

国际儒学论坛·2016



亚洲价值 东方智慧

亚洲文明交流互鉴北京国际学术研讨会论文集

ASIAN VALUES ORIENTAL WISDOM

Proceedings of Exchanges and Mutual Learning among Asian
Civilizations: Beijing International Symposium

国际儒学联合会 编

滕文生 主编



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Confucian Values in the Asian Future

by [Name]

Confucianism Civilization

The concept of Confucianism, a traditional Chinese ethical and political philosophy, has long been a subject of scholarly interest and debate. In the context of the Asian future, Confucianism is often discussed in terms of its potential to influence modern societies. This article explores the role of Confucianism in the Asian future, focusing on its impact on the development of the region's culture, politics, and economy.

Confucianism is a complex and multifaceted philosophy that has shaped the Asian continent for centuries. Its core values, such as filial piety, respect for authority, and the emphasis on education, have been integral to the region's cultural and social fabric. In the context of the Asian future, Confucianism is often seen as a source of inspiration for leaders and citizens alike. Its emphasis on harmony and social order is particularly relevant in a world characterized by rapid technological change and global interconnectedness.

While the Asian future is a complex and uncertain prospect, the influence of Confucianism is likely to be significant. As the region continues to develop and integrate into the global economy, the values and principles of Confucianism may provide a guiding light for a more harmonious and prosperous future.

Confucian Values in the Asian Future

[Australia] Reg Little

[Centre for East West Economic and Cultural Studies, Bond University, Australia]

I. A Confucian Global Community

Any claim of an emerging Confucian global community cannot but give rise initially to much misunderstanding and heated protest. The only people accustomed to such claims, who are very jealous of their presumed monopoly, are the English speaking Anglo Americans who make frequent statements on behalf of the “international community”. It makes limited sense, however, to talk of “Confucian Values in the Asian Future” without recognizing both the role of Confucian values in the global future and the diverse role of Confucian values in the Asian past and present.

In contrast to a recent Anglo American global order, the emergence of what might be called a Confucian global order has been characterized by discretion, humility and a variety of soft, yielding and seductive strategies. In one sense, although shaped by China today, these are perhaps most easily understood by those not of Asian origin, by examining the way in which Japan recovered and overtook American economic strength following its defeat and occupation in 1945. In a most disciplined and focused manner it served its conqueror with the supply of inexpensive, high quality goods and services. In this manner, it built dependency and ultimately forms of vulnerability.

Others in Asia drew on the same strategic wisdom and followed Japan. Of course, this wisdom derives from the Confucian tradition. Inevitably,

China, after consolidating its revolution, applied it in a manner that continues to transform global order in ways that remain poorly understood.

Nevertheless, by realistic measures, China is already the world's largest economy, has the largest foreign exchange and precious metal reserves, dwarfs other nations in highly educated human resources, and has the most active and influential diplomatic initiatives. While these initiatives are played down they are already posing major questions about the continuing viability of the post 1945 international institutions, such as the United Nations, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization.

It is too early to determine the likely character of a future Confucian Global Order, but it is clear that Chinese initiatives under the heading of "One Belt One Road" (OBOR), which is often associated with an evolving Asian Economic Union, is beginning to suggest that this type of order could marginalize the English speaking, maritime powers (United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia), which have long assumed the right to speak for the "international community".

OBOR is unique as a global economic integration plan, with almost \$1 trillion in future investments already announced. In June 2015, the China Development Bank announced the foundation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank with over 50 members and in June 2016 the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, is likely to bring together China, India, Pakistan, Russia, Iran and others. The focus is on visionary, constructive and cooperative activity.

It is obvious that the powers brought together in this manner will not see themselves as constructing a Confucian global order. It is, however, equally obvious that the emerging order has been shaped by a Confucian genius that exercises influence in a variety of ways beyond the capacity of other involved states.

Equally, China alone is likely to have the highly educated human resources that can involve themselves productively and persuasively across an area of such cultural diversity. Just as the English language and related culture has been a pervasive and definitive global influence over the past several centuries, so Chinese language and culture is likely to become central to most developments and to be critical in exercising influence when critical decisions are being formulated to determine future directions.

It also needs to be recognized that this type of new and unfamiliar global structure may emerge much more abruptly than presently seems likely.

In acting out and continuing to enjoy their past authority and privileges, the English speaking powers have used short term strategies. These have greatly weakened their economic resources, depleted their financial reserves, neglected their educational and technological needs and disciplines and dumbed down their political leaders.

As a consequence, neither of the two major Anglo American powers, America and Britain, show any evidence of understanding their dilemmas, declining power or disintegrating coherence. In fact, one might say that both are increasingly dependent on Chinese tolerance and support to continue their past practices. This makes sense as a means to keep the global system functioning. Moreover, neither of these powers seems capable of any type of recovery and both only become weaker with time. Indeed, one prominent American commentator, Paul Craig Roberts who held a senior position in the Treasury under President Ronald Reagan recently described America as a “third world basket case”.

There is another dimension to a Confucian global order. The nations of East Asia (Japan, Korea and Vietnam) has been deeply shaped as Confucian societies throughout their history and the nations of South East Asia have been discreetly guided by Confucian Chinese minorities to assume a variety of critical Confucian qualities. One might say that East and South East Asia, a region of over two billion people, is already a Confucian regional order where it is easy to overlook its Confucian character. At the same time, the peoples of South, Central and West Asia are distant from Confucian Asia.

If one puts together Confucian Asia and the Eurasia Economic Union, America and Europe shrink into insignificance as peripheral in an emerging Confucian global order. America and Europe can be left outside and more or less allowed to go their own way as long as they behave or they can be welcomed into the Confucian global order. They are quickly losing their capacity to exercise serious influence and are becoming supplicants and dependents.

In this emerging order, there can be little question about the central role of Confucian classics, values and thought if there is any desire to understand and influence the character of the people who are positioned to shape the way the global community evolves into the 21st Century. Of course, amongst many Chinese there is as much conscious awareness of Confucianism as there is of Christianity amongst many in the West. There is, nevertheless, a

profound knowledge and growing and deepening interest amongst those who have a sense of and carry responsibility for the future of China and the legacy of its past.

The immediate challenge ahead for all people involves a complex process of judgement and choice. This will demand a mature evaluation of the legacies of the Anglo American global order and decisions about which need to be retained and which need to be reformed or rejected. None of this will be simple, straightforward or quick but it will consume the energies of people everywhere who wish to optimize their future well-being.

In this process, Confucian values will play a central role both in the Asian future and in the global future. As already suggested, the history of East Asian peoples ensures that they have already shared, understood and enjoyed most of the qualities of Confucian values and the population mix of South East Asian peoples ensure that they have already accommodated, shared, understood and enjoyed many of the qualities of Confucian values. However, peoples from elsewhere in Asia who have had little exposure to the forms taken by Confucian values and influence may find themselves sharing challenges with peoples from other regions of the world, although some Muslim, Buddhist and other communities in South East Asia may have some useful experience to share.

A major challenge to this process of change may, nevertheless, derive from the efforts many peoples have made to adjust their local traditions to the imperatives imposed by an English speaking Anglo American global order. This past may for some time seem to offer the most convenient way to bring people together for the future. Even so, projects like OBOR will soon engage large numbers of diverse peoples in activities that highlight the benefits of mastering Confucian values in working to shape both Asian and other futures.

II. Confucian Civilization

The distinctive qualities of Confucian values and civilization present almost all people shaped in any depth by Western values with various types of almost insurmountable challenges. There are simply an innumerable variety of areas where fundamental Western certainties are defied by Confucian

thoughts, histories, practices, subtleties and insights.

The abstract, rational, theoretical and faith based character of Western thought from at least the time of the Greek philosopher Plato is very different from the holistic, intuitive, reflective and practical thought that derives from the Chinese classics. This makes it almost impossible to translate between Chinese and Western and many other languages. The cultural and related historical experience associated with each word is simply too different. It then becomes most difficult to explore these issues of contrasting language and culture, unless all parties have a real depth of experience of the diverse alternatives under discussion.

In Asia, as Muslims share the Abrahamaic tradition and Greek influence with both Christians and Jews they seem likely to encounter similar difficulties. In contrast, the Shinto people of Japan have long embraced the various learnings of Chinese classics and history and effectively made them their own. Indonesia, although predominantly Muslim also has a Hindu tradition and accommodates many and distinct traditions, including Confucian, in a harmonious community. In other words, the great diversity of traditional wisdoms in Asia ensure that the region is not readily addressed in general terms.

The Confucian cultivation of rites or ritual forms of behaviour complicates matters further. This often misleads others about the extremely sophisticated quality of thought that has been shaped from an early age by classics as diverse, but mutually reinforcing, as the *Lunyu*, the *Daodejing* and the *Yijing*. The discretion and courtesy that is expressed in ritualised or formalized behaviour often totally misleads the inexperienced into assuming a lack of reflective thought, when the contrary is true. The contrast with some Western behaviour of being excessively explicit and predictable in thought is stark.

The nature of China's historical experience can also be a source of incomprehension among those unfamiliar with its profound influence on Chinese character. In the contemporary world, most people are in thrall to the seemingly overwhelming nature of Western progress and innovation, but an educated Chinese can readily place such Western convictions in a vast historical panorama and quickly identify various forms of self-delusion.

This capacity is a source of much strategic insight and wit during an End of Empire period. China is the only global political entity that has reinvented itself stronger than ever after numerous End of Empire (or Dynasty)

experiences. Western communities seem to only ever have one imperial experience, which after decline can only be celebrated historically and in memory, whether it is Egypt, Greece, Rome, Britain or America. In contrast, Chinese history is an on-going celebration of an almost cyclical rise and fall of empires, with a continuous written record that becomes a source of understanding and wisdom when addressing contemporary situations. It is difficult to explain the skill and subtlety with which China has accommodated and facilitated the contemporary Anglo American End of Empire, without addressing it in this context.

Of course, China's own history warns that, after the revitalization of a new order, problems emerge inevitably if a new leadership class becomes too confident, assertive and insensitive in exercising its power. Human nature eventually seems to succumb to such temptations. In China's history there has, however, always been a class shaped by its classic wisdom that seems capable, even on occasions under foreign rulers, of regenerating and reinventing the essence of Confucian civilization.

These are unique and unrivalled qualities in the global community and have a value that reaches beyond just China itself. It may be helpful to attempt to outline a few of the qualities that are fundamental and inherent in the tradition but are not necessarily explicitly stated in as many words in the classical Confucian texts.

First, one should note the long ingrained custom of rote learning the Chinese classics from very early so that by the age of five a child can recite the chapters of key classics with pride and confidence. Already by this age, important social disciplines are deeply ingrained, a taste and appetite for learning has been nurtured and a young person has an ever accessible guide to recognising, understanding and managing life's riddles and challenges. Perhaps more importantly this guidance is provided by shaping an inquiring, flexible and reflective mind.

Second, as noted just above, the Chinese classics do not assert rigid formulas but rather encourage the development of minds that are accustomed to study, practice, exploration and humility, all qualities highlighted in the opening lines of the *Lunyu*. In this way the classics nurture a community intellect that is not easily locked into forms of belief that serve hidden interests. Moreover, they have a record of nurturing the world's most remarkable tradition

of administrative excellence, which has been the fundament reason for the rich historical achievements and continuity of Chinese civilization and the contemporary rise of Chinese economic and political power and influence.

Third, early mastery of the Chinese classics, Confucian teachings and their distinctive and ancient language provides lifetime access to records of Chinese history that illuminate the benefits and challenges inherent in the practice of Confucian values.

Fourth, this combination of qualities associated with Confucian values leads to a thought culture free of the dependence on abstractions, rationality, theory and belief that characterizes Western tradition and that can lead to forms of intellectual serfdom before philosophers, priests, intellectuals or even economists in authority. A type of intellectual serfdom to economic theory has shown itself defenceless before the soft and yielding seductions of Asian (Confucian) economic strategy over recent decades.

In a few words, early rote learning of the Confucian classics matures open and exploring minds, nurtures holistic, intuitive, reflective and practical habits of thought and provides an unrivalled body of historical experience to inform and guide administrative decision making in a world of much greater complexity than humans have ever previously experienced. Personal professional progress as a Chinese administrator has to be achieved by impressing a community who largely share such an educational and professional preparation.

As an adult foreigner, it is very difficult to penetrate and begin to comprehend the way Confucianism, Chinese classics, historical records, modern education, government policy, social behaviour and much else all interact and become a powerful influence in transforming today's global community. Without substantial language training, professional engagement with the achievements of Chinese policy, exposure to children engaged in rote learning the classics and an opportunity to learn something of Chinese history, one is unlikely to advance far. Even then there is little to encourage one to venture further as any interlocutor not of Asian background who does not share a similar range of experience and interests will almost certainly be impatient with and critical of one's reflections and conclusions.

In other words, the treasures and secrets of Confucian values and Chinese thought culture are well protected and hidden by the demands they make on the effort, time, determination and persuasiveness of any newcomer

who may be persuaded of their importance. Another major obstacle is the need to work within an environment where a dominant, if declining, imperial culture, which is convinced of its own certainties and is dismissive of claims about any other culture and tradition, has worked aggressively to discourage consideration of rivals. Of course, China itself has recent experience of such dismissive attitudes at the end of the Qing Dynasty in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At that time ruling Manchu aristocrats were slow to understand the importance of studying and mastering the West's new organizational and technological cultures.

Intriguingly, today's Confucian challenges to Western and other cultures are deeper and more demanding than organizational and technological challenges. They involve the deeper qualities of humanity, culture, society and thought. In an important sense, this is already evident but remains largely neglected because of the recent assertive dominance of Western certainties. Accordingly, Asian peoples have often been overwhelmed by these Western assertions and can share Western difficulties in preparing for a future where Confucian values will complete the work of revealing deficiencies in these Western certainties.

It is important to review quickly the qualities that have facilitated the rise of the Western (or Anglo American) peoples but that now leave them uncomprehending before a greater civilizational wisdom, Confucianism. The Greek Plato's focus on transcendental forms as the means for understanding this world has shaped almost all subsequent Western thoughts, including the Roman Church's doctrine and dogma, the European Enlightenment's universal values and even Adam Smith's market forces, which were likened to the invisible hand of God.

As a consequence, the West looks for some form of absolute "truth" while someone in the Confucian tradition will seek the "way", which is never everlasting. The former becomes reliant on abstractions while the latter explores a practical understanding. The former seeks rational structures while the latter knows that organic life can take fluid forms. The former is fond of theories that offer access to the "truth" while the latter knows that the "way" can only be followed with keen and disciplined intuitions. The former is prepared to allow philosophers, priests and economists to dictate where to place one's faith while the latter respects those who are humble about their efforts to study

and explore the “way” in order to guide their family, community or nation.

The early studious habits of the Confucian tradition nurture a capacity to master new material quickly. It was possible to master, manage and manipulate Western thought and behaviour quickly once that became an identified goal. In contrast, the West is still cocooned in the privileges of (waning) imperial power and totally misunderstands the talents nurtured by Confucian values. Consequently, it insists on interpreting early rote learning as a type of brain washing, when in reality early learning of the Confucian classics, the full meaning of which rarely translates well into Western languages, works to create a freedom and rigor of thought that is almost unknown in the Platonic tradition.

The rise and aspirations of a type of Anglo American global order need also to be traced back as far as the English East India Company which attracted finance to mobilize under-employed English youth to travel to distant places and seek their fortunes by various forms of plunder and pillage. It is likely that the sources of this finance were also the continental sources of the finance that enabled Oliver Cromwell to topple the House of Stuart from the British Throne and that facilitated the establishment of the “Private” Bank of England in 1696. This was only “nationalized” in 1947 in what appears to have been a token exercise that changed nothing of substance. In other words, it is hard to dismiss the probability that the rise of the British Empire, largely initiated by the English East India company, was both funded and master-minded by the continental financiers who brought William of Orange to the English throne and who had unique international knowledge of existing trade and commerce and its future potential.

This is a vast subject that cannot be explored further here but, with the Rothschild family’s substantial takeover of much of the English financial economy after the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 and evidence of the private ownership of almost all the West’s Central Banks, it is hard not to conclude that continental financiers have been the master minds behind the rise of the English speaking peoples. Given the present circumstances of the English speaking communities, it then seems to follow that much promoted values and practices associated with democracy and human rights have been used to distract attention from the foundation of Anglo American power, namely discreet and strategic financial powers mostly operating outside formal English language political processes.