

## NO (LOGICAL) PLACE FOR ASIAN VALUES IN EAST ASIA'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT\*

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*This paper tries to challenge the pro-Confucian hypotheses which explains that the Confucian ethic has contributed to the rise of capitalist East Asia. First of all, the concept of East Asia is too abstract and too vague to serve as a proper unit of analysis. Second, it is difficult to employ cultural tradition as an autonomous and independent variable for a meaningful analysis of economic development. Third, the alleged positive correlation between Confucianism and East Asia's economic success fails to make sense in terms of logical causality as well as empirical evidence. And finally, the debate over Asian values seems to be a geopolitical and ideological struggle rather than a purely academic polemic. Instead of the culturalist approach, this article demands to locate the possibly Confucian elements within the historical dynamic for the better explanation of East Asia's economic development.*

### INTRODUCTION

Debates on Asian values are rapidly on the rise. Despite an abysmal crisis of the East Asian economy in the late 1990s, some scholars insist on underlining the positive aspects of Asian values which, they believe, are responsible for the region's decades-long economic performance as well as for the recent transition to political democracy. The so-called 'post-Confucian challenge' (MacFarquhar, 1980) is, to be sure, a drastic reversal of the conventional understanding of Confucianism which characterizes Asian values as playing a negative role in the process of modernization. This is the backdrop against which an increasing number of scholars have become concerned with Confucianism in East Asia.

As a matter of fact, the question of whether the Confucian ethic has contributed to the rise of industrial East Asia has attracted considerable public attention and generated a great deal of scholarly inquiry since the 1960s. At first, it was Japan's capitalist economic development in the 20th century

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which triggered the re-examination of Max Weber's theory of capitalism. It was argued that the so-called 'low or vulgar Confucianism,' 'Tokugawa religion,' or the 'Japanese ethos' was a functional equivalent of the Protestant ethic in the West (see Bellah, 1957, 1968; Eisenstadt, 1968; Morishima, 1982). However, Japan was not the only case which challenged Weber's theory. Other countries of East Asia also showed a regional ability to achieve and sustain the world's highest economic growth since the 1960s. In order to explain the 'economic miracle' in South Korea, Taiwan, Hongkong and Singapore, serious attention was given to their common cultural heritage called the Confucian tradition (see Berger, 1986, 1988; Cho H-I, 1998; Choi, 1998; Kim D-J, et al., 1999; Kim H-K, 1995; Kook, 1999; Lew, 1997; Tai, 1989; Tu, 1984, 1996).

The efforts to 'bring Asian values back in' have produced the concept of 'Confucian capitalism.' According to it, the Confucian emphasis on a strong state and political authority, education and self-cultivation, frugality and thrift, hard work and labor discipline, social harmony and group-orientation, social civility and the role of intellectuals has been quite conducive to the capitalist development in East Asia. Cho H-I (1998: 95) contends that even though capitalism originated in Western Europe, its eventual growth in East Asia implies certain cultural similarities between Christianity and Confucianism. "Without the Confucian legacy," Lew (1997: 75) even argues, "East Asia's economic success was impossible." Certainly, this view is a repetition and continuation of the culturalist argument in the Weberian tradition, but, in consequence, it arrives at an almost complete repudiation of Max Weber who denied the possibility of a self-made Asian capitalism.

This paper does not intend to underestimate the virtue of Confucian ethic and thought. Rather, it withholds any sort of value judgement of Asian values themselves. It is also not the purpose of this article to answer directly the question of whether the Confucianism has contributed to the rise of industrial East Asia or not. This paper only aims at a critical assessment of the current mode of explanation regarding the positive relationship between Asian values and the capitalist transformation in East Asia. We believe that most of the existing literature on the 'Confucian capitalism' fails to show the conducive effect of Confucianism on East Asian capitalism *in a reasonably logical manner*. Unless both stricter theoretical discussions and richer empirical evidences are provided, we fear, the argument for the Confucian capitalism hypothesis would render itself less convincing and persuasive.

## EAST ASIA AS (WISHFULLY) 'IMAGINED COMMUNITY'

In order to discuss a correlation between Asian values and the region's capitalist development, whether it be positive or negative, the term East Asia must be, first of all, clearly defined. It is true that East Asia has, to some extent, a geographical reality on the world map. But this does not necessarily mean that the East Asian countries share a distinctive commonality which is not found in the other parts of the world. Justification for a regional focus is customarily found in the common heritage of the religion, the Confucian tradition (Rozman, 1991: 6). But Confucianism has been only one of the many religions in East Asia along with Taoism, Buddhism and so on. Cultures in East Asia have contained much more than just the Confucian heritage. In the Tokugawa Japan, for instance, it was the development, in some Buddhist sects, of innerworldly asceticism and of a work ethic which went hand in glove with the rise of the merchant class (Golzio, 1985).

Furthermore, the alleged common Confucian tradition in East Asian countries has not only considerably weakened, in general, but also it has been significantly transformed due to the acculturation process following Western invasion. It is well known that Japan's modernization was achieved through the nationwide campaign for de-Confucianization and pro-Europeanization. In contemporary Korea, the Christian population outnumbers the Confucian population, according to official statistics. Also, there are many cases of economic growth in the non-Confucian NIEs as well, including such nations as Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. In short, it is difficult to define the scope and characteristics of East Asia as a proper unit of analysis.

Of course, the most typical East Asian nations are China, Japan, and Korea. Their traditional societies were, however, rather a universe unto themselves, lacking in political alignments or large-scale flows of trade over a long period of time. This region's separate countries were, in fact, insulated from one another before the 19th century (Ko, 1995). Even when the Confucianization of Korea took place, Korean society did not become a copy of China as Koreans adapted Confucian principles to indigenous patterns (Robinson, 1991: 206). Historically speaking, therefore, traditional East Asia was hardly comparable to feudalistic Europe in terms of cross-national cultural universality (Cho B-H, 1997: 27) as well as of conditions conducive to the construction of the kind of significant trading network (Palais, 1998: 18). The concept of East Asia itself was of external origin *via* the Western impact (Han, 1996: 1730). The three countries' seeming similarity based upon

Confucianism is somewhat deceptive when such variables as ethnicity, language, and custom are accurately taken into account.<sup>1</sup>

In particular, China, Japan and Korea have been quite antagonistic to one another in recent history, as war and colonization have characterized East Asia in the turbulent 20th century. Even today, each country is too big and too unique in its own way to be united with one another conceptually. Furthermore, East Asia is the only region in the world where the nations are divided into capitalist and socialist countries. Therefore, it is hard to expect them to form a European-style regional community in the near future. According to Benedict Anderson (1983: 6-7), "communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined." In this sense, the concept of East Asia in conventional literature seems to be a 'wishful' construction of an imagined community. Considering its flexible boundaries, cultural diversity, and structural heterogeneity, the concept of East Asia exists not in reality but only in the intentional efforts to invent it as an 'inverse image' of the West.

#### PROBLEMS OF THE CULTURALIST APPROACH

The argument that Asian values have contributed to the rise of capitalism in East Asia derives from a culturalist approach. The thesis of the Confucian capitalism is based upon the culture-centered modernization perspective. According to the classical modernization perspective, traditional values are by and large obstacles to modernization, and Marxist and dependency theory also hold, in general, a negative view on traditional culture in the non-Western world. The new modernization studies insist that, however, traditional values may sometimes be very helpful in promoting modernization (So, 1990: 56). A typical case of this can be found in the so-called Confucian capitalism.

On the other hand, the debate over the Confucian capitalism means a struggle with the ghost of Max Weber, who is often misunderstood as an idealist or a culturalist. The efforts to refute Weber's theory of capitalist development are futile, however. First of all, Weber is wrongfully seen as the defender of the role of ideas in history. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber seemed to be showing that capitalism itself was produced not by economic forces but by the influence of religious ideas; the drive of Puritans to work out their anxiety over their salvation or damna-

<sup>1</sup>It is interesting to know that, according to Huntington (1996), the Japanese civilization does not belong to the Sinic civilization.

tion, which was left in doubt by the theological doctrine of predestination (Weber, 1958). However, the Protestant ethic was, according to Weber, responsible only in part for the rise of capitalism in Europe. He never intended to suggest that the Protestant ethic was the exclusive and the most important cause of capitalism. The central reality of Weber was that he saw both the world and history as multidimensional (Collins, 1994: 84).

It is true that Weber emphasized the connection of the spirit of modern economic life with the rational ethics of ascetic Protestantism. And his subsequent explorations of the value systems of India and China verified capitalism's uniqueness in the European cultural background (Weber, 1960, 1964). For Weber, capitalism's emergence in Europe was seen as an event unique to Europe's cultural formation, for only within the religious conditions that Europe provided was the transformation to capitalism possible. But he overtly concluded that "we treat here only one side of the causal chain" (Weber, 1958: 27). In order to answer the question of why modern capitalism emerged in Western Europe, rather than in one of the other great civilizations, he happened to find a 'selective affinity' between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism.

As an historian, Weber did not intend to say that there are general laws in history. According to Weber, history is just the endless unfolding of particular events. Furthermore, since the rise of capitalism in Europe occurred just once, it might have been simply an historical accident, which makes it additionally difficult either to confirm or dispute the relationship between a particular type of religion and a certain mode of economic system. Therefore, as Gary Hamilton (1985) notes, what makes East Asia *East Asia* cannot be learned from a theory about Europe in the Weberian fashion. The fundamental problem in Confucian capitalism lies in the culturalist approach itself which, rather strictly speaking, tends to misunderstand and distort Weber.

The culturalist explanation of social change has other limitations as well. Culture often explains everything and nothing at the same time. In this context, it is of no wonder that the same Confucianism which was once responsible for the stagnation of the Asian economy, is now seen as enhancing its capitalist transformation. As a matter of fact, almost all religions in the world have been proven to have some positive elements for the capitalist development. Certain factors which can produce the spirit of capitalism are found not only in Protestantism and Confucianism, but also in Catholicism (Novak, 1993), Judaism, and Islamism (see Braudel, [1986] 1996: 218). This indicates that a society's religious heritage is far from an independent factor when considering effects on its economic destiny. Culture is not a destiny as

far as a country's economic development is concerned.

In addition, the culturalist approach tends to assume an actorless and conflict-free progress of social change. Social actors, whether they be collective or individual, are regarded as 'prisoners of culture' which simply play their given roles for the harmony and development of the society. Therefore, the culturalist approach is hostage to the 'functionalist trap.' Furthermore, the culturalist approach which places more emphasis on the internal society usually neglects external or international factors. The historical evolution of capitalism as a world-system and the geopolitical arrangement of the nation-states are by and large not properly taken into account by the culturalist explanation. Capitalism was, however, more than an internal and domestic affair from the very beginning. As Karl Marx ([1848] 1978: 476-77) noted, capitalism, which has a cosmopolitan character, "chases over the whole surface of the globe."

Finally, the culturalist approach appears to confuse certain characteristics of the Asian capitalism with those of late capitalism. According to the so-called 'late or late, late development thesis' (see Gerschenkron, 1962; Hirschman, 1958), the intervention of the strong state was a major driving force for the industrial revolutions in Germany, Russia, Japan, and in many Third World countries. Ronald Dore (1973) argues that the difference in factory organization between England and Japan was more due to the timing of industrialization, rather than to the cultural heritages of the two countries, even though Confucianism may have brought a more human face to industrial development in Japan. If such is the case, it is difficult to say exactly what kind of role Confucianism has been playing in East Asia's political economy. The difference between the West and the East cannot easily override that of the past and the present in its explanatory power in the discussion of global capitalism.

#### CAUSALITIES IN TROUBLE

Even when we accept the validity of the culturalist explanation, the argument for the Confucian capitalism still shows many significant problems in the construction of a meaningful causality between Confucianism and East Asia's capitalist development. In other words, let alone the appropriateness of the culture-centered approach *per se*, the alleged causalities shown in the existing literature on the Confucian capitalism seem to have a number of internal drawbacks. The cause-and-effect relationship between Confucianism and capitalist development in general tends to be assumed rather than to be analyzed. The following are some examples.

In the first place, the status of Confucianism as an independent variable is quite indeterminable and insecure. From its inception in ancient China, Confucianism has undergone enormous change over time and has evolved into diverse versions in different societies. Thus, it is even hard to tell which elements of the so-called Confucian culture are exactly the essential Confucian portion. As Berger (1988) argues, it is difficult to attribute so-called 'this-worldliness' of the East Asian mentality only to Confucianism because the same idea holds for folk Taoism, shamanism, and Shintoism, for example. In short, Confucianism is not a single entity and Asian values exist in the plural. Paradoxical conclusions regarding the role of Confucianism in East Asia's capitalist transformation are, therefore, primarily due to the imprecise nature of the independent variable of Confucianism.

Moreover, some Confucian factors which are conducive to the capitalist development in East Asia are rather taken selectively and emphasized intentionally. For instance, the thesis of the Confucian capitalism tends to underline the role of the strong state and its active interventions for social welfare, moral stress on education, and the group-oriented social system. But it is also true that Confucianism involves some detrimental elements for capitalist transformation, such as repression of human creativity and social diversity, moral disdain of commerce and industry, and the rigidity of social stratification. It is not too much to say that those scholars in support of the Confucian capitalism see only what they want to see.

The alleged positive correlation between the Confucian ethic and the rise of industrial East Asia seems to be quite spurious as well. For example, the strong state itself cannot be a determining factor in successful economic transformation. More important is the structural conditions under which its strength is able to actively intervene for economic development (Rueschemeyer and Evans, 1985). The state's autonomy *vis-a-vis* civil society as well as its construction of a well-developed bureaucratic machinery are usually regarded as preconditions for the state's successful intervention. In other words, the strong state is not always identical with the so-called 'developmental state.' To have a strong state within the Confucian culture is one thing, and the state's successful intervention for capitalist transformation is another.

A similar critical point can be made against the Confucian emphasis on education. Even though Confucianism, in general, takes education very seriously, the spread of mass education in East Asia actually began only from the late 19th century. China, which has the longest history of Confucian tradition in the world, still has very high illiteracy rate and low participation ratio in school education (Sonoda, 1991: 180). Korea's modern education

system was first introduced by Christian missionaries and colonial bureaucrats. Furthermore, the central importance of mass education since that period was primarily due to its role as the channel for upward mobility rather than simply due to any particular traditional value placed on education (Kim K-D, 1994). What seems to have been figured even more importantly is the pecuniary rewards which are provided by the increased opportunities of formal and mass education.

Nationalism is another case in point. It is true that political authority and the spirit of nationalism did assist state-led economic development in East Asia. However, Confucianism itself knows little about the idea of nationalism. In other words, a more sophisticated sense of identity with the nation-state is less apparent in Confucianism since it asks for crude loyalty to much smaller, limited units of collectivity such as the family. Nationalist sentiment in Korea, for example, is primarily a 20th-century phenomenon when the aggressive actions of Western imperialism in the late 19th century were followed by Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910 (Palais, 1998: 5). In general, we believe that the rise of development-oriented nationalism in East Asia in the 20th century can be attributed mainly to the Prussian-style state or the Fascist state of the Western origin. It is also true that there are many other societies in the world where strong and central governments exist without Confucian backgrounds.

Finally, we can find some inverted causalities between the Confucian ethic and capitalist transformation in East Asia. Hard work and labor discipline which have often been regarded as promoting East Asia's economic success may be in fact *acquired* social values after the introduction of capitalism in the 20th century. In other words, it was the capitalist economic system that made people work against time and be obsessed with punctuality, maybe not *vice versa*. Before the development of capitalism, time was *not* money in traditional East Asian culture. Also, labor discipline required by capitalism has little to do with the inherited moral ethics, it is not the cause but the result of capitalist development. In many cases, the discipline was imposed by the state's labor policy in East Asia. In short, Confucianism should not be used in opportunistic ways or *ex post facto*. We might as well remember here that, for Weber, the religious origin of the Protestant ethic was an early element in the history of European capitalism. Thus, most people today work within capitalism because they are compelled to do so, whether to simply survive or to get rich, not because they perceive capitalist accumulation as a route to moral salvation (Brook, 1995: 95).



## ASIAN VALUES AS (POLITICALLY) 'INVENTED TRADITION'

The heated discussions on Asian values seem to have something to do with the political changes in recent years, including the collapse of the Cold War and the ensuing globalization of American capitalism. And in certain parts of East Asia, the Confucian tradition has been intentionally exaggerated and highlighted for various political purposes. In this respect, the alleged Asian values may be nothing more than what Eric Hobsbawm (1983: 1) calls the 'invented tradition.' According to him, it means "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past."

In the post-Cold War world, according to Samuel Huntington (1996: 21-29), global politics has become multipolar and multicivilizational for the first time in history. In this new world, he believes, "the most pervasive, important, and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor, or other economically defined groups, but between peoples belonging to different cultural entities." As a matter of fact, the clash of civilization was triggered in part by the United States whose hegemony has expanded dramatically all over the world since the demise of the Cold War. The United States especially tries now to maintain and strengthen her dominant economic position in East Asia where the most dynamic capitalist development in the world has taken place during recent decades. The American attempt to bring down the curtain on East Asia's economic challenge usually goes "under the neoliberal legitimation of Smithian free markets and Lockean democracy and civil society" (Cumings, 1998: 51).

In response, the forerunners of Asian values including Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong of Singapore, as well as Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia, express a strong desire for Asian solidarity against the Western world. They admonish Americans not to foist their system indiscriminately on societies in which it will not work since "culture is destiny" (see Zakaria, 1994; Goh, 1994). The so-called 'America-bashers' in 'Singapore school' is now acquiring many supporters in China, Japan, Thailand, and Korea. In Hegel's words, the debate over the superiority of a particular culture resembles "the struggle for recognition" in the post-Cold War world (see Fukuyama, 1992: 135). In this sense, the argument for or against Asian values seems to be an ideological phenomenon rather than a purely academic interest.

The problem is that Asian values proponents aiming to denounce liberal democracy as a specifically Western value system alien to Asian culture

ironically rely on Western normative languages and concepts. As Inoue (1999) notes, to silence voices calling for human rights, they invoke state sovereignty which is a distinctively Western concept in origin. The dichotomy between an individual West and a communitarian Asia shown in the existing literature on the Confucian capitalism is also quite exaggerated. Even though the United States tends to neglect certain social and economic rights, as Donnelly (1999) argues, the welfare states of Western Europe have a relatively good record of implementing such rights. If Japan, Korea, and Taiwan have done well at achieving a relatively egalitarian form of economic development, other states in Asia, including China and even Singapore, sacrifice economic and social rights to the pursuit of market-driven rapid growth.

Of course, Asian values may provide us with many useful ideas when we critically reflect the Western model of modernization process itself during the past centuries (see Ham, 1998 for instance). Yet, it is very hard to suppress the suspicion that even the professedly East Asia-centered debate over Asian values is in actuality not so much an academic export to as an import from those Western scholars who, critical of the Western model of modernization process, search for a new non-Western cultural paradigm. In other words, it is hard to sustain an unquestionable expectation that Asian values will represent the very way to overcome the limits of Western values. More important is thus to harmonize both Asian and Western values in a mutually complementary fashion for the future postmodern society (Jun, 1999). In order to achieve such a goal, the positive and negative side of Asian values need first of all to be accurately classified. We should not intentionally 'invent' or 'retrieve' the Confucian tradition for a political mobilization of social science.

## CONCLUSION: BRINGING HISTORY BACK IN

Thus far, we have discussed some problems in the 'post-Confucian' argument which regards Asian values as a factor conducive to East Asia's economic development. This paper, however, does not agree with the pro-Confucian hypotheses. First of all, the concept of East Asia is too abstract and too vague to serve as a proper unit of analysis. Second, it is difficult to employ cultural tradition as an autonomous and independent variable for a meaningful analysis of economic development. Third, the alleged positive correlation between Confucianism and East Asia's economic success fails to make sense in terms of logical causality as well as empirical evidence. Finally, the debate over Asian values seems to be a geopolitical and ideolog-

ical struggle rather than a purely academic polemic.

Here, we suggest, instead of the culturalist approach, to 'bring history back in' for the better explanation of East Asia's economic development. This does not necessarily mean, however, to discard the culturalist position and jump to the opposite extreme held by the institutionalists (Berger 1988: 9-10). One cannot simply dismiss the argument that cultural factors affect economic activities. Yet, we demand to locate the possibly Confucian elements within the historical dynamics. We believe that capitalism, by its own nature, is indifferent to cultural and religious differences. The appetite of capitalism is so enormous that it is capable of gulping down any kind of religion or culture in the world.

As Guy Sorman (1994/1995) aptly argues, traditional China's failure to develop a capitalist market economy was not due to the dominant Confucian ethic, but due to the bureaucratic repression of the emerging capitalist sprout in the name of Confucius. What needs to be noted here is not the function of Confucianism as a unified concept, but the social institutions and state policies within the given Confucian cultural traditions. The same Confucian element may be either conducive or inimical to capitalist activity, depending on the context and the mechanism of interaction among various forces (Kim K-D, 1994: 103). Therefore, attention should be paid to the structural conditions in which a particular culture is produced, consumed, distributed, mobilized, and repressed. In the analysis of the East Asian capitalism, what matters is not the Confucianism itself, but the power relationship behind it.

Taking history and social actors seriously as components in the explanation of East Asia's economic transformation must include the importance of international and world-historical contexts as well, since the culturalist approach tends to focus upon the internal aspect of a society. East Asian capitalism must be seen as closely related, in respects of its cause and accomplishment, to the internationally uneven spread of capitalist economic development and nation-state formation on a world scale. Both the development and underdevelopment of the East Asian countries in the 20th century need to be analyzed in the context of 'world time' as well as in that of their respective structural positions within international arenas. Capitalism as a world-system is so powerful and flexible that it is able to make the same Confucianism either facilitate or hinder economic development in East Asia (Lee, 1998). This is what Immanuel Wallerstein (1996) calls 'historical capitalism.'

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