

To Become a Sage

Summary: To find expressions of Confucian values in the United States one must look not so much at explicit ceremonial activities, but at underlying motives as they surface in everyday life. Confucian values are often expressed among many East Asian immigrants through an emphasis on education, family cohesiveness, and self-abnegation in support of others.

On March 7, 1996, Jian Tang, a Chinese immigrant and restaurant worker, reluctantly participated in a news conference to announce that he had won \$18 million in the Massachusetts state lottery. He had neither come forward immediately, nor even told his relatives, friends, or coworkers about his good fortune because he felt uneasy about the publicity he would receive and the changes in his life this sudden influx of wealth might precipitate. Although Jian Tang refused to tell reporters where either he or his wife worked, where they lived, or even what make of car they drove, he did inform them how some of the money would be spent. Most importantly, his family would use it for education. He and his wife would both return to college to finish their degrees, and they would set aside funds to finance the education of their daughter, nephews and nieces. In the more immediate future, he and his family would return to China for two months to visit his ill mother-in-law.

Jian Tang most likely would not identify himself as a Confucian. And yet, his reluctance to step into the spotlight as an individual, the great value he placed on education, and his emphasis on the extended family as a cohesive unit all exemplify core Confucian values. In this respect, Tang is quite representative of East Asian immigrants: not claiming a distinct Confucian religious identity although profoundly Confucian in worldview. To find expressions of Confucian values in the United States one must look not so much at explicit ceremonial activities, but at underlying motives as they surface in everyday life. Very few East Asians participate in formal Confucian programs and the traditional forms of Confucian practice have largely been left behind. Nevertheless, the spirit animating those forms continues to manifest itself in daily life.

The attitude toward education is a good example of this spirit. The Confucian curriculum as designed by Zhu Xi called for students to begin their studies by memorizing and reciting the Four Books. Once the wisdom found in these was completely internalized, a student was to turn to the Five Classics and various commentaries to gain a refined understanding of what it means to be human. East Asians who

have come to the United States have at most a vague notion of this Neo-Confucian curriculum. The dedication to education as vital to fulfilling one's potential, however, remains. Learning continues to be regarded as a lifelong process that builds moral character, thereby preparing people to fulfill their duties toward family and the larger society.

Because the Scholarly Tradition lacks any institutional infrastructure in most places in the United States, its values are primarily nurtured through informal familial education. In addition, Christian and Buddhist organizations with a large East Asian membership often act as vehicles for transmitting Confucian virtues. The tendency in Korean-American Christian congregations to emphasize familial responsibilities, loyalty to church elders, and respect for authorities may certainly be attributed to the subtle perpetuation of Confucian sensibilities. For some Korean-American Christians, the Confucian tone of their congregation's interpretation of Christian ethics is readily apparent. For many, however, the interpenetration of the two exists more subconsciously.

Confucian values have been honored not only in the name of Christianity, but in the name of Buddhism as well. Buddha's Universal Church in San Francisco exhibits a particularly strong Confucian imprint. It emphasizes the cultivation of religious values in daily life so as to transform oneself, one's family, and society at large. Unlike other Chinese Buddhist associations, the services of Buddha's Universal Church include neither incense nor chanting. Dr. Hung, one of the organization's leaders, explains that no incense is burned since the only fragrance needed for worship is the pure thought of one's heart-and-mind, which stems from sincere motivation. Similarly, chanting in hopes of receiving the aid of a Buddha makes little sense when the focus of practice is on self-cultivation through moral development. Members are advised to meditate twice daily, but the method and goal of such practice is much more similar to Zhu Xi's notion of "quiet sitting" than to the Chan Buddhist practice of meditation. According to Dr. Hung, meditation is a time to observe the workings of the mind and to control errant thoughts and feelings so that one's true human nature and its virtues can be manifest.