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Implications of the Rise of "Confucian" East Asia

FOR MORE THAN TWO DECADES, I have been engaged in a transtemporal, cross-cultural, and interdisciplinary discussion on the modern significance of Confucian humanism. As an evolving axial-age civilization, the Confucian tradition has undergone significant transformations. The difference between Classical Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism is arguably more pronounced than the difference between Catholicism and Protestantism, and, mainly because of the impact of the West, the rupture between Neo-Confucianism and the New Confucianism of the twentieth century is perhaps more radical than that between traditional Christology and the contemporary "God is dead" theology. As scholars in cultural China conventionally do nowadays, we can roughly periodize more than two thousand years of Confucian history into three epochs. Classical Confucianism began with Confucius (551-472 B.C.), and, since Confucius described himself as the transmitter of an ancient scholarly tradition, its origins could be several centuries earlier; it ended with the disintegration of the Han empire in the third century.

Neo-Confucianism, symbolized by the Confucian Revival in the Song dynasty (960-1279), was marked by the spread of its ideas and practices to Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. Prior to the sudden appearance of the Western powers in the mid-nineteenth century, East Asian polity, society, and culture had been so much seasoned in the Confucian persuasion that political



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governance, social ethics, and even the habits of the heart in China, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan were characteristically Confucian in word and deed. The flexibility and adaptability of the Confucian teaching to different styles of leadership, education, and organization, including the family, enabled it to maintain a coherent world view under divergent circumstances. Yet Confucianism has been so much an integral part of East Asia and so salient a feature of the Sinic world that, unlike Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, it is often perceived as a regional phenomenon rather than a world religion.

However, when we examine the Confucian phenomenon from a variety of academic disciplines, we are impressed by the universal implications of the problematic it evokes. In other words, this historically and culturally specific form of life offers insights into perennial intellectual and spiritual concerns that address the human condition of the emergent global community.¹

In our joint venture to explore modernity as both a historical reality and a conceptual framework, Confucian East Asia helps to identify three sets of issues: (1) traditions in the modernizing process, (2) the relevance of non-Western civilizations to the self-understanding of the modern West, and (3) the global significance of local knowledge. While each one of these issues is immensely complex, and the interactions between them layer the picture with ambiguities, a discussion of them together may show new possibilities emerging in this creative confusion and demonstrate that we are at a critical juncture to move beyond three prevalent but outmoded exclusive dichotomies: the traditional/modern, the West/the rest, and the local/global. Our effort to transcend these dichotomies has far-reaching implications for facilitating dialogues between civilizations in the global community. I would, therefore, like to focus my attention on the rise of East Asia as an exemplification of this mode of thinking.

Whether or not Hegel's philosophy of history signaled a critical turn in which Confucianism, together with other spiritual traditions in the non-Western world, was relegated to the dawn of the Spirit, the common practice in cultural China of defining the Confucian ethic as "feudal" is predicated on the



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strong thesis of historical inevitability implicit in the Hegelian vision. We need to unpack this highly condensed version of "Confucian China and its Modern Fate."² It is too easy to relegate it to the background as a blatant assertion of Eurocentrism. After all, the overwhelming majority of East Asian intellectuals accepted the judgment that Confucianism, like other axial-age civilizations, was outmoded. The enduring power of the Hegelian persuasion that, in the last analysis, the burden of history must be borne by the reflective minds of the modern West, if not by the Prussian thinker who, for the first time in human history, philosophized as a world philosopher, is manifested in the current debate on the "end of history."³

The irony is that the entire Enlightenment project as captured by the epoch-making Kantian question "What is Enlightenment?" was, in its initial stage of formulation, an affirmation that cultural traditions outside the West, notably Confucian China, were well ordered without the benefit of revelatory religion. What happened in the nineteenth century when the dynamics of the modern West engulfed the world in a restless march toward material progress was definitely not the result of a straightforward working out of the Enlightenment project. On the contrary, it was thoroughly undermined by the unbound Prometheus, an unmitigated quest for complete liberation. While, in the eyes of the East Asian admirers, the demands for liberation from all boundaries of authority and dogma characterized the dynamic transformation of the modern West, we need not be either post-imperialist social critics or post-colonial cultural critics to acknowledge that the modern West also symbolizes conquest, hegemony, and enslavement. This background is indispensable in understanding Habermas's concerted effort to continue the unfinished business of the Enlightenment project.

Hegel, Marx, and Weber shared the ethos that, despite all its shortcomings, the modern West was the only arena where meaningful progress in the world could be made. The unfolding of the Spirit, the process of historical inevitability, and the "iron cage" of modernity were essentially European predicaments. Confucian East Asia, the Islamic Middle East, Hindu India, and Buddhist Southeast Asia were on the receiving end of this process. Eventually, modernization as homogenization would



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make cultural diversity inoperative, if not totally meaningless. It was inconceivable that Confucianism or, for that matter, any other non-Western spiritual traditions could help shape the modernizing process. The development from tradition to modernity was inevitable and irreversible.

In the global context, what some of the most brilliant minds in the modern West assumed to be self-evidently true has turned out to be parochial, a form of local knowledge that has, significantly, lost much of its universal appeal. In both the Western and the non-Western worlds, the projected transition from tradition to modernity never occurred. As a norm, traditions continue in modernity. Indeed, the modernizing process itself is constantly shaped by a variety of cultural forms rooted in distinct traditions. The recognition of the relevance of radical otherness to one's own understanding of the eighteenth century seems more applicable to the current situation in the global community than does the inattention to any challenges to the Western mind-set of the modern age. As we near the twenty-first century, the openness of the eighteenth century may provide a better guide for the dialogue of civilizations than the exclusivity of the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century.

In the fields of Asian and comparative religion, it has long been established that, since religious pluralism is inevitable, inter-religious dialogue is both necessary and desirable. Indeed, all major studies of human spirituality, inspired by cultural diversity as a pervasive phenomenon in urban centers, take an ecumenical approach to world religions. Long before Samuel Huntington's controversial hypothesis of the "coming clash of civilizations,"⁴ numerous attempts had been made to explore the possibilities of communication, negotiation, accommodation, and fusion between and within different faith communities. Huntington's warning against major fault lines in international politics further enhances the urgency for civilizational dialogues and for exploring a global ethic. Implicit in this sense of urgency is the increasing awareness that the anticipated emergence of the "global village," far from being an integrated fiduciary community, signals difference, differentiation, and outright discrimination.



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Fraternity, the functional equivalent of community, has attracted scanty attention in modern political thought among the Enlightenment values advocated in the French Revolution. The preoccupation with defining the relationship between the individual and the state since Locke's treatises on government is, of course, not the full picture of modern political thought, but it is undeniable that communities, notably the family, have been ignored as irrelevant in the main stream of Western academic discourse. Hegel's fascination with the "civil society" that exists beyond the family and below the state was mainly prompted by the dynamics of the bourgeoisie, a distinct urban phenomenon threatening to all traditional communities. It was a prophetic view toward the future rather than an acknowledgment of the value of community. The transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* was thought to have been a major rupture. As a result, Weber referred to "universal brotherhood" as an outmoded medieval myth unrealizable in the disenchanted modern secular world.

The recent North American upsurge of interest in community may have been stimulated by a sense of crisis that social disintegration is a serious threat to the well-being of the Republic, but the local conditions in the United States and Canada, precipitated by ethnic and linguistic conflicts, are generalizable throughout the highly industrialized, if not postmodern, First World. The advent of the "global village" intensifies perceived and actual inequalities in wealth, power, influence, and accessibility to goods, ideas, and information. The conflict between globalizing trends—including trade, finance, information, migration, and tourism—and localism rooted in ethnicity, language, land, class, and religious faith seems unresolvable.

The Confucian insistence on the importance of equality rather than freedom, sympathy rather than rationality, civility rather than law, duty rather than rights, and human-relatedness rather than individualism may appear to be diametrically opposed to the value-orientation of the Enlightenment. It is unsurprising that the "Asian values" advocated by political leaders such as Lee Kwang Yew and Mahatir often provoke strong cynical reactions in the West. From the perspective of the human-rights communities in North America and Western Europe, the Asian



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values' rhetoric smacks of pernicious justification for exercising undemocratic authoritarian mechanisms of control. Nevertheless, in light of the danger of social disintegration at all levels, from family to nation, the worldwide need for social justice, reciprocal empathy, mutual understanding, responsibility, and a sense of togetherness is obvious. As Louise Henkin emphatically notes, these so-called Asian or Confucian values, like Enlightenment values, are universal too.⁵

Industrial East Asia since the 1960s and socialist East Asia since the 1980s have experienced a revival of Confucian teaching as political ideology, intellectual discourse, merchant ethics, family values, or in the spirit of protest is the combination of many factors. Despite tension and conflict rooted in primordial ties, the overall life pattern in East Asia involves consensus formation based on values significantly different from the modern Western emphasis on contractual relationships. Yet East Asian intellectuals have been devoted students of Western learning for more than a century. In the case of Japan, from Dutch, British, French, German, and, since World War II, American learning, the *samurai*-bureaucrats learned the superior knowledge of Western science, technology, manufacturing industries, and political institutions. Similarly, the Chinese scholar-officials, the Korean *yangban*, and the Vietnamese literati acquired knowledge from the West to rebuild their societies anew. Their commitment to substantial, comprehensive, or even wholesale Westernization was remarkable. Through their perceptions and firsthand experiences of the *modus operandi* of the modern West, they thoroughly transformed their economies, politics, education systems, and societies. Such positive identification with the West and active participation in a fundamental restructuring of their "lifeworlds" enabled them to emulate the West with marvelous success. In this process of massive cultural absorption, East Asian countries deliberately relegated their own rich spiritual resources to the background. However, this enhanced their need to appeal, often inadvertently, to native patterns to reshape what they had acquired from the West. This model of creative adaptation helped them to strategically position themselves in forging a new synthesis of Enlightenment rationality and Confucian humanism.



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It is interesting to note that, more than a hundred years prior to the Western impact on China in the mid-nineteenth century, intellectuals in France, England, Italy, and Germany had become aware of the humanistic splendor of Chinese civilization through missionary reports of the Jesuits. Voltaire, Quesnay, Diderot, and the physiocrats were fascinated by the Chinese world view, cosmological thinking, benevolent autocracy, and secular ethics. While the vogue for things Chinese that overwhelmed eighteenth-century European aristocracy was merely a craze for *chinoiserie*, Confucian China provided an intellectual challenge to the self-reflexivity of a small coterie of the most creative Western minds. Ironically, the outcome of European rationalism, dispirited and denatured, was a far cry from the organismic vision of Confucian humanism.

The modern West's dichotomous world view (spirit/matter, mind/body, physical/mental, sacred/profane, creator/creature, God/man, subject/object) is diametrically opposed to the Chinese holistic mode of thinking. Arguably, it is also a significant departure from ancient Greek, Judaic, and early Christian spiritual traditions. Informed by Bacon's knowledge as power and Darwin's survival through competitiveness, the Enlightenment mentality is so radically different from any style of thought familiar to the Chinese mind that it challenges all dimensions of the Sinitic world. While the Enlightenment faith in instrumental rationality fueled by the Faustian drive to explore, know, and subdue nature spurred spectacular progress in science and technology, it also became a justification for imperialist domination and colonial exploitation. As the international rules of the game, defined in terms of wealth and power, were superimposed on China by gunboat diplomacy, Chinese intellectuals accepted the inevitability of Westernization as a necessary strategy for survival.

The deliberate choice of the May Fourth (1919) intellectuals to engage in an iconoclastic attack on the rich cultural resources of the Confucian tradition and to embark on a materialist path to save the nation was predicated on a rational calculation: the shortcut to modernization was wholesale Westernization. The demand for effective action and demonstrable results was so compelling that there was little room for reflec-



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tion, let alone meditative thinking. As a consequence, respect for the life of the mind was marginalized. For philosophy and religion, the outcome was disastrous. The anticipated "short-cut" became a tortuous road to revolutionary romanticism and populist scientism and, for several generations of intellectuals, serfdom. Unlike their Indian counterparts who maintained their native spirituality during centuries of colonization, Chinese intellectuals were prompted by their semicolonial status to reject all the spiritual traditions that defined China's soul. We have only just begun to see indications that Chinese thinkers are recovering from this externally imposed yet self-inflicted malaise.

With all of its boundless energy and creative impulse, the Enlightenment was, at best, a mixed blessing. Despite its enduring legacy of liberating the human spirit from religious dogmatism, its anthropocentric self-assertion, like the destructive will, was detrimental to human flourishing. In light of the ecological crisis and the grave danger of social disintegration, the need to retrieve the Greek wisdom of self-knowledge, the Judaic sense of awe, and the Christian feeling of reverence is widely acknowledged in the Western scholarly community today.

By contrast, it is intriguing to observe that the Enlightenment mentality is alive and well in China. Surely the overwhelming majority of Chinese scholars reject the characterization of human beings as rational animals endowed with inalienable rights and motivated by their self-interest to maximize profit in the marketplace. Yet market economy, democratic polity, and individualism, Talcott Parsons's three inseparable dimensions of modernity, loom large in China's intellectual discussion. Several recent heated debates in Beijing were focused on von Hayek's idea of the market, Isaiah Berlin's interpretation of liberty, and John Rawls's theory of justice. Many young scholars strongly believe that the basic intellectual problem in the tragic history of China's modernization is that national sentiments to save the nation overshadowed the need for a deep understanding of the Enlightenment. This partly explained the lamentable outcome of China's march toward modernity.

The assumption is that the burning desire for national survival frustrated the concerted effort to learn from the West. As



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a result, the time was too short and the psychology too anxious for Enlightenment ideas such as liberty, equality, rationality, and due process of law to grow and flourish in Chinese intellectual soil. It may have taken centuries for science and democracy to become fully established in Western Europe and North America, but the Asian Westernizers and, by implication, the modernizers felt they had only a few decades to employ science and democracy to save China from political and social disintegration.

Nevertheless, in a deeper sense, the difficulty lies in the ambiguity of the Enlightenment legacy itself. The Chinese Westernizers who unabashedly identified themselves as modernizers were committed political activists with a passion to save China from the dark history of backwardness, its own feudal past. They unquestioningly embraced the Enlightenment mentality as the only road to ensure China's survival. It is unfortunate that they failed to realize the transformative potential of the Confucian tradition. For example, they could have learned from the Japanese Meiji Restoration, a well-known case in which indigenous resources were mobilized for modernization. As a result, Confucianism as political governance, social organization, and moral education flourished in Meiji Japan. Despite Japan's conscientious attempt to reject the Sinic model and join the West, she did not opt for iconoclasm as a way out.

The Confucian tradition, marginalized as a distant echo of the feudal past, is forever severed from its imperial institutional base, but has yet kept its grounding in an agriculture-based economy, family-centered social structure, and paternalistic polity. Needless to say, as a response to the Western impact, all of these have been thoroughly reconfigured in a new constellation. Confucian political ideology has provided great symbolic resources for the development states of Japan and the four Mini-Dragons. It is evident in the political processes of the People's Republic of China (PRC), North Korea, and Vietnam. As the demarcation between capitalist and socialist East Asia begins to blur, the shared ethical norms that cut across the great divide can very well be interpreted in Confucian terms. Economic culture, family values, and merchant ethics in East



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Asia and in China (including Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan) have also expressed themselves in Confucian vocabulary. We may, of course, reject such an explanation as a postmortem justification. Yet, even if we agree that the Confucian articulation is but an afterthought, the pervasiveness of ideas such as network capitalism, soft authoritarianism, group spirit, and consensual politics throughout the East Asian economy, polity, and society suggests the continuous relevance of Confucian traditions in East Asian modernity.

To put the issue in historical context, it seems fitting to quote a paragraph from Edwin Reischauer's prophetic statement made in 1973 and subsequently published as "The Sinic World in Perspective" in *Foreign Affairs*:

The peoples in East Asia share certain key traits, such as group solidarity, an emphasis on the political unit, great organizational skills, a strong work ethic, and a tremendous drive for education. It is because of such traits that the Japanese could rise with unprecedented speed from being a small underdeveloped nation in the mid-nineteenth century to being a major imperial power in the early twentieth—and an economic superpower today. . . . And now her record is being paralleled by all the other East Asian units that are unencumbered by war or the economically blighting pall of communism—namely, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, which like Hong Kong, is essentially a Chinese city-state.

Throughout the non-East Asian countries of Southeast Asia, Chinese minorities remain so economically and educationally dominant as to cause serious political and social problems. One cannot but wonder what economic growth might be in store for Vietnam, if peace is ever achieved here, and for China and North Korea if their policies change enough to afford room for the economic drive of which their people are undoubtedly capable.⁶

Reischauer, with amazing brevity, outlined the trajectory of the rise of Confucian East Asia, based on his penetrating insight into the underlying values shared by both industrial East Asia (Japan and the four Mini-Dragons) and socialist East Asia (mainland China, North Korea, and, for cultural reasons, Vietnam).



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Specifically, East Asian modernity under the influence of Confucian traditions presents a coherent social vision with at least six salient features:

(1) Government leadership in a market economy is not only necessary but desirable. The government is perceived, in principle, as a positive force for social stability rather than as a necessary evil. Even if the market by itself can provide an "invisible hand" for ordering society, the need for an outside regulatory and distributive agency overseeing economic activities is beyond dispute.

There are many styles of governance in East Asia, ranging from Singapore's direct involvement to Hong Kong's "active noninterference." But the consensus is also strong: a government that is responsive to public needs, responsible for the welfare of its people, and accountable to society at large is vitally important for the creation and maintenance of order. Furthermore, virtually all East Asian countries subscribe to the Confucian principle that the government is charged not only with maintaining law and order and providing the basic necessities of life, but with offering educational opportunities for its citizens.

(2) Although law is the essential minimum requirement for social stability, "organic solidarity" can only result from human ties of interaction. The civilized mode of conduct can never be coerced. Exemplary teaching as a standard of inspiration invites voluntary participation. Law alone cannot generate a sense of shame to guide civilized behavior; it is the ritual act that encourages people to live up to their own aspirations. Law may provide the minimum condition for social stability, but only the cultivation of virtue through the practice of rites can create the cultural space for human flourishing.

(3) Family as the basic unit of society is the locus from which core values are transmitted. The dyadic relationships within the family, differentiated by age, gender, authority, status, and hierarchy, provide a richly textured natural environment for learning the proper way of being human. The principle of reciprocity in human interaction defines all forms of human relatedness in the family. Age and gender, potentially two of the most serious gaps in the primordial environment of the



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human habitat, are brought into a continuous flow of intimate sentiments of human care. Concern for the unintended negative effects of abusive familial relationships compels Confucian societies often to acknowledge family affairs as public interests rather than private matters.

(4) Civil society flourishes not because it is an autonomous arena above the family and beyond the state. Its inner strength lies in its dynamic interplay between family and state. The image of the family as a microcosm of the state and the ideal of the state as an enlargement of the family indicate that family stability is vitally important for the body politic and that the state should strive to ensure the organic solidarity of the family. Civil society provides a variety of mediating cultural institutions that allow a fruitful articulation between family and state. The dynamic interaction between private and public enables civil society to offer diverse and enriching resources for human flourishing.

(5) Education ought to be the civil religion of society. The primary purpose of education is character building. Intent on the cultivation of the full person, education should emphasize ethical as well as cognitive intelligence. Schools should teach the art of accumulating "social capital" through communication. In addition to providing for the acquisition of knowledge and skills, schooling must be congenial to the development of cultural competence and appreciation of spiritual values.

(6) Since self-cultivation is the common root of the regulation of family, the governance of state, and peace under Heaven, the quality of life of a particular society depends on the level of self-cultivation of its members. A society that encourages self-cultivation as a necessary condition for human flourishing is a society that cherishes virtue-centered political leadership, mutual exhortation as a communal way of self-realization, family as the home for learning to be human, civility as the normal pattern of human interaction, and education as character building.

Of course, these societal ideals are not fully realized in East Asia. East Asian societies often exhibit totally un-Confucian behavior and attitude, a clear case of the seemingly unbridgeable gap between ideation and actuality. Indeed, partly due to



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the humiliating experience of imperialism and colonialism, the rise of East Asia blatantly displays some of the most negative aspects of Western modernism: exploitation, mercantilism, consumerism, materialism, greed, egoism, and brutal competitiveness. However, as it was the first non-Western region to become modernized, the cultural implications of the rise of "Confucian" East Asia are far-reaching. The modern West provided the initial impetus for worldwide social transformation. The historical impetus for the modernizing process in Western Europe and North America is not necessarily a structural component of modernity. Surely Enlightenment values such as instrumental rationality, liberty, rights-consciousness, due process of law, privacy, and individualism are all universalizable modern values, but, as the Confucian example suggests, "Asian values" such as sympathy, distributive justice, duty-consciousness, ritual, public-spiritedness, and group orientation are also universalizable modern values. Just as the former ought to be incorporated into East Asian modernity, the latter may turn out to be critical and timely references for the modern Western way of life.

Confucian modernity demonstrates that modernization is not, in essence, Westernization or Americanization. Does this mean that the rise of East Asia symbolizes the replacement of an old paradigm with a new one? No. But it does point to the need for the West, especially the United States, to transform itself into a learning as well as a teaching civilization. What East Asian modernity signifies is pluralism rather than alternative monism. The success of Confucian East Asia in becoming fully modernized without being thoroughly Westernized clearly indicates that modernization may assume different cultural forms.

It is thus conceivable that Southeast Asia may become modernized in its own way without being either Westernized or East Asianized. The very fact that Confucian East Asia has provided an alternative model of modernization for Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia signifies that Buddhist and Islamic and, by implication, Hindu forms of modernity are not only possible but highly probable. There is no reason to doubt that Latin America, Central Asia, Africa, and indigenous traditions throughout the world all have the potential to develop their own alternatives to Western modernism. While many alterna-



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tives to Western modernism, such as Maoism and militant religious fundamentalisms, have been disastrous for the imagined global community, the emergence of a plurality of modern forms of life is a cause for celebration.

I am acutely aware that the neat conclusion, as the result of our commitment to pluralism, may have been reached prematurely. Any indication that this is likely to happen, a sort of historical inevitability, betrays simple-minded wishful thinking. We do not have to be tough-minded realists to know the likelihood of this scenario occurring. If the "First World" insists upon its privilege to overdevelop, if industrial East Asia forges ahead with its accelerated growth, if the PRC immerses herself in the "four modernizations" at all costs, what shape will the world be fifty years from now? Is East Asian modernity a promise or a nightmare? One wonders.

The current financial crisis notwithstanding, Confucian East Asia's transformation in the last four decades, from a warworn wasteland to the most vibrant economy the world has ever witnessed, is undeniable. Japan's metamorphosis from an obedient student under American tutelage to the single most powerful challenger to U.S. economic supremacy compels us to reflect upon this profoundly modern and significantly non-Western form of modernity. The "reform and open" policy of the PRC since 1979 has propelled her to become a full-fledged development state. The Tiananmen tragedy of 1989 seriously damaged the credibility and legitimacy of the Beijing government. Yet its comprehensive program of systematic integration into the global community continued to function well. The collapse of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the former Soviet Union signaled the end of international communism as a failed experiment, but socialist East Asia seems to be in the process of reinventing itself in reality, if not in name.

It may seem reasonable to assume that since China has been humiliated by the imperialist West for more than a century, revenge is her principal motive for restructuring world order. Memories of the Pacific theater of World War II and the Korean War, not to mention the Vietnam War, give credence to the myth of the Yellow Peril. The emigration of wealthy Chinese from Southeast Asia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong to North



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America, Australia, and New Zealand further enhances the impression that there is a Chinese conspiracy to rearrange power relationships and control precious financial resources in the global community. These commonly held assumptions, myths, and impressions construct a grossly distorted picture of China's integration into the global community as a deliberate strategy of modernization. With thousands of political dissidents in the West, worldwide support for an independent Tibet, and Taipei's effective lobbying of Capitol Hill, China's radical otherness is perceived in the American mass media as a threat to international peace. The popular demonization of China as a pariah state, replacing the former Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire," may become a self-fulfilling prophecy, a topic well worth the attention of public intellectuals in the government and society at large. The need to take a global, rather than a highly politicized local, perspective on a sustainable Sino-American relationship is more urgent than ever.

While the rise of Confucian East Asia signals that modernization may take on diverse cultural forms, it does not indicate that Western modernism is being eroded by, let alone replaced by, an East Asian alternative. The claim that Asian values, rather than Western Enlightenment values, are more congenial to current Asian conditions and, by implication, to the emergent global community in the twenty-first century is simple-minded, if not pernicious. The task ahead is the expansion of a global civilizational dialogue as a prerequisite for a peaceful world order. The perceived clash of civilizations makes the dialogue imperative. The real challenge, then, is to have not only the willingness and courage to understand the "radical otherness" rooted in different axial-age civilizations, but the wisdom to transform a teaching culture into a learning culture as a way to elevate our self-knowledge from local to global concerns. Paradoxically, since the primordial ties of concrete living communities are intractable realities in real communication, fruitful mutuality is built upon basic trust. The move to global concerns by no means undermines long-term local self-interests. Indeed, it is the global significance of local knowledge that compels us to be engaged in the dialogue of civilizations.



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As the East Asian example implies, although all traditions have been fundamentally restructured as a result of modernization, they continue to shape modernity in a variety of directions and, in a substantial way, define the meaning of being modern. If that is accepted, what happens to the claim that modernity must be conceived in terms of three inseparable dimensions: market economy, democratic polity, and individualism?

Surely market economy is a powerful engine of globalization. Yet the market force, as it has been released in East Asia, demands vigilant political attention. Effective governmental participation in the smooth running of the market mechanism is not an impossibility. Often political leadership provides necessary regulatory leverage for a stable market. In both domestic and foreign competition, economically sophisticated government agents can be instrumental in creating an environment for healthy growth. Collaboration between officialdom and the business community is common in East Asian societies. Actually, a defining characteristic of the East Asian political economy is the constant interplay between what are designated in the West as the public and private domains. Government's participation in the economic sphere may take different forms—direct management (Singapore), active leadership (South Korea), informed guidance (Japan), selective interference (Taiwan), or positive noninterference (Hong Kong)—but the presence of the central government in all weighty economic decisions is not only expected but also desired by the business community and the general public. The message is clear: globalization as dictated by the market force is urgently in need of an efficient and reliable transnational mechanism for governance. This fact alone demands pluralistic thinking and collaborative spirit.

The trend toward democratization seems unstoppable, but, in practical terms, democracy as a form of life is more than the electoral culture. The East Asian manifestations of the democratic idea strongly suggest that democratization as an evolving process is compatible with bureaucratic meritocracy, educational elitism, and particularistic social networking. The democratic experience in England has been significantly shaped by traditions of pragmatism, empiricism, skepticism, and gradualism, whereas in France, anti-clericalism, rationalism, culturalism,



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and the revolutionary spirit feature prominently. Furthermore, German democracy has been characterized by romanticism, nationalism, and ethnic pride, and the continuous presence of a strong civil society is uniquely American. The Confucian faith in the betterment of the human condition through self-effort, commitment to family as the basic unit of society and to family ethics as the foundation of social stability, trust in the intrinsic value of moral education, self-reliance, work, mutual aid, and a sense of an organic unity with an ever-extending network of relationships provides rich cultural resources for East Asian democracies to develop their own distinctive styles.

It is true that the Confucian rhetoric, in a discussion of Asian values, may be used as a framework for criticizing the indiscriminate imposition of Western ideas on the rest of the world. The new agenda to broaden human rights from exclusive emphasis on political and civil rights to include economic, social, and cultural rights may very well be perceived as a strategic maneuver by Asian leaders to divert attention from blatant human-rights violations in East Asia. While the need for East Asian societies to free themselves from nepotism, authoritarianism, and male chauvinism is obvious, democracy with Confucian characteristics is not only imaginable but may also be practicable.

This is not to undermine the explicit claims of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that the international community is obligated to take a stand against a government depriving its people of basic political rights. Violation of human rights under the disguise of internal security should not be condoned. For example, the denial of freedom of speech under the pretext of social solidarity is not at all justifiable in Confucian terms. While governments such as India may choose to list nonjudiciable rights (such as job security and universal education) in the constitution, the substitution of economic rights (sufficient food) for political rights is unacceptable as a Confucian idea.

East Asian intellectuals have begun to probe the spiritual resources of Confucian tradition for economic development, nation-building, social stability, and cultural identity. But having been overwhelmed by the scientism, materialism, and utilitarianism of the modern age, many of them have become numb



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to the broad humanistic spirit of the Confucian tradition. Those who are attuned to the Confucian message inevitably discover that Confucian personality ideals (the authentic person, the worthy, or the sage) can be realized more fully in a liberal democratic society than in either a traditional imperial dictatorship or a modern authoritarian regime. They are also critically aware that Confucian ethics must creatively transform itself in light of Enlightenment values before it can serve as an effective critique of the excessive individualism, pernicious competitiveness, and vicious litigiousness of the modern West. Similarly, the current Western confidence verging on arrogance—"our" present is necessarily the rest of humanity's future—is not only distasteful but seriously misplaced. Even if we can demonstrate empirically that the material things an average American takes for granted as the basic necessities of life are the aspirations of all developing societies, we Americans are woefully inept in defining the wholeness of life for them and, for all practical purposes, for ourselves.

To reiterate an earlier point, intellectuals in the Confucian world have been devoted students of Western learning for more than a hundred years. As they became seasoned in the universal Enlightenment values of the modern West, they began to retrieve values from their own indigenous spiritual traditions. The transmutation of Confucian values as a creative response to the hegemonic discourses of Western Europe and North America seems a natural outcome of this intercultural communication. Since cultural China is no longer merely an agrarian society with its vast majority statically wedded to the land, and as it is also one of the most dynamic migrant communities in the world, the habits of the Chinese populace as well as the corporate consciousness of the Chinese intelligentsia provide a brand-new context for the modern transformation of the Confucian tradition.

The estimate of thirty-six million ethnic Chinese overseas clearly indicates that the sons and daughters of the Yellow Emperor encompass not only the largest farming population but also one of the most enterprising merchant classes in the emerging global community. If we assume that Confucian culture still matters and that its values are still cherished, or at least uncon-



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sciously upheld by the Chinese people, the form of modernity that the Confucian tradition helps to shape should be relevant to the rest of the world in understanding the human condition. On the contrary, if Confucian ethics can no longer provide guidance for action in Chinese society and if Confucian values are neither relevant nor crucial to Chinese economic behavior, there is an urgent need to inquire what ethical thinking can provide a strong enough moral basis for the Chinese to take an active part in the global stewardship so essential to world peace.

The matter is immensely complicated by the decision of the political leadership of the PRC to envision modernization exclusively in terms of science, technology, economic development, and military hardware. Through the "reform and open" policy, China has joined the restless march toward wealth and power. Already, an internal migration of more than one hundred million people has occurred, mainly from the countryside to the cities, especially along the southeastern coast where economic development has been most vibrant. Tidal waves of commercialization have overwhelmed all major Chinese cities. The pressure to define the good life in Western material terms has seriously affected government, labor, the military, the professions, and the academic community. The Chinese population curve is expected to grow to 1.6 billion before it begins to level off well into the twenty-first century. The one-child policy has produced a new generation of "little emperors" with the unintended negative consequence of gender imbalance and accelerated aging. Above all, environmental degradation has created major problems of air and water pollution, flooding, soil loss, and deforestation. The issue of sustainable growth or even survivability has been raised and widely discussed in the mass media. Given the gravity of the situation, the appeal of Buddhist vegetarianism and Daoist asceticism as well as the Confucian ethic of moderation is widespread.

Whether or not China will successfully muddle through this critical transition is vitally important for the global community. We need to remind ourselves, at this juncture, that since the Opium War (1939), China has endured many calamities. Prior to 1949, the Chinese people experienced a major man-made



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disaster each decade, and imperialism was the main culprit. Furthermore, since the founding of the PRC, the society has suffered continual upheaval, experiencing a fundamental restructure almost every five years because of erratic leadership and faulty policies. Although millions of Chinese died, the neighboring countries were not seriously affected, and the outside world was, by and large, oblivious to what actually happened. Since 1979, China has been rapidly becoming an integral part of the international economic system. More than 30 percent of the Chinese economy is tied to international trade. Village-township enterprises, a combination of private entrepreneurial initiatives and public ownership, have been a dynamic engine for development. Natural economic territories have emerged between Hong Kong and Quanzhou, Fujian and Taiwan, Shandong and South Korea. European, Japanese, and American as well as Hong Kong, Taiwanese, and overseas Chinese investments are present in virtually all provinces in the PRC. The return of Hong Kong to China, the conflict across the Taiwan Straits, the economic and cultural interchange between overseas Chinese communities and between them and the motherland, the intraregional communication in East Asia, the political and economic integration of the Association for Southeast Asian Nations, and the rise of the Asia-Pacific region will all have a substantial impact on our shrinking global community.

If we broaden our scope to include Cultural China, a second migration, as contrasted with the first migration of millions of Chinese from the Guangdong and Fujian provinces to Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century, is underway. In the last two decades, Chinese with substantial financial resources in Southeast Asia, Hong Kong, and Taiwan have begun to emigrate to Australia, Canada, and the United States for reasons of political security, economic opportunity, cultural expression, or education for their children. In the United States, newly arrived ethnic Chinese from South Vietnam and students from the PRC have literally altered the landscapes of Chinatowns and international student communities throughout the country. On the other hand, it should be noted that there has been a steady flow of highly qualified Asian professionals in science and engineering leaving North America and returning to industrial East



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Asia. If we further broaden our scope to include both industrial and socialist East Asia, the presence of Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese communities throughout the world further enhances the need to understand the dialogue of civilizations as a dynamic process. Is it still meaningful to talk about Confucian East Asia?

The designation of East Asia as "Confucian" in the ethico-religious sense is comparable to the validity and limitation of employing "Christian," "Islamic," "Hindu," and "Buddhist" in identifying geopolitical regions such as Europe, the Middle East, India, or Southeast Asia. The religious pluralism of "Confucian" East Asia deserves our special attention. It is not at all difficult to imagine that Shintoist or Buddhist Japan, shamanist, Buddhist, or Christian Korea, and Daoist or Buddhist China are all constitutive parts of the East Asian spiritual landscape. As a result, the term "Confucian" can be used as an adjective to describe some Buddhists, Daoists, Christians, and Muslims in East Asia, or, for that matter, in other parts of the world. Needless to say, Confucian ethics so conceived is not a simple representation of Classical Confucian or Neo-Confucian teaching. Rather, it is a new way of conceptualizing the form of life, the habits of the heart, or the social praxis of those societies that have been under the influence of Confucian education for centuries.

As we are confronted with the issue of a new world order replacing the exclusive dichotomy (capitalism and socialism) imposed by the super powers, we are tempted to come up with facile generalizations: "the end of history," "the clash of civilizations," or "the Pacific century." The much more difficult and, hopefully, much more significant line of inquiry is to address truly fundamental ethical issues confronting the global community: Are we isolated individuals, or centers of interpersonal relationships? Can we afford to cut ourselves off from the spiritual moorings of our cultures? How can we transmit the values we cherish to our children if we do not try to embody them in our own lives? How can we expect others to respect our way of life if we have no desire or curiosity to understand what they regard as meaningful and worthwhile? Can our society endure and prosper without developing a basic sense of



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duty and responsibility? Should our pluralistic society deliberately cultivate shared values and a common ground for human understanding for the sake of unity? As we become acutely aware of our earth's vulnerability and increasingly wary of social disintegration, what direction must we take for the sake of our survival?

The revitalization of the Confucian discourse may contribute to a much needed communal critical self-consciousness among East Asian intellectuals. We may very well be witnessing the very beginning of global history rather than the end of history. And, from a comparative cultural perspective, this new beginning must take as its point of departure the dialogue of civilizations. Our awareness of the danger of civilizational conflicts rooted in ethnicity, language, land, and religion makes the necessity of dialogue particularly compelling. A plurality of models of sustainable development emphasizing the ethical and spiritual dimensions of human flourishing must be sought.

The time is long overdue to move beyond a mind-set shaped by modernization as a unilinear progression. As the politics of domination fades, we welcome the dawning of an age of communication, networking, negotiation, interaction, interfacing, and collaboration. Even if we strongly believe that the United States alone can exert hegemonic influence in the global community, the real American strength lies in "soft power" (moral persuasion) rather than military might. This is the reason we hope that East Asian leaders, inspired by the Confucian spirit of self-cultivation, family cohesiveness, social solidarity, benevolent governance, and universal peace, will practice an ethic of responsibility in managing their domestic affairs. We also hope that as Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Vietnamese emigrate to other parts of the world, they bring along their rich cultural heritage for sharing. In the last analysis, whether or not we celebrate cultural diversity without falling into the trap of pernicious relativism is profoundly meaningful for global stewardship.

As Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Wolfgang Schluchter observe in the *Dædalus* issue on "Early Modernities":

Theories of modernization and of modernity, as formulated in the fifties and sixties, were based on the assumption of convergence. It



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was believed that modernization would wipe out cultural, institutional, structural, and mental differences and, if unimpeded, would lead to a uniform modern world. While minor differences would remain, according to these theories, primarily due to the persistence of premodern factors, in the long run they would fade away.⁷

In the 1980s, when the economic dynamism of East Asia was exceptionally strong, the thesis of reverse convergence was either clearly articulated or strongly implied by several theoreticians of modernization. The ideas of "Asian values," "network capitalism," and "the Asia-Pacific century" were in vogue for more than a decade. The financial crisis of the summer of 1997 prompted a new discourse. Since authoritarianism and crony capitalism were identified as the main reasons that the Asian financial institutions had suffered from lack of transparency, public accountability, and fair competitiveness, the arguments for reverse convergence have lost much of their persuasive power. As the economies of Japan and Korea begin to recover, East Asia will probably reemerge as an important reference for Western Europe and North America again. Since, as Björn Wittrock notes, "the multiplicity of modern societies around the globe is obvious" and "the claims to cultural supremacy of any single one of them may appear only a demonstration of arrogance,"⁸ mutual referencing among societies is inevitable and the dialogue of civilizations is both desirable and necessary.

The rise of Confucian East Asia suggests that traditions are present as active agents in modernity, and, by implication, the modernizing process can assume different cultural forms. Notwithstanding the established fact that modernization as the most dynamic economic, political, and social force for transforming the world in human history originated in Western Europe, it was in its inception a mixture of conflictual and even contradictory orientations. If we have conceptual difficulty generalizing about British, French, and German modernities, American modernity must be treated as a separate case. We can, therefore, characterize the story of modernization as a master narrative containing a variety of globally significant local knowledge. Precisely because an overwhelming majority of cases of local knowledge that are globally significant are



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Western (Western European and North American) in origin, the phenomenon of East Asian modernity is particularly intriguing.

With a view toward the future, it seems reasonable to expect that an increasing number of cases of normal or even exemplary modernity will come from the non-Western world. Already, fruitful comparisons have been made across geographic, linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and religious boundaries. As "mutual referencing" progresses, East Asia can benefit from civilizational dialogues with South Asia and the Islamic world as well. I have been advocating in Beijing as well as in other centers of learning in East Asia that if China takes India seriously as a reference society, she will significantly enhance her symbolic resources in understanding her own past and in appreciating Tibet as the modern manifestation of a venerable cultural heritage. A significant lesson we learn from multiple modernities is that we can be authentically modern without being obsessed with wealth and power.

ENDNOTES

- ¹See Tu Weiming's chapter on Confucianism in Alvind Sharma, ed., *Our Religions* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1993).
- ²Joseph Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate: A Trilogy*, 3 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).
- ³Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
- ⁴Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
- ⁵Louise Henkin, "Postscript," in Wm. Theodore de Bary and Tu Weiming, eds., *Confucianism and Human Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
- ⁶Edwin O. Reischauer, "The Sinic World in Perspective," *Foreign Affairs* (January 1974).
- ⁷Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Wolfgang Schluchter, "Introduction: Paths to Early Modernities—A Comparative View," *Dædalus* 127 (3) (Summer 1998): 2.
- ⁸Björn Wittrock, "Early Modernities: Varieties and Transitions," *ibid.*, 38.

