

INTRODUCTION

THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF CONFUCIANISM

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Confucians have long been preoccupied with social and political change. According to the standard account, Master Kong (Latinized name: Confucius; c. 551–479 B.C.) left his native state of Lu, hoping to find a ruler more receptive to his ideas about good government. Unfortunately, Confucius did not have any luck, and he was forced to settle for a life of teaching. Several generations later, a student in the academic lineage of Confucius's grandson named Master Meng (Latinized name: Mencius; c. 390–305 B.C.) committed himself to spreading Confucius's social and political ideas. Like the old master, Mencius moved from state to state, looking for opportunities to put his political ideals into practice. Mencius had slightly more success – he served briefly as Minister of the State of Qi – but he became disenchanted with political life and reluctantly settled for a teaching career.

Several hundred years later, however, the social and political ideas of Confucius and Mencius – as recorded in *The Analects of Confucius* and *The Works of Mencius* – proved to be literally world transforming. Following a short-lived experience with Legalism, the newly founded Chinese state of Han adopted Confucianism as its official ideology. For the next two thousand years, the country's best minds sought to interpret and modify Confucianism to make it more relevant in particular situations with novel features. By the late nineteenth century, the whole East Asian region was thoroughly “Confucianized.” That is, Confucian values and practices informed the daily lives of people in China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, and whole systems of government were justified with reference to Confucian ideals.

Since the advent of modernity in the latter half of the nineteenth century, however, Confucianism has fared less well. Max Weber, one of the earliest scholars to devote serious attention to the relationship between Confucianism and modernity, singled out Confucianism among the major “world religions” as the least conducive to capitalist development. East Asians, for their part, began to condemn this venerable tradition as they deepened their

encounter with the West. Nationalists and militarists held Confucianism responsible for their country's inability to withstand the onslaught of Western imperialism. From the other side of the political spectrum, the communists did their best to extirpate every root and branch of Confucianism that they regarded as a feudal and reactionary world view hindering progress. Indeed, for the vast majority of East Asians, modernity had come to mean overcoming Confucianism.

As such, in the postcolonial era, few, if any, East Asians openly declared allegiance to Confucian ideals. For most of the cold war period, East Asians had to choose between two alternative roads to modernity – Marxism and capitalism – and the Confucian tradition had almost completely disappeared from public discourse. That modernity itself was the ultimate goal was rarely in doubt. In fact, one of the most remarkable aspects of Confucianism's encounter with modernity is that unlike in the case of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, there has never been an organized Confucian resistance to modernization. Confucianism seems to be one "religion" where one would be hard put to find any "fundamentalist" adherents at all.

Perhaps this lack of fundamentalist resistance to modernity underpins the remarkable ability of many of the countries that belong to the "Confucian sphere of influence" to industrialize and, in some cases, democratize. While the contradictions inherent in the communist bloc were becoming more apparent, while other Third World countries were trapped in seemingly inextricable patterns of underdevelopment, and while even the advanced industrialized countries were mired in the vicious cycle of stagflation, the countries of East Asia continued to flourish through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. In fact, the success of the countries in this region became so conspicuous as to require some explanation. The need for a new theoretical framework became all the more acute primarily because the social scientists, both liberal and Marxist, failed to predict or explain the economic success of these "Confucian" states while the Weberian thesis regarding the alleged incompatibility between Confucianism and capitalism rapidly lost credibility.

Since the early 1980s, there has been much discussion regarding the role of Confucianism in the modernization of East Asia, particularly in the economic sphere. Initially, those who found Confucianism to hold the secret to the region's economic success were mostly Western scholars. It was "outside observers" who began attributing the success of East Asia to Confucianism (MacFarquhar, Hofheinz and Calder, Vogel, among others). The irony was that few living in the Confucian world thought that their political and economic success was due to Confucianism. What success they enjoyed, they typically attributed to their success in having overcome Confucianism.

The first among the East Asians to openly and enthusiastically espouse the idea that Confucianism had much to do with the rapid industrialization of the region were politicians. Most notoriously, Singapore's senior statesman Lee Kuan Yew has invoked Confucian values – under the guise of “Asian values” – with the apparent aim of justifying constraints on the democratic process. Authoritarian governments in the region have similarly appealed to Confucian values meant to contrast with Western-style democracy. Even the Chinese Communist Party “rectified” its previous anti-Confucian stance – party leaders have been trying to tap Confucian teachings to help curb rampant corruption and to counter the widespread social malaise that threatens to undermine the Communist Party.¹ These political leaders affirmed the linkage between Confucianism and modernity not only to explain their economic success but also to argue that the political and economic system that they had erected was in many ways superior to that of the West.

Against this trend, anti-Confucian liberal intellectuals and social critics argued that Confucianism is a dead tradition that has been (justifiably) relegated to the dustbin of history. Others recognized that Confucian values continue to exert moral and political influence in East Asia, with the proviso that these values are not desirable in the modern world and thus Confucianism should be opposed whenever it rears its ugly head. Confucianism, it was argued, is incompatible with the social and political manifestations of modernity – democracy, capitalism, and the rule of law. The Confucian emphasis on differentiated and hierarchical relationships as manifested in the Five Cardinal Virtues (*wulun* 五倫) leads inevitably to elitism and authoritarianism. The Confucian dictum that one should pursue justice, not profit, conflicts with the commercial ethos that undergirds capitalism and the ethics of self-interest that drives it. The Confucian emphasis on moral cultivation and reliance on a morally cultivated elite to bring just order to society exposes it to the danger of subjective and hence arbitrary rule and clashes with the modern reliance on institutions and procedures that secure the rule of law.

The debate soon came to be mired in polemics. The argument over the alleged superiority of one set of values over another might have revealed some interesting psychology at work among the participants, but it did little to

1 See Tony Lau, “Jiang’s Appeal to Virtue Harks Back to Confucius,” *South China Morning Post*, February 20, 2001. Some mainland Chinese intellectuals have also “returned” to Confucianism for inspiration: see, e.g., Guoji Ruxue Lianhehui, ed., *Ruxue Xiandai Tansuo* [Search for Contemporary Confucianism] (Beijing: Beijing Tushuguan Chubanshe, 2002), and Tang Kailin and Cao Gang, *Chongshi Chuantong: Rujia Sixiang de Xiandai Jiazhi Pinggu* [Reinterpreting Tradition: Contemporary Evaluation of Confucian Thought] (Shanghai: East China Normal University Publishing House, 2000).

shed light on the linkages between Confucianism and modernity. In fact, given the state of the debate surrounding Confucianism and modernity, it is not surprising that once East Asia was hit by a financial crisis in 1997, those who had been arguing against the Asian values thesis simply began to dismiss the whole issue. Just as the advocates of Asian values tried to reverse Weber's thesis on Confucianism, so now the critics of Asian values tried to treat the whole argument concerning Confucianism as having been completely misbegotten. When they did acknowledge Confucianism's influence on economic development, they now did so only in order to "prove" that it has produced "crony capitalism" characterized by corruption and inefficiency.

In the meantime, another group of East Asian intellectuals and their Western sympathizers has sought to articulate a vision of Confucianism that avoids either of these extremes by highlighting the humanistic and liberal elements in the Confucian world view while recognizing its flaws. Here the assumption has been that Confucianism has indeed underpinned economic and political development in modernizing East Asian societies and the aim has been to understand how Confucianism actually works in economic organization, political ideology, and social behavior.² While this enterprise has primarily been descriptive and explanatory, it has also been animated by a normative vision. This group of "Confucian humanists," as Tu Wei-ming puts it, defends Confucianism on the grounds that it expresses values of universal significance for those concerned with leading moral lives. In the contemporary world, this tradition has the added advantage of buttressing valued forms of communal life against the disintegrating and atomizing forces of economic globalization. As shown by "actually existing" East Asian societies, the Confucian cultural heritage can also underpin relatively egalitarian forms of economic development.

This appealing vision, however, often seems to lack specific proposals for social and political change. That is, the debate over Confucianism continues to be based on values and norms as contained in classical texts and historical past. Little work has been done to investigate linkages between Confucian ideals and concrete practices/institutions, be they political, economic, social, or legal, in the existing "Confucian" societies. It is time for the debate to move beyond the theoretical and speculative stage to more practical and institutional considerations. If Confucianism is to remain viable, it will not be sufficient to "apologize" for the supposedly authoritarian tendencies of its theories and tenets. Rather, proponents of Confucianism need to engage in more affirmative and constructive thinking where the institutional manifestations of Confucianism for modern democratic societies are actively sought and

² See, e.g., Tu Wei-ming, ed., *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

articulated. This means sorting out and clearly articulating those aspects of Confucianism that are feasible and defensible in the modern world. Thus, those trying to negotiate the relationship between Confucianism and modernity need to tackle the following questions: Which particular Confucian values should be promoted in contemporary East Asian societies? How should they be promoted? What are the political and institutional implications of “Confucian humanism”? How do the practical implications of modern Confucianism differ from the values and workings of liberal capitalist societies? Can these differences be justified from a moral point of view?

This book emerged from a multiyear project on “Confucian democracy.” Our contributors have all made a commitment to take Confucianism seriously, to engage in constructive criticisms, and to identify those parts of Confucianism (if any) still worth defending in a contemporary world. They were asked to work out (and defend) in concrete detail the implications of Confucianism in modern societies and to argue for distinctive Confucian policies and institutions that are still feasible and desirable in East Asian states and beyond.

Internationally renowned lawyers, sociologists, historians, philosophers, and political scientists from East Asia and elsewhere participated in a series of conferences.³ Each scholar was encouraged to go beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. Theorists and historians were asked to think in practical terms while scholars engaged in more empirically oriented research were encouraged to reflect on the normative and cultural underpinnings of their work and to imagine alternative institutions and practices which could become the vehicle for the norms and values they have observed.

The conferences were held in various Korean sites, ranging from ultra-modern Seoul to ancient Confucian academies. The choice of the conference sites, on the part of the organizers, was quite deliberate. The sites were chosen not only to enable the participants to enjoy the beautiful surroundings afforded by centuries old Confucian academies but also to impart a sense of Confucianism as a living reality and an essential part of the daily lives of ordinary people of Korea. By witnessing the ways in which Confucianism continues to be fully integrated into the lives of otherwise “modern” Koreans,⁴ the participants once again felt the urgent need for articulating concrete institutional means by which to maintain or reform Confucianism for the modern

3 All the essays in this book were presented at these conferences, with the exception of a specially commissioned essay by Wang Juntao.

4 On the process of historical transmission of Confucian values in Korean society, see Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series, 36, 1992). On the continuing relevance of Confucianism in Korea, see Hahm Pyong Choon, *Korean Jurisprudence, Politics, and Culture* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1986).

world. The interest on the part of the “locals” was just as great. The descendants of the illustrious Confucian scholars in whose names the Confucian academies were dedicated were surprised and delighted to see scholars holding an international conference and using the hallowed halls to debate the implications of Confucianism for the modern world. The interdisciplinary dialogues were filmed and broadcast live on the Internet, and participants were occasionally surprised to see themselves on the evening television newscast.⁵

During the proceedings, the papers were submitted to rigorous scrutiny and critical questioning by the participants.⁶ The editors then made certain that the papers were revised for inclusion in this book. The book is divided into three parts that correspond to what we take to be the basic hallmarks of modernity as a social and political system – democracy, capitalism, and the rule of law.⁷ Our contributors offer Confucian perspectives on these themes and attempt to draw political/economic/legal implications for the modern world. The book ends with an epilogue by William Theodore de Bary.

CONFUCIAN PERSPECTIVES ON DEMOCRACY

Modern-day governments, it is commonly argued, must be constituted “by the people.” Whatever the practical arguments for and against democracy,

- 5 Korean participants may have been less surprised, since they are living in a context where academics are given uncommon amounts (by Anglo-American standards) of respect and public attention. The relevance of the value of respect for educated persons – traceable, arguably, to the Confucian value of respect for exemplary persons (or *junzi* 君子) – can also be illustrated by the fact that teachers are given 10% discounts on national airlines for intra-Korea travel (it is interesting to note similar policies in “communist” China, where teachers are given 50% discounts on ferry tickets – e.g., between Hong Kong and Shekou – during summer holidays).
- 6 The critical exchanges were occasionally “formal” by Anglo-American academic standards – for instance, the Korean professors, even the best of friends, referred to each other as “Professor” in both public and private contexts. This did not, however, prevent participants from exchanging critical views. In fact, it can be argued that appropriate decorum may occasionally allow for more productive exchanges than relative informality. If the critic says, “Sam, I object to . . .,” this can be interpreted as a personal attack on Sam and he may be needlessly defensive. But if the critic says, “Professor X, I object to . . .,” this show of respect may allow the recipient to focus on the substance of the criticism without feeling that his or her whole personhood is being targeted for attack.
- 7 This classification of the “basic hallmarks of modernity” is, of course, contestable (for a similar account, see Randall Peerenboom, *China's Long March Toward Rule of Law* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003]). Focusing primarily on the “subjective” components of modernity, Charles Taylor argues that “the affirmation of ordinary life” constitutes part of the modern identity (*Sources of the Self* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989]). From a Confucian perspective, the affirmation of ordinary life has long been a staple of the tradition (see, e.g., *Confucianism and the Family*, eds. Walter H. Slote and George A. DeVos [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998]).

this form of government has emerged as an ineliminable symbol of equal political recognition in modern societies. Even autocratic leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew recognize that democracy is the best form of government and that all modern countries must eventually adopt this political ideal. The history and culture of the East Asian region, however, may seem to hinder this development. Prior to the twentieth century, not a single political regime in this region was democratic. That is, ordinary people did not have a say in choosing their country's most powerful political decision makers by means of competitive elections, and the majority of "citizens" did not have any other mechanisms for participating in the political process. As the first two contributions show, however, this does not mean that political rulers were "authoritarian" despots who could operate without any checks on their power.

Hahm Chaihark, who teaches Korean studies at Yonsei University, argues that the Confucian concept of ritual propriety (*li* 禮) functioned as a public political norm that effectively restrained and disciplined political rulers in premodern East Asia. The Confucian rulers' political legitimacy depended on correctly regulating their conduct according to *li*, and this meant that rulers had to pay the utmost attention to detailed specification and correct observance of ritual propriety. More importantly, the rulers were surrounded by Confucian scholar-officials who were themselves disciplined by *li* and believed that their mission was to discipline the highest political leader of the country according to ritual propriety.

In modern East Asia, many of the idioms and vocabularies for making sense of politics and rendering value judgments are derived from the Confucian tradition. Given that constitutional norms are more likely to be effective if they are grounded in a society's political culture, Hahm argues that these norms must resonate with the idea of *li* in the East Asian context. Thus, the ruler's power could be effectively checked by modern-day Confucians who are socialized into "the role of disciplinarians of political leaders." Confucian political education can be promoted in families, schools, and other settings with the aim of teaching people the importance of effective and regularized restraints on their government.

It would also be in the ruler's interest to be disciplined by *li*, since this could help to secure legitimacy for the government. Here too, we can learn from past practices. In Korea, Chosŏn dynasty rulers were properly disciplined by various mechanisms and by being educated in the art of governance. For example, the king was obliged to listen to policy lectures by Confucian scholars and he was not allowed to hold audience with his ministers unless he was accompanied by two court historians, one of whom recorded all the verbal transactions while the other recorded all physical movements. Hahm argues that "we should retrieve the notion that a ruler can and should be disciplined

by being lectured to all the time, and put under constant surveillance.” The need for disciplining political rulers has certainly not diminished in the modern world, and such Confucian disciplinary mechanisms could arguably be adapted to fit modern governmental structures. This may not make the ruler into a paragon of virtue, but it should at least help to prevent obvious corruption – not to mention other indiscretions in presidential offices.

Jongryn Mo, who teaches international political economy in the Graduate School of International Studies at Yonsei University, draws on the example of the Censorate in Korea to argue that there were effective institutional restraints on the ruler’s power in Confucian political regimes. In the Chosŏn dynasty, the Censorate consisted of three organs that were designed to prevent abuses in the exercise of political and administrative authority. Mo shows that the censors were not only judicial and auditing agents, “but also voices of dissent and opposition, playing the roles of mass media and opposition parties in modern democracies.” Moreover, he argues that the Censorate was well designed for effective horizontal accountability, meaning that Confucian scholar-officials were able to hold agencies of equal power accountable. In effect, the Censorate was a branch of government in a system of checks and balances.

Mo argues for the need to reintroduce elements of the Censorate – such as the practice of appointing censors whose job is to write critical reports on the ruler’s conduct – in contemporary East Asian political systems, especially that of Korea. For one thing, this institution is compatible with Confucian political culture and may resonate with the habits and values of East Asian people. With respect to the contemporary Korean context, the Censorate could also help to increase the quality of governance, given that major political actors and some top political organizations have not completely shed their authoritarian ways.

The weakest link in Chosŏn’s system of accountability, according to Mo, was the absence of vertical accountability. That is, ordinary people had virtually no way to keep political leaders accountable. More generally, the various Chosŏn checks on abuses of power described by Hahm and Mo are fully compatible with what John Rawls terms a “decent, well-ordered society”⁸ – a political regime that satisfies the main requirements of good governance with the exception of democracy. In the East Asian context, this might translate into a constitutional arrangement that provides Confucian *junzi* (君子) (“gentlemen,” or “exemplary persons”) with institutional mechanisms to check the ruler’s power⁹ but without empowering the people with the right to choose their country’s political rulers.

8 See John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

9 For another institutional suggestion along these lines, see Daniel A. Bell, *East Meets West: Human Rights and Democracy in East Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), ch. 5.

In short, Hahm and Mo persuasively argue against the conventional view that Confucianism is an ideology that encourages conformity and submissiveness toward authority. But is there anything specifically Confucian that might also justify democracy in the ordinary sense of “power by the people”? The next two papers turn to this topic.

Wang Juntao’s essay challenges the perception that political dissidents in China favor uprooting their own tradition in favor of wholesale Westernization.¹⁰ Wang, a doctoral candidate in political science at Columbia University, argues that many of the key figures in the various democracy movements in contemporary Chinese history drew inspiration from Confucian values. From the late nineteenth century onward, leading Chinese intellectuals have struggled to promote “minimal” democracy (i.e., free and fair competitive elections to select political leaders) in their country. It turns out that nearly all the important figures in the history of Chinese democracy movements – Kang Youwei, Zhang Jian, Sun Yatsen, Liang Qichao, Zhang Junmai, Wang Xizhe, and Chen Ziming – tried to revive Confucianism in order to support democratization. Several had received a traditional Confucian education and they argued that democratic institutions such as parliamentary systems, elections, and equal rights are natural extensions of Confucianism. For example, Sun Yatsen, the founding father of the Republic of China, said:

Our three-*min* (三民) principles [nationalism, citizen rights, and the welfare of human beings] originate from Mencius and are based on Cheng Yichuan [a Song dynasty Confucian]. Mencius is really the ancestor of our democratic ideas. . . . The three-*min* principles are a completion of the development of those three thousand years of Chinese ideas about how to govern and maintain a peaceful world.

Others admitted the existence of some weaknesses in Confucianism that blocked China’s march toward democracy but added that Confucianism can be reinterpreted to make it consistent with democracy. This project was successfully carried out in the case of Catholicism – Wang reminds us of Samuel Huntington’s argument that Catholicism was transformed from an important obstacle to democratization into one of the major ideological factors underpinning the “third wave” of democratization in the world – and Confucianism may hold similar potential.

The political importance of Wang’s argument is that democracy may be easier to implement in the Chinese context if it can be shown that it need

¹⁰ Wang Juntao’s personal history is sufficient to cast doubt on this claim. He is a long-time democratic activist who was labeled (by the Chinese government) one of the two “black hands behind the scenes” of the May/June 1989 Tiananmen democracy movement. Arrested after the June 4, 1989, massacre, Wang spent five years in jail before being released to the United States on medical parole.

not conflict with traditional political culture. As Wang puts it, “If Confucianism is consistent with democracy, the traditional culture may be used as a means of promoting democratization in East Asia. At the very least, the political transition will be smoother and easier, with lower costs, since there will be less cultural resistance.”

Chang Yun-Shik’s essay shows that Confucian values do not merely have the *potential* to support democracy. In the Korean context, Confucianism *in fact* helped to bring about a transition to a democratic form of government. Chang, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of British Columbia, focuses on the ethic of mutual help. This communal ethic has long been embedded in rural farming communities, but it was reinforced and modified by the importation of Confucian values from China. Koreans incorporated the idea of the community compact articulated by the great twelfth-century Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi. Eventually, the community compact – self-regulating local communities under the leadership of an educated moral elite – became the norm in rural farming communities.

Over the last century, social bonds of mutual obligation and trust spread from rural to urban settings. In contemporary Korea, kinship ties continue to play an important role by linking clan members residing in the city to those remaining in the same surname village (*tongjok maül*).¹¹ Moreover, cities provided people with new opportunities to meet and interact, and the ethic of mutual help came to underpin personal relationships beyond the confines of neighborhood and kinship organizations – in schools, workplaces, training centers, churches, and prisons.

Chang argues that this ethic initially proved to be inimical to democracy. Democratic constitutional forms imposed by Western occupying forces were molded by traditional person-oriented norms, with each president fortifying his position by staffing governmental offices from the personal circles of close kin members, friends, and acquaintances who pledged personal loyalty to him. This led to “administrative despotism,” corruption, the decline of party politics, and other ills associated with authoritarian government.

However, this same ethic of mutual help also informed the workings of opposition social forces in Korea. Pro-democracy students and dissident church leaders led the struggle for democracy, and the student-church nexus was molded by the ethic of mutual help. For example, groups of students from the same high school or hometown or church formed “study circles”

11 Project participants benefited from this cultural phenomenon. Lew Seok-Choon, one of the project organizers, has extensive networks in his ancestral home of Andong, Korea. Due to these networks, local help could be mobilized to organize enjoyable and affordable social and academic events for visitors in Andong. This region is also renowned for its commitment to Confucianism.