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Project Report

Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity: Exploring Moral Authority and Economic Power in Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons

Tu Wei-ming

From May 15 to 18, 1991, at the House of the Academy, more than twenty scholars from Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Israel, and North America convened at a meeting funded by the Henry Luce Foundation. They took part in an intense discussion of precirculated position papers, chaired by Tu Wei-ming, professor of Chinese philosophy and history at Harvard University. The papers were subsequently revised by the authors and edited for publication in a forthcoming book tentatively entitled Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity (currently being readied for submission to a university press). The book is the work of fifteen contributors, leading authorities in their respective fields, who offer several thoughtful perspectives on the Confucian dimension in industrial East Asia. This collaborative effort is essentially the "proceedings" of an international conversation that continues to generate new dynamism and create new possibilities. As such, it has all the trappings of an interim report: tentativeness, conflict of interpretations, and divergent perspectives. Its heuristic value, however, is immense, for it represents the current thinking of some of the most sophisticated minds on this vital and intriguing subject.

The following abridged version of the book's introductory chapter, written by Mr. Tu, is published here without footnotes.

The question of whether the Confucian ethic has contributed to the rise of industrial East Asia has attracted much public attention and generated a great deal of scholarly inquiry since the 1970s. The issue is significant not only for academicians studying East Asia and nonspecialists engaged or interested in East Asian affairs but also for journalists, business executives, and policy makers. The region's ability to sustain the highest growth
rate since the 1950s has merited serious attention by developmental economists, comparative sociologists, and political scientists. However, it is not the growth rate itself but the emerging form of life it engenders and the various structural and functional factors underlying East Asia's "economic miracle" that present a particularly thought-provoking challenge to the intellectual community.

When a small coterie of Harvard colleagues initially gathered at the House of the Academy to explore ways of understanding and studying this phenomenon in 1987, the plan was first to assess the overall impact of the rise of industrial East Asia by focusing on Japan in such areas as industries, international trade, global finance, foreign aid, science, technology, art, and literature. The second step was to consider the implications of the rise of industrial East Asia for mainland China, and eventually to comment on its implications for Western Europe and North America. A line of exploration that could run parallel to this overall plan was to study the Confucian dimension in industrial East Asia, involving scholars in the humanities as well as social scientists. The justification was the felt need to appreciate the role of culture, not only as a background but also as a constitutive part of economic dynamics. We assumed that any sophisticated analysis of the rise of industrial East Asia must wrestle with issues of moral education, political authority, social solidarity, and religious beliefs.

A generous grant from the Luce Foundation enabled us to launch the Confucian project by organizing a workshop to discuss a variety of perspectives on the role of Confucian culture in industrial East Asia in 1989. Centered on topics such as Confucian ethics as a common discourse, cultural identity and social implications, gender and family, community and education, political culture and economic ethos, and popular thought and religion, twenty-seven participants from the fields of anthropology, economics, history, political science, religion, sociology, and philosophy engaged in an intense and thought-provoking exchange of views on the Confucian Problematik. This resulted in The Confucian World Observed: A Contemporary Dis-
As evidenced in that digested conversation, there is as much contested interpretation as fusion of horizons on virtually all aspects of the Confucian Problematics. For instance, is Confucian ethics a common discourse in industrial East Asia? The answer varies according to academic discipline, regional specialization, and personal judgment. Historians, especially intellectual historians, tend to stress the common heritage and shared spiritual orientation, but anthropologists are wary about any broad generalization and prefer to offer thick descriptions of the local scene. Japanologists, while acknowledging the ubiquitous presence of the Confucian pattern of behavior, tend to minimize the prominence of Confucian thought in Japan's modern transformation. The relevance of Confucian ethics in the economic ethos and political culture of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and overseas Chinese communities is taken for granted by Sinologists, but there is no consensus on the role and function of the Confucian ethic in the modern transformation of these societies.

It ought to be noted, however, that it was that towering figure in American Japanology, Edwin Reischauer, who in his seminal essay “The Sinic World in Perspective” (Foreign Affairs, January 1974) first emphasized the pervasiveness of the Confucian mentality in contemporary East Asia, including Japan. While mindful of Japan’s uniqueness, Reischauer insisted on situating Japan in the East Asian cultural universe to show that her economic dynamism indicates not merely exceptionalism but a pattern of modern transformation encompassing all of East Asia. Putting the Sinic world in perspective thus provides a proper context for understanding Japan, the Four Mini-Dragons (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore), overseas Chinese communities, and, eventually, socialist East Asia (mainland China, North Korea, and Vietnam).

As noted by Peter L. Berger and Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, editors of In Search of an Asian Development Model (Transaction Books, 1988), “the claim that Confucian eth-
ics, as reflected in government leadership, competitive education, a disciplined work force, principles of equality and self-reliance, and self-cultivation, provides a necessary background and powerful motivating force for the rise of industrial East Asia" has yet to be substantiated. Nevertheless, the benefit of addressing the issue, commonly referred to as the Confucian hypothesis, is obvious. Rarely has there been an opportunity to engage scholars working in many different fields in the kind of interdisciplinary and cross-cultural venture undertaken by the Academy. The difficulty of confronting the role of culture in industrial East Asia is of course enormous, but by focusing our attention on the Confucian dimension, we are compelled to wrestle with the question instead of relegating it to the background or to a residual category. Already, the Confucian hypothesis has stimulated an impressive array of productive research and will continue to challenge us to formulate more comprehensive and refined interpretations.

Among the conceptual resources widely tapped for this kind of inquiry, the Weberian mode of questioning, as demonstrated in Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, looms large in our discussion. However, the method of finding the functional equivalent of the Protestant ethic in the "modernized" or "vulgarized" Confucian ethic is too facile, simple-minded, and mechanistic to merit serious attention. This observation is not meant to downplay the importance of a work ethic in East Asian productivity. Actually, several significant empirical studies have helped us to understand the correlation between value orientation, attitude, and performance in East Asian industry, and the Confucian ethic is often noted as a positive factor in these studies. Nevertheless, the danger of regarding the Confucian ethic as the functional equivalent of the Protestant ethic in East Asia lies not in what it has managed to reveal but in what it has inadvertently concealed. After all, Weber's brilliant study of the psychocultural conditions that made possible the development of the spirit of capitalism was, in his own view, only a preliminary step toward the estimation of
“the quantitative cultural significance of ascetic Protestantism in its relation to the other plastic elements of modern culture.”

In The Protestant Ethic Weber indicated that he was critically aware of the requisite intermediary steps involved in the kind of cultural study for which his book was a mere beginning:

The next task would be rather to show the significance of ascetic rationalism, which has only been touched in the foregoing sketch, for the content of practical social ethics, thus for the types of organization and the functions of social groups from conventicle to the State. Then its relation to humanistic rationalism, its ideal of life and cultural influence; further to the development of philosophical and scientific empiricism, to technical development and to spiritual ideals would have to be analyzed. Then its historical development from the mediaeval beginnings of worldly asceticism to its dissolution into pure utilitarianism would have to be traced out through all the areas of ascetic religion.

What Weber outlined was his vision of the rise of the modern West, a vision pregnant with fruitful ambiguities and far-reaching implications for comparative civilizational studies.

Before the Academy's project was launched, a concerted effort had been made to wrestle with the Weberian mode of questioning. Under the sponsorship of the Institute of East Asian Philosophies in Singapore, a series of international meetings were organized to explore ways of addressing Weber's thesis, with particular attention to the East Asian experience. Several of the participants in the Academy's project were present at these meetings. Understandably, Weber's well-known interpretive stance on Confucianism served as a point of departure for the entire discussion, notwithstanding the obsolescence of many of his empirical observations. For example, Weber's concluding remark in his Religion of China is still highly suggestive:

The Chinese in all probability would be quite capable . . . of assimilating capitalism which has technically and economically been fully developed in the modern culture area. It is obviously not a question of deeming the Chinese “naturally ungifted” for the demands of capitalism. But compared to the
Occident, the varied conditions which externally favored the origin of capitalism in China did not suffice to create it. Likewise capitalism did not originate in occidental or oriental Antiquity, or in India, or where Islamism [Islam] held sway. Yet in each of these areas different and favorable circumstances seemed to facilitate its rise. Many of the circumstances which could or had to hinder capitalism in China similarly existed in the Occident and assumed definite shape in the period of modern capitalism.

Evidently, there is fluidity in Weber’s characterization of the genetic reasons for the development of capitalism. As Wolfgang Schluchter notes, since Weber was mainly concerned with a specific historical question—namely, why industrial capitalism emerged in the Protestant West—his interpretation leaves open the possibility of different forms of capitalism growing out of a variety of cultural traditions as responses to the challenge of the modern West. This may be what prompted Peter Berger to characterize industrial East Asian capitalism as a “second case.”

Our venture to explore the Confucian dimension in Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons is part of the international collaborative effort to come to terms with the rise of industrial East Asia as a cultural phenomenon as well as an economic and political process. Our decision to involve scholars from different academic disciplines, with different regional specializations, and working at different levels of generalization and styles of explanation was predicated on the assumption that, as the subject has attracted much attention from policy makers, the mass media, and the general public, it is imperative that we continue our brainstorming to raise thought-provoking questions. Our purpose, then, is to aim at a broad grasp of the interplay between cultural values and the economic, political, social, and ethical life of East Asian peoples.

While true to the Academy’s spirit of “associating many specialized lines of concentration by gathering the individuals in whom they are embodied” so that “the group as a whole is enriched,” we were critically aware of the danger that since each of us is narrowed by our own specialization, the results of our
conversation might lack the coherence needed for setting a new agenda for furthering productive scholarship. In retrospect, our sense of the precariousness of the enterprise was not at all exaggerated. The asymmetry between social scientists and humanities scholars, between Japanologists and Sinologists, between economists and culturalists, and between idealists and realists was blatantly clear.

Fortunately, all the participants had a genuine desire for interdisciplinary and cross-cultural communication, a strong commitment to working toward a common agenda, and, perhaps most significant, a shared Problematik and a tacitly agreed-upon methodological orientation. Benjamin Schwartz of Harvard University, Peter Berger of Boston University, and Edward Tiryakian of Duke University, the three senior scholars who did not contribute papers but who at various stages were enormously helpful in shaping the character of the May 1991 conference, set the tone for the conversation.

The underlying assumptions that culture matters and that economic facts and political institutions are laden with cultural values was neither trivialized nor relegated to a residual category. While opinions varied in assigning specific weight to the Confucian factor in explaining the dynamic transformation of industrial East Asia, there was a remarkable convergence of views on the inadequacy and superficiality of attention to the Confucian dimension in current interpretive literature on East Asia in the English-speaking community. Imagine a reporter from Beijing who intended to write a series of articles on American economy, polity, and society during the highly energized 1992 election season, yet who was not only unfamiliar with Christian symbols but insisted on the irrelevance of the Protestant tradition to his journalistic task. Would we have much faith in his ability to present culturally sophisticated reports on the current American scene, including the presidential debates?

Surely, since conceptually it is too vague and misleading to label American society as Christian, it is neither instructive nor correct to characterize any East Asian society as Confucian. Yet cultural sensitivity and cultural
competence, as reflected in either a general theory or an empirical investigation, are desirable and often necessary. This, of course, is noted not to conflate knowledge about Confucian ethics with sensitivity and competence in East Asian culture, but to acknowledge that familiarity with Confucian ethics can serve as a litmus test for judging the intellectual seriousness of those approaching East Asia as a subject in comparative civilizational studies.

We must not underestimate the complexity of the methodological issues involved in addressing the Confucian dimension in East Asian societies, itself a fine art because that dimension is both elusive and pervasive. We are, on the one hand, at a loss to identify and define how the Confucian ethic actually works in economic organization, political ideology, or social behavior. At the same time, we are impressed by its presence in virtually all aspects of interpersonal relationships in East Asian life. Understandably, our authors have chosen a variety of methods to investigate the phenomenon. The range of options includes the core curriculum in moral education, ancestral veneration in family ritual, the style of protests among the intelligentsia, the symbolic resources in the development of a civil society, the formation of a political ideology, and networking in economic behavior and organization.

If we try to look for an integrated pattern that tells us precisely where the boundaries are and what significance there is to depicting the Confucian dimension in industrial East Asia, we are most likely to be disappointed. At the same time, while we frankly admit that there is asymmetry in style, method, and level of analysis, we maintain that Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity offers a many-faceted conversation rather than discrete monologues. If we are willing to probe, there are so many points of convergence and intersections of communication that it is not far-fetched to claim that the book symbolizes a concerted effort of like-minded scholars to come to grips with Confucian traditions in East Asian modernity. The broad picture emerging from the contributors’ focused, sometimes highly specialized studies is, to use Jürgen Habermas’s expression, a lifeworld,
significantly different from our own in the West (specifically, in Western Europe and North America) yet modern in every sense of the word.

Two implications are worth mentioning: first, the fascinating phenomenon of traditions in modernity. The question, In what sense has the Confucian ethic contributed to the economic dynamics of industrial East Asia? seems less interesting than a much more profound subject of investigation: How does the Confucian tradition, in belief, attitude, and practice, continue to impede, facilitate, and guide the modern transformation in East Asia and, in the process, how is it being rejected, revitalized, and fundamentally restructured? The limited Weberian project of searching for the functional equivalent of the Protestant ethic must be subsumed under Weber’s general comparative civilizational Problematik—namely, given the vital importance of the value orientation in economic development, What can the Confucian dimension in industrial East Asia tell us about the relation between tradition and modernity?

Weber’s assertion that “the impediments to the development of capitalism must be sought primarily in the domain of religion” suggests that Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and, by implication, all indigenous religious traditions, unlike Protestantism, are detrimental to the modernizing process initiated in Western Europe and must therefore be thoroughly revised. A more reasonable position is to argue for the transformative potential of all these major ethico-religious traditions. What the development experience in industrial East Asia suggests is not the passing of a traditional society but the continuing role of traditions in providing the rich texture of an evolving modernity. Confucianism—and, presumably, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and indigenous religious traditions (for instance, those of the Maori) as well—may have impeded the modernization of a traditional Oriental society in the Occidental sense. But the modernization of a Confucian society—or, for that matter, of a Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist, or Maori society—requires the continuous participation and creative transformation of its ethico-religious tra-
dition. Since the rise of industrial East Asia indicates the authentic possibility of a Confucian spirit of capitalism, it may not be outrageous to imagine a Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist, or Maori spirit of capitalism.

This inevitably leads to the second implication: Can the modernization process assume cultural forms different from those characteristically Western since the period of the Enlightenment? Put differently, Are market economy, democratic polity, and individualism so essential to the modernist project and so integrated as three inseparable dimensions of modernity that no society can ever become modernized without simultaneously being Westernized? The rise of industrial East Asia, at a minimum, has significantly complicated the Weberian picture of modernization as rationalization, a sort of unfolding of the Enlightenment mentality. Indeed, no matter how diverse and complex we imagine the West to be (Weber’s concept is certainly sophisticated enough to accommodate many conflicting trends), the inclusion of the East Asian experience in the picture of modernity makes it extremely difficult to interpret modernization in the light of exclusively Western symbolic resources. When we acknowledge the compatibility of market economy and authoritarian state, recognize the centrality of family virtues to social solidarity, appreciate the fruitful interplay between group consensus and personal independence, construct ideas of “civil society” based on indigenous categories, and employ new conceptual apparatuses, such as “network capitalism,” to understand a different kind of economic dynamics, we are well on our way to an alternative vision of modernity.

In the East Asian cultural context, government leadership is deemed indispensable for the smooth functioning of the domestic market economy and vital for enhancing national comparative advantage in international competition. The central government is expected to have a holistic vision of the well-being of the nation and a long-term plan to help people maintain an adequate livelihood so that they can attain aspirations of human flourishing. Strong government with moral authority, a sort of ritualized symbolic power fully ac-
cepted by the overwhelming majority, is acclaimed as a blessing. For it is the responsibility of the ruling minority to translate the general will of the people into reasonable policies on security, health care, economic growth, social welfare, and education. Indeed, political leaders (including civil servants) in East Asia often possess a commanding influence in the public sphere. They may not be able to dictate the agenda or control the outcome of a public debate, but their voice normally overpowers the voices of other sectors of society, such as the mass media, the business community, and the intelligentsia. Either in self-understanding or in public image, the political leader ought to be a teacher as well as an exemplar and a public servant. Indeed, scholars, journalists, and entrepreneurs often cultivate their most cherished and coveted personal ties with members of the officialdom.

The lack of clear boundaries between public and private in East Asian societies, occasioned by the pervasive influence of politics in all segments of the lifeworld, may not conform to the Western model of modernity, with its highly differentiated spheres of interest. It is, however, wholly commensurable with the centrality of the family in East Asia, not only as a basic social unit but also as a metaphor for political culture. The structure and function of the family vary substantially among Chinese, Japanese, and Korean societies, but the family’s supreme role in capital formation, power politics, social stability, and moral education is comparable in all East Asian communities. The classical Confucian vision that “only when families are regulated are states governed” (as stated in the opening passage of Great Learning) is still taken absolutely seriously in East Asian political culture. The idea of the state as an enlarged family may have lost much of its persuasiveness, but the metaphor of the family is widely present in all forms of social organization. Moreover, family-style connectedness is characteristic of many prominent styles of interpersonal communication based on educational, territorial, and religious ties. The lack of development of a Western-style civil society rooted in voluntary associations is clearly attributable to the
saliency of this noncontractual, extralegal, and ascriptive networking.

Implicit in the significance of the family for social intercourse is the idea of duty. The sense that one is obligated to, and responsible for, an ever-expanding network of human relatedness may not be a constraint on one's independence and autonomy. On the contrary, since personal dignity in East Asian cultures is predicated on one's ability not only to establish oneself but also to take care of others, one's levels of independence and autonomy are measurable in terms of the degree to which one fulfills obligations and discharges responsibilities to family, community, state, world, and heaven. The psychological mechanism reflected in the fear of losing face in public, which is often accompanied by a profound sense of personal guilt, is deduced from this. As the eminent New Confucian thinker Tang Junyi (T'ang Chün-i, 1901–78), perceptively notes, duty-consciousness prompts East Asian moral and political leaders to act to enhance the public good. The difficulty East Asian societies have in developing a sophisticated legal system based on human rights lies not only in the absence of a juridical tradition but also in the strong presence of a different style of moral reasoning.

A significant and captivating aspect of the East Asian alternative vision of modernity is the communal spirit. Although many observers of the industrial East Asian scene have noticed that “individualism has flourished as growth has occurred; hedonism has also increased, in the sense of viewing happiness not as a reward for hard work but as a natural right that is also a goal in itself” in Japan and elsewhere (Herman Kahn and Thomas Pep- per, The Japanese Challenge [Morrow, 1980]), the trends that are expected to have changed the social structure of the East Asian workplace do not seem to have fundamentally undermined the power of the communal spirit. Consensus as a preferred way of decision making, negotiation as a conventional method of conflict resolution, informal arbitration as a frequent substitute for formal legal procedures, and, as a last resort, the common practice of mediation through a third party rather than direct confrontation
between rivals are all symptomatic of an overriding concern for group solidarity in politics, business, and society at large in East Asia. In this particular connection, what Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons symbolize is a less adversarial, less individualistic, and less self-interested but highly energized and fiercely competitive approach to modernization.

It is vitally important to note that the East Asian form of modernity is in a substantial way "Western." After all, it has been the result of a conscious response to the challenge of the modern West since the mid-nineteenth century. Without the Western model, including the Dutch, British, French, German, and, more recently, American examples, East Asian societies would not have embarked on a restless march of modernization. What would East Asia have become, had the imperialist powers never imposed their way of life on the Land of the Rising Sun, the Hermit Kingdom, and the Central Country? The region most likely would not have developed the "capitalist spirit" as Weber understood it, but the overwhelming presence of the modern West for more than a century makes this kind of counterfactual imagination historically insignificant, if not theoretically inconceivable. Indeed, East Asian intellectuals have reluctantly but thoroughly accepted the modern Western nations as the initiators, executors, and judges of the international rules of the game in foreign trade, diplomacy, power politics, military confrontation, and transnational communication for so long that they have taken it for granted that modernization, in theory and in practice, is synonymous with Westernization. The record number of industrial East Asian leaders in academia, politics, business, mass media, and the military who have been educated in the United States since the end of the Second World War further enhances the impression that Westernization is, by and large, Americanization.

The rise of industrial East Asia, paradoxically, signifies the continuous vitality and dynamism of modernization as Westernization. This is clearly evidenced in the persuasive power of the market economy and democratic polity, as well as their attendant Enlightenment values, such as progress, equality, lib-
erty, human rights, individual dignity, and due process of law, in the psychocultural construct of the East Asian intelligentsia. Modernization as Americanization is perhaps most obviously demonstrated in the receptivity of East Asian youth to American popular culture and the susceptibility of the East Asian general public to American consumerism. However, the commanding influence of American higher education, especially at research universities, on East Asian natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities may have been the single most important factor in perpetuating the image of the United States as a future-oriented global intellectual leader in East Asian minds.

Nevertheless, the modernizing experience in industrial East Asia seriously challenges all the conceptual apparatuses that have been used to characterize Western-style modernity. Surely, the modern West may have prompted East Asia to modernize in the initial stage. As the process gathered momentum, a variety of indigenous resources were mobilized, and the structures that emerged appeared to be significantly different from those in Western Europe and North America. It seems that the social and cultural capital that has sustained the economic dynamism of Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons has been at least commensurable with Confucian ethics, if not thoroughly Confucian in nature. Even if Weber was correct in assuming that Confucianism had impeded the development of modern industrial capitalism in traditional East Asia, the thesis that the Confucian ethic is incompatible with the spirit of capitalism is untenable. On the contrary, it has been shown that the Confucian ethic is not only compatible with the spirit of capitalism but also may have helped industrial East Asia to develop a different form of modern industrial capitalism. Actually, attempts have been made to argue a much stronger hypothesis—namely, that the capitalism rooted in Confucian ethics may turn out to be more consequential for the twenty-first century than the classical capitalism fashioned by the inner-worldly asceticism of the Puritan ethic. The implications are profound and far-reaching. The contributors to *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity*
are particularly interested in two of them: tradition in modernity and the modernizing process that may assume several different cultural forms.

In our conference we did not intend to cover, even in bold outline, the salient features of East Asian modernity. However, by focusing our attention on the Confucian dimension, we wanted to probe the cultural resources that have made modern industrial East Asia distinctive. Admittedly, we are far from being able to make any definitive statements about either the modern transformation of Confucian humanism or the nature of East Asian modernity as shaped by Confucian traditions. As participants in an ongoing international conversation, however, we have made an important step toward setting up a long-term, comprehensive agenda for a systematic inquiry into the cultural significance of the rise of industrial East Asia for comparative civilizations. Especially noteworthy is our pioneering attempt to formulate a way of interdisciplinary and cross-cultural communication so that the kind of issues mentioned above will be addressed appropriately and persistently.