Introduction

In this work of historical sociology, I explore various Asian social and cultural responses – actual and potential – to the unsustainable nature of global modernity as we have known it. While the period of this study covers the last hundred years or so, I range back in time to better understand these responses in our present moment that is characterized by three global changes: (1) the rise of non-Western powers; (2) the loss of authoritative sources of transcendence (e.g., Marxism or religion); and (3) the looming crisis of planetary sustainability.

I believe that these changes require us to revisit the paradigm of historical sociology deriving from the nineteenth century which essentially seeks to explain the rise of the West. This narrative was most sharply and exhaustively theorized by Max Weber (1864–1920), a scholar for whose work I have the greatest respect. Weber believed that it was only in the West that knowledge came to have "universal significance and validity." The overarching theme of Weber's historical sociology was to trace the long history of the rationalizing process which culminated in modern Western civilization. Rationalization, by which he meant world mastery by calculability and prediction, was made possible by the process of 'disenchantment' whereby religious and irrational knowledge came to be replaced by science and technological knowledge. Yet, this very process was itself germinated by certain forms of religious knowledge, ethics and disciplines – namely, Protestantism.[1]

There has also been a great deal of critical work directed at this literature since, perhaps, the writings of Oswald Spengler at the time of World War I, followed by the de-colonizing nationalist historians of the mid-twentieth century and, more recently, a school of economic historians who argue that Asia, particularly East Asia, was just as highly developed

[1] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Trans. Talcott Parsons with introduction by Anthony Giddens (London: Routledge, 1992). See in particular the author's introduction, pp. xxviii–xlii.

as the West and witnessed proto-industrialization (or the 'industrious' revolution) right up to the early nineteenth century.

While not unsympathetic to these critics, I have a different goal. Rather than criticize Weber and his colleagues for their empirical lacunae and biases, I wish to stand the Weberian tradition on its head; that is, to trans-value or re-evaluate it by a different standard. I have no major quarrel with Weber in his assessment of Protestantism as *a* key to the emergence of the disciplines of the modern West, nor do I radically disagree with his thesis that neither the 'religion of China' nor the 'religion of India' had the capacity by themselves to bring about the modern revolution.[2] Rather I want to shift the paradigm to suggest that the cultural and subjective conditions needed for the modern revolution are no longer necessary. They have resulted in human *overreach* in the conquest by man of nature, and we are confronted today with the crisis of sustainability whereby a large proportion of living beings will not be able to survive the combined effects of climate change.

If so, might it not be time for us to revisit the alternative traditions from China and India, many strains of which have adapted to the unceasing circulations of modernity, to examine whether they allow a more viable cosmological foundation for sustainability? To be sure, the cultures of these societies have many strains that are abhorrent to modern sensibilities and other strains that have adapted all too well to the desires for human overreach, nationalism and profit maximization. But for many, the older cosmologies – or parts of them – are still relevant and are particularly important for the discipline of self-formation or self-cultivation and the methodologies of linking the self to locality, community, environment and the universal. These older modes of self-formation are important to my understanding of the responses to the crisis in Asia.

In his late writings, Michel Foucault examined classical Roman biographies to probe how individual subjects came to be formed not only through relationships of power and knowledge (or power/knowledge) but also co-constituted themselves through intentional practices as ethical subjects.[3] The history of Asia is crowded with competing theories and practices of cultivating the ethical and disciplined self. For instance, the great sixteenth-century Confucian philosopher and statesman, Wang Yangming, developed a distinct philosophy of self-cultivation as a guide

[2] For a reinforcement and development of the Weberian argument, see Philip S. Gorski, *The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Rise of the State in Early Modern Europe* (University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[3] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. III: *The Care of the Self*, Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

to a perfect moral life that departed significantly from earlier Chinese ideas and practices. For him the human mind already possesses the moral principle of Heaven, but it is obscured by selfish desires which can be overcome not by scholarly investigation of the prevailing Confucian paradigm of the 'principle of things', but through rectification of thought and moral action.[4] Wang's ideas and his school of self-cultivation became widely popular among many communities and groups across East Asia, including the Japanese samurai.

Two master concepts pervade the study: circulation and transcendence. Analytically central to my project, both are highly important but neglected phenomena and categories in the field of historical inquiry. What I call 'circulatory histories' is, to some extent, gaining acceptance and there is now an enormous quantity of historical data on transnational and trans-local flows. However, the conceptualization and larger implications of foregrounding circulatory histories over linear and bounded national or civilizational histories are yet to be elaborated, and my early chapters represent a preliminary effort in this direction. If circulatory history may be more acceptable to historians, the idea of transcendence is a definite turn-off for most social scientists. Yet, it is not difficult to show that many important and eventful changes in world history have in one way or another been tied to transcendent sources of imagination, inspiration, commitment and resolve, even though these qualities have hardly been sufficient in themselves as explanations unless they are grasped in relation to societal structures and environmental conditions.

Circulatory histories and transcendence

Given the importance of the concept of transcendence in my study, I will discuss it in greater depth in this introduction. In the first place, I distinguish the different meanings of transcendence in the social scientific literature and clarify my usage of it. Second, I briefly introduce my notion of dialogical transcendence, and, finally, I touch on the ways I think of the relations between circulatory histories and transcendence.

Academic theories of transcendence have been most developed by the tradition of historical sociology known as theory of Axial Age civilizations. I draw upon this school of thought but also take their ideas as a significant

[4] P. J. Ivanhoe, *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mengzi and Wang Yangming* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002), pp. 96–8. See also the work of Judith Farquhar and Zhang Qicheng, *Ten Thousand Things: Nurturing Life in Contemporary Beijing* (New York: Zone Books, 2012), for the recent revival of everyday practices of nurturing forms of life that reach back to the Chinese classics.

point of departure for my own conception. Their ideas are derived from the insights of Karl Jaspers and were developed most famously by S. M. Eisenstadt, Benjamin Schwartz and Robert Bellah. The Axial Age refers to the sixth century BCE when revolutionary developments in society, philosophy and religion occurred across the Eurasian axis of China, India, the Middle East and Greece. Philosophers, prophets and what we would today call religious thinkers pursued the quest for human meaning and effected world-transforming changes by appealing to transcendent sources beyond the known world and magical explanations.[5]

There are several ways in which transcendence is understood even by Axial Age theorists. At a most basic level it refers to transcending the here and now of the world. This going beyond typically embeds a *critique* of existing conditions and posits a non-worldly power and vision to morally authorize an alternative to the existing arrangements and structure of power. In other words, transcendence is a source of non-worldly *moral authority* that can speak back to power. Moreover, this transcendence does not simply imply a temporal transcendence from the present but also its messengers or prophets often claim a *universal* applicability. Finally, *reflexivity*, rational knowledge and a synoptic view of the world are seen by many to be a product of the Axial Age. The philosopher Jurgen Habermas makes the most far-reaching claims for this breakthrough.

> The Axial Age, captured by the First Commandment, is emancipation from the chain of kinship and arbitrariness from mythic powers. Axial Age religions broke open the chasm between deep and surface structure, between essence and appearance, which first conferred the freedom of reflection and power to distance oneself from the giddy multiplicity of immediacy. For these concepts of the absolute or the unconditioned inaugurate the distinction between logical and empirical relations, validity and genesis, truth and health, guilt and causality, law and violence, and so forth.[6]

Habermas may be rather rashly identifying the unconditioned with the absolute since transcendence as a concept does not necessarily involve the idea of God or gods. Axial Age philosophies such as Confucianism kept the realm of gods quite separate from worldly changes, although an

[5] Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953); Shmuel Eisenstadt, Ed., *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986).

[6] Jurgen Habermas, *Time of Transitions*, Ed. and Trans. Ciaran Cronin and Max Pensky (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), p. 160. According to Bellah, "Without capacity for symbolic transcendence for seeing the realm of daily life in terms of a realm beyond it, without the capacity of 'beyonding' . . . one would be trapped in a world of what has been called dreadful immanence," Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 9.

impersonal moral order of Heaven was certainly relevant to it. The Buddha was still more skeptical and denied any form of transcendent Being, even though the ultimate truth and morality could be achieved from closeness to the state of pure nothingness, or Nirvana. A certain measure or type of transcendence is often necessary as a foundation of ideals and values, but the radical transcendence of the Abrahamic religions of an absolute and omnipotent God – or what A. N. Whitehead called "an all-powerful imperial ruler or an unmoved mover" – is by no means the only expression of transcendence.[7]

The concept of transcendence that I deploy analytically in the book does not refer to an ontological status in itself and, although it is subjective, it is better thought of as occupying a meta-epistemic locus. In other words, it is not about how we know but about a *way* of knowing and as such is structured by worldly conditions. After long years of searching for an adequate conceptualization of this category, I ran into Georg Simmel's discussion of religion, which has been most helpful. Simmel views religion like art, as something that bridges the gap between the subjective and the objective. To be sure, I distinguish between transcendent and immanent expressions of religion, but my use of transcendence fits his description of religion as the objectification of human yearning – a metaphysical dimension of humans – by means of human interaction. Note that Simmel insists this dimension has little to do with whether or not the transcendent is out there, but, rather, it is an aspect of human subjectivity.[8]

Simmel asks whether this metaphysical yearning "once fulfilled by the idea of transcendence, and now ... paralyzed by the withdrawal of the content of faith and as if cut off from the path to its own life" can survive in a secular age. Can its lofty meaning be found in the depths of life itself?[9] I try to show that in a transfigured way, this yearning – or calling – can and needs to survive, although there are severe challenges. Indeed, Simmel suggests this survival is part of what it means to be human – at least for humans who are 'religiously musical', the phrase that Weber used to describe Simmel himself. Although I am not sure what Simmel means by the person of an 'erotic nature', his general meaning is abundantly clear; "[J]ust as an erotic person is always erotic in nature, so too is a religious person always religious, whether or not he believes in God."[10]

[7] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, Ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), p. 275.
[8] Georg Simmel, *Essays on Religion*, Ed. Horst Jürgen Helle in collaboration with Ludwig Nieder (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), ch. 1.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 9. [10] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

To sum up, by *transcendent* I mean *a way of human knowing* based upon an inscrutable yearning or calling with several attributes that coexist in varying degrees. It is a critique of existing conditions that draws on a non-worldly moral authority. This authority is frequently justified by a reflexive and holistic worldview involving rational, mystical and practical knowledge and behavior designed to affect and often change the self and the world. A reader of the manuscript of this book was puzzled as to why I considered Marxism (which is not a religion) to be transcendent and Shinto (a religion) not to be so. To the extent that Marxist and Shinto ideals or utopian goals can effectively appeal to a source of universal authority beyond the existing structure of power, these ideals remain transcendent. When this source of authority is appropriated by worldly powers and rendered inaccessible to others, it can no longer be said to be truly transcendent. The history of the world may, from one perspective, be seen as the recurrent capture and institutionalization of transcendent authority. Historically, however, it has reappeared as the source of renewal though sometimes accompanied by devastating violence when its agents are convinced of the absolute truth of the transcendent vision. The task of this work is to see if it still has the capacity for renewal in our time and whether it can do so without the violence of absolute conviction.

Historically, a less radical, 'dialogical transcendence' has pervaded most Asian societies. The ultimate truths and ethics of these traditions to which the *virtuosos* – who are not necessarily the elite – have special access through their knowledge and cultivation of the practices of the mind and body, are open to most people with the material, social and spiritual capacities to access these truths. Despite the harsh forms of discrimination levied against them, even the Untouchables in Indian society, like slaves in other societies, could develop and access forms of transcendence drawn from but also opposed to the wider cosmology that oppressed them. This kind of transcendence is *dialogical* insofar as it permits coexistence of different levels and expressions of truth. As such, it is to be distinguished from the Hegelian idea of the dialectic where one of the two terms negates and supersedes the other. This coexistence took place by debate and disputation, through mutual disregard, and more often by covert circulatory practices of absorption or unacknowledged 'borrowings' and hierarchical encompassment. Disciplinary practices of self-cultivation and self-formation that sought to link the self, and/or the community or locality to the transcendent ideals did not typically or historically eliminate other groups or immanent expressions of religion based on doctrine, although there were certainly historical cases in which it did occur.

The relationship between circulatory history and transcendent authority is a fundamental historical problem I probe in this work. As we have noted, transcendent movements are also historically prone to become congealed or institutionalized in orthodoxy or high Culture – such as Christianity, Hinduism, state Marxism, modernization theory, etc. – until challenged once again often from the *locus* of transcendence. In its crystallization as worldly power, institutionalized transcendence serves to discipline unruly and disruptive forces. Analytically, the relationship has been a necessary one for societies to organize, order or control the unpiloted flows and circulations of events and processes. But that ordering is historically variable in different locations and times. The nature or kinds of transcendence that I have distinguished above – most broadly between radical and dialogical transcendence – can, under certain circumstances, make an important difference to the kind of society that emerges.

The historical argument

The principal historical argument of this book is that the dynamic between circulatory history and institutionalized transcendence becomes radically transformed under the conditions of the capitalism and the nation-state that it has itself fostered. I focus on the distinctive ways in which doctrine, or *doxa*, intertwines with the material and ideological forces of change. I synthesize the literature that suggests to me that competitive nationalism in the early modern West developed in relation to the 'confessional nationalism' of the 'chosen people' during the religious wars of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Thus, the first phase of modernity is not the story of secular toleration brought about by the commercial expansion, the Renaissance or even the Enlightenment. Rather it is the sharpening of certain forms of radical transcendence that contribute in particular to confessional nationalism, disciplinary revolutions, and social and political mobilization. To be sure, over time, the development of capitalism, industrialization and the force of Enlightenment ideas transform confessional nationalisms into secular expressions of nationalism in the disenchanted polity.

The early modern period is simultaneously the period when expanding and accelerating circulations bring parts of the world closer to each other through exchange of knowledge, technologies and ideas, and the period when Western Europe is able to dominate or control the emergent global networks of exchange. It is also the period when the circulatory/transcendence dynamic in Western Europe departs significantly from much of the rest of the Eurasian and especially the non-Abrahamic world – until the rest of the world begins to adopt and adapt that relationship from the

late nineteenth century. The circulation of power-promising confessionalist ideas in the nineteenth century affected many Asian intellectuals and leaders who sought to convert their less radically transcendent and exclusivist traditions. This was the case among Hindu groups in India, Shinto sectarians in Japan, Buddhists in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, Taiping Christianity and the anti-Christian Boxers, and other popular groups in China. To be sure, each society adapted these ideas to their particular institutions and modes of regulating circulatory ideas. At the same time, many communities and groups continued to pursue modes of life and occupy ecologies that accommodated pluralities, albeit often hierarchically. Dialogical transcendence continued to shape self-formation in Asian societies even as they absorbed new ideas and ideals of the time.

The modern determination to conquer a disenchanted nature and subject the commons – natural resources such as water, air and forests necessary to all life – and, indeed, all beings – to resource mobilization has also advanced in these Asian societies, leading to an unsustainable and dystopian future. Although it is today mostly thought of as a secular ideology, nationalism and the nation-states have in many ways displaced or 'trafficked' the confessionalist forms and ideas of a chosen people that I discuss in the middle chapters of the book. While circulatory forces continue to make nations increasingly interdependent in the contemporary round of globalization, the ideology of national exclusivism continues to hamper efforts to counter global degradation and unsustainability. In this impasse, the environmental movement in parts of the developed world has fashioned important responses to the crisis which is already upon us. At the same time, communities in developing Asia have also begun to reach back into the values and practices of dialogical transcendence to salvage their worlds. Can the ensemble – or perhaps *gamelan* – of these forces attain a momentum that may be able to develop a vision of sustainability as a new transcendence?

In my oral presentation of some of these chapters, I occasionally encountered a fierce resistance to what is seen by some scholars as an essentialization of the differences between the Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic religions. Let me clarify my position at the outset. I believe that there are doctrinal differences between the monotheistic Religions of the Book that are characterized by a powerful dualism of the saved and the damned and an injunction to proselytize (in the later Abrahamic faiths), on the one hand, and, on the other, traditions of transcendence that coexist with polytheistic, pantheistic, panentheistic – where the divine interpenetrates the natural world but is also timeless – traditions through hierarchical modes of accommodation. The effects of these doctrinal

differences should not be overblown because for much of human history there was considerable coexistence of both tendencies in all religions.

There were countertendencies towards radical transcendence and dualism in the non-Abrahamic traditions, albeit in a minor key, while, as we know, many versions of Sufism were accommodative and the very word *Catholicism* – presumably a Protestant nomination – came to mean undiscriminating acceptance or practical absorption of paganism. Of course, there were powerful episodes of confessional differentiation and intolerance as during the *jihads* and Crusades of the first half of the second millennium or the later religious wars in Europe.[11] It was when a mode of community-formation that I have called confessional nationalism became suitable for the competitive pursuit of global resources that doctrinal differences became salient. History is the circulatory and dynamic repository of live possibilities for future actions. When and how some currents become activated lies at the crux of the relationship between ideas and other historical forces.

The confessionalization of religion was not the only way in which religious circulations in the nineteenth century affected the world. The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modes of secularization in several Western countries also generated the modern concept of 'spirituality' freed from institutional control by clergies – for example, among the Theosophists or Unitarian Universalists – that began a new dialogue with the syncretic or accommodationist religious traditions of Asia. In many ways, it is this hybrid product of circulation that represents the more transgressive and even challenging dimension of transcendence in contemporary Asia. Beginning with M. K. Gandhi's exemplary challenge to the Leviathan of modernity and the Gandhian environmental movement in India, the Buddhist environmental and activist forest monk movements in Thailand and Southeast Asia, and the Chinese Buddhist groups led by the nun Ciji, many religious, spiritual and inspired secular movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have emerged in Asia to critique, oppose or alleviate the devastation being perpetrated on the planet by the combined assault of capitalism and nationalism.

I try to assess the role and – to a limited extent – the impact of these religious and secular civil-society movements upon contemporary Asian societies. The nature and rate of economic, population and urban growth in India and China in particular, which continue the model set out by the West two centuries ago, will almost certainly cause desolation on the

[11] For the importance of the ideology of the *Reconquista* in Andalusia as the crucible of the Crusades, see Roberto Marin-Guzman, "Crusade in al-Andalus: The Eleventh Century Formation of the *Reconquista* as an deology," *Islamic Studies*, *31*(3) (1992): 287–318.

planet. While both societies are making laudable environmental efforts, their impact on relieving the wreckage being produced by their current models is quite inadequate. A global effort with justifiable sacrifices on all sides is the urgent call of the day. At the same time, both societies will have to make special efforts. They can still look to their local and indigenous traditions, which, when re-energized by circulatory ideas and practices of our time, can and have begun to address the problems more dramatically. Of course, finding the cultural and intellectual resources in the tradition scarcely means that people or communities pursue the ideal practices in reality. As Mark Elvin has pointed out, late imperial China witnessed almost the entire spectrum of attitudes towards nature from undertaking large-scale engineering schemes on land and water to reverential approaches to an anthropocosmic order where cosmic energy flows (*qi*) unified humans, nature and Heaven.[12]

The goal of this work is to identify traditions in Asia that have been consonant with global imperatives in the Anthropocene – when humans have begun to significantly affect nature and the environment – not only by revealing different attitudes and ideals regarding nature (and other subjugated entities) but also by showing us different methods and techniques of self-formation that can link the personal to the social, natural and the universal to counter the consumerism and nationalism of our times. As in earlier times, these modes and 'techniques of the self' will inspire only a minority, but, through their leadership, this minority can develop the capacity to mobilize around policymaking and questions of state sovereignty in the way that the Green parties have sought to do in Europe and elsewhere.

This work is also a quest for answers to a personal question, which, it turns out, is close to Simmel's question. What causes certain people – often at different stages in their lives – to undertake altruistic, if not saintly, activity, whether through philanthropy, social work, NGO activism or political resolve? The 'altruism gene' is not relevant to my question because it has long been established that the epigenetic cultural conditions may allow it to be expressed in many ways or not at all. Religious transcendence, which motivates people in a great variety of ways, many of which are unsuited to our contemporary concerns, has, historically, been an obvious source of such commitment and empathy. It is affiliated with a host of related concepts: resolve, sacrifice, suffering, compassion, faith, love and selflessness. In the absence of a religious culture with the ability to sustain such commitment when the world is in urgent need of *physical*

[12] Mark Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).