.

The middle road, or the Doctrine of the Mean, in Confucianism means that in making decisions, the best choice is the one between what are seen as unworkable extremes.

The outcome of such an interpretation is an agreement that is bent when it is implemented, according to Prof Zheng.

'We say: 'In principle, it is like this'. But in reality, it is something else,' he said.

On top of that, different standards are applied to different people in resolving a problem.

Prof Zheng said this lack of clear-cut lines in the way things were managed would not benefit China's long-term globalisation efforts.

'In international business and international management, the rules of the game are strict,' he said.

'One is one, two is two, and there is little room for manoeuvring.'

However, Professor Mu Zhongjian, the head of the Contemporary Confucianism Research Centre, insisted that Confucianism continued to be relevant to China in the WTO era.

'Confucius taught morals and values. But the problem today is the lack of trustworthiness. People break contracts; they borrow and do not repay loans.

'He preached honesty and sincerity. If you sign a contract, you don't break it,' he said in an interview with The Straits Times.

He suggested that, in fact, too little heed had been paid to Confucius' teachings.

For most of the past century, such as during the 1919 May 4 movement, the Chinese denounced Confucianism as an outdated philosophy which impeded modernisation.

One reason for this rejection, Prof Mu said, was that Confucius (BC 551 to 479) attached importance to agricultural society and patriarchy.

He agreed, however, that some of the ancient sage's teachings had to change, such as the importance of men over women.

Another thinking which should be modified was his high esteem for patriarchy in which the word of the head of the family was law.

'Some influence of this remains today, such as in government. For instance, everyone listens to what a bureau head says,' he said, suggesting that such a compliant attitude had fostered abuse by officials.