

HUMANENESS AND FAMILY VALUES
IN TRANSCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE: THE CONFUCIAN
REVIVAL IN THE MIRROR OF INTERCULTURAL
EXCHANGE BETWEEN CHINA AND CENTRAL
AND EASTERN EUROPE

<https://doi.org/10.31577/aassav.2022.31.1.03>

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The topical processes of modern identity-making within Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) on the one hand, and China on the other, are fundamentally results of different forms of cultural and economic transformation, conflict and harmonious social adjustment. The aim of the present article is to show the need to appreciate the role of culture not only as a background to, but also as a constitutive part of, economic dynamics. Thus, it assumes that any comparative analysis of the rise of transitional societies must deal with questions connected to respective value systems, i.e. issues of moral education, political authority, social solidarity, and religious beliefs. It is not coincidental that the rapid recent development of the People's Republic of China (PRC) owes much to such crucial traditional virtues as social hierarchy, self-discipline, social harmony, strong families and a respect for education. In this context, the present article examines the revival of the Confucian tradition in China. According to previous research results, traditional East European values were in many aspects closer to such virtues than traditional Western values that have been mainly focused upon the idea of individual autonomy. Hence, this study examines the hypothesis that the Central and Eastern European area could function as a cultural and axiological bridge between China and Europe.

Keywords: China, Central-Eastern European area, Confucian revival, contemporary social values, transition, tradition and modernity

1. Introduction

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, Central and Eastern Europe has been re-defined by the combined effects of complex political and social processes. During the same period, economic reform has brought China to the forefront of the global economic stage. Based on current trends, in the near future China may become the largest economy in the world. Contemporary China represents a model of exceptional diversity in social structures, organizational forms, strategies, and practices. In addition, it is experiencing a far-reaching revival of certain institutional rules¹, social norms, business strategies and cultural values emerging from a specifically Chinese tradition.

It is not coincidental that the rapid recent development of the PRC owes much to such crucial traditional virtues as social hierarchy, self-discipline, social harmony, strong families and a respect for education.² According to previous research results,³ traditional Central and East European values were in many aspects closer to such virtues than traditional Western values, which have been mainly focused upon the idea of individual autonomy.⁴

The confrontation and understanding of so-called “foreign cultures” is linked to the issues of various languages, traditions, histories and socializations. The interpretations of the various aspects and elements of 'non-European' cultures are linked to the geographic, political and economic positions of both – the interpreting and the interpreted – subjects. Intercultural research always includes translation issues; of course this does not mean merely a translation between languages, but also translation between various discourses, which include interpretations of individual text and speech structures, categories, concepts and values that differ in different socio-cultural contexts.⁵ We often

¹ DE BARY, W. Th. *Asian Values and Human Rights: A Confucian Communitarian Perspective*, p. 18.

² SIGURÐSSON, G. Confucianism Vs. Modernity: Expired, Incompatible or Remedial? In *Asian Studies*, 2014, Vol. 2, No.1, p. 22. <https://doi.org/10.4312/as.2014.2.1.21-38>; DESSEIN, B. Faith and Politics: (New) Confucianism As Civil Religion. In *Asian Studies*, 2014, Vol. 2, No.1, p. 60. <https://doi.org/10.4312/as.2014.2.1.39-64>.

³ POŠKAITE, L. Filial Piety (xiao 孝) for the Contemporary and Global World. In *Asian Studies*, 2014, Vol. 2, No.1, pp. 99–114. <https://doi.org/10.4312/as.2014.2.1.99-114>.

⁴ ROŠKER, J. S. Cultural Conditionality of Comprehension: The Perception of Autonomy in China. In CAO, Qing, TIAN, Hailong, CHILTON, P. (eds.). *Reinventing Identities: the Poetic of Language Use in Contemporary China*, p. 50.

⁵ ZHANG Dainian張岱年. *Zhongguo zhexue shi fangfalun fa fan* 中國哲學史方法論發凡 [An Introduction of the methodology of the History of Chinese Philosophy], p. 145.

encounter a discrepancy between the etymological and functional understanding of a certain expression; in certain cases, the same expression may even be understood completely differently on the level of the general social context in the two societies.

The main motive for comparative research between Chinese and CEE cultures does not lie merely in the recognition of “different axiological models”, but in the relativization of the value systems and perception structures. In order for this relativization to take place we need an insight into the conceptual structures and connections between concrete historic, economic, political and cultural systems that form the material and conceptual base of both cultural areas in question.

Proceeding from the notion of the so-called “vacuum of values” that determines the alienation which defines modern post-capitalist societies in the global world, it is also important to analyse the question whether the Confucian revival which is taking place in contemporary China, is really in the process of generating a non-individualistic version of post-modernity, because if so, then the geopolitical area of CEE could represent a linkage between new post-capitalist European values and the revival of certain Chinese traditional ethical concepts that could serve as a suitable system for the elimination of the abovementioned axiological vacuum. The present article introduces this revival through the lens of some crucial works published by the main representatives of contemporary Modern Confucian philosophy.

2. China and the CEE Area: Between Tradition and Modernity

In the 21st century, the evolving central values of the new, globalized societies have to be fitted into new political contexts. This revaluation is the most important condition for a consolidation of new ideologies to form a political basis for the changing societies and their new economies. On the one hand these “new” value-systems should assure economic efficiency and on the other preserve political stability. China and the CEE countries today are routinely confronted with specific issues of modernization within a framework of new, globally structured economic and political trends. These issues naturally call for a rethinking of traditional values:⁶ the requirements of the new era, which have been determined by changes in elementary social conditions, demand their revaluation. This revaluation is the most important condition for a consolidation

⁶ TANG Junyi 唐君毅. *Zhongxi zhexue sixiangzhi bijiao lunji* 中西哲學思想之比較論集 [A Collection of Essays on Comparing Chinese and Western Thought], p. 32.

of new ideologies; these should be able to form a political basis for the changing societies and for their new economies.

A number of sinologists and comparative philosophers have recently argued for the relevance of Confucian ethics for the contemporary European world, which is in accordance with the recent rebirth of studies of Confucianism, its reinterpretation as a teaching with a universal appeal and the currently topical interest in comparative axiological studies.

In her study on the significance of the traditional Confucian virtue of filial piety (孝) for Eastern European youth, Loreta Poškaitė⁷ shows that such Confucian virtues (and the values they imply) were in many ways not only understandable but also most relevant for CEE students in Chinese studies, because in certain ways they help them to reconnect with certain values rooted in their own cultural tradition and to overcome in this way the contemporary axiological crisis prevailing in all transitional society.

She points out that A.T. Nuyen from the National University of Singapore lays stress upon the fact that the central Confucian value of filial piety (孝) is important to contemporary global ethics and culture, if it is understood as the respect for tradition. He argues that in this sense it could even be used “to correct the ‘traditional’ Chinese family structure that has been the subject of social critics”.⁸ But the most extensive arguments about the relevance of filial ethics for the contemporary global world were presented by H. Rosemont and R.T. Ames in the *Introduction* of their translation of “孝经” [The Classical Book of Filial Piety]. They believe that this classical text can even help Europeans to realize the cost of prioritization of such values in Western ethics as individual freedom and independence, equality, privacy and individual rights and entitlements.

Poškaite’s findings clearly show that for the CEE Sinology students, the ethics of filial piety seem neither exotic nor strange nor too specific to Chinese culture, if viewed from a comparative perspective. Even if not discussing it in the sense of respecting and honouring one’s obligations towards ruler and state, it is something that could be easily understood by most people around the world, since its concept in its basic sense – as reverence for parents – is present in all cultures, although differing in extent and forms of expression. On the other hand, some of the students consider it as one of the best means to explain a specific type of behaviour by Chinese people, for example, not daring to

⁷ POŠKAITE, L. Filial Piety (xiao 孝) for the Contemporary and Global World. In *Asian Studies*, 2014, Vol. 2, No.1, p. 101. <https://doi.org/10.4312/as.2014.2.1.99-114>.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 210–213.

oppose or resist an older person. They treat such behaviour as standing in a sharp contrast with the Western cult of “individualism”.

The results of a cross-cultural comparative inquiry⁹ in China, Slovenia and Austria about the comprehension and use of the concept of “autonomy” (自律) showed that the understanding of the notion of law as a criterion of regulation of human interaction in a society cannot be separated from the political system in which it arises and functions.

Thus, if we want to find out about the meaning of autonomy discourse in a particular society, we first have to investigate its historical institutional context. Among others, this investigation has clearly shown that individual self-understanding in China and the CEE respectively, is – in both cases – not strictly established as an individualistic consciousness, but as a consciousness of individualization. In sharp contrast to individualism, which is based on positive valuations of supposedly typical characteristics of an individual in opposition to collective considerations and duties, individualization can be seen as a process of identification of an individual with the cosmic – and thus also with social unity. Here, it is important to understand that this kind of self-reflection or self-understanding of an individual – despite the importance it places on the consideration of the social backgrounds – must not be confused with the principle of collectivism. The latter has to be seen as a mere bipolar idealized node, in opposition to individualism. Both are parts of a mechanistic ideology based on an abstract dichotomy between the concepts of individual and society. Thus, in the context of individualization, the special characteristics of an individual cannot be understood as something alien to general social unity. On the contrary, they possess a singular special relation of emergence and/or differentiation of functions and abilities that respectively is/are universal in nature. This kind of understanding implies a complementary relationship between an individual and society.¹⁰ However, when we explicitly try to raise the question as to which of the two elements is of primary importance, the answer is predictable: most of the influential East Asian state doctrines (especially Confucianism, of course) will rank the universal before the particular, and society before the individual. The cross-cultural inquiry has shown that similar priorities are much stronger in Eastern than in Western Europe.

⁹ ROŠKER, J. S. Cultural Conditionality of Comprehension: The Perception of Autonomy in China. In CAO, Qing, TIAN, Hailong, CHILTON, P. (eds.). *Reinventing Identities: the Poetic of Language Use in Contemporary China*, p. 56.

¹⁰ EISENSTADT, S. N. Multiple Modernities. In *Daedalus*, 2000, Vol. 129, No. 1, p. 29.

In order to find a method of intercultural axiological reconciliation and to enhance the exchange and the possible cooperation between both cultures in question, an overall analysis and interpretation of such issues seems reasonable and important. This implies various tasks linked to investigations into the role and the function of the contemporary Confucian revival, which manifests itself in the intellectual current of modern Confucianism.

3. The Confucian Revival

The so-called Confucian revival that manifests itself in the philosophical stream of Modern Confucianism is one of the most significant elements of the new Asian ideologies of modernization.¹¹ This current of thought in no way constitutes a monolithic theoretical *corpus*, and includes a wide range of theoretical elaborations of a tradition which, in itself, is already extremely complex and heterogeneous.

A prime consequence of the current transnationalization of capital may be that, for the first time in the history of capitalism, the capitalist mode of production appears as an authentic global abstraction, separated from its specific historical origins in Europe.¹² This means that the narrative of capitalism is no longer a narrative of the history of Europe. For the first time non-European capitalist societies are making their own claims on the history of capitalism and modernization.

As a major source of social values, Modern Confucian theory has acquired a fundamental importance amidst the proliferation of instrumental rationality in contemporary China.¹³ This current is distinguished by a multifaceted effort to revitalize traditional (mainly Confucian) thought by means of new influences borrowed or derived from Western systems.¹⁴ It defines itself as the search for a synthesis between “Western” and traditional Chinese thought, aimed at

¹¹ BERGER, P. An East Asian Development Model? In BERGER, P., HSIAO Hsin-huang M. (eds.). *Search of an Asian Development Model*, p. 78.

¹² DIRLIK, A. Modernity as History: Post-Revolutionary China, Globalization and the Question of Modernity. In *Social History*, 2002, Vol. 27, No. 1, p. 30.

¹³ CHEN, Lai 陈来. *Gudai zongjiao yu lunli – ru jia sixiangde genyuan 古代宗教与伦理——儒家思想的根源* [Ancient Religion and Ethics – the Original Foundations of Confucian Thought], p. 98.

¹⁴ ROŠKER, J. S. The Philosophical Sinification of Modernity and the Modern Confucian Paradigm of Immanent Transcendence (内在超越性). In *Asian Studies*, 2014, Vol. 2, No.1, p. 67. <https://doi.org/10.4312/as.2014.2.1.67-81>.

elaborating a new system of ideas and values, suitable for modern, globalized society. Modern Confucian discourses are based on the supposition that Confucian thought can be amalgamated with capitalist development.¹⁵ Its proponents also believe that a renewed form of this traditional Chinese system of philosophical and moral thought can serve as a basis for endowing modern life with ethical meaning, while providing a “spiritual salve” for the alienation which appears as an undesirable side-effect of capitalist competition and profit-seeking.

The philosophical current of Modern Confucianism (*xin ruxue*), while mainly developed during the last century in Taiwan and Hong Kong, also gained widespread popularity in most other East Asian societies traditionally influenced by Confucian thought, such as Japan and South Korea. Although the Modern Confucians of the 20th century were mostly active and lived primarily in Taiwan and Hong Kong, this current also began to appear in the PRC in the last two decades of the last century. It is generally acknowledged that Modern Confucianism provided the theoreticians in mainland China with certain basic elements for the elaboration of their new ideologies, which combined neo-liberal elements in the economic sphere with traditional elements in the political one.

In general, this trend forms the most influential and important current of thought in contemporary East Asian theory and since the 1980s it also represents a crucial component of the new prevailing ideologies in the PRC. It is defined as the search for a synthesis between Western and traditional East Asian thought, aimed at elaborating a system of ideas and values capable of resolving the social and political problems of the modern globalized world. Thus, its political, social and ideological backgrounds and its intrinsic links with the ideological foundations of East Asian modernity might prove to be important not only for Asian but also for global societies. Modern Confucianism is thus determined by various attempts to reconcile “Western” and “traditional Chinese” values in order to elaborate a theoretical model of modernization that would not be equated with “Westernization”.

4. Modern Confucianism and Chinese Modernization

Since Modern Confucians see modernization primarily as a rationalization of the world, they search within their own tradition for a series of authentic

¹⁵MOU, Zongsan. *Zhide zhijue yu Zhongguo zhexue* 智的直覺與中國哲學 [Intuitive Reason and Chinese Philosophy], p. 12.

concepts which could be considered as comparable to the two main Western paradigms that underpinned modernization: i.e. subjectivity and reason or rationality.¹⁶ Based on this general premise, it is worth analysing the central values of Confucianism and interpreting them within the different sociopolitical contexts in order to evaluate their impact upon prevailing contemporary ideologies.¹⁷ The same holds true for the main elements that have been utilized in order to effect the amalgamation of traditional Chinese values within the framework of capitalist ideologies and axiological contexts.

The new value systems developed within this current of thought aim at guaranteeing economic efficiency while also preserving political stability. Traditionally, stability was guaranteed by various state doctrines which focused on hierarchic and formalistic social structures.¹⁸ The current demand for a social stability which, according to its proponents, can only be realized within a capitalist mode of production and the “democratization” of society is inherently paradoxical. Thus, from a cultural comparative perspective, we have to situate this contradiction within the context of issues linked to present economic and cultural transition, which are determined by diverse social outgrowths emerging from the (mostly artificial) gap between “tradition” and “modernity”.

In the 20th century, the most influential theorists of Modern Confucianism were Mou Zongsan, Xu Fuguan, Tang Junyi and Fang Dongmei. The interpolation of their thought into the methodological and theoretical framework of contemporary theories of modernization represents an important contribution to the general understanding of questions linked to societies in transition.

Until recently the official ideologies of the PRC dismissed Confucianism as an “outdated feudal tradition”, while Western modernization theories likewise stressed the need for Chinese (and Asian) societies to abandon Confucianism if ever they hoped to develop into a modern society. In fact, classical Western theorists of modernity generally viewed traditional Chinese culture as incompatible with modernization. The Modern Confucian critique of such presumptions manifests itself in the so-called “post-Confucian hypothesis”,¹⁹ which argues that societies based upon the Confucian ethic may, in certain respects, be superior to the West in terms of the pursuit of industrialization,

¹⁶ AN, Yanming. Liang Shuming and Henri Bergson on Intuition: Cultural Context and the Evolution of Terms. In *Philosophy East and West*, 1997, Vol. 47, No. 3, p. 340.

¹⁷ LEE Ming-Huei (LI Minghui 李明輝). *Der Konfuzianismus im modernen China*, p. 12.

¹⁸ ALITTO, G. S. *Last Confucian – Liang Shuming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity*, pp. 29.

¹⁹ THOMPSON, M. R. Whatever Happened to “Asian Values”? In *Journal of Democracy*, 2001, Vol. 12, No. 4, p. 12.

affluence and modernization.²⁰ Max Weber, who assigned a fundamental role to the protestant ethic in the development of modern societies, likewise concluded that traditional Asian ideologies (especially Confucianism) were profoundly unsuited or even antithetical to modernization.²¹ Instead modern Confucians question this Eurocentric assumption and, through their analyses of Modern Confucian discourses, show that modernization represents a complex process of social transitions that includes both universal and culturally conditioned elements.

In this context, it is important to investigate whether the Modern Confucian model could provide the theoretical basis for the creation of a non-individualistic form of modernity.²² The results of contemporary research in this field clearly show that the purported inherent relation between modernity and individualism is merely an outcome of prevailing Western discourses on modernity.

Among other issues, it is also important to examine the axiological differences within Chinese society, focusing on the Modern Confucian treatments of epistemological and ethical concepts that can serve as the foundation for a specifically “Chinese” theory of modernization.²³ The notions of moral self (道德本心), unlimited heart-mind (無限的智心) and intellectual intuition (智的直覺) are especially important in this context.²⁴

5. Comparative Perspectives: Future Prospects and Challenges

For Europeans, the understanding of non-European cultures is always linked to the issue of differences in language, tradition, history and processes of

²⁰ DALLMAYR, F. Tradition, Modernity, and Confucianism. In *Human Studies*, 1993, Vol. 16, Nos. 1–2, “Postmodernity and the Question of the Other”, p. 67.

²¹ EISENSTADT, S. N., SCHLUCHTER, W. Introduction – Paths to Early Modernities – A Comparative View. In *Daedalus*, 1998, Vol. 127, No. 3, p. 70.

²² LEE Ming-Huei (LI Minghui 李明輝). *Ruxue yu xiandai yishi 儒學與現代意識 (Confucianism and Modern Consciousness)*. Taipei: Wenjin chuban she, 1991, p. 43.

²³ LEE, Ming-Huei (LI Minghui 李明輝). *Ru jia yu daode 儒家與康德 (Confucianism and Morality)*. Taipei: Lianjing, 1990, p. 21.

²⁴ LIU Shuxian 劉述先. Chaoyue yu neizai wentide zai shengsi 超越與內在問題的再省思 (Rethinking the question of Transcendence and Immanence) In Liu, Shuxian, Lin, Yuehui (eds.) *Dangdai ruxue yu xifang wenhua – zongjiao bian 當代儒學與西方文化 (Modern Confucianism and Western Culture)*. Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan – Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiusuo, 2005, p. 40.

socialization. If we want to discover some common ground in the scope of traditional values in the cultures of China and the CEE cultures respectively, we have to follow the fundamental hypothesis that Western epistemology represents only one of many different models of human comprehension.²⁵ Thus, any research in this field has to adhere to the main methodological tenets of intercultural research, and to take into account the incommensurability of paradigms conditioned by culturally heterogeneous situations (or, to put it another way, of theoretical frameworks which emerged within the diversely formed discourses of different cultural and linguistic contexts). This methodology seeks to synthesize general perspectives, knowledge, skills, interconnections and epistemologies within the basic research setting, in order to facilitate the study of a topic which, while coherent, cannot be adequately understood from a single perspective. Hence, within the broader scope of intercultural humanities, future research in possible axiological connections between China and the CEE countries has to be structured in an interdisciplinary fashion, and to include inquiries and methods pertaining to the following research areas:

- Socio-cultural perspective: different patterns of modernization;
- Epistemology: the cultural and linguistic conditionality of comprehension;
- Intellectual history: the political and ideal background of both societies in question
- Comparative philosophy (the impact of European ideas upon modern Confucian philosophers, their elaboration of traditional paradigms and the creation of syntheses between Chinese and Western philosophies);
- Conceptual analysis: the elaboration and cultural renewal of crucial modernization concepts (especially those existing in Asian philosophies which are comparable to the Western concepts of subject and reason);
- Axiology: the critical examination of new “Asian Values” and the contribution of Modern Confucian ethics to the new values of the contemporary world;
- Ideological: the impact of Modern Confucianism upon new theoretical trends in Chinese society.

The studies that have hitherto been carried out in this field can thus tell us a great deal about our present time and about the evolution of traditional values within diverse contemporary societies; further research conducted through the

²⁵ ROŠKER, J. S. *Searching for the Way: Theory of Knowledge in pre-Modern and Modern China*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2008, p. 12.

lens of a comparative perspective might furthermore reveal possibilities for a new intercultural dialogue, based upon various common grounds of specifically Chinese and CEE axiological heritages.

Conclusion

Despite the many books and articles which have appeared in Chinese, well-informed academic publications on this topic in European languages are still decidedly lacking. Since Modern Confucian efforts to revitalize and restructure traditional Confucian thought can be seen as an attempt to counter dominant ideological trends and to preserve Chinese cultural identity, the present study can contribute to the development of theoretical dialogues between Chinese and CEE discourses.

All these findings reopen a question: if contemporary changes in the economy, politics and social structure have a significant impact on the revival of traditional Confucian values in contemporary China, then in what sense and ways could these principles be acceptable and relevant to contemporary CEE societies and cultures, in which alienation processes are even more intense and cardinal?

Since Modern Confucian efforts to revitalize and reconstruct traditional Confucian thought can be seen as an attempt to counter the dominant ideological trends and preserve Asian cultural identity, its introduction will contribute to the development of theoretical dialogues between Asia and Eastern Europe. Previous research has clearly shown that Chinese modernization processes imply certain specific features that cannot be regarded as universal. Due to the fact that studies concerning the complex question of tradition and modernity, of continuity and change in a global context, are still in a developmental stage, and due to the fact that Modern Confucian discourses, which represent a relevant part of these studies, are still insufficiently explored by European theoreticians, the research in these issues might fill an important gap in contemporary intercultural social and philosophic studies by evaluating and improving upon the knowledge regarding current intellectual transformations in transitional societies in order to provide a more consistent basis for international relations between CEE (including Slovenia) and China. Such a basis will enable CEE researchers in Chinese studies to provide a systematic and coherent analysis and new interpretations of the contents, axiological innovations and social relevance of Modern Confucianism and to introduce its most relevant contributions to contemporary global theory to a wider academic audience.

Acknowledgment

The author acknowledges the financial support of the Slovenian Research Agency (ARRS) in the framework of the research core funding *Asian Languages and Cultures* (P6-0243) and in the scope of the research project N6-0161 (Complementary scheme) *Humanism in Intercultural Perspective: Europe and China*.

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