

Introduction

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THE LAST QUARTER CENTURY has brought remarkable progress across a broad spectrum of domains. The recent worldwide recession notwithstanding, global wealth has increased at historically unprecedented rates. Medical advances have made life expectancies around the world the highest in history. The Internet and smartphone revolutions have made information almost miraculously accessible to an ever-increasing portion of the world's people. And democracy movements across North Africa and the Middle East have raised hopes for the ideals of universal suffrage and human rights.

Yet alongside these undeniably positive effects of the contemporary processes of industrialization and globalization there have come widening gaps of wealth, income, resource use, and risk. Recognition has dawned that human activity is capable of adversely affecting such planetary-scale phenomena as the climate, amplifying the conditions for opportunity migration, and causing potentially catastrophic economic disruption. The manufacturing and consumption booms that are fueling global economic growth have accelerated environmental degradation, including urban environments; transportation advances have accentuated the likelihood of global pandemics; development-heightened appetites for energy have made recourse to high-risk fuel extraction and power-generating technologies matters of perceived national necessity; and the conditions for continued economic and political vitality have become ever more intimately keyed to those for volatility.

This “perfect storm” comprised of successes mixed with ever-amplifying challenges has several underlying conditions that encourage us to view our current situation as marking an era-defining shift from prioritizing the technical to giving privilege to what is ethical. First, human beings and our ways of being in the world are complicit in some immediate way for the predicaments we are facing. Second, these predicaments are not constrained by national or social

boundaries. Crises such as pandemics and global warming have global reach and affect everyone regardless of nationality or status. Third, an organic relationship obtains among this set of pressing challenges, rendering them zero-sum—we either address them all or we can resolve none of them. This means that these challenges cannot be met seriatim by individual players. Rather, we are facing largely human-precipitated predicaments that can only be engaged wholesale by a world community acting in concert. Finally, the predicaments with which we find ourselves ever more powerfully confronted can only be resolved by effecting a radical change in human intentions, values, and practices.

At the same time, however, the growth dynamics of the “network society” and “global informational capitalism” are fueled by the multiplication and magnification of differences. In combination with the near ubiquitous embrace of democratic ideals that urge respect for individual voices, there is a glaring absence of a robust global culture of respectful and open deliberation. The stage is thus set for intensifying confrontations among groups and value systems, each claiming rights to sovereign conduct—conditions that are ill-suited to global predicament resolution. A signal result is the growing awareness of the limits of liberalism writ at global scale in a world of increasingly complex interdependencies. Corollary to this is a growing recognition of the need to consider alternatives to the bifurcation of the liberal and illiberal approaches to world order that framed the conflicts of the Cold War era and that continues to inform much of contemporary national policy-making and international relations.

In a single generation, the rise of Asia, and particularly the rise of China, has precipitated a sea change in the prevailing economic and political order of the world. In the quarter century since 1989, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum has grown to include twenty-one Asia-Pacific nations with 40 percent of the world’s population, the GDP in the Asia-Pacific region has more than tripled, and trade in and with the region has increased by over 400 percent. The Chinese economy has grown at annual double-digit rates to overtake Japan as the second largest economy in the world, and is predicted to become the world’s largest economy at some time in the 2020s.

Asian development generally and the global impact of China’s growth more specifically are producing seismic changes in the world’s economic order and international relations. To date, these changes have remained largely entrained with the troubling dynamics of the “perfect storm” noted above. But this reconfiguration of economic and political dominance nevertheless opens possibilities for cultural changes of the sort required to challenge a world cultural order that has long been dominated by a powerful liberalism, especially since this liberalism has proven impotent with respect to the global predicaments and equity issues that promise to shape the course of the twenty-first century. Challenges might be posed, for example, from the perspectives of indigenous peoples, or

from religious traditions like Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. But there is much to recommend considering the cultural resources offered by what Robert Bellah referred to as “secular religions” like Confucianism.

When we look for the cultural resources necessary to respond to global predicaments, primary among them are resources suited to replacing the familiar competitive pattern of single actors pursuing their own self-interest with a collaborative pattern of players strengthening possibilities for coordination across national, ethnic, and religious boundaries. As is now widely appreciated, Confucian cultures celebrate the relational values of deference and interdependence. That is, relationally constituted persons are to be understood as embedded in and nurtured by unique, transactional patterns of relations—a conception of person that contrasts rather starkly with the more familiar model of discrete, self-determining individuals that is an artifact of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western European approaches to modernization and nation-state building and that has become closely associated with liberal democracy. Might a contemporary Confucian ethic that locates moral conduct within a thick and richly textured pattern of family, community, and natural relations be a force for challenging and changing the international cultural order?

James P. Carse provides us with a distinction between finite and infinite games that might be useful in beginning to think through how Confucian values could make a difference in a newly emerging cultural order.¹ Using the “game” as an analogy for purposeful human endeavors, James Carse distinguishes between finite games that are played to win by single actors according to a finite set of rules over a finite period of time. Finite games thus have specifiable beginnings and ends, and result in both winners and losers. The pervasiveness of what has become an ideology of individualism and rational-choice theory makes finite games a familiar model of the way in which we are inclined to think about our daily transactions as particular persons, as corporations, and as sovereign states, across a range of activities that entail competition, including sports, business, education, and foreign affairs.

Infinite games are different. They are not played to win, but rather to enhance the quality of play. Infinite games thus have no discernible beginnings or endings, and rather than focusing on competition among single actors, they focus attention on strengthening relationships with the ultimate goal of sharing in advancing human flourishing, not sorting out winners from losers. The relationship among family members might be a good example of the infinite games we play, where parents are resolutely committed to continuing to strengthen the relationship they have with their children so that together they can respond productively to whatever increasingly complex problems their lives lived together might present. In the case of infinite games, the interdependence of relationships means that the success and prosperity of parents and children

are coterminous and mutually entailing—they either succeed or fail together. Infinite games are always win-win or lose-lose.

What is Confucianism? In English this tradition takes its name from “Confucius,” but not so in Chinese. “Confucianism” as *ruxue* 儒學 does not appeal to the person of Confucius; it is rather the learning of the *ru* class of intellectuals dating back to the Shang dynasty who are responsible for inheriting the tradition, reforming and reauthorizing it for their own time and place, and then passing it on to the succeeding generation with the recommendation that they do the same. It is for this reason that we have argued for a *narrative* rather than an *analytical* understanding of Confucianism.² Confucian philosophies are not finite games playing in hope of winning argumentative victories, but rather as infinite games of continually enhancing relational quality in response to always changing circumstances.

In short, framing our question as “What is Confucianism?” in analytical terms tends to essentialize Confucianism as a specific ideology—a technical philosophy—that can be stipulated with varying degrees of detail and accuracy. “What” is a question that is perhaps more successfully directed at attempts at systematic philosophy where through analysis one can seek to abstract the formal, cognitive structure in the language of principles, theories, and concepts. However, the “what” question is at best a first step in evaluating the content and worth of a holistic and thus fundamentally aesthetic tradition that takes as its basic premise the uniqueness of each and every situation, and in which the goal of ritualized living is to redirect attention back to the level of concrete feeling. Beyond the “what” question, we need to ask more importantly after the always transforming and reforming content of a still persistent tradition; that is, we need to address Confucian *practice*. Thus, our central question is: *how* has “Confucianism” functioned historically generation after generation within the specific conditions of an evolving Chinese culture to try to make the most of its circumstances?

However we might choose to characterize “Confucianism,” it is more than any particular set of precepts or potted ideology identified post hoc within different phases or epochs of China’s cultural narrative. Confucianism is not so much an isolatable doctrine or a commitment to a certain belief structure as it is the continuing narrative of a community of people—the center of an ongoing “way” or *dao* of thinking and living. Approaching the story of Confucianism as a continuing cultural narrative presents us with a rolling, continuous, and always contingent tradition out of which emerges its own values and its own logic. A *narrative* understanding of Confucianism is made available to us by drawing relevant correlations among specific historical figures and events. Confucianism is importantly biographical and genealogical—the stories of formative models. And in reflecting on the lives of Chinese *philosophers*—a survey of

often passionate, sometimes courageous intellectuals who as heirs to the tradition of the “scholar-official” (*shi* 士) advance their own programs of human values and social order—we become immediately aware that any account of the existential, practical, and resolutely historical nature of this tradition makes it more (and certainly less) than what would be defined as “philosophers” doing “philosophy” within the contemporary Western context.

Over time, this intergenerational embodiment and transmission of an aggregating Confucian culture spread throughout the East Asian world of Korea, Japan, and Vietnam to become a pan-Asian phenomenon that over the centuries has shaped and been shaped by this family of distinctive and yet inter-related cultures. And, the evidence today is that many in Asia feel that Confucian culture can make valuable contributions to the articulation of a new world cultural order. Enormous resources are being invested in China and other Asian cultural spheres to renew traditional Confucian learning as a repository of values and conceptual resources that can be drawn upon to shape their own responses to contemporary dynamics. Within China, we have over the past two decades witnessed a dramatic rise of “Schools of Canonical Learning” (*guoxueyuan* 國學院) across college campuses. And internationally, at the best institutions of higher learning across America and the globe, we have seen the proliferation of now almost four hundred Chinese government-funded “Confucius Institutes” (*Kongzi xueyuan* 孔子學院). It is clear that Confucian philosophy is being actively promoted both domestically and internationally by a collaboration of academic and political forces within China itself.

In July 2013 academic representatives from the traditional Confucian cultures—China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam—together with other international scholars held a preparatory meeting at Sungkyunkwan University in Korea and agreed to establish a World Consortium for Research in Confucian Cultures. This initial meeting was followed by the inaugural conference of this Consortium at the University of Hawai‘i and the East-West Center in October 2014. The conference sought to explore critically the meaning and value of Confucian cultures in a newly emerging world cultural order by asking the following questions: What are Confucian values within the context of the disparate Confucian cultures of China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam? What relevance do Confucian values have for a changing world cultural order? What are the limits and the historical failings of Confucian culture and how are these weaknesses to be critically addressed? How must Confucian culture be reformed in our generation if it is to become an international resource for positive change? This volume of essays aims at opening intercultural prospects on answering these questions, but also on responding to the distinctive ethical and moral challenges of flourishing together in an increasingly interdependent and predicament-rich world.

This book is divided into four parts: “Confucianisms in a Changing World Cultural Order,” “Different Confucianisms,” “Clarifying Confucian Values,” and “Limitations and the Critical Reform of Confucian Cultures.” The four chapters in Part I, “Confucianisms in a Changing World Cultural Order,” argue that Confucian traditions are not merely of historical interest, but also offer resources that have significant and growing contemporary relevance. Part II, “Different Confucianisms,” addresses the historically and culturally complex nature of Confucianism. The five chapters in this section explore how differences among Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese engagements with Confucian texts and practices open up spaces for mutual contribution—opportunities for “growing” Confucian thought through intercultural comparison.

Part III, “Clarifying Confucian Values,” includes two chapters that seek to bring key Confucian values into high-resolution focus: contingency and loyalty. Whereas a main stream of Western philosophy has focused on the search for epistemic certainty and the derivation of universal principles in accordance with which to organize the moral life, the evolution of Confucian thought has been rooted in bringing the concrete and particular roles and relationships that are constitutive of personal and communal identity into ever higher *resolution* and then deepening the *resolve* with which one strives to enhance relational quality. Examining the concepts of contingency and loyalty makes usefully concrete how Confucian commitments structure the moral life. Finally, the four chapters in Part IV, “Limitations and the Critical Reform of Confucian Cultures,” acknowledge the open nature of Confucian traditions and the importance therein of reflexive critique—a readiness to revise and reform the constellation of values that shape the emergence and evolution of Confucian cultures. It is only a vital and critical Confucianism that will have real relevance for a new and emerging world cultural order.

Notes

1. James Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games* (New York: Ballantine, 1987).
2. “New Confucianism: A Native Response to Western Philosophy,” in *Chinese Political Culture*, ed. Hua Shiping (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001).