

Multiple Modernities: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Implications of the East Asian Modernity

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The rise of 'Confucian' East Asia – Japan, the four mini-dragons – suggests that despite global trends defined primarily in economic and geopolitical terms, cultural traditions continue to exert powerful influences in the modernizing process. 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 seriously flawed, if not totally mistaken. The challenge ahead is the need for global civilizational dialogue as a prerequisite for a peaceful world order.

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Modernity is both a historical phenomenon and a conceptual framework. The idea of multiple modernities is predicated on three interrelated assumptions: the continuous presence of traditions as an active agent in defining the modernizing process, the relevance of non-Western civilizations for the self-understanding of the modern West, and the global significance of local knowledge.

In an exploration of economic culture and moral education in Japan and the four mini-dragons (Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore), the continuous relevance of the Confucian traditions in East Asian modernity is studied from cross-cultural and interdisciplinary perspectives. Each geographic area is greatly varied and each disciplinary approach (philosophical, religious, historical, sociological, political, or anthropological) is immensely complex, and the interaction among them layers the picture with ambiguities. A discussion of them together shows that an appreciation of the Confucian elite's articulation and the habits of the heart of the people informed by Confucian values is crucial for understanding the political economy and the moral fabric of industrial East Asia (Tu Weiming 1996).

'Modernization'

Historically the term 'modernization' was employed to replace 'westernization' in recognition of the universal significance of the modernizing process. Although the modernizing process originated in Western Europe, it has so fundamentally transformed the rest of the world that it must be characterized by a concept much broader than geography. Including the temporal dimension in the conception reveals modernization as the unfolding global trend rather than as a geographically specific dynamic of change.

The concept of modernization is relatively new in academic thinking. It was first formulated in North America in the 1950s by sociologists, notably Talcott Parsons, who be-

lieved that the forces unleashed in highly developed societies, such as industrialization and urbanization, would eventually engulf the whole world. Although these forces could be defined as 'westernization' or 'Americanization', in the spirit of ecumenicalism, the more appropriate and perhaps scientifically neutral term would be 'modernization'.

It is interesting to note that, probably under the influence of intellectual discussion in Japan, the Chinese term for 'modernization', *xiandaihua*, was coined in the 1930s in a series of debates to address issues of development strategies, organized by the most influential newspaper in China, *Shenbao*. The three major debates, which centered on whether agriculture or industry, socialism or capitalism, or Chinese culture or Western learning should have priority in China's attempt to catch up with imperialist powers (including Japan), provide a richly textured discourse in modern Chinese intellectual history (Lo Rongqu 1985). Furthermore, a focused investigation of the Chinese case will help determine the applicability of the concept of modernization to non-Western societies.

However, the claim that East Asian modernity is relevant to the modern West's self-understanding is built on the assumptive reason that if the modernizing process can assume cultural forms substantially different from those of Western Europe and North America, it clearly indicates that neither westernization nor Americanization is adequate in characterizing the phenomenon. Furthermore, East Asian forms of modernization may help scholars of modernization develop a more differentiated and subtle appreciation of the modern West as a complex mixture of great possibilities rather than a monolithic entity impregnated with a unilinear trajectory.

If we begin to perceive modernization from multiple civilizational perspectives, the assertion that what the modern West has experienced must be repeated by the rest of the world is no longer believable. Indeed, upon scrutiny, the modern West itself exhibits conflictual and contradictory orientations, a far cry from a coherent model of development. The difference between European and American approaches to modernization broadly defined gives ample evidence to the argument for diversity within the modern West. Actually, three exemplifications of Western modernity – Britain, France, and Germany – are so significantly different from one another in some of the salient features of the modernizing process that, in essence, none of the local knowledge is really generalizable. This by no means undermines the strong impression that virtually all forms of local knowledge that can be generalized, if not universalized, are Western in origin.

Nevertheless, we are at a critical juncture and must 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 developing a sophisticated understanding of the dynamic interplay between globalization and localization. The case of East Asia is profoundly meaningful for this kind of inquiry. I will focus my attention on Confucian humanism as the basic value system underlying East Asian political economy. Let us begin with a historical observation.

Whether or not Hegel's philosophy of history signaled a critical turn that relegated Confucianism, together with other spiritual traditions in the non-Western world, to the dawn of the Spirit, the common practice in cultural China of defining the Confucian ethic as 'feudal' is predicated on the strong thesis of historical inevitability implicit in the Hegelian vision. The irony is that the whole Enlightenment project as captured by the epoch-making Kantian question, 'What is Enlightenment?' was actually an affirmation that cultural traditions outside the West, notably Confucian China, had already developed an ordered society even without the benefit of revelatory religion.

As understood by contemporary thinkers such as Jurgen Habermas, what happened in the nineteenth century when the dynamics of the modern West engulfed the world in a rest-

less march toward material progress was definitely not the result of a straightforward working out of the Enlightenment. On the contrary, the perceived Enlightenment trajectory of rationality was thoroughly undermined by the unbound Prometheus, symbolizing an unmitigated quest for complete liberation from the past and thorough mastery of nature. The demand for liberation from all boundaries of authority and dogma may have been a defining characteristic of Enlightenment thinking; the aggressive attitude toward nature is also a constituent part of the Enlightenment mentality. To the rest of the world, the modern West, informed by the Enlightenment mentality, has been characterized by conquest, hegemony, and enslavement as well as by models of human flourishing.

Hegel, Marx, and Weber shared the ethos that, despite all its shortcomings, the modern West was the only arena of progress from which the rest of the world could learn. The unfolding of the Spirit, the process of historical inevitability, or the 'iron cage' of modernity, was essentially a European *Problematik*. 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 make cultural diversity inoperative, if not totally meaningless. It was inconceivable that Confucianism, or for that matter any other non-Western spiritual traditions, could exert a shaping influence on the modernizing process. The development from traditional to modern was irreversible and inevitable.

In the global context, what some of the most brilliant minds in the modern West assumed to be self-evidently true turned out to be parochial. In the rest of the world, and definitely in Western Europe and North America, the anticipated clear transition from tradition to modernity never occurred. As a norm, traditions continue to exert their presence as active agents in shaping distinctive forms of modernity, and, by implication, the modernizing process itself has continuously assumed a variety of cultural forms rooted in specific traditions. The recognition of the relevance of radical otherness to one's own self-understanding of the eighteenth century seems more applicable to the current situation in the global community than the inattention to any challenges to the modern Western mindset of the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, the openness of the eighteenth century as contrasted with the exclusivity of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries may provide a better guide for the dialogue of civilizations.

The current debate between the 'end of history' (Fukuyama 1992) and the 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington 1996) scratches only the surface of the *Problematik* I wish to explore. The euphoria produced by the triumph of capitalism and the expectation that the liberal democratic persuasion will be universally accepted is shortlived. The emergence of the 'global village', at best an imagined community, symbolizes difference, differentiation, and outright discrimination. The hope that economic globalization engenders equality, either of consequence or opportunity, is simple-minded. The world has never been so divided in terms of wealth, power, and accessibility to information and knowledge. Social disintegration at all levels, from family to nation, is a serious concern throughout the world. Even if liberal democracy as an ideal is widely accepted as a universal aspiration by the rest of the world, the claim that it will automatically become the only dominant discourse in international politics is wishful thinking.

Although the 'clash of civilizations' is based on the sound judgment that cultural pluralism is an enduring feature of the global scene, it is still rooted in the obsolete notion of pitting the West against the rest of the world. The credible proposition that only Western forms of local knowledge are generalizable, even universalizable notwithstanding, the thesis of Western exceptionalism is defensible. If the 'clash of civilizations' is a strategy of enhancing the persuasive power of cherished Western values, its goal, in the last analysis, is

comparable to the 'end of history', except for the cautionary note that, as a process, the initial stage may be wearisome for the advocates of Western liberal democracy.

In a deeper sense, neither the end of history nor the clash of civilizations captures the profound concern of modern Western intellectuals. Despite all of the ambiguities of the Enlightenment project, its continuation is both necessary and desirable for human flourishing. The anticipated fruitful interchange between Habermas' communicative rationality and John Rawls' political liberalism is, perhaps, the most promising sign of this endeavor. The challenges to this mode of thinking indiscriminately labeled as postmodernism are formidable, but this is not the place to elaborate on them. Suffice it now to mention that ecological consciousness, feminist sensitivity, religious pluralism, and communitarian ethics all strongly suggest the centrality of nature and spirituality in human reflexivity. The inability of our contemporary Enlightenment thinkers to take seriously the ultimate concerns and harmony with nature as constitutive parts of their philosophizing is the main reason for them to respond creatively to postmodern critique. Lurking behind the scene is the question of community. We urgently need a global perspective on the human condition that is predicated on our willingness to think in terms of global community.

Among the Enlightenment values advocated by the French Revolution, fraternity – the functional equivalent of community – has received scant attention among modern political theorists. The preoccupation with establishing 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 relegated to the background as insignificant in the mainstream of Western political discourse. Georg Hegel's fascination with the 'civil society' 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 gaze into the future rather than a critical analysis of the value of community. The transition from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft* was thought to have been such a rupture that Max Weber referred to 'universal brotherhood' as an outmoded medieval myth unrealizable in the disenchanting modern secular world. In political and ethical terms, strenuous effort is required for the family of nations to rise above the rhetoric of self-interest to recapture the cosmopolitan spirit of interdependence.

The upsurge of interest in recent decades within North America regarding 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 visible throughout the highly industrialized, if not postmodern, First World. The conflict between globalizing trends, including trade, finance, information, migration, and disease, and localism, rooted in ethnicity, language, land, class, age, and faith, is not easily resolvable. We are compelled by brutal confrontations as well as encouraging reconciliation around the world to transcend the 'either-or' epistemology and to perceive the imagined global community in a variety of colors and many shades of meaning. The case of East Asian modernity from a Confucian perspective helps us cultivate a new way of thinking.

Confucian Humanism

The revival of Confucian teaching as political ideology, intellectual discourse, merchant ethics, family values, or the spirit of protest in industrial East Asia since the 1960s and socialist East Asia more recently is the combination of many factors. Despite tension and conflict rooted in primordial ties (particularly ethnicity, language, cultural national-

ism, and life orientation), the overall pattern in East Asia is an integration based on values significantly different from the Enlightenment mentality of the modern West.

East Asian intellectuals have been the devoted students of Western learning for more than a century. In the case of Japan the samurai-bureaucrats learned the superior knowledge of Western science, technology, manufacturing industries, and political institutions from the Dutch, British, French, Germans, and, in recent decades, Americans. In similar fashion, the Chinese scholar-officials, the Korean 'forest intellectuals', and Vietnamese *literati* acquired knowledge from the West to build their modern societies. Their commitment to substantial, comprehensive, or even wholesale westernization enabled them to thoroughly transform their economy, polity, and society according to what they perceived, through firsthand experience, as the superior *modus operandi* of the modern way.

This positive identification with the West and active participation in a fundamental restructuring of one's own world according to the Western model is unprecedented in human history. However, East Asia's deliberate effort to relegate its own rich spiritual resources to the background for the sake of massive cultural absorption enhanced the need to appeal to the native pattern to reshape what they had learned from the West. This model of creative adaptation following the end of the Second World War helped them to strategically position themselves in forging a new synthesis.

The Confucian tradition, having been marginalized as a distant echo of the feudal past, is forever severed from its imperial institutional base, but it has kept its grounding in an agriculture-based economy, family-centered social structure, and paternalistic polity that are reconfigured in a new constellation. Confucian political ideology has been operative in the development states of Japan and the four mini-dragons. It is also evident in the political processes of the People's Republic of China, North Korea, and Vietnam. As the demarcation between capitalist and socialist East Asia begins to blur, the cultural form that cuts across the great divide becomes distinctively Confucian in character.

Economic culture, family values, and merchant ethics in East Asia and cultural China have also expressed themselves in Confucian terms. It is too facile to explain these phenomena as a postmodern justification. Even if we agree that the Confucian articulation is but an afterthought, the circulation of terms such as network capitalism, soft authoritarianism, group spirit, consensus formation, and human relatedness in characterizing salient features of the East Asian economy, polity, and society suggests, among other things, the transformative potential of Confucian traditions in East Asian modernity.

Specifically, East Asian modernity under the influence of Confucian traditions suggests a coherent vision for governance and leadership:

- Government leadership in a market economy is not only necessary but also desirable. The doctrine that government is a necessary evil and that the market in itself can provide an 'invisible hand' for ordering society is antithetical to modern experience, West or East. A government that is responsive to public needs, responsible for the welfare of the people, and accountable to society at large is vitally important for the creation and maintenance of order.

- Although law is essential as the minimum requirement for social stability, 'organic solidarity' can only result from the implementation of humane rites of interaction. The civilized mode of conduct can never be communicated through coercion. 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.

• Family, as the basic unit of society, is the locus from which the 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 as a two-way traffic of 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 human habitat, are brought into a continuous flow of intimate sentiments of human care.

• Civil society does not flourish 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 political body, and that a vitally important function of the state is to ensure 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 interplay between the private and public enables the civil society to offer diverse and enriching resources for human flourishing.

• 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, school should emphasize ethical as well as cognitive intelligence. Schools should teach the art of accumulating 'social capital' through communication. In addition to the acquisition of knowledge and skills, schooling must be congenial to the development of cultural competence and the appreciation of spiritual values.

• Since self-cultivation is the root for the regulation of family, 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, the value of the family as the proper home for learning to be human, civility as the normal pattern of human interaction, and education as character building.

Confucianism and Modernization

It is far-fetched to suggest that these societal ideals are fully realized in East Asia. Actually, East Asian societies often exhibit behaviors and attitudes just the opposite of the supposed salient features of Confucian modernity. Indeed, having been humiliated by imperialism and colonialism for decades, East Asia now, on the surface at least, blatantly displays some of the most negative aspects of Western modernism with a vengeance: exploitation, mercantilism, consumerism, materialism, greed, egoism, and brutal competitiveness. Nevertheless, as the first non-Western region to become modernized, the cultural implications of the rise of 'Confucian' East Asia are far-reaching.

The modern West as informed by Enlightenment mentality provided the initial impetus for worldwide social transformation. The historical reasons that prompted the modernizing process in Western Europe and North America are not necessarily structural components 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 (see Bary 1998; Langguth 2003; Elgin 2010). Just

as the former ought to be incorporated into East Asian modernity, the latter may turn out to be a critical and timely reference for the American way of life.

If Confucian modernity definitively refutes the strong claim that modernization is, in essence, westernization or Americanization, does this mean that the rise of East Asia, which augurs the advent of a Pacific century, symbolizes the replacement of an old paradigm by a new one? The answer is definitely in the negative. The idea of a kind of reverse convergence, meaning that the time is ripe for Western Europe and North America to look toward East Asia for guidance, is ill-advised. Although the need for the West, especially the United States, to transform itself into a learning as well as a teaching civilization is obvious, 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 right, without being either westernized or East-Asianized. The very fact that Confucian East Asia has provided an inspiration for Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia to modernize 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.

But this neat conclusion, resulting from a commitment to pluralism, may have been reached prematurely. Any indication that this is likely to happen, a sort of historical inevitability, smacks of wishful thinking. We do not have to be tough-minded realists to recognize the likelihood of this scenario occurring. If the First World insists on its right to overdevelop, if industrial East Asia forges ahead with its accelerated growth, if the People's Republic of China immerses itself in the 'four modernizations' at all costs, what shape will the world be in fifty years from now? Is East Asian modernity a promise or a nightmare? One wonders.

The current financial crisis notwithstanding, the surge in the last four decades of Confucian East Asia – the most vibrant economy the world has ever witnessed – has far-reaching geopolitical implications. Japan's transformation from an obedient student under American tutelage to the single most powerful challenger to American economic supremacy compels us to examine the global significance of this particular local knowledge. The 'reform and open' policy of the People's Republic of China since 1979 has propelled it to become a gigantic development state.

Although the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the former Soviet Union signaled the end of international communism as a totalitarian experiment, socialist East Asia (mainland China, North Korea, and, for cultural reasons, Vietnam) seems to be in the process of reinventing itself in reality, if not in name. With thousands of political dissidents in the West and a worldwide network in support of Tibet's independence, China's radical otherness is widely perceived in the American mass media as a threat. It seems self-evident that since China has been humiliated by the imperialist West for more than a century, revenge may be China's principal motivation for restructuring world order. Memories of the Pacific theater of the Second World War 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 America, Australia, and New Zealand further enhances the sense of crisis that there is a Chinese conspiracy to rearrange power relationships in the global community.

The rise of 'Confucian' East Asia – Japan, the four mini-dragons, mainland China, Vietnam, and possibly North Korea – suggests that despite global trends defined primarily in economic and geopolitical terms, cultural traditions continue to exert powerful influences in the modernizing process. Although modernization originated from the West, East Asian modernization has already assumed cultural forms so significantly different from those in Western Europe and North America that, empirically, we must entertain alternatives to Western modernism. However, this does not indicate that Western modernism is being eroded, let alone replaced, by East Asian modernism. 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 seriously flawed, if not totally mistaken. The challenge ahead is the need for global civilizational dialogue as a prerequisite for a peaceful world order. The perceived clash of civilizations makes the dialogue imperative.

The paradox, then, is our willingness and courage to understand radical otherness as a necessary step toward self-understanding. If the West takes East Asian modernity as a reference, it will begin to sharpen its vision of the strengths and weaknesses of its model for the rest of the world. The heightened self-reflexivity of the modern West will enable it to appreciate how primordial ties rooted in concrete living communities have helped to shape different configurations of the modern experience.

This is a giant step toward true communication between the West and the rest, without which basic trust and fruitful mutuality across civilizational lines can never be established. Actually, from the perspective of the global community, the dichotomy of the West and the rest is unnecessary and undesirable. It is also empirically untenable. The West, as a hegemonic power, has been trying to dominate the rest by coercion, and the rest has fully penetrated the West as a result of multiple migration: labor, capital, talent, and religion. The time is ripe for a dialogue of civilizations based on the spirit of interdependence.

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