

**Reconsidering the Term 'Asian Values' and Reformulating the Debate:  
What is Ethical in 'Confucian Ethics'?**

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I

On hearing the term "Asian values," what first comes to my mind is the image of Professor T. W. de Bary at Columbia University who possessed such penetrating eyes even in his late seventies. I attended his seminars on Neo-Confucianism in 1997 and 1998. Early drafts of de Bary's *Asian Values and Human Rights: A Confucian Communitarian Perspective* and some writings included in *Confucianism and Human Rights* were discussed from time to time during these seminars. As is clear in these recently published books, de Bary felt uneasy with the term "Asian values." He viewed words like "Confucian" and "Asian" as terms ideologically employed in support and justification of Lee Kwan Yew's style of authoritarian statism and Deng Xiaoping's developmental communist regime. He was critical of the practice of using "Confucianism" and "Asian values" as a way to justify the *jaebeol* (conglomerate) and corporate cronyism observable in Asian corporate culture.

Above all, de Bary considered it nonsensical to ignore the complexity of Asia and the diverse historical and cultural traditions of the region by bundling them together under this one term as if homogeneous Asian values indeed existed. In the same vein, in his critique of Samuel Huntington, he pointed out that what Huntington called "the Confucian cultural zone" included a wide variety of cultural differentiations and influences, including Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Hinduism and other indigenous popular beliefs. He lamented what he considered the unfounded nature of Huntington's arguments.

De Bary strived to find something universally shared across all humanity within Confucianism. To him, Confucianism represented, on the one hand, a mixture of individual autonomy and social concerns, and, on the other hand, the sprout of constitutional liberalism. He attempted to trace the former in the spirit of self-learning and the *hyangyak* (state-built Confucian schools) and *seowon* (private Confucian academies) movement, and the latter in Huang Zongxi's *Mingyi daifanglu* (*Waiting for the Dawn*). While remaining wary of the possible utilization of the discourse on human rights by the imperial hegemony of the West, he attempted to prove that aspects of the elements fundamental to modern human rights existed in the Confucian tradition.

De Bary sought to illuminate the elements of humanism and liberalism within the Confucian tradition from a universal, progressive perspective. He considered "Asian values" to be moving in the opposite direction, in connection with the attempt to exploit the traditional culture and legacies of the Asian region for 'impure' purposes in the service of particular interests, or for the maintenance of the status quo.<sup>1)</sup>

In general, I agree with de Bary's views on 'Asian values.' The term is politically contaminated and is of no scholarly use. As Bell puts it, we should "dump the term 'Asian Values'" (Bell 2001: 170). In fact, the problematic term 'Asian values' has almost disappeared from scholarly research; it is only infrequently heard in inflammatory catch-phrases such as those of Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir.

Terms like "Confucian values" or "Confucian elements," however, are still widely used in the studies of East Asian development. The term "Confucian values" dispenses with the weaknesses of the term "Asian values" but retains

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1) As Yi Sook-in points out in response to my paper, that de Bary does use the term "East Asian civilization" to encompass Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese and Japanese cultures and to conceptualize their unique cultural and social characteristics. But his concept of civilization is not incommensurable, unlike Huntington's, and he uses the term as part of his effort to find their commensurability with universal human civilization (See de Bary [1998]). Though I do not endorse de Bary's theory completely, I sympathize with his effort to find human universality in Confucianism, and I do not fully accept the Confucian values he internalized.

the intent, operating as a substitute concept with a stronger defense mechanism. I would like to discuss "Confucian values" briefly, rather than the term "Asian values" which has little scholarly significance.

The term "Confucian values" was used long before the term "Asian values" emerged politically. Among the many uses of the term, attention was drawn to the relationship between Confucian values and economic growth when Roderick MacFarquhar spoke of "post-Confucian characteristics" as a factor in the success of the Japanese economy in an article in *The Economist* in 1980. Japan's economic prosperity was soon followed by the economic success of "Asia's four dragons" and the connection between "Confucian values" and (capitalist) economic growth became cemented in mainstream theory in the studies of East Asian development. In 1998, however, this theory was critically challenged by the Asian economic crisis, and discussions to counteract this damage are actively ongoing.

I will not attempt to review existing theories concerning "Confucian values" and their relationship with capitalist economic growth in East Asia or take a side in the debate. I believe Weber's thesis, which provides the prototype to such approaches—his work relating the "Protestant ethic" and "capitalist development"—cannot be substantiated by historical evidence. If Weber's thesis is a fallacy, then its application to the Confucian case, or the so-called theory of Confucian capitalism can hardly be defended.

Weber links early Calvinism and capitalist development in a causal relationship—he terms this an "elective affinity," not an inevitable connection. There's much research that shows that early orthodox Calvinism and Puritanism hindered capitalist development, much less helped it.<sup>2)</sup> Bound by patriarchal authority, early Calvinists opposed free profit-seeking activities. Liberal Calvinists or liberal Puritans emerged from the struggle with orthodox Calvinism in the Netherlands and England in the 17th century. They rejected authoritarian

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2) For a comprehensive review of this issue, see Mackinnon (1988, 1995) and Pellicani (1988), among others.

patriarchism and the existing kinship order to build modern affectionate family units, and become actors of capitalistic profit-making and entrepreneurial activities. The early orthodox Calvinism which caught Weber's attention only served to impede capitalistic development. It was after the defeat of early orthodox Calvinism by liberal Puritans that full-scale capitalism developed (Cox 1959).

Despite this weakness, Weber's work linking religion and modernity offers many valuable insights. The logic connecting the two variables, the "protestant ethic" and "capitalist economic growth," is neither a core element of Weber's theory—though it is not entirely absent—nor an accurate formularization of Weber's thesis. A core concept of Weber's sociology is that modern society and modernity are closely related to mental, religious and ethical elements. Recent research on Weber no longer focuses on the relationship between Calvinism and capitalism; emphasis has moved to the exploration of the association between modernity and methodical lifestyles. In this process, new concepts such as moral autonomy, ethical personality and inner-distance have gained credence (Tenbruck 1980; Hennis 1988; Schroeder 1991).

Following the above line of research, the newly imperative question rising in relation to the "Confucian values" debate is not "Is there a connection between 'Confucian values' and economic development?" but "What is valuable in Confucian values?" or "What is ethical in 'Confucian ethics'?" I would like to reformulate the central questions of the Confucian values debate to reflect this new perspective. The primary focus here is to reveal the kinds of ethics we are discussing, the meanings implied in an ethics related to modernity, and to expose what aspects of modernity-related ethics can be found within Confucian values.

This is a very broad topic, and it is very difficult to address the many involved aspects in the limited amount of time available here. Please allow me to condense and present only some of what I consider to be the core points.

## II

The background of many discussions on the usefulness of the concept of "Asian values," "Oriental values" or "Confucian values" is a commonly-held perception that Western civilization is material and Eastern is spiritual. I think this contrast is only political and has no empirical evidence or scholarly depth. All cultures have both material and spiritual elements; there has been no one civilization which is based on only one of these.

The point at issue in Weber's argument is that modern society has an ethical foundation different from that of traditional societies. Capitalism is one of the economic principles constituting modern society. To Weber, socialism, like capitalism, is also an economic principle in the formation of modern society, though of course capitalism precedes socialism historically and socialism developed in competition with its predecessor. Weber has a pessimistic view of modern society, considering it destined to be shackled by the "iron cage" of instrumental rationality. He believes that socialist societies will suffer this more severely than capitalist societies. With the collapse of socialist regimes, Weber's prophetic viewpoints appear very accurate. However, with the collapse of this strong "iron cage," the progression of modern history seems more hopeful than Weber thought.

Weber considers modern society and the economic principles constituting it (capitalism and socialism) to be universal and to have originated in the West by historical accident. Historical facts appear to support this view. Some disagree, arguing that East and West are two different entities marching on eternally parallel lines and claim that modernity, capitalism and socialism belong to the West. They assert that these have penetrated the East only temporarily and they do not and will never belong to the East. This view only generates unnecessary confusion, and a futile zeal for divisiveness, offering no productive direction.

Weber's viewpoint obviously contains both Eurocentric and Orientalist elements. Furthermore, he claims that before Eurocentrism and Orientalism, only

Protestant doctrines could furnish the ethical foundation for modernity and were compatible with (rational) capitalism have met with much resistance even in Europe and America (especially from Catholic quarters). It is not difficult to critique Weber based on these weaknesses in his argument—on both logical and or historical grounds. However, to enhance the development of the debate on "values," it is more important to grasp and concentrate on the "rational core" of his argument which is still of value.

Weber viewed Calvinist predestination as having an affinity with modernity and capitalism. Key in this assertion is that the causal relationships connecting the secular world and God's will have disappeared. This logic forms the core of the secularization thesis in the sociology of religion. Though Weber's explanation of the relationship between secularization and the work ethic of capitalism is not persuasive, and subject to much criticism, the broader topic of the connection between secularization and ethics in modern society is still a valid and interesting theme. Why do people perform good acts for others without any guarantee or promise of compensation in heaven? Despite the widespread criticism of the ethics of modern society, no one can deny that ethical acts and an ethical realm still exist in modern society. Rather, many argue that the possibility of meeting ethical demands has risen in modern society. How can this be? Weber's sociological work provides a number of hints to answer this question.

Like other classical sociologists such as Marx, Durkheim and Simmel, Weber positively describes the process by which modern society moves beyond the bounds of kinship, locality, and language with the expansion into universal relations. However, since that universal expansion is led by instrumental rationality, he was pessimistic about the future of modern society. Contemporary sociologists, such as Anthony Giddens, Scott Lash and Ulrich Beck who have developed the thesis of classical sociologists, summarize the core of modernity not as the universalization of instrumental rationality but as reflexivity, a higher and more abstract concept. Reflexivity is the act of consistently and critically

reflecting on given bounds and conditions with the aim of attempting to transcend and expand them (Giddens 1991; Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994).

Reflexivity can be applied to the ethics of modernity as well. Most important in this is the position and meaning of the Other. Up to the 17th century, the word "stranger" was similar in meaning to the word "enemy." Strangers and those considered the Other were the objects of suspicion and hostility to the members of a restricted community with no mobility. With the evolution of modern society, "stranger" became a neutral term. The recent deepening interest in the ethical contemplation of the Other is a feature of modernity (Baker 1995; Madison and Fairbairn 1999; Levinas 1969, 2000). Most significant are the conditions that enable ethics in modern society to expand beyond the individual self in the secular context, disregarding God's will which was both the fertile ground and foundation of the traditional era. The transcendental ethics in the traditional era could expand to others within the transcendental being through looking up to the transcendental being (or the absolute transcendental principle). In the modern era, transcendental ethics expands to others by encountering and looking at each other and engaging in communication.

Since Liang Qichao, arguments highlighting the modern nature of Confucianism have often stressed that Confucianism itself is a secular religion. According to this view, Confucianism was from its origination, an enlightened, secular, and thus modern religion without a belief in a transcendental being, miracles, or other "superstitions." Liang Qichao may have been attempting to establish connections between Confucianism and Deism, or the rational secular religion of the Enlightenment period. However, his claim ignored (probably intentionally) the fact that Confucianism in the traditional era practiced ancestor worship very seriously and developed the transcendental concept of the Heavenly Lord (上帝). In addition, the Confucian precepts of the Sacred Kings (聖王) and the Sacred Transmission of the Way(道統) contain strong sentiments of ethical transcendentalism. Denying the religiosity of Confucianism, Liang

Qichao might have thought he convincingly defeated Western prejudice against Confucianism. However, this is not the case, because religiosity and religious transcendentalism founded the evolution of modern ethics. Weber failed to see these transcendental aspects in Confucianism. He failed because his notion of the transcendental was limited to soteriological religion, that is, other-worldly transcendentalism. But as some scholars observe, there is strong 'this-worldly transcendentalism' in Confucianism (Eisenstadt 1986; Helman 1989; Taylor 1990).

In this context, the difference between traditional and modern societies is that in secularized modern society, transcendence is internalized in individual conscience and human relations. In the modern society of enlightened consciousness, the transcendental being that dominated the human mind throughout the traditional era functions as a force that places ethics in the individual conscience and opens up interpersonal relations. The claim that a transcendental being was absent in Confucianism from its inception is tantamount to arguing that Confucianism has less affinity with the ethical aspects of modernity than with the negative aspects of the modern era, i.e., secular motivations and the 'material interests are everything' mentality. (Actually, this is the key point of Weber's criticism of Confucianism.) To summarize, the bud of expanded ethics which has emerged in the modern era and surpasses the closed self exists in every culture, and Confucianism offers no exception. As Christianity has the story of the good Samaritan, the Confucian classic *Analects* has this phrase in Chapter 17, as Yang Huo states: "So close to each other in nature, yet so far from each other in habit." Meaning that despite the differences among different people caused by different customs, peoples' minds are very similar.

In my understanding, Confucianism is structured on the combination of two key ethical principles. One is the ethics of the oneness of the family and the state based on clan rules and the other is the ethics of individual cultivation based on "self-learning." The former has relates little to modern ethics, so it will be discarded for the purpose of this discussion, but the latter requires



refinement and further expansion. As seen in the eight principles in *Daehak* (Daxue, *The Great Learning*), the two have a deep connection historically, so it will be most difficult to separate them. The political form of the former can be called Confucian *moralpolitik* and its appearance is very similar to that of religious fundamentalist politics. Needless to say, a fundamentalist fusion of morality and politics does not fit modern political ethics and can be very dangerous.<sup>3)</sup> The work of separation will not be complete until the ethics of individual refinement in Confucianism are separated from the clan ethics of familism. Ultimately, the ethics of the family and the clan, which is at the core of Confucianism, must be discarded. It is difficult to predict the form of Confucian ethics that will emerge as suitable to modern conditions in this process. We are only able to debate the direction of such reforms.

I believe that Confucian family law, and the Confucian tenets of propriety and individual refinement via self-cultivation are all founded on the transcendental demands of an ethics-based religion. If this were not the case, one could not explain the countless examples of Confucian scholars who denounced the wrong deeds and impropriety of kings at the risk of their own lives, in the search to fulfill the requirements of 'the Way' by shedding worldly fame in this world and residing in their own serene, autonomous world. Though evidence cannot be provided in detail for this argument here, I would like to refer to a few papers I have published on this topic (Kim 2000; 2002). The endless historicity of the drive to transcend this world extant in the Confucian

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3) Prof. Kim Joo-seong's comment on my paper that the fusion between morality and politics in Confucianism needs to be emphasized at this point in time does not make a clear distinction between morality in modern politics and morality in traditional Confucian politics. If morality in modern democratic politics is based on liberty, equality and fairness, morality in Confucian politics is founded on kinship ethics and religious orthodoxy. As we can see in the factional politics of the Joseon Dynasty, it was an inevitable result of the fusion between politics and fundamentalist orthodoxy that Confucian moral politics developed into martyrdom politics or the politics of honorable revenge. After all, the kind of morality needed for modern politics differs from the type of morality needed in Confucian society. The statement that ethical elements must be emphasized in contemporary politics is very different from the claim that Confucian moral politics must be restored.

tradition has fostered the obstinate persistence of ethical elements in every aspect of the politics, economy and culture in contemporary modern Korean society. It is important that these ethical principles be adapted to suit the specific conditions of modern society and be developed creatively. I believe this is the key for Korea to establish a culturally and spiritually mature society while simultaneously achieving material prosperity.

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