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## Marx Enters the Confucian Temple

By Guo Moruo

Translated by Matthew Finkbeiner and John Timothy Wixted



Guo Moruo in 1941.

Two days after the October-fifteenth autumn services in his memory, Confucius was sitting with three of his favourite disciples, Yan Hui, Zi Lu, and Zi Gong. They were in the Confucian Temple in Shanghai, eating the cold meat of a pig's head that worshippers had left behind as an offering, when four young compradores carrying a red-lacquer sedan-chair barged in.

Zi Lu saw them first. Getting so angry his hair nearly lifted his hat, he slammed down his chopsticks and was about to go up front and put an end to the disturbance.

Confucius hastened to restrain him, saying, "*Zi Lu, your bravery exceeds mine; but you are lacking in judgment.*"<sup>1</sup>

Zi Lu could only hold back his anger.

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<sup>1</sup>*Analects*, V.7. Italics in the translation indicate passages that cite or echo, sometimes ironically, earlier texts, which are identified in footnotes.

Confucius took a while to send Zi Gong to welcome the guests.

Only when the red-lacquer sedan-chair had been set down in the front of the sanctum did the man inside step out. His face was red like a crab, his whiskers covered his chin and cheeks: he was a Westerner. Zi Gong went up front to welcome the guest and lead him back into the hall. The four sedan-bearers followed behind. Thereupon, guests and hosts—nine altogether—stood on opposite sides of the great hall and greeted each other as equals.

Confucius introduced himself and asked the guest his name. It turned out the bearded, crab-faced Westerner was none other than Karl Marx!

Because of his recent widespread acclaim, Karl Marx's name had already reached Confucius' ears. And Confucius was one who respected the wise and loved learning. You see, while alive, he studied ritual with Lao Zi, the zither with Shixiang, and music with Changhong. As long as a person excelled in something, not only was he unwilling to offend him, but with bowed head and humble heart he would seek the person's instruction. This was precisely what made Confucius Confucius—quite different from the people of our generation who close the door to all, refusing to take in anything, while feigning to understand what they do not. So as soon as Confucius heard that his guest was Marx, he could not help but call out in pleasant surprise:

"Ah, a friend from afar has come; is this not a pleasure!<sup>2</sup> Mr Marx, what a rare delight your coming is! Rare indeed. Have you come to our humble temple to teach us something?"

Marx launched unceremoniously into his speech—it goes without saying it was all the chirping gibberish of the Southern Barbarians. For Confucius to understand, he had to depend completely on the compradores to translate; and what he said, as well, had to pass through a round of translation before Marx could understand.

"I have come specially to seek your instruction," Marx said. "Our doctrine has already been transmitted to your land of China and I hope it can be put into practice here. But of late, some have been saying that my doctrine and your way of thought are different; that in a China where

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<sup>2</sup>*Analects*, I.1.

your thought is widespread, there is no possibility of my doctrine being put into practice. For this reason I have come to seek your instruction. What, after all, is the nature of your thought? How is it different from my doctrine? And to what degree do they differ? I sincerely hope you can answer in some detail.”

Confucius listened to what Marx said, simply nodding his head in approval. Only then did he reply: “My thought is not very systematic because, as you know, when I was alive there was no science. And logic is beyond me. If I were to go first and speak of my thought in jumbled fashion, even I would be unable to find a thread to unravel it all, and I fear I would fail your good intentions. It would be better if you spoke first about your doctrine; then I could add my views by way of comparison. You see, although your doctrine came to our China some time ago, I am still unclear as to exactly what it is, since not even one of your books has been translated into Chinese.”

“What!?! Not even one of my books has been translated? How is it then that my doctrine has been creating such a stir here?”

“I have heard it said, in order to talk about your doctrine there is no need for any of your books. All you need is to read a few Japanese or Western magazines—that’s all.” Openly showing he could also be mischievous, Confucius faced the four compradores and asked, “Isn’t that right, you New Men?”

But these New Men were no fools. They did not translate accurately what Confucius said. What they translated was: “But everyone can read your works in the original. And these compradores—well, their German and economics are top-notch.” This was how both Marx and Confucius were deceived by the four ‘scholar-compradores’.

“That’s all right, then,” Marx said. “As long as they are able to read the original, that’s fine.”

“What a rare treat that you have come in person today. Being pressed for time, we cannot rightly ask you to give a formal lecture—asking famous foreigners to give lectures is all the fashion nowadays—but could you give an informal talk at least?”

“Fine, fine,” Marx answered. “I will go first and speak about my doctrine. But before talking about it, I must first explain the starting point for my thought. My thought vis-à-vis the world and human life is

thoroughly affirming, which is simply to say that I am not like the standard religious thinker, who views life and the universe as being meaningless or as being evil. Since we already live in this world, we should seek a way that will enable us to achieve the greatest happiness in our lives, as well as a way to make our existence achieve the greatest happiness, and a way to make the world suitable for our existence. I stand in this world and speak of this world. On this point, I differ from many religious thinkers and metaphysicians. And it is on this point I wish to ask you: how exactly does your thought compare with mine? If even on this starting point we already differ, then we are following two fundamentally divergent paths and there is no need to continue our discussion.”

Marx had just finished speaking when Zi Lu, without waiting for Confucius to speak, rushed in:

“That’s right! My master is certainly one who emphasizes utilizing the principle of improving life; more than anything he emphasizes the livelihood of the people. This is why he said, *‘It is the great virtue of Heaven and Earth to grant life.’*”<sup>3</sup>

“Correct,” Confucius continued. “One could say that the point from which we start is the same. But if you would like a world better suited to our existence, then what kind of world would that be? In what kind of world could we achieve the greatest happiness? Surely you have thought about this kind of ideal world. What would it be like?”

“You want to know about my ideal world? Fine, fine. You have asked a very good question.” Marx suddenly became cheerful, his eyes beaming with uncommon warmth and his hands arranging his side whiskers. He continued, saying: “There are many who would make a materialist of me. Taking me to be an animal, they think I only know how to eat and that I am without ideals. In fact, I am just as you suggested: I am one who has the highest, furthest-reaching kind of ideal world. I daresay I am the most idealistic idealist in history. My ideal world is one where one and all would be able, freely and equally, to develop their talents, to use their abilities to the full without expecting reward, and to be assured of their livelihood without the worry of cold or hunger. This would be a

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<sup>3</sup>*Book of Changes*, ‘Xici’, xia 1.

communist society of the kind where, as the expression goes, ‘*From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.*’<sup>4</sup> If this kind of world were ever realized, would not a heavenly kingdom have been built on earth?”

“Ah, yes!” At this point even the dignified Confucius could not but clap his hands in applause. “This ideal world of yours and my Grand Harmony unexpectedly coincide. Let me recite an old passage of mine: ‘*When the Grand Harmony was pursued, a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky; they chose men of virtue and ability; their words were sincere, and what they cultivated was harmony. Thus men did not love their parents only, nor treat as children only their own sons. A competent provision was secured for the aged till their death, employment for the able-bodied, and the means of growing up to the young. They showed kindness and compassion to widows and widowers, orphans, childless men, and to the sick and disabled, so that they were all sufficiently maintained. Males had their proper work, and females had their homes. They accumulated articles of value, disliking that they should be thrown away upon the ground, but not wishing to keep them for their own gratification. They laboured with their strength, disliking that it should not be exerted, but not exerting it only with a view to their own advantage. In this way selfish schemings were repressed and found no development. Robbers, filchers, and rebellious traitors did not show themselves, and hence the outer doors remained open, and were not shut. That was what we call the Grand Harmony.*’<sup>5</sup> Is this not identical to your ideal world?”

Confucius elongated each syllable while chanting the above, one of his favourite passages. When he intoned the two sentences—‘*They accumulated articles of value, disliking that they should be thrown away upon the ground, but not wishing to keep them for their own gratification. They laboured with their strength, disliking that it should not be exerted, but not exerting it only with a view to their own advantage*’—he even wagged his head back and forth, displaying a kind of self-hypnosis.

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<sup>4</sup>Karl Marx, ‘Criticism of the Gotha Programme’, 1875.

<sup>5</sup>*Book of Rites*, VII.1. Slightly modified from James Legge’s translation.

Marx, however, remained quite calm—he did not seem to find the passage as important as Confucius did. At best, might the latter at this point have been in Marx's eyes no more than a 'utopian socialist'? So Marx, as if standing on a dais giving a lecture, began again to expand on his doctrine.

"But"—Marx gave emphasis to this adversative conjunction—"my ideal is different from that of some utopianists. My ideal is not an empty concoction, nor is it something that can be reached in one step. First, we can prove from history that it is possible for society's production gradually to increase and prosper. What follows, though, is that the gradual increase in commodities from this production slowly becomes concentrated in only a few people's hands. This then gives rise to poverty and to social struggles persisting without respite."

"Hmm. . . . Of course. . . . Of course. . . ." Confucius still had not completely awoken from his earlier self-intoxication; he merely kept nodding his head in agreement. "A long time ago, I once said: *'The ruler is not troubled by scarcity; he is troubled by uneven distribution. He is not troubled about poverty; he is troubled by instability.'*"<sup>6</sup>

Before Confucius' words had, as it were, touched the ground, Marx was already raising objections.

"No! No! We have two different views after all. I am concerned about scarcity as well as uneven distribution; I am concerned about poverty as well as instability. You must understand, if there is scarcity, then equal distribution can never occur; and as for poverty, it is the root of instability. That is why, although I oppose the concentration of private assets, I not only favour an increase in production but most energetically promote it. Therefore we advocate using the greatest force possible to abolish private property, and at the same time using the greatest force possible to increase society's production. If production increases and it is possible for everyone to enjoy it together, only then can people, peacefully and with one mind, equally and without favour, develop their innate talents and individual natures. It goes without saying that the impetus for this force is the proletariat—those who approve of abolishing private property.

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<sup>6</sup>*Analects*, XVI.1.

Moreover, this force will first take the state as its unit, then extend it internationally. If this can be realized, everyone will be equally able to satisfy fully his individual needs, both material and spiritual. Only then can human existence achieve the greatest happiness. My ideal, then, has a definite sequence and solid, factual underpinning.”

“Yes, yes!” Confucius, as before, nodded his head in agreement. “I also said: *‘Since they are numerous, make them rich. Once they have been made rich, instruct them.’*”<sup>7</sup> I also stated that government policy should be *‘That there be sufficient food, sufficient arms, and the people’s confidence be gained.’*”<sup>8</sup> (At this point, Confucius turned towards Zi Gong and said, “I said that to you, didn’t I?” to which Zi Gong merely nodded his head.) “I also argued: *‘If a true king were to arise, it would require a generation for there to be benevolence.’*”<sup>9</sup> I also noted: *‘The state of Qi, with a change, can attain the level of the state of Lu; Lu, with a change, can attain the Way.’*”<sup>10</sup> I also stated: *‘Those who would make bright virtue shine bright throughout the empire should first order well their own states.’*”<sup>11</sup> Valuing what is material has been fundamental to the traditional thought of our China. The initial instance of this is found in the *Book of Documents*, where food and goods are among the ‘Eight Objects of Government’ in the ‘Great Plan’ section.<sup>12</sup> Guanzi also said: *‘After their granaries are full, they can learn about ritual and moderation; when their clothing and food are sufficient, then they can learn about honour and shame.’*”<sup>13</sup> So my thought, as well as my country’s traditional thought, is fundamentally the same as yours: first increase production—only then can there be equal distribution. That is why I said, *‘They accumulated articles of value, disliking that they should be thrown away upon the ground, but not wishing to keep them for their own gratification.’* I have always looked down upon merchants, but this disciple of mine (the master again turned and indicated Zi Gong) never listens. Many times I have

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<sup>7</sup>*Analects*, XIII.9.

<sup>8</sup>*Analects*, XII.7.

<sup>9</sup>*Analects*, XIII.12.

<sup>10</sup>*Analects*, VI.24.

<sup>11</sup>*Great Learning*, IV.

<sup>12</sup>*Shangshu*, V.4.

<sup>13</sup>*Guanzi*, I.8.



told him not to conduct business, but he deliberately turns a deaf ear. (He does know how to make money, though.) You have to understand that when we were alive, science had not been developed, so our methods of producing wealth were quite rudimentary. Within the confines of such limited ability to produce wealth, we could only advocate economizing. This was due to the age we lived in. But I think that even now economizing is still important, don't you agree? When there is not even enough rice to go around, we certainly should not allow a minority to eat such delicacies as sea slugs and shark's fin."

"Ah, you're right!" Marx now began to exclaim: "I never imagined that two thousand years ago in the distant East there was already an old comrade like you! Our views are completely at one. How can there be people who say my thought is at odds with yours, that it does not suit the national conditions of China and cannot be implemented here?"

"Ai!" Confucius at this point suddenly exhaled a long sigh—a sigh long enough to release two thousand years of pent-up frustration. "Ai!" Having vented the long sigh, he continued: "How can they implement your way of thought, when even I have been eating cold pig's head for more than two thousand years?"

"What!/? You mean Chinese are unable to implement your way of thought?"

"How can you speak of implementing it! People need only understand it; then those who believe you won't oppose me, and the people who believe me won't oppose you."

"Ah, if that's the case, then I want . . ."

"What is it you want?"

"I want . . . to go back for my wife."

Had this been the Confucius seen in the eyes of moralists, at this point he certainly would have flown into a rage and cursed Marx as a beast for missing his wife. But the sage does not prohibit what human feelings are unable to resist. So our sage not only did not curse Marx, he even asked him rather enviously, "Mr Marx, do you have a wife?"

"Would I not have one? My wife and I share the same ideals and aspirations. Besides, she's very good-looking!"

When it came to speaking of his wife, Marx, ever impolite, inflated her into an ideal in the same way he inflated his ideology into an ideal.

The master, seeing Marx so pleased with himself, heaved a deep sigh, intoning: "*All men have wives. Only I have not!*"<sup>14</sup>

At this point, Zi Gong, who had been holding back his tongue for some time, quickly interposed: "*All within the four seas are his wives. How can the master worry about being without a wife?*"<sup>15</sup> Twisting the old cliché, Zi Gong, the only orator worthy of the name among Confucius' disciples, managed to elicit a smile from Confucius.

Marx was at a loss. Upon close enquiry he learned that Confucius had divorced of his own free will—which he felt lent Confucius more depth of character.

After a while Confucius continued addressing Marx: "*Nonetheless, I treat the aged in my family as they should be treated, and extend this to the aged of others. I treat the young of my family as they should be treated, and extend this to the young of others. I treat my wife as she should be treated, and extend this to the wives of others. So your wife is also my wife.*"<sup>16</sup>



By Ah Wu

<sup>14</sup>In *Analects*, XII.5. Confucius refers to "brothers".

<sup>15</sup>*Analects*, XII.5. Word play on the original: *All within the four seas are his brothers.*

<sup>16</sup>*Mencius*, I.A.7.

Hearing this, Marx was so startled he shouted: "What!?! Mr Confucius! I only advocate sharing commodities; you openly advocate sharing wives! Your ideas are even more dangerous than mine! Very well, I won't provoke you further."

After saying this, Marx quickly beckoned the four sedan-bearers and hastily retreated from the field, as if the wife he had left behind in Europe were to be immediately shared by Confucius.

The master and his three disciples stood in the hall and watched Marx's sedan-chair until it was carried out the west gate. Only then did Yan Hui, who from start to finish had been looking on as if dumb, finally speak up:

"*'The Gentleman for one word is deemed wise, for one word deemed foolish.'*<sup>17</sup> *'Our master of today is not our master of yesterday.'*<sup>18</sup> Why were your words so extreme?"

The master, *well pleased and smiling*, said, "*My remarks just now were only in jest.*"<sup>19</sup>

Thereupon everyone followed suit and began to smile. After a while, they returned to their mats and, picking up the cold pig's-head meat they had been eating before, began anew their appreciative chewing.

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<sup>17</sup> *Analects*, XIX.25.

<sup>18</sup> Lu Tong 盧仝, 'Poem on friendship with Ma Yi' 與馬異結交詩, *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 388.

<sup>19</sup> *Analects* XVII.4.