

Modern Confucianism and the Concept of “Asian Values”

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Abstract

Through contrastive analysis, the present paper aims to introduce the connections between the now fashionable notion of Asian values and the Modern Confucian discourses. Even though this has often been closely identified with Confucian axiology, this article shows how and why this notion has almost nothing to do with the contemporary stream of the so-called Modern Confucians or their philosophy. However, precisely because of this false identification, and in order to clarify any misunderstandings as to the supposed Confucian roots of this idea, it must be examined in greater detail, and placed in its historical, ideological, and sociological context. Hence, the present paper aims to introduce the difference between Modern Confucian philosophy and the discourse on Asian values, which is often mistakenly comprehended as forming part of Modern Confucianism. Given the prevalence of this confusion, it is important to explain why and in what ways Modern Confucians are, instead, generally critical of the concept of “Asian values”.

Keywords: Modern Confucianism, ideology, Asian values

Izveček

Ta prispevek predstavlja odnos med trenutno zelo modnim pojmom azijskih vrednot na eni in filozofsko strujo modernega konfucijanstva na drugi strani. Četudi se azijske vrednote pogosto enačijo s konfucijansko aksiologijo, članek nazorno utemelji, da ta pojem nima tako rekoč nobene zveze s sodobno strujo modernega konfucijanstva, niti s filozofijo njenih predstavnikov. Vendar je treba prav zaradi napačnega enačenja razjasniti nesporazume glede domnevnih konfucijanskih korenin te ideje. V ta namen moramo koncept azijskih vrednot podrobno raziskati tudi znotraj njegovih zgodovinskih, ideoloških in socioloških kontekstov. Zato je glavni cilj tega prispevka predstavitev oziroma ponaazoritev razlik med filozofijo modernega konfucijanstva in diskurzi azijskih vrednot, ki se pogosto napačno predstavljajo kot konstitutivni del modernega konfucijanstva. Glede na razsežnost problema je pomembno poudariti, da se moderni konfucijanci s to idejo nikakor ne identificirajo, temveč so, prav nasprotno, do nje zelo kritični.

Ključne besede: moderno konfucijanstvo, ideologija, azijske vrednote

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Modern Confucianism and Its Values

The revitalization of the complex traditions of Chinese philosophical thought during the 20th century has assumed increasing relevance and significance in recent decades. In the first half of the 20th century, this tendency could be observed in the works of many of the leading modern Chinese philosophers who were searching for ways to renew the methodological and theoretical aspects of the Chinese tradition, and especially of the pre-modern philosophy that followed the Neo-Confucian revival.

Modern Confucianism as an important philosophical discourse in contemporary China did not emerge only due to the desire for a modern synthesis of the Confucian and Euro-American traditions, but also as a consequence of an axiological crisis in both traditions. The crisis of Confucianism as a leading state doctrine of pre-modern China was part of the much more general crisis of the Chinese state on the threshold of modernity, a crisis due to Chinese technological backwardness, widespread poverty, and the failure of the political system to adapt to the actual conditions of society. The specific circumstances of the 19th and 20th centuries demonstrated that Confucianism, which had functioned as the central state doctrine and ideological basis of traditional Chinese society for two millennia, could no longer serve as an ideational basis for a modern society.

Some of the most prominent Chinese philosophers of the 20th century developed Modern Confucianism, as the discourse, which most clearly expressed the rehabilitation of traditionalism. In addition to the acknowledged precursors of this current, Feng Youlan and Xiong Shili, we should mention in this context Liang Shuming, Zhang Junmai and He Lin. These thinkers belong to the so-called first generation of this stream of thought.¹ The present article focuses upon the work of the 2nd generation, which includes Mou Zongsan, Tang Junyi, Fang Dongmei and Xu Fuguan, and especially upon the ideas of some of the most well-known contemporary proponents of the 3rd and the 4th generations, such as Yu Yingshi and Lee Ming-huei.

We should also bear in mind that the term Confucianism (*ru xue* 儒學) often denotes early Chinese thought in general.² It certainly holds true that the Neo-Con-

1 The categorization into "generations" follows a long tradition in Confucian scholarship, which is ultimately rooted in classical Confucianism.

2 Tu Weiming, a prominent member of the 3rd generation of Modern Confucianism, has described this in the following way: "The scholarly tradition envisioned by Confucius can be traced to the sage-kings of antiquity. Although the earliest dynasty confirmed by archaeology is the Shang dynasty (18th–12th century BCE), the historical period that Confucius claimed as relevant was much earlier. Confucius may have initiated a cultural process known in the West as Confucianism, but he

fucians of the Song and Ming Dynasties, who created the theoretical framework that underpins Modern Confucianism, formally distanced themselves from Daoism, Buddhism, and similar, more mystical and less rational traditions, even going so far as to view the proponents of these systems as their philosophical “enemies”. At the same time, however, one of the greatest theoretical shifts in Neo-Confucian philosophy was due precisely to the integration of many important Daoist and Buddhist concepts and methods into the framework of classical Confucianism. It was the assimilation of those very ideas that orthodox classical Confucian doctrine deemed dangerous, improper, and even “heretical”, which to a great extent defined the reform of classical Confucian thought, which, already at that time, had ossified and become far too formalized. These Buddhist and Daoist impulses saved Confucianism from collapse in the period from the 10th to the 14th centuries and succeeded in transforming the classical state-building doctrine into a system of thought that deserved once again to be called “philosophy”.³ In their attempts to synthesize Euro-American and Chinese philosophies and modernize the Chinese philosophical tradition, many other Modern Confucian thinkers also focused on various traditional discourses which do not belong to the framework

and those who followed him considered themselves part of a tradition, later identified by Chinese historians as the *rujia*, ‘scholarly tradition’, that had its origins two millennia previously, when the legendary sages Yao and Shun created a civilized world through moral persuasion” (Tu 2014, 1). In addition to Tu, many other scholars have noted the broader connotations of the term *ru*. Roger Ames, for example, has shown how this notion refers to a general classical “scholarly tradition” (see Ames 2014, 5). This, of course, does not mean that Daoist and Buddhist texts were included in the Confucian canon, but only confirms how inextricably intertwined these three major idea systems were. In most forms of Confucian state orthodoxy, e.g. the *Shiji* and *Hanshu*, the term *Ru* basically signifies an expert in the Five Classics. In her book on Confucianism and women, Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee also writes: “The concept of *Ru* 儒... denotes the inexact Chinese counterpart of the term Confucianism used by Jesuits in the 18th century... The ambiguity of its semantic origins in ancient, pre-Confucian times obscures the connection between *Ru* as an intellectual discipline and Confucius, as its most prominent spokesperson. Unlike the term Confucianism—its secularized and simplified representation in the West—the complex term *Ru* can only be approximated as the teaching of the sages and the worthies wherein the ethical teaching of Confucius—the Supreme sage and the First teacher—forms a part, but an important part nevertheless.” (Rosenlee 2006, 4)

- 3 It is difficult to say to what extent this process was a conscious one, but the contemporaneous integration and “discharging” of Buddhist and Daoist philosophy certainly constituted a challenge for Neo-Confucian philosophers. By the 10th century, the formalized classical Confucian doctrine was an empty husk, and was studied and mastered only in order to pass the official state examinations, which for the successful candidates (and their clans) opened up access to political power. But because this doctrine was incapable of satisfying the intellectual needs of the educated classes, these classes turned to the study of Daoist and Buddhist philosophies, a tendency which threatened both Confucianism as such, and the entire ideological system on which the traditional state institutions were based. In this sense, the Neo-Confucian reform was absolutely necessary for the preservation of Confucianism, in terms of its function as the main social, ethical and philosophical system of thought in China.

of Confucianism in a narrow sense.⁴ As a final point, we must also take into account the differences between the original Chinese notions and their semantic connotations that originate in the translations of these notions into Indo-European languages. The expression "*ru xue*" is translated as "Confucianism" (also in the term "Modern Confucianism"), and thus automatically connotes Confucius (Kong Fuzi 孔夫子) and the various historical phases of Confucian teachings. But "*ru xue*" actually signifies "the teachings of the scholars", which means that this expression does not a priori exclude any of the major influences on the history of Chinese thought. In fact, what Confucian and Daoist philosophy, as well as sinicized Buddhism all share is this idea of traditional Chinese philosophy as the "teachings of the scholars".

Here, we must stress the fact that Confucian values are multilateral and multifaceted. Although official publications in contemporary China dedicated to promoting new values that define their idea of a modern, harmonious society often indicate Confucius and Confucianism as the source of this concept and the underlying values, a more detailed analysis can quickly show that the modern idea of Asian values has little to do with original Confucianism.

The Political and Ideological Background of "Asian values"

In dealing with Asian modernization, we have often encountered the fashionable catch-phrase of so-called "Asian values". Even though it has often been closely identified with the Confucian tradition (see for example, Fetzer and Soper 2007; Yu 2000; de Bary 1998; Lee Hung-jung 2003), this expression, as we shall show below, has almost nothing to do with the Modern Confucians or their philosophy.

In recent years, the term "Asian values" has represented the key concept of an authoritarian ideology that, in order to contain the presumed threat and risks of "Western" individualism within in their own societies, promoted the "virtues" of Asian communitarianism and rigorous government.

"Asian values" as a doctrine of developmentalism can be understood as the claim that, until prosperity is achieved, democracy remains an "unaffordable luxury". This "Protestant ethic" form of "Asian values" attributes high growth rates to

4 Modern Confucians rarely relied on Daoism, and understandably so, for this current emerged not only in order to preserve cultural identity, but also with the goal of modernizing and "saving" the institutional framework of Chinese society. The anarchic classics of Daoism are eminently unsuited for such goals. That said, several Modern Confucian philosophers have devoted considerable effort to the study and integration of Buddhist thought into their own theories (e.g. Xiong Shili, Liang Shuming and Mou Zongsan).

certain cultural traits. These characteristics include hard work, frugality, discipline, and teamwork. Western democracy hinders rapid development, claim authoritarian rulers in the East Asia and thus must be delayed until substantial development has been achieved (Thompson 2001, 155–6).

It is hardly a coincidence that the concept of Asian values emerged amidst the panorama of new Asian ideologies (especially in Singapore and Malaysia) in the early 1980s, precisely in the period when the (semi-westernized) governments of both countries were confronted for the first time with the phenomena of widespread democratic movements and growing individualism among their citizens. This ideology warns against heedlessly embracing “Western” democracy and a free press, watching foreign TV programs and listening to pop music, in short, all those elements that could lead their countries down the slippery slope of degeneration. In this way, Asian values became the polar opposites to everything that was wrong with the West.

Rising crime and divorce rates—as well as new tastes in music, television, and film—were linked to an electoral swing away from the ruling People’s Action Party (whose vote share fell nearly 20 percent between 1980 and 1991). The importance of maintaining “Asian values” could thus justify both draconian laws regarding personal behavior and the crackdown on political opposition in 1987. In short, the Singaporean state had created an ideology to combat democratic tendencies and individualism despite the country’s advanced stage of economic development (*ibid.*, 157).

After the successful elimination of political opposition by the Malaysian government in the 1980s, Asian values gained importance in that country as well. The then Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamed argued that these values provided the best foundation for official rule, and criticized Western countries for trying to impose an arbitrary version of “democracy” on that country⁵. He also attacked the West for its growing decadence and used that argument in order to promote Asian values as the best alternative to the risks of “Westernization”.

A similar view was taken by government of the P.R. of China. In 1995, Jiang Zemin declared at the United Nations general assembly:

The sacred nature of state sovereignty is inviolable. No state has the right to interfere in the internal affairs of another or force its own will on others. Some large countries frequently use the pretext of “freedom”, “democracy” or “human rights” to encroach upon the sovereignty of other states,

5 Although wide swaths of Malaysian population are Islamic, the concept of Asian values is compatible with this religion, as it mainly refers to principles of behavioral ethics and political ideals.

interfering in their internal affairs, damaging the unity of other countries or the solidarity of their nationalities. This is a major factor behind the lack of peace in the world today. (Jiang Zemin in Moody 1996, 166)

While he did not explicitly refer to the concept of Asian values in this address, his views were supported by the majority of Asian countries and the connection between such highly problematic approaches as "cultural relativism" and Asian cultures as a conceptual unity acquired some institutional corroboration. In fact, even before Jiang's speech, in 1993 a meeting of Asian countries in Bangkok had issued a joint declaration stating that human rights were contingent upon the real culture, history, level of economic development and other similar factors (Moody 1996, 166). Western countries, therefore, had no right to impose their views and consider their own concepts and opinions superior to those of other cultures. This view was expressed most vehemently by the P.R. of China and was accepted by the majority of Asian countries, with the exception of Japan and the Philippines.

In order to better understand the historical and social functions of Asian values, Mark R. Thompson (2001, 158) drew a series of historical comparisons between modern Singapore and Malaysia, and imperial Germany of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He observed many historical parallels and claimed that these similarities were not accidental, for imperial Germany had had a considerable impact on Japanese ideologies in the Meiji era and, through Japan, upon other countries of East and Southeast Asia. Like imperial Germany, Singapore and to a lesser extent Malaysia were also equipped with strong bureaucratic apparatuses that regulated industrial development. But while imperial Germany had had a parliament, parliamentary institutions were purely formal in Singapore and Malaysia and had no significant role in government decision-making.

Modern Confucian Reactions and Some Axiological Clarifications

The concept of Asian Values appeared in the forefront of a broader international exchange thanks to the Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, who was reproached by Lee Ming-huei for behaving like "the press secretary for Confucian culture" (2001, 85). This is quite problematic, of course, and hardly favorable for achieving a broader understanding of the Confucian tradition, given that the concept of Asian values is to a great extent rooted in the ideas of the despotic (i.e. legalist) line of Confucianism.

This line is grounded in the interpretations of Xunzi, the ancient philosopher who represented a sort of bridge between Confucianism and Legalism. His philosophy

served the ideologists of the Han Dynasty as a solid basis for the consolidation of a Confucian ideology that was suited to the needs of the new Han Empire, which had succeeded the huge centralized Qin Empire and needed an ideology that would justify and support a centralized control over the entire state. This ideology therefore comprised numerous despotic elements (e.g., the principle of collective responsibility or the principle of denunciation). This line of Confucianism has also been advocated by the majority of the new Confucian ideologues in the P.R. China. Not surprisingly, Lee Kuan Yew's idea of "Asian values" was very warmly received in mainland China and, in 1994, he was appointed honorary president of the International Confucian Association, in Peking.

We can doubtlessly agree with Lee Ming-huei (2001, 85), who claimed that Confucian culture as understood by Lee Kuan Yew is an anti-liberal, despotic culture in which the community is much more important than the individual. In his opinion, while Lee Kuan Yew's critique of Western societies is reasonable, his image of Confucian society is still too one-sided, even if it is not completely in contradiction with the historical facts. The fact that the Confucian cultural tradition has, over the course of Chinese history, often been linked to monarchic despotism, in no way means that despotism was a Confucian ideal.⁶ When reading the ancient Confucian classics by Lunyu, Mencius or Xunzi, it becomes very clear that original Confucianism implied a tendency to consider the will of the people. This tendency, of course, is not comparable to democracy in the modern sense, but it nevertheless contains ideal foundations that are suitable for the establishment of a democratic order:

Not surprisingly, most Modern Confucians advocate the idea and values of democracy, and Lee Kuan Yew's views on the Confucian tradition did not find all Asian leaders in agreement. For example, the South Korean president Kim Dae Jung and the former president of the Republic of China (Taiwan) both confirmed the connection between the Confucian tradition and democracy. (ibid., 85)

Lee Ming-huei has also criticized the thesis of "Asian values", calling its content "unclear" (ibid., 85). In his view, the evaluation of Confucianism must consider

⁶ The despotic line in Confucianism was established during the Han Dynasty, which had inherited the enormous, centralized, legalist, and despotic Qin state. Because ruling such a state required a centralized doctrine, and because the new rulers could not simply appropriate Legalism, which had represented the central ideology of the defeated Qin empire, the new state doctrine was based upon Dong Zhongshu's reinterpretation of the original Confucian teachings. This reinterpretation was rooted primarily in Xunzi's elaboration of original Confucianism, such that Xunzi appears as the bridge between Confucian and Legalist teachings.

its democratic tendencies, as this is the only way its intellectual heritage, which has preserved its vital force to the present day, can also maintain its significance in future.

The general orientation of the concept of Asian values has also been criticized by Yu Ying-shih in his *Confucianism and China's Encounter with the West in Historical Perspective* (2005). In this essay, he tries to differentiate between the values proposed by advocates of Asian values and those advanced by the Modern Confucians, concluding that the authors of the Declaration advocated an interpretation of the Chinese cultural heritage that implied certain modern Western values, such as science and democracy (Yu 2005, 214). In this context, he also criticizes Huntington's thesis on the "clash of civilizations"⁷:

It is rather unfortunate that Huntington speculates a great deal about the prospect of a clash between Chinese and Western civilizations without a basic historical grasp of the developments of Confucianism in modern and contemporary China. He seems to rely heavily on Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, as the sole authoritative interpreter of Confucianism who, as Havel says, takes great interest in the Confucian tradition only to use it to condemn Western democracy. I do not deny that a deep-seated antagonism does seem to exist between the regime in Peking and the West. However, the source of this antagonism clearly lies elsewhere. It is only fair that Confucian culture be absolved of all blame. (ibid., 215)

Political Confucianism and the Problem of Hierarchy

In their empirical study on the influence of Confucian values on the views of Taiwanese citizens, S. Fetzner and Christopher J. Soper (2007, 153) found that Confucian values—which they consider to be the core of Asian values—were not in substantial contradiction with the principles of liberal democracy, and that none of its three central values (i.e. loyalty or filial piety, social hierarchy and the idea of social harmony) could be regarded as reducing the support for democracy. They also concluded that many Confucian values could reduce certain "phenomena" associated with Western style democracy and its glorification of individualism. In

7 Here, we should mention two additional aspects of Huntington's theory: "...That the civilizations he referred to, while they represented long-standing cultural traditions, were not relics of the past but were products of modernity that were empowered by their claims on modernity. Second, that to impose the values of the modern West on these societies would not only not work, but also represented a kind of imperialism." (Dirlik 2001, 22)

particular, the Confucian communitarian ethics, which are defined by principles of mediation and the concept of the extended family, could offer new ways of joining people in communities, while the principle of social harmony, which repudiates the one-dimensional glorification of individual rights regardless of their social and cultural context, also appears as a positive factor for coexistence. In this framework, they even found certain positive aspects in the ethic of filial piety, as a way for individuals to transcend their narrow egoistical interests and recognize their responsibilities towards previous generations (Fetzer and Soper 2007, 154). In their view, democracy is by no means incompatible with Confucian values, such that linking or creating a synthesis of the two discourses is unnecessary. They concluded their study with the declared hope that a growing percentage within the overall Asian population would become the driving force in reviving those traditional elements which are favorable to democratic development and social progress.

However, in his critique of deBary's book, *Asian Values and Human Rights: A Confucian Communitarian Perspective*, Anthony C. Yu offers a decisive rebuttal of such views:

Against this line of argument, the following points may be made: First, among contemporary sinologists outside China, Confucian revivalists such as Wang Gungwu, Tu Wei-ming, Julia Ching, Irene Bloom, and de Bary himself, have repeatedly emphasized the reciprocity of obligations expected of differentiated human relations (renlun) as a less stridently individualistic and more desirable (because more communitarian) precursor of the notion of rights. What they consistently fail to acknowledge is the asymmetry of these "principles of relations (lunli, the literal Chinese translation of 'ethics') and the resulting inequality of obligations presumed in the hierarchical conception of relations and obligations. (ibid., 300)

Here, we must point out that hierarchy, which is doubtless paramount in the Confucian concept of social structure, is clearly based on inequality. However, parliamentary democracy is also based upon a hierarchical decision-making process and system, while the basic premise of the Confucian model of hierarchy can instead be identified in the principle of a representation that is reciprocal, correlative, and complementary. There is thus mutual conditioning and co-dependence of both levels within the hierarchic structure, which requires that the superior entity always recognize its responsibility to represent the interests of its subordinates, i.e. of the hierarchically inferior entity. This responsibility towards subordinates is clearly manifested in the canonical Confucian virtue of justice (*yi*), which constitutes the elementary principle of governance in original Confucianism:

長幼之節，不可廢也；君臣之義，如之何其廢之？欲潔其身，而亂大倫。君子之仕也，行其義也。人倫明於上，小民親於下。

If the relations between old and young may not be neglected, why should the duties that should be observed between sovereign and minister be neglected? If one wishes to maintain personal purity, how can he permit human relations to come to confusion? A nobleman takes office, and performs the righteous duties belonging to that office. (Confucius 2012a, Wei zi 7)

Of the classical Confucians, Mencius was the one who always stressed the responsibility of the rulers towards their people:

人倫明於上，小民親於下。...父子有親，君臣有義，夫婦有別，長幼有序，朋友有信... 勞之來之，匡之直之，輔之翼之，使自得之，又從而振德之。

When the importance of human relations is clear to superiors, kindly feelings will prevail among the people below (Mencius 2012, *Teng Wen gong* I/3) ... There should be closeness and affection between father and son, justice and righteousness between sovereign and minister, separate functions between husband and wife, proper order between old and young and sincere fidelity between friends... People should be encouraged and led; they should be rectified and made straight; they should be guided, so they can grow wings and become possessors of themselves. On such a basis they can become virtuous. (ibid., I/4)

In traditional Confucianism, the concept of the "Heavenly Mandate" (*tian ming* 天命) represents the highest criteria for the measurement or evaluation of a ruler's suitability⁸:

君子有三畏：畏天命，畏大人，畏聖人之言。

A nobleman is in awe of three phenomena. These are the Heavenly Mandate, great personalities, and the teachings of the sages. (Confucius 2012a, *Ji shi* 8)

Even Xunzi, whose works provided the basis for a new Confucian state doctrine that implied despotic-legalist elements during the Han Dynasty, stressed that a good government should always consider the needs and interests of the people. If

8 A suitable ruler will consider the decrees of the Heavenly Mandate and obey the Mandate; a ruler who ignores it is unsuitable for his position

a ruler did not show proper responsibility towards his subjects, they had a legitimate right to take his power from him.

君者、舟也，庶人者、水也；水則載舟，水則覆舟。此之謂也。故君人者，欲安、則莫若平政愛民矣。

A ruler is like a boat and common people are like water. The boat can be carried by the water, but water can also overturn it. If a ruler wants to rule in peace, the best thing he can do is love his people. (Xunzi 2011, *Wang zhi* 5)

Conclusion: Asian Values as a New Form of “Reversed Orientalism”?

Claiming Confucian roots for the concept of Asian values, as its proponents continue to do, thus appears as both groundless and one dimensional. Indeed, the very foundation of this concept is problematic, for even in the context of its allegedly indigenous culture it appears as a completely artificial construct. As Peter R. Moody Jr. (1996, 166) pointed out, the term Asia denotes a superficial and insufficiently defined geographic notion, given that in the pan-Asian area there exist many different cultures with prevailing values that differ from one another in the same way that specific prevailing values differ within Western axiological systems.

“Traditional” values, which purportedly prevailed before the invasion of Western culture, function as the single point of reference meant to link these values to one another. Of course, this does not reduce the generalization on which this apparently post-colonial ideal construct rests, for the “Confucian tradition”, which is meant to symbolically connect all these different values, is likewise an artificial construct (Hill 2000, 177). It is, in fact, a hybrid model of a “homogeneous” Confucianism that in reality does not exist. Thus, one of the basic characteristics of the concept of Asian values is this function of reproducing the methods of so-called “reversed Orientalism”.

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9 We should also recall that the Confucian tradition—in various forms—only had an influence on the East Asian countries. For example, in India and other South Asian countries it had no influence at all, even before colonialization. It would therefore be more correct to speak of “East Asian values”.

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