

The 21st Century: A Confucian Revival?

Summary: The late 20th century saw the rise of organizations that promote Confucianism in the United States and abroad. In 2004, for instance, the Chinese government opened the Confucius Institute, a partnership with many institutions to teach Chinese language, culture, and literature. In the United States, Boston Confucianism is a growing intellectual movement that asserts that anyone, not only East Asians, can participate and learn from the Confucian tradition.

In a reversal from the rhetoric used throughout most of the 20th century, the Chinese government is now actively promoting Confucianism as a cultural treasure, a means to better society and maintain social harmony. One result of this new political endorsement was the creation of the Confucius Institute in 2004. Headquartered in Beijing, the organization's goal is to set up partnering Confucius Institutes throughout the world to promote and teach Chinese language and culture. In the first seven years, 256 Confucius Institutes were established worldwide, 60 within the United States. By 2019, there were 530 Confucius Institutes worldwide and 88 in the United States. Whereas East Asians of the 20th century tended to view Confucianism as an embarrassment, it appears the 21st century is seeing the rise of a new outlook in which the Confucian tradition is a heritage to be proud of that could provide insight into solving modern problems.

Starting in the late 20th century, America has also seen the rise of its own indigenous form of Confucianism known as Boston Confucianism. "Boston Confucians" was a term that began to be used jokingly in the late 1980s at conferences of Confucian-Christian dialogue to refer to the representatives from the Boston area. However, the initial joking nature has come to define an actual intellectual movement, one that seeks to promote a form of "Boston Confucianism." This small but growing group of intellectuals seeks to both promote Confucianism by showing what it can offer the world and argue that Confucianism can stand alone outside of its East Asian roots. One of the main figures of the movement, Robert Cummings Neville, who does not speak or read Chinese, considers himself to be both a Confucian and a Christian. In other words, the Boston Confucians argue that one does not need to be an East Asian, read classical Chinese, or abandon other religious affiliations to understand and incorporate this philosophy into one's way of life.

It remains to be seen in just what ways Confucianism will continue to develop in the United States in the coming years. Will Confucianism largely remain part of the culture of East Asian immigrants, rarely an acknowledged tradition? Will America's Confucius Institutes stir a true revival in the study and implementation of the Confucian tradition? Will Boston Confucianism grow in size and become increasingly popular beyond its relatively small intellectual circle? Only time will tell, but for now it does appear that a uniquely American form of Confucianism is beginning to form.