

The Global Significance of Local Knowledge: A New Perspective on Confucian Humanism

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Prior to the mid-19th century the impact of the modern West or, to use a Japanese expression, the coming of the "Black Ships," Confucian humanism as inscribed in the Four Books had for centuries provided the core values of self-cultivation, family ethics, social behavior, and political governance in East Asia. The marginalization of Confucian humanism by the Enlightenment mentality of the modern West generated an identity crisis unprecedented in Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese history. The difficulty of finding a proper niche for Confucian studies in modern East Asian studies is a case in point.

Surely, the Enlightenment, as a rationalist humanist cultural movement, profoundly undermined the church's authority over education in European societies, but universities in the modern West have been so intertwined with Christianity that even the most secular of them often have deep religious roots. Christianity as a theological study continues to be a vibrant intellectual discipline in the modern West. In Germany, it is perhaps still the most influential academic subject in the humanities. Enlightenment humanism, originally intended as a radical critique and a total rejection of Christian scriptural authority, never destroyed the Christian roots in Western institutes of higher learning. One of the most celebrated disciplines in the humanities, hermeneutics, actually grew out of Biblical scholarship. In contrast, as the Enlightenment

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mentality was introduced as a dominant ideology, Western learning fundamentally replaced Confucian studies in the curriculum of East Asian education.

Ironically, there is a good Confucian reason for the displacement of Confucian studies in modern Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese education. Prompted by an urgent concern for national survival, East Asian intellectuals seasoned in the Confucian ethos of social engagement and political participation opted for the path of “wealth and power” as the highest educational priority. If abandoning Confucian studies in favor of science and democracy was the price to pay for saving the nation, no self-respecting East Asian intellectual would argue against it. Notwithstanding the simplicity or even fallacy of the reasoning behind such a premise, it was widely accepted as self-evidently true. Indeed, the brave new world envisioned by the Enlightenment mentality was so compelling that to challenge its persuasive power was condemned as conservative, traditionalist or reactionary. The spirit of the time was captured by an iconoclastic attack on tradition. The revolutionary will, the courage to change, the willingness to redefine oneself, and the commitment to embrace the West as the wave of the future characterized the mentality of the May Fourth (1919) generation in China.

There was a deep psycho-cultural reason for this deconstructive radicalism. In the years from the Opium War of 1893 to the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, every decade or so China experienced a traumatic dislocation—the Taiping Rebellion, the encroachment of the foreign powers, the Japanese aggression, the collapse of the Manchu dynasty, the warlord period, the advent of World War II, and the civil war between the Communists and the Nationalists. Dramatic political campaigns and social restructuring occurred almost every five years during the Maoist era from 1949 to 1976. Even during the peaceful transformation after 1979, the Tiananmen tragedy greatly tarnished Teng Xiaoping’s reputation as a reformer. China’s desperate attempts to adapt to the rules of the game imposed by Western powers compelled her to critically examine the institutional, mental, intellectual, and meaning structures that defined her existence. China’s self-strengthening movement, with emphasis on military defense and industrial buildup and reform efforts to develop a constitutional monarchy, was thwarted by internal inertia and external pressure. The revolutionary

path to the Leninist model of violent struggle seemed inevitable to some of the most brilliant idealist minds. As a result, the demand for immediate action was overwhelming; few had patience for reflection. The rejection of Confucian humanism was considered a necessary precondition for embarking on a new approach to save the nation. The intellectual consensus that, in a deep psycho-cultural sense, the only way for China to survive the brutal assault of foreign aggression was to fundamentally restructure the Confucian way of life was the outcome of a long and agonizing soul-searching. Many East Asian intellectuals still strongly doubt the accuracy of this political diagnosis.

Westernization, modernization and, more recently, globalization have underscored the conviction that the Enlightenment mentality has triumphed. Both capitalism and socialism are manifestations of this mentality. The superiority of the capitalist system apparent since the end of the Cold War has further enhanced the impression that the American Way (an exemplification of the modern Western *modus operandi*) is the only viable road to development. Fukuyama's "End of History" and Huntington's "Coming Clash of Civilizations" subscribe to the conflictual dichotomy: the West and the rest. The new model defined in terms of market economy, democratic polity, civil society, and individualism is thought to be the universal program for the global community.

While we cherish the values underlying the universal program—notably liberty, rationality, due process of law, human rights, and dignity of the individual—we are aware of the danger of imposing forms of local Western knowledge as global standards of development. We need to be critically aware of the specific historical conditions under which a particular institution evolved. Take the example of democratic polity. The French revolutionary model is significantly different from the British reformist model, and both are substantially different from the German experience of nationalism. American democracy, characterized by a dynamic civil society, is yet another model. Similarly, although there are minimum requirements for the development of a market economy, how the market functions in a given society depends heavily upon the conditions of the given non-economic environment, such as the role of the government. Civil society, too, is not a monolithic idea. If we apply a strict notion of civil society based on the American model,

none of the Western European countries (France, Germany or England) have developed comparable institutions.

The rise of East Asia as one of the most dynamic economies since World War II deserves special consideration from this perspective. As the only non-Western region to develop a form of modernity comparable in complexity and sustainability, East Asia has obviously learned a great deal from the West. In other words, East Asia, by deliberate choice, has been profoundly influenced by the West. However, the forms of life exemplified in East Asian societies are greatly different from those of the West. Given the current situation, it seems reasonable to assume that there are Japanese, Taiwanese, Singaporean, and Korean models of democracy. I have elsewhere explored "Confucian" traditions in East Asian modernity. Suffice it to note that "Confucian" elements defining East Asian modernity in recent decades, far from the "feudal past" criticized by the May Fourth iconoclasts, have been thoroughly transformed by Enlightenment values. It is inconceivable that the New Confucian does not accept liberty, rationality, due process of law, human rights, and the dignity of the individual as positive values. Even in the highly politicized "Asian values" discourse the major contention is the hegemonic imposition of a single interpretation of political rights as a disciplinary instrument, not the outright denunciation of Western values.

Strategically, East Asian intellectuals are in an excellent position to bridge the gap between East and West. As devoted students of Western learning (in the Japanese case, Dutch, British, French, German, and, in the last five decades, American learning), Enlightenment values are an integral part of their cultural tradition. While it is both necessary and desirable to learn more comprehensively and deeply from the West, East Asian intellectuals are themselves actually a part of the West. They have earned the right to understand the West from within. The intellectual challenge ahead is how to integrate the best resources of their traditional culture into new cultural institutions which, for understandable reasons, have been dominated by Western learning.

The revitalization of Confucian studies as an integral part of East Asian studies is a case in point. We should take seriously the ideas of "Confucian" democracy, "Confucian" capitalism, "Confucian" civil society, and "Confucian" modernity both as phenomena for critical analysis and as aspirations for self-realization. I cannot accept Lucian

Pye's assertion that Confucian democracy is an oxymoron because I do not equate Confucian polity with authoritarianism. I cannot accept the journalistic practice, in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, to characterize network capitalists as nepotistic, corrupt, publicly unaccountable and lacking transparency. Nor can I accept the view that the Confucian idea of expanding family ethics to society and extending government's responsibility to education hinders societies under Confucian influence from developing a vibrant political sphere. I certainly do not accept the accusation that by stressing the importance of the group, Confucian ethics fails to account for the dignity of the individual. Actually, I do not believe that the dictum, "Nation and community above the individual," is based on the Confucian principle of self-cultivation.

With the rise of ecological consciousness, feminist sensitivity, religious pluralism and global ethics, the need to embrace common humanity while celebrating diversity is widely felt among ethicists, comparative religionists, concerned philosophers, and public intellectuals. The Enlightenment mentality as a form of dispirited and denatured anthropocentrism is woefully outmoded. New Confucian Humanism, having been transvaluated by Enlightenment values, can contribute significantly to developing a culture of peace that emphasizes communication, negotiation, dialogue, and reconciliation.

1. The self-cultivation philosophy in Confucian humanism seeks to integrate all four dimensions of the self into one dynamic equilibrium; body, heart-mind, soul, and spirit. Through "embodied knowing" the self transforms and harmonizes its emotions so that the inner disposition of the heart-mind can establish a sympathetic resonance with an ever-expanding network of interconnectedness enabling the self to form one body with Heaven, Earth and the Myriad things.

2. Fruitful interaction between individual and community at all levels from the family to the global community. The self cultivates roots in the family, village, nation, and the world. The feeling of belonging is predicated on a ceaseless spiritual exercise to transcend egoism, nepotism, parochialism, ethnocentrism, and anthropocentrism. The reciprocal interplay between self as center and self for others enables the self to become a center of relationships. As a center, personal dignity can never be marginalized and, as relationships, the spirit of consideration is never suppressed.

3. Sustainable relationship between human species and nature.

We are co-creators of the cosmic process and are thus obliged to assume full responsibility for the consequences of our actions, because “Heaven engenders and humans complete.” In Thomas Berry’s felicitous idea, the “Great Work” for us is not to subdue, master, exploit or conquer nature, but rather, in both aesthetic and ethical senses, to “take part in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth.”

4. Mutual responsiveness between the human heart-mind and the Way of Heaven. The idea that “Humans can make the Way great and the Way cannot make humans great” evokes feelings of awe, responsibility, commitment, and humility. Although our nature is conferred by heaven and, through self-knowledge, we can know the Mandate of Heaven, our ignorance is so great that wisdom begins when we acknowledge what we do not know. However, we are fully responsible for our thought and action and we are totally committed to the task of self-realization that, in its highest manifestation, exemplifies the unity of heaven and the human. This calls for humility as well as celebration.

Confucian humanism so conceived has the potential for becoming a source of inspiration for human flourishing in the twenty-first century.