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By Stephen Miller

Kung Te-cheng

Lineal Descendant of Confucius Fostered Tradition



Government Information Office of the Republic of China

Kung Te-cheng, the 77th lineal descendant of Confucius, studied and revived rituals honoring the ancestral sage, as well as taught traditional Chinese culture and language at several of Taiwan's universities.

After losing the Chinese Civil War to the Communist Party in 1950, the Kuomintang's strongman Chiang Kai-shek took with him two things to ensure his regime's legitimacy: the Chinese imperial art collection and the 77th lineal descendant of Confucius, Kung Te-cheng.

In Taiwan, Mr. Kung studied and revived Confucian rituals honoring the ancestral sage said to have died in 479 B.C. He led annual birthday sacrifices at the Confucius Temple in Taipei, often with President Chiang looking over his shoulder. He later served as president of the Examination Yuan, the Taiwan civil service.

The revival in Taiwan stood in stark contrast to Mao's China, where Red Guards smashed Confucius statues and railed against the "Four Olds" of tradition.

Fireworks and merriment rang out in Qufu in 1920 when he was born, the first son of the Yancheng duke "Lord of the Sage's Lineage," as Confucius's lineal descendants had been styled for a millennium. The lineage was honored by successive emperors who bestowed land and money. The temple to Confucius in Qufu was reputed the finest in the country and the family lived in a 500-room mansion, attended to by hundreds of servants. Mr. Kung was born of his father's second concubine.

But they were dark days for the Confucian lineage. Part of the reason for rejoicing at Mr. Kung's birth was that his father, Kung Ling-I, had died three months earlier and there had been some doubt whether there would be a son to continue the dynasty. His mother Mme. Wang died within days of his birth, the victim, some said, of poison.

There were graver threats to Confucianism. The Qing dynasty had fallen in 1911, and from its ashes rose the Republic of China, determined to modernize China. The Republic removed the

young duke's title and threatened to expropriate the family's lands. Confucian tradition was excoriated by popular writers of the day, including Lu Xun whose "Diary of a Madman" described China as a society that eats its young through excessive filial duty and urged readers to "save the children." Others clamored for science and democracy, concepts not covered by the sage

China after the emperors was weak. Wartime dispatches in 1938 reported that Japanese invaders -- who also revered Confucius -- offered the young man the throne of China. But he turned them down and urged loyal Confucians to expel the foreigners. The mansion fell into disrepair. Mr. Kung worked for a time at the War Ministry in Chongqing.

A shy and scholarly young man, Mr. Kung went abroad to study philosophy at Yale after World War II. In 1948, he told the Christian Science Monitor that he followed no religion but adhered to Confucian tenets. "I am very proud of my family tradition," he said. "But I do find there are many inconveniences. I would like to be a plain citizen -- nothing more, nothing less." That he never would be.

Returning to China, he was caught up in the Communist revolution only to go into exile with Chiang. Communists' revolutionary rule, commencing in 1949, was inimical to Confucian harmony.

Chiang in the 1960s chartered a commission including Mr. Kung to study and modernize Confucian rituals. Even as Mao's Revolutionary Guards were demonstrating against Confucius and subjecting his descendants to painful "rehabilitation," Mr. Kung was leading rituals of renewed precision and integrity.

He also taught traditional Chinese culture and language at several Taiwan universities. He rarely gave interviews, but in 1984 he told Reuters, described as professorial and puffing on a cigar, "I suppose I'm a piece of national treasure, well-protected and immune from all kinds of turbulence." He stepped aside as head of the civil service in 1993 as Taiwan embraced democratic elections.

As it has come to embrace capitalism and its own history in recent years, China rehabilitated the ancient sage and even began exporting him by founding hundreds of Confucius Institutes around the globe.

In its brief obituary of Mr. Kung, the official Chinese news agency Xinhua called Confucius "a great thinker and educationist in ancient China."

The family compound, the temple, and Confucius's grave in Qufu have re-emerged as a focus of pilgrimage in recent years.

Mr. Kung was too ill to preside at Confucius's birthday celebration earlier this month. Since his son had predeceased him, his grandson, the 79th lineal descendant Kung Chuei-chang officiated at the ceremony, Taiwan's Central News Agency reported.

Death

Kung was sent to Tzu Chi hospital in Sinyuan City. He acquired pneumonia and sepsis when he arrived at the emergency department. Kung died 8 days later of heart and respiratory failure.