In Tradition is the Preservation of the World:
A Twenty-First Century Confucian Utopia

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an in-depth analysis of the utopian vision proposed by contemporary Confucian philosopher Zhang Xianglong. Throughout most of the twentieth century, Confucianism has been the subject of intense criticism in China. It was often portrayed as a relic of a corrupt system that stands in the way of progress and modernity. Recent years, however, witnessed a Confucian renaissance. Academics, government officials, and grassroots activists in Mainland China have been engaged in various attempts to reassert Confucianism's enduring relevance for modern life. This article offers a close reading of Zhang's key works in an attempt to explore the motivation behind his call for the creation of Special Districts for Confucian Culture (SDC) and its place within the Confucian revival. Located in remote rural areas, these eco-friendly and self-sustainable intentional communities offer their members a refuge from modern society and an opportunity to take an active role in saving Confucian values and practices from extinction. The article situates Zhang's vision against the backdrop of modern Western utopianism and ancient Chinese descriptions of ideal societies, showing the distinctiveness of his syncretic utopian proposal and its potential legacy.

In July 2001, an essay titled "Finding a Refuge Place for Endangered Ancient Chinese Culture: On Establishing Confucian Cultural Conservation Zones" appeared in *Modern Education News*, a magazine published in China. The short piece called for the creation of small autonomous intentional communities with independent political, social, economic, and education systems based on the traditional Chinese philosophy of Confucianism. Located in the countryside, these self-sufficient communities would provide an alternative to modern mainstream society, thereby serving as a place of refuge from the fast-paced urban lifestyle of twenty-first century China.

The author, Zhang Xianglong (1949–2022), was a professor at the prestigious Peking University and one of China's most renowned scholars of Western philosophy. Born only a few weeks before the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Zhang was raised in Beijing and experienced first-hand the tumultuous years under the rule of Chairman Mao. In 1977, he joined the first generation of students who were allowed to study abroad, and he earned graduate degrees in philosophy from the University of Ohio in Toledo and SUNY Buffalo. Upon his return to China in 1992, Zhang began teaching comparative philosophy at Peking University, but he gradually shifted his interests to classical Confucian thought and became one of the leading voices in the post-Mao Confucian revival. As an active public intellectual, Zhang was mostly known for his media campaign to erect a statue of Confucius on the Peking University campus, as well as for designing a modern Confucian ritual for his son's wedding ceremony in 2010.[1]

Despite Zhang's academic credentials and prominent standing in the Chinese intellectual scene, his proposal to establish Special Districts for Confucian Culture (henceforth referred to as SDC) received criticism from both sides of the political spectrum and was largely dismissed as a "utopian fantasy." In the media, SDC were caricaturized as primitive enclaves inhabited by poor peasants living in straw huts, cut off from the benefits of modern life. Public policy experts questioned the economic feasibility of the SDC and argued that the government should use its resources to alleviate poverty and develop infrastructure instead of squandering taxpayers' money to fund frivolous "social fossils." Meanwhile, Zhang's colleagues in academia criticized the modest aspirations of his vision. Chen Ming, a professor of philosophy

at Capital Normal University in Beijing and one of the most outspoken of China's New Confucians, labeled the SDC as an "affront to Confucianism" and argued that they would encounter the same ill fate as the Native American Reservations in the United States, ultimately leading to the marginalization of Confucianism.[2]

Faced with such persistent criticism, Zhang did not give up. Instead, he spent the last two decades of his life publicly defending his proposal. Until his death in 2022, Zhang continued to develop and expand his blueprint for SDC communities and stress their importance for the survival of Confucianism as a viable way of life in the twenty-first century. In an interview with the Shanghai-based publication *The Paper*, Zhang even compared himself to Theodore Herzl, whose 1896 book *The Jewish State* was met with widespread ridicule and denounced as a frivolous utopian flight of fancy. Only after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, contended Zhang, was Herzl's vision rightfully recognized when he was credited as the father of modern political Zionism.[3]

Driven by a similar sense of vocation, Zhang worked to advertise his vision in China and abroad, publishing academic essays and holding frequent interviews with popular news media outlets. Despite his efforts, the SDC have not received broad exposure outside of China. In English-language academic scholarship, Zhang's proposal has been treated as a curious but ultimately inconsequential example of Confucian utopianism. To further complicate the matter, Zhang insisted that his vision is not "utopian,"[4] but his writings feature multiple references to utopian thinkers and tropes. In addition, his SDC bare a strong resemblance to historical and contemporary intentional communities around the globe.

In this article, I offer a close reading of Zhang's key works[5] in an attempt to explore the roots of the apparent contradictions in his utopian ideals. I will begin by outlining the interconnected history of Confucianism and modern utopian thinking over the last two centuries, and demonstrate that the ultimate failure of the grand utopian experiments on the twentieth century prompted Zhang to distance himself from the label "utopian," and instead to pitch his project as a crucial act of cultural conservation. I demonstrate how Zhang utilizes both ancient Chinese depictions of ideal societies, as well as Western utopian models, to present the SDC as sustainable green communities that offer an authentic Confucian alternative to mainstream urban society.[6] I conclude by examining the viability of this project and its contribution to contemporary Chinese utopian discourse.

Confucianism and Utopianism in Modern China

Throughout most of recorded Chinese history, Confucianism was associated with the imperial state and its traditional institutions of power. The bureaucrats who controlled the government were members of a cultural elite educated in the Confucian classics. As long as the Chinese empire enjoyed military, political, and cultural dominance in East Asia, Confucianism was held in high regard. Toward the middle of the nineteenth century, however, power relations in the region began to change. Britain, France, Russia, and other colonial forces instigated a series of military conflicts. Taking advantage of their technological and military superiority, these nations compelled the Chinese state to sign humiliating peace treaties that included crippling war reparations, unequal trade agreements, and the cession of important port cities such as Hong Kong.

Faced with this crisis, calls for radical political and social change grew louder. In 1898, an official by the name of Kang Youwei (1858–1927) was appointed by the imperial court to spearhead a series of reforms aimed at modernization. Kang, who received a traditional Confucian education but was also exposed to Western teachings during his time in the British colony of Hong Kong, was not successful in his mission. His ideas, chief among them the shift from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy, were rejected and he was forced to flee China. While in exile, Kang began writing his magnum opus, *The Book of Great Unity* (dàtóngshū). Considered to be one of the most influential modern Chinese utopian texts, the book envisions a future global society devoid of discrimination, national boundaries, and economic exploitation. Informed by Charles Fourier's socialist utopian model and Edward Bellamy's depiction of future Boston in *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*,[7] Kang's vision was also motivated by a desire to demonstrate the enduring relevance of Confucianism and its system of ethics for China and the world. The term "Great Unity" is derived from a depiction of an ideal society found in *The Records of Rites* (Lǐjì), one of the Five Confucian Classics. While criticizing the Confucian emphasis on hierarchy and its conservative attitude toward gender and sexuality, Kang still believed that with proper modifications, Confucianism could be China's outstanding contribution to world culture and a foundation for a future global society.

Other reformers, many of whom were also educated abroad, did not share Kang's optimistic view of Confucianism. Instead, they blamed it for China's

troubles. Members of the New Culture progressivist movement, which flourished in urban centers in the 1910s and 1920s, denounced Confucianism as a relic of the past and aimed to replace it with Western-inspired liberal values accompanied by a commitment to modern science. This trend continued after the establishment of the People's Republic by Mao Zedong. Inspired by Western socialist utopianism, Marxism-Leninism, and the egalitarian message of Kang Youwei, Mao spent the 1950s and early 1960s establishing small-scale model agrarian communes as a preliminary step for the creation of a national classless society. Known as the People's Communes, these were self-sufficient and self-governing units. In order to abolish the old structures of power associated with Confucianism such as traditional social hierarchies, adult male and female members of the People's Communes worked, lived, and ate together, sent their children to communal nurseries and schools, and participated in long daily sessions of political education. Frustrated by the slow progress and limited success of his model agrarian communes, Mao eventually launched the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), a radical utopian campaign designed to purge the entire population of traditional power structures, accelerate class warfare, and eventually establish a utopian socialist paradise. During this decade, Confucius was designated as the quintessential symbol of a traditional way of life that needed to be eradicated.[8]

The death of Mao in 1976 signaled a turn in Confucianism's fortunes. Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, embarked on a series of reforms designed to reverse the damage of the Cultural Revolution. Gradually, China's old religious and philosophical traditions emerged from hiding. Temples were rebuilt, and texts that were strictly banned by Mao began to appear in bookstores. The late 1980s saw the emergence of what has been dubbed as "culture fever," a nostalgic yearning for traditional ideas, values, and practices to fill in the spiritual void left by Mao and his personality cult. For the first time in decades, Confucius was celebrated as a symbol of national Chinese cultural identity. Confucian values such as filial piety were enshrined in law, and private entrepreneurs invested their own capital in building new Confucian temples. Parents began sending their children to Confucian academies for a traditional education. Popular books extoling the enduring values of Confucianism in the modern world became national bestsellers.[9]

The Confucian revival was mostly met with enthusiasm in academic circles. For the first time in more than a century, Confucianism was once again politically and socially relevant in China. During the Mao era, self-proclaimed

"New Confucians" in Taiwan, Hong-Kong, and other diasporic communities promoted a liberal version of Confucianism that attempted to reconcile its teachings with modern liberal and democratic values. Set against this progressive wing, New Confucians in Mainland China advance a more conservative and nationalist agenda.[10] Some, such as the aforementioned Chen Ming, argue that Confucianism should serve as the foundation for a Chinese civil religion, thereby reestablishing a sense of national unity built around a cultural narrative. Others, most notably Jiang Qing, outline a vision in which China is governed via a tricameral legislature that would represent the Confucian political ideal. Both Chen Ming and Jiang Qing cite Kang Youwei and his Great Unity society as a key source of inspiration and extoll his sweeping utopian vision.[11]

Pandas, Tigers, and Confucians: On Natural and Cultural Preservation

Zhang Xianglong's plan to establish Confucian conservation zones was motivated by his rejection of Kang's utopian vision and the ambitious projects of his intellectual successors, the Mainland New Confucians. Despite his active public role in the Confucian revival movement, Zhang did not share the optimism of many of his fellow New Confucians. He argued that popular grassroots initiatives are too diverse in their interpretations of the traditional Confucian doctrine and can only lead to further fragmentation rather than "true communal cohesion." A top-down revival engineered by the state, on the other hand, only serves the ideological agenda of the party. The same applies to the ambitious projects of Jiang Qing and Chen Ming. Their grand visions would require too much state support and give the regime too much power in shaping the future of the Confucian movement.[12]

Zhang's rejection of the large-scale projects of the Mainland New Confucians can be traced to their association with Kang Youwei and his brand of modern utopianism. In a 2015 interview, Zhang expresses his admiration for Confucius and his early intellectual successors who codified and canonized the doctrine now known as "classical Confucianism."[13] When asked about modern Confucian thinkers, such as Kang Youwei, Zhang states that, after a thorough reading of the *Book of Great Unity*, he concluded that Kang was not worthy of being called a real Confucian, as his vision of a stateless world with no hierarchy, no traditional family units, and no gender differentiation was

too radical and too far removed from classical Confucianism to be considered an authentic expression of the sage's doctrine.[14]

Zhang's rejection of Kang Youwei's Confucian credentials is related to his negative attitude toward Western utopianism as a social and political movement. While descriptions of ideal societies can be found in many classical Chinese texts, the Chinese word for utopia, *wūtuōbāng* 烏托邦, first appeared in Wilhelm Lobscheid's 1860 *English and Chinese Dictionary* in reference to Thomas More's 1516 book by the same name. The phrase was adopted by the scholar Yan Fu in his 1898 translation of Thomas Henry Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*, as well as his 1902 version of Adam Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*.[15]

In the early twentieth century, when young Chinese students traveled abroad to receive a Western education, the ideal well-ordered society referred to as utopia/*wūtuōbāng* and the radical political and social vision it symbolized inspired a new generation. Narratives of a future utopian China become a central theme in the writings of prominent authors and intellectuals such as Liang Qichao and Cai Yuanpei.[16] These literary utopias, together with Kang Youwei's *Book of Great Unity*, provided inspiration for real-life attempts to fundamentally reform traditional Chinese society, first by members of the New Culture progressivist movement and later by Mao Zedong. However, much like many other twentieth-century utopian experiments, these efforts often ended in failure. Utopianism, once synonymous with an optimistic belief in a better future, gradually became a pejorative term. For some, it was tantamount to authoritarianism, totalitarianism, and other dangerous ideologies. For others, it was little more than a naïve and escapist mode of thinking.[17]

Given the declining status of utopianism in the twentieth century and the pejorative connotations associated with the phrase utopia/*wūtuōbāng*, Zhang's reluctance to label the SDC as a "Confucian utopia" is quite understandable. How, then, can we explain the evident similarities between his vision and many other modern intentional communities, as well as his persistent references to Western utopian thinkers such as Henry David Thoreau and Theodore Herzl? Zhang's answer lies in the modest scope and ambitions of the SDC. In his study of twentieth century utopianism, historian Jay Winter makes a distinction between "major" and "minor" utopias. The former refers to large-scale attempts to change the nation, or even the entire world, through radical social engineering. In the twentieth century, major utopianism became associated with both extremes of the political spectrum. The fascist policies of Hitler and the communist visions of Stalin and Mao

had a similar aim: the transformation of society through the elimination of its enemies. Minor utopias, on the other hand, are much more modest in scale. They aim at a partial transformation of a smaller society. Such imaginings, argues Winter, are powerful and "sketch out a world very different from the one we live in, but from which not all social conflict or all oppression has been eliminated."[18]

Winter's model offers a solution to the contradictions in Zhang's vision. Unlike the major utopianism of Kang Youwei and Mao Zedong, with its comprehensive authoritarian undertones, the SDC are modest in scale. While Zhang did not specify their exact size in his writings, he envisioned them as small, sustainable, and independent communities located in remote rural areas. Inspired by the Amish settlements he encountered during his studies in the American Midwest, Zhang saw the SDC as "pocket utopias," places of refuge where like-minded individuals would be able to enjoy an alternative lifestyle away from mainstream society.[19]

The limited scope of these communities is also directly linked to Zhang's rather pessimistic assessment of the Confucian revival in Mainland China. Traditional Chinese culture, he argues, has been under attack throughout the twentieth century. This continuous onslaught, asserts Zhang, has made Confucianism akin to an endangered species in need of urgent rescue. Compared to Buddhism and Daoism, China's two main organized religious traditions that also faced extinction during the Cultural Revolution, Confucianism lacks self-contained spaces of worship. While religion is still strictly supervised by the state, places of worship provide practitioners a safe space for praying and participating in rituals. During the post-Mao economic reforms, many Buddhist and Daoist temples were rebuilt, thereby allowing Buddhist and Daoist priests to enjoy a modicum of authority.

Confucianism, on the other hand, was so intertwined with the imperial state bureaucracy it did not have to develop its own independent institutions and spaces. While Temples of Confucius did exist in major cities, their status was marginal compared to their Buddhist and Daoist counterparts. For this reason, asserts Zhang, the Confucian revival has no long-term chance of survival. Dispersed grassroots efforts lack organization and a unified visions. State-sponsored projects lack substance and authenticity. The grandiose visions of New Confucian scholars are too abstract. As it currently stands, Zhang concludes, Confucianism runs the risk of becoming an elite movement that only exists in museums, academic conferences, and empty Temples of Confucius.[20]

Confucians therefore need to take bold action in the face of a real and imminent prospect of extinction, Zhang argues. He compares his plan for the survival of Confucianism to the principles of environmental conservancy. When the populations of pandas and Siberian tigers in China were under threat, humans established artificial natural reserves designed to protect them. Zhang believed that this solution should not only be reserved for animals; it should also be applied to struggling cultural traditions such as Confucianism. As recent research suggests, argues Zhang, biodiversity is a key component of any flourishing ecosystem, and the extinction of one species can have serious repercussions on the viability of the system as a whole.[21]

In Zhang's eyes, the demonization of Confucianism throughout the twentieth century created a similar cultural crisis. The solution was therefore to design an artificial temporary solution in the form of the SDC. In an ever-changing world, he argues, there is no way to know what system of government and what cultural practices would succeed or fail. For almost a century, China turned its back on tradition and cast it aside in favor of chasing modernity and progress. In order to minimize the risk of offsetting the delicate balance of the ecosystem, Confucianism must be preserved in special protection zones. Zhang concludes with the following analogy: forests protect human habitation by acting as a buffer for sandstorms and other natural disasters. When forests are cut down, humans are put in immediate danger. Confucianism is the forest that protects contemporary Chinese society from the sandstorm and must therefore be preserved.[22]

The SDC and Traditional Chinese Models of Ideal Agrarian Communities

Unlike major utopias, which aim to radically transform society, minor utopias need to be able to coexist with mainstream society and the state in order to survive. In his writings, Zhang stresses that the formation of the SDC must be done in complete cooperation with the government through legislation. Land that is not otherwise used can be allocated to the SDC by means of a land grant. In exchange for a promise to develop the area, the SDC will receive an official recognition as a Special Administrative Region based on the "One Country, Two Systems" model currently enacted in Hong Kong and Macau. Once a suitable location has been secured, the structure of the community's institutions and its governing laws and regulations will be determined by a

committee made up of Confucian scholars and government officials. Once these preliminary conditions are met, a screening process for incoming members can begin. Zhang emphasizes that, while recruitment efforts should be centered in China, non-Chinese may join the SDC as long as they possess the necessary skills and are willing to commit themselves to the Confucian way of life.[23]

Zhang openly acknowledges the limited allure of the SDC, especially for young people. The legacy of the Anti-Confucian ideology promoted throughout the twentieth century would have the potential to make the recruitment process quite challenging. In order for the project to succeed, life in the Confucian communities must be not only be palpably "alternative" but also physically distanced from mainstream society. To facilitate the transition from a modern urban lifestyle to a traditional Confucian community, outside distractions would have to be minimized. During the pilot phase, this would be achieved artificially by establishing three separate geographical zones: an inner Confucian core dedicated to a traditional lifestyle, an intermediary buffer zone, and outer border areas allowing more interaction with the surrounding populations. Once the trial phase is concluded, the community would be completely independent and establish its own institutions, social structure, legal system, and foreign policy.[24]

As a justification for the remote location of the SDC and its physical separation from mainstream society, Zhang references two models: Amish communities in the United States, and the idealistic society described by poet Tao Yuanming in his 421 CE *Records of the Peach Blossom Spring* (Táohuāyuán jì). Heralded as China's most influential premodern literary utopia, the latter tells the story of a fisherman whose boat drifts into a secluded community hidden inside a large cavern. Amazed by the simple but sound architectural layout, the lushness of the fields, and the happiness of the population, the fisherman asks about the community's origins and is told that it was established hundreds of years ago by farmers seeking refuge from government tyranny. Although they are fearful of outsiders, the residents of the Peach Blossom Spring allow the fisherman to stay for a while under the condition that he agrees never to reveal the location of their refuge. Upon his return home, the fisherman breaks his promise. All attempts to find the cavern fail, however, and the community's location remains hidden.[25]

The agrarian utopia described by Tao Yuanming can be traced back to philosophical ideas developed in the Warring States period (475–221 BCE). Motivated by the unprecedented chaos of the time, Confucius and other

philosophers began to devise comprehensive plans for the social and political reforms necessary to restore order, but not all early Chinese thinkers shared Confucius' optimism about the future. Some believed that war could only be resolved if large states were disbanded and replaced with small, independent agrarian communities. The common thread running through all descriptions of various utopian communities is the rejection of political institutions such as government, social hierarchy, morality, and technological innovation. Instead, early Chinese philosophers yearned for an idealized past in which humans and animals lived in harmony free of the need for rules, regulations, and laws.[26] Zhang's repeated references to the *Peach Blossom Spring* and his description of the SDC as a "pastoral place located outside the realm of worldly things" build on the popularity of this classical utopian trope and its connotations with an "alternative lifestyle."[27]

At first sight, Zhang's combination of Confucianism and an agrarian lifestyle seems out of place. Throughout Chinese history, Confucianism was associated with the educated urban elite. Unlike the majority of the population, who were farmers, Confucians were scholar-officials who underwent intense training in classical philosophy, poetry, and history while dedicating themselves equally to administrative and aesthetic pursuits. During the early decades of the Communist regime, the Confucian intelligentsia were classified as class enemies, and the urban elites were forced to relocate to the countryside for mandatory cultural reeducation.

The death of Mao and the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 resulted a mass wave of reverse migration back to the cities. The reforms enacted by Deng Xiaoping signaled a pronounced shift from an agrarian into an industry-based economy, and migrant workers from rural areas flocked to the cities in search of employment.[28] Recent years, however, have seen a small but highly visible "pastoral living" movement celebrated in mass media and on online social networking platforms. Disillusioned by highly competitive work environments and the rampant consumerism of urban life, young professionals have begun to express their desire to leave their superficial city lives behind in favor of a simpler and purer existence. Driven by social media influencers such as popular "rural lifescape" vlogger Li Ziqi, this wave of cultural nostalgia has made a significant impact on the Chinese popular imagination.[29]

The nostalgic yearning for an authentic pastoral life is not unique to twenty-first-century China, of course. Following decades of accelerated progress during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, humanity has supposedly reached what American historian Howard Segal described as a "scientific and

technological plateau." In the realm of utopian thought, this situation manifests in a gradual shift away from futuristic visions and a resurgence in the popularity of "green utopias" that deliberately reject technology in favor of a simpler life.[30]

Zhang's vision for the SDC exemplifies this global trend. Building on popular support for environmental conservancy, Zhang describes his Confucian communities as sustainable and self-sufficient, a prime example of "green living." Any machinery that uses fossil fuels, for example, will be strictly outlawed in the SDC, as will genetically modified agriculture. In Zhang's vision, such polluting technologies will be replaced with "green" windmills and watermills, organic non-GMO crops, and sustainable livestock husbandry. While Zhang is careful not to advocate for the wholesale rejection of all technology, he stresses the benefits of "unplugging." Zhang argues that social media and other forms of modern communication and entertainment have had a damaging impact on contemporary Chinese society and must therefore be outlawed in the SDC.[31] In order to reflect an authentic Confucian lifestyle, the SDC must exist as protected islands of tradition in a sea of modernity, much like the Amish communities in the United States.

Amish and Confucians: Preserving Tradition, Rejecting Modernity

Zhang's 2018 essay, written in English for an international audience, contains a detailed history of Amish communities in the United States and their relation to his own utopian vision. As a traditionalist Anabaptist movement, the Old Order Amish trace their history to post-Reformation Europe. Faced with persecution from both the Roman Catholics and Protestant churches, Anabaptist groups such as the Mennonites and the Amish immigrated to the United States in the eighteenth century and established independent religious communities dedicated to the preservation of their traditional lifestyle. These traditions stress a strict social hierarchy, a deference to the authority of the elders, and an obedience to a set of precepts called the *Ordnung* (order). Amish communities maintain their distance from mainstream society and openly reject many of its hallmarks, including technology. Much like the Shakers, the Amish are often depicted as representatives of the conservative religious strand of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American utopianism, which is distinguished from progressive secular utopias that aimed to challenge mainstream social, sexual, and institutional norms.[32]

Zhang believes that contemporary Amish communities in the United States could serve as a model for the SDC. First, in order to sustain their minority religious beliefs in what Zhang describes as a "hostile environment," Amish settlements are geographically isolated from mainstream society. This separation allows them to remain authentic to their sacred way of life while enjoying a high level of social intimacy within the community. As islands of tradition in a sea of modernity, Amish communities must enforce artificial restrictions, such as limiting movement outside the community and resisting the "overwhelming domination of modern technology." Zhang emphasizes that the Amish are not uncritical luddites. Their resistance is motivated but what they perceive as the negative influence of an overdependence on technology, which they believe results in laziness, moral decay, and a loss of social solidarity. Zhang provides the example of cellphones, which can connect people across long distances but simultaneously contribute to social isolation. The same system of thinking can be applied to agricultural machinery. While manual labor is physically taxing, it fosters a sense of dignity and solidarity based on a shared experience of overcoming hardship.[33]

Zhang is aware that, in the American popular imagination, the Amish's resistance to modernity and technology paints them as regressive and "backward." He therefore contends that the SDC should adopt a more progressive and future-facing approach by embracing innovations such as solar energy and other forms of green technology. He also stresses the importance of educating people about the addictive and potentially harmful impact of contemporary digital technologies such as social media and video games, and that this education should not be accompanied by a ban against these technologies. Such moral education is of utmost importance in classical Confucian doctrine. Throughout Chinese history, literary study and a commitment to the lifelong arduous process of moral self-cultivation were the hallmarks of Confucian cultural identity. For these reasons, Zhang believes that the creation of an independent education system would be critical for the success of the SDC. This education would not entail reverting to a premodern Confucian curriculum, but rather supplementing the study of classical texts with math, science, and other practical forms of knowledge.[34]

Despite his call for significant modifications to the Amish way of life, Zhang expresses awe at their enduring dedication to their cultural traditions. "The Amish experience," he claims, "demonstrates how a small minority community through its vitality and humanity can exert substantial sociocultural

influence on mainstream society over time."[35] The SDC would establish a similar model for Chinese society, but only if these communities were able to attract enough people by allowing them to experience an authentic Confucian way of life that is palpably "alternative" and therefore transformative. This sense of being an alternative to contemporary urban society could be achieved in multiple practical ways. One way would be a focus on green living and an environmentally sustainable lifestyle. Other measures range from symbolic gestures, such as switching back to the traditional Chinese lunar calendar, to more substantial steps, such as adopting a "Confucianized democracy" as a form of government. This iteration of democracy as a political system would emphasize two of the hallmarks of classical Confucianism: familism and social hierarchy.

Harmony Without Uniformity: Family and Hierarchy in the Confucian Utopia

Zhang identifies the growing influence of individualism as a source of danger. Despite advancements in technology and an unprecedented level of material comfort, members of contemporary Chinese society suffer from spiritual homelessness and ennui. Zhang believes that the root cause of this sense of aimlessness is the diminishing status of the family. Motivated by individualistic aspirations, people no longer defer to the authority of their elders or care for their aging parents, preferring to send them to nursing homes instead. In his lavish praise of the Amish, Zhang identifies the family orientation of Amish communities as their most laudable feature. Unlike the more individualistic members of mainstream American society, Amish families are tight-knit units that reside together and take care of each other throughout their lives.[36]

Zhang argues that traditional Chinese society is akin to the Amish emphasis on filial piety. According to classical Confucianism, the family is the most important unit of society. Parents care for newborns from the very first moment—they nurture them, take care of their physical and emotional needs, and help them navigate the world. In return, children have the obligation to respect their parents and repay them for their love and support. Society and the state, argued the Confucians, need to be based on this model. The ruler must treat his subjects as a father cares for his children, providing for them and ensuring that they may enjoy the best conditions to prosper.

If a ruler performs his duties properly, he will earn the respect of their subjects, who will repay his benevolence by treating him with the same sense of reverence and piety children have for their parents.[37]

One of the best examples of this vision of the family as the foundation of society and the state can be found in the "Great Learning" (Dàxué), a chapter from the *Records of Rites*, a work that was included in the basic Confucian curriculum for more than two millennia. The text, quoted frequently by Zhang, portrays sociopolitical stability and prosperity as a direct result of familial harmony. When parents raise their children properly and children respect their parents, society as a whole reaps the rewards of interpersonal harmony. The political and administrative apparatuses of the state are, in that sense, secondary to the family. For this reason, concludes Zhang, the large-scale reform projects touted by the Mainland New Confucians are doomed to fail. For Confucianism to survive, it must first tend to the restoration of the traditional family.[38]

Modern intentional communities often reject the traditional family in favor of a communal egalitarian lifestyle and social experimentation. From the socialist experiments of the Israeli Kibbutz and Mao's People's Communes to the pious Christian communalism of the Shakers or the polyamorous perfectionism of the Oneida Community, a large percentage of intentional communities around the globe have endeavored to offer an alternative to the institution of the family.[39] Zhang, on the other hand, makes familism the centerpiece of his vision. Zhang envisions SDC members residing in large households that would house multiple generations of the extended lineage. Unlike the Western "one person, one vote" system, in a Confucianized Democracy the head of the household would represent their lineage's interests in the political decision-making process, thus restoring the family to its proper place at the center of social and political life.[40]

Zhang's "Confucianized Democracy" is designed to offer a middle path between Western liberal democracy and absolute monarchy. Much like a family, the traditional Chinese imperial state was not seen as an egalitarian unit but a hierarchical pyramid with a single monarch at the top. Once Confucianism was adopted as the official state ideology during the Han Dynasty, it became intrinsically associated with authoritarianism. The major utopian experiments of the twentieth century, however, demonstrated the dangers of a totalitarian regime, prompting Zhang to devise a compromise—a political system that is democratic but not egalitarian. His main inspiration for this model is the ideal society is the principle of "harmony without

uniformity" (hé èr bùtóng), which first appears in the *Analects* of Confucius and later expanded in the "Evolution of Ritual" (Lǐyùn), another chapter from the Confucian classic *The Records of Rites*.[41]

Hailed as the quintessential work of ancient Confucian utopianism, the chapter opens with a description of the ideal society that supposedly existed in remote antiquity. In this golden age, poverty and crime did not exist. There was no shortage of food, clothing, or employment. People treated each other with respect, and the government promoted officials based on merit. Known as the Great Unity (dàtóng), this vision inspired generations of Chinese utopian thinkers, including Kang Youwei, who named his egalitarian universal utopia after it, and Mao Zedong, who used it to promote his political agenda.[42] The description of the ideal society of Great Unity, however, only features briefly in the beginning of the "Evolution of Ritual" chapter. The emergence of complex societies necessitated the creation of new social and political institutions designed to maintain order and harmony.

The romanticization of the Great Unity eventually gave way to a more practical ideal: a society of Modest Prosperity (xiǎokāng) based on the Confucian principles of morality, filial piety, and ritual propriety (lǐ). The concept of "ritual propriety" refers to a set of traditional rules of behavior that govern and regulate human interaction. Imprinted on the individual through education and repeated training, these rules ensure harmonious relations between members of society. Through the ritualization process, humans learn how to function in an interlocking set of hierarchical systems as they work for the common good.[43] Zhang consistently draws on the vision of Modest Prosperity in his writings. According to Zhang, the acquisition of practical knowledge through repeated participation in daily ritualized interactions is the only way to ensure the survival of tradition. For this reason, Confucian ritual propriety should be the foundation of social, political, and cultural life in the SDC.[44] While the utopian ideal of the Great Unity may never be restored, the society of Modest Prosperity can be recreated in the SDC, thereby guaranteeing the preservation of Confucianism.

Conclusion: In Tradition is the Preservation of the World

Zhang Xianglong continued to promote the SDC until his death in 2022. Over time, his defense of tradition and his opposition to modern technology

became increasingly entrenched in his writings. In March 2020, during the initial wave of COVID-19 lockdowns, a group of influential Confucian scholars were asked to provide their reflections on the pandemic and its potential ramifications. In his response, Zhang extolled the benefits of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in treating the symptoms of the disease, and he argued that China's inability to curb the spread of COVID-19 should serve as a staunch warning against an overreliance on modern science, medicine, and technology. He concluded that society must maintain a harmonious balance between modernity and tradition and not abandon the wisdom of the ancients in favor of the worship of contemporary technology.[45]

Zhang's devotion to conservative Confucian values and his belief that "in tradition is the preservation of the world" sets his utopian vision apart from his contemporaries.[46] The recent emergence of the pastoral lifestyle movement has resulted in the formation of new intentional communities in rural China. The most well-known is AnotherLand (also known as the Southern Living Community), which was founded in Fujian Province by artists Tang Guanhua and Xing Zhen in 2015. Centered around a communal lifestyle and founded on a commitment to sustainability and self-sufficiency, AnotherLand recruits highly educated young professionals who wish to live closer to nature in order to be free of the anxieties of modern urban life. AnotherLand has received positive coverage in the media, with community members citing its apolitical nature and rejection of the strict social hierarchy of mainstream Chinese society in favor of an egalitarian lifestyle as key points of attraction.[47]

Zhang Xianglong's vision, with its strict sociopolitical structure and devotion to Confucian family values, failed to comply with the demands of the current Chinese utopian marketplace, and the SDC never came to fruition. This does not mean that Zhang's utopian writings are insignificant, however. After all, not all utopias "are intended to be established in the first place."[48] The environmentally grounded agrarian ideals that Zhang expressed in the concept of the SDC represent an act of social dreaming and serve as a meaningful form of resistance against the dystopian future potentially facing technocratic capitalist narrative promoted by the current Chinese regime.[49]

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Notes

1. Margaret Mih Tillman and Hoyt Cleveland Tillman, "Modernizing Tradition or Restoring Antiquity as Confucian Alternatives: A View from Reading Wedding Rituals in Contemporary China," in *Contemporary Confucianism in Thought and Action*, ed. Guy Alitto (Berlin: Springer, 2015), 79–100.

2. Monika Gänßbauer, "'A Special Zone for Confucianism'? Theses of the Academician Zhang Xianglong on Traditional Chinese Culture," *Azijske študije* 2, no. 1 (2014): 115–26. Chen Ming expressed his dismay with Zhang's vision in a 2011 interview with *Outlook Oriental Weekly* magazine. See https://tinyurl.com/4kehtwd4.

3. See https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1370252.

4. For a description of Zhang's vision as a "Confucian Utopia," see Sebastien Billioud and Joël Thoraval, *The Sage and the People: The Confucian Revival in China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 143–44. Zhang rejects this label in an interview conducted by Dai Zhiyong, published in the Guangzhou-based *Southern Weekly* magazine on December 8, 2013. See https://www.rujiazg.com/article/3731.

5. Zhang has written extensively on this topic. For this article, I chose the most detailed Chinese version of his vision, which was published in 2014, and the only English-language version, written by Zhang himself, which was published in 2018. See Zhang Xianglong, *Fujian Tiandixin: Rujia Zai in de Yunyi yu Daolu* [*Restoring the Heart of Heaven and Earth: The Meaning and Path of the Confucian Revival*] (Beijing: Dongfang Chubanshe, 2014) and Zhang Xianglong, "The Special District of Confucian Culture, the Amish Community, and the Confucian Pre-Qing Political Heritage," in *Confucianisms for a Changing World Cultural Order*, ed. Roger T. Ames and Peter D. Hershock (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 55–71.

6. China has a long history of literary descriptions of nonexisting ideal societies, from sociopolitical blueprints of harmonious societies to fictional descriptions of remote Buddhist and Daoist paradises. The most comprehensive survey of more than four thousand years of utopian writings in China is Wolfgang Bauer, *China and the Search for Happiness* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).

7. See Guangyi Li, "'New Year's Dream': A Chinese Anarcho-cosmopolitan Utopia," *Utopian Studies* 24, no. 1 (2013): 91, and Laurence G. Thompson, *Ta t'ung Shu: The One-World Philosophy of K'ang Yu-wei* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1958), 211.

8. Baogang Guo, "Utopias of Reconstruction: Chinese Utopianism From Hong Xiuquan To Mao Zedong," *Journal of Comparative Asian Development* 2, no. 2 (2003): 197–209.

9. Billioud and Thoraval, *The Sage and the People*.

10. For a concise and informative discussion on the ideological differences between "New Confucians" in Hong-Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora and their Mainland

counterparts, see Stephen C. Angle, "The Adolescence of Mainland New Confucianism," *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 49, no. 2 (2018): 83–99.

11. Alex Payette, "Contemporary Confucian Revival: Reflecting on the Nation, the State and Modernity," in *Concepts and Methods for the Study of Chinese Religions, Volume I: State of the Field and Disciplinary Approaches*, ed. André Laliberté and Stefania Travagnin (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 45–66.

12. Billioud and Thoraval, *The Sage and the People*, 144. In his 2015 interview to *The Paper*, Zhang stated that any grand project will inevitably lead to a corrupt form of Confucianism: https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1370252.

13. The term "classical Confucianism" refers to texts and ideas dating back to the Warring States (475–221 BCE) and Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) periods.

14. See https://www.rujiazg.com/article/3731.

15. Yi-Chun Liu, "Translating and Transforming *Utopia* into the Mandarin Context: Case Studies from China and Taiwan," *Utopian Studies* 27, no. 2 (2016): 335–36.

16. Guangyi Li, "New Year's Dream."

17. Russell Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 5; Howard P. Segal, *Utopias: A Brief History from Ancient Writings to Virtual Communities* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 1–2.

18. Jay Winter, *Dreams of Peace and Freedom: Utopian Moments in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 5.

19. Lucy Sargisson, *Fool's Gold? Utopianism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 74.

20. Zhang, *Restoring the Heart of Heaven and Earth*, 132–33.

21. Zhang, *Restoring the Heart of Heaven and Earth*, 133.

22. Zhang, *Restoring the Heart of Heaven and Earth*, 133–34.

23. Zhang, *Restoring the Heart of Heaven and Earth*, 140; Zhang, "The Special District of Confucian Culture," 57.

24. Zhang, *Restoring the Heart of Heaven and Earth*, 140.

25. Zhang Longxi, "The Utopian Vision: East and West," in *Thinking Utopia: Steps into Other Worlds*, ed. Jörn Rüsen, Michael Fehr, and Thomas W. Rieger (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 221–25.

26. Zhang himself refers to one such description, known as "the Society of Perfect Virtue," which appears in the Daoist classic *The Zhuangzi*. See *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 65–66.

27. Zhang, *Restoring the Heart of Heaven and Earth*, 139; the quote is taken from Zhang's 2015 interview with *The Paper*, see https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1370252.

28. The share of urban population between 1980 and 2022 more than tripled itself, from about 20 percent to 65 percent. See https://www.statista.com/statistics/270162/urbanization-in-china/.

29. Han Li, "From Disenchantment to Reenchantment: Rural Microcelebrities, Short Video, and the Spectacle-ization of the Rural Lifescape on Chinese Social Media," *International Journal of Communication* 14 (2020): 3769–87.

30. Segal, *Utopias: A Brief History*, 234–39.

31. Zhang, *Restoring the Heart of Heaven and Earth*, 135–36.

32.   John W. Friesen and Virginia Lyons Friesen, *The Palgrave Companion to North American Utopias* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2004).

33.   Zhang, "The Special District of Confucian Culture," 61–63.

34.   Zhang, "The Special District of Confucian Culture," 64. See also Zhang, *Restoring the Heart of Heaven and Earth*, 136.

35.   Zhang, "The Special District of Confucian Culture," 67.

36.   Zhang, "The Special District of Confucian Culture," 61.

37.   Erin M. Cline, *Families of Virtue: Confucian and Western Views on Childhood Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

38.   Zhang, "The Special District of Confucian Culture," 58. See also his interview for *The Paper*, in https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1370252.

39.   Friesen and Friesen, *The Palgrave Companion to North American Utopias*.

40.   Zhang, *Restoring the Heart of Heaven and Earth*, 137.

41.   Analects 13.23. See *Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), 149–50.

42.   Craig A. Smith, "Datong and Xiaokang," in *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao To Xi*, ed. Christian P Sorace, Ivan Franceschini, and Nicholas Loubere (Canberra: ANU Press, 2019), 63–66.

43.   *Li Chi: Book of Rites*, trans. James Legge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1885), 364–93.

44.   Zhang, *Restoring the Heart of Heaven and Earth*, 135.

45.   https://www.rujiazg.com/article/18322. For more on the use of TCM during the COVID-19 pandemic in China, see https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01284-x.

46.   The idea that tradition is crucial to the preservation of the world is inspired by Henry David Thoreau's famous "in wildness is the preservation of the world" from his 1862 essay "Walking." Zhang refers to it in his 2015 interview with *The Paper*. See https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1370252.

47.   See https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/long-reads/article/3037535/chinas-new-communes-self-sustainability-fujian and https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1006694.

48.   Segal, *Utopias*, 13.

49.   See William Callahan, *China Dreams: 20 Visions of the Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).