

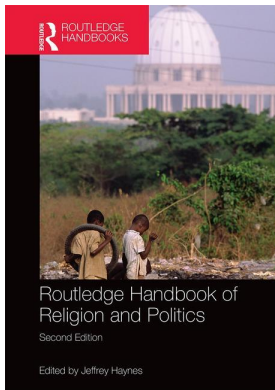
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4

CONFUCIANISM

Classical, Neo- and ‘New’

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Confucianism notionally began in the sixth century BC with the teachings of an obscure Chinese scholar and occasional government adviser called *Kongfuzi* (Confucius). This picture, however, is slightly misleading because Confucius was himself drawing upon traditions, ideals and cosmologies that were already ancient. He was in fact calling for a revitalisation of these traditions in an attempt to bring an end to the chaos that had engulfed China in his own day. He reaffirmed the traditional Chinese notion that virtue, morality, humaneness and harmony are all heavenly realities waiting to be discovered through education and the adoption of ‘proper’ relationships between members of families and members of society. In the hands of his disciples and generations of their successors his teachings gave rise to an ethical code that assumed a status akin to that of a state religion in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam, providing a central basis of regime legitimacy for many generations of imperial dynasties.¹ In the tenth century a rigid, state-centric version known as Neo-Confucianism was imposed in China as the national ideology and versions of this spread to Japan and Korea. It was in this period that the examination system became the basis of governance in China and the empire entered a new period of conservatism. As both a state religion and as a system of governance Confucianism is now dead, but at the level of the lived experience of ordinary people, it continues to act as a religion, imposing patterns of social cognition that provide a reasonably consistent social underlay across Chinese and other East Asian cultures. The divergent elements separating these ‘Confucian’ cultures (China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Vietnam and Singapore) are legion, but the common elements are also very firmly established.

Confucianism makes no claim to absolute or revealed truth, though Neo-Confucianism at its peak guarded its orthodoxies with a keenness reminiscent of a revealed faith.² Nevertheless, in all its manifestations it begins from the premise that ‘the way of the sages’ brought to light natural and innately known truths rather than revealed faith. It is a philosophy and a praxis that provides a logical and time-honoured method of ordering society for the common good by cultivating virtue in everyone from the highest political authority to the most menial commoner, with the ruler and his advisers setting the highest standard: a ‘virtuocracy’. Indeed its classical statecraft was premised on recognition of the absolute power of the emperor, but sought to direct that power for the common good by cultivating virtue in the heart of the emperor and by surrounding him with wise, virtuous and scholarly advisers. The ideal Confucian is a ‘cultured gentleman’

(*junzi*) and a ‘humane person’ (*ren*) as opposed to a ‘mean/small person’ (*xiao ren*). The two central elements that we find in common in societies influenced by Confucianism include:

- a heavily relational, hierarchical and conservatively ordered view of society, whereby society is regarded substantially as an extension of a patriarchal family; and
- respect for scholarship and virtue, with an implicit assumption that the latter is derived from the former.

In its pre-modern forms Confucianism also saw virtue as being properly expressed through rites and rituals (*li*) that ensure everyone in society operates in a proper fashion according to his or her place in the social hierarchy. Although the formal rituals are no longer very common practice, social intercourse still tends to follow somewhat ritualised patterns that can seem obsequious to outsiders. Central to the relational and hierarchical perspective of classical Confucianism are two sets of relationships. The first is the ‘five relationships’ that govern Confucian thought: ruler over minister/subject; father over son; husband over wife; elder brother over younger brother; and friend and friend. Friendships are the only apparently non-hierarchical relationship in the Confucian order, but in practice friends tend to model their behaviour on the older brother/younger brother relationship. The second set of relationships is the traditional hierarchy of occupations, whereby scholars are almost venerated, farmers are accorded considerable respect, workers are held in lower regard, and merchants are at the bottom of the pile. Soldiers are so low that they are not accepted as part of the hierarchy at all, except in Japan, where the Samurai traditionally took the place of scholars in the hierarchy. It is a sign of the flexibility of contemporary Confucianism that the subservient role of women is generally dismissed (at least at levels of official policy), that merchants are held in high regard in many Confucian societies, and every country with a Confucian heritage gives its military a place of honour (except, ironically, in pacifist Japan where the military had earlier held a place of honour).

Described in broad terms, Confucianism can appear to be a monolithic social force and an uncompromising force for conservatism, but such an assessment ignores the heterogeneity that is found in Confucian societies. Perhaps the most stark and public point of difference today is in political outcomes, whereby Confucianism has found itself from time to time being conscripted to the side of authoritarian established orders in China and Singapore, even as radical and apparently successful experiments in democracy are taking place in the Confucian societies of South Korea and Taiwan. The conservative claims rest upon Confucianism’s elitism, the high value it places on social order and its promotion of deference towards those in positions of authority. Advocates of democracy do not generally justify their positions with reference to Confucianism at all, but there are some who focus on the ways that a Confucian perspective helps shape and modify the practice of democracy,³ and others who go further and argue the positive advantages that a Confucian perspective brings to democratic processes and cultures.⁴ Rarer among scholars (but more common among ordinary South Koreans, Taiwanese, Hong Kongers and Singaporeans) are those who articulate an unambiguous case that Confucianism needs liberal democracy to establish its relevance and legitimacy in the twenty-first century.⁵

The renewed interest in and thinking about Confucianism has been led by a high-profile and extremely prolific group of scholars who have been engaging in efforts to recast Confucianism to make it newly relevant and important. They are often described by others and themselves as advocates of ‘New Confucianism’, though there is too much diversity in their thinking to regard New Confucianism as anything more than a convenient label for a complex phenomenon. They can be broadly described as an unstructured group of scholars who emphasise the

humanitarianism and benevolence inherent in an ideal Confucian order,⁶ though they sometimes engage in intellectual slippage whereby the ideal of a Confucian order is not compared to the ideal of a liberal democratic order, but is juxtaposed to the tawdry realities and shortcomings of liberal democratic societies.⁷ Notable examples of New Confucianists include the prolific Daniel A. Bell of the Department of Philosophy at Tsinghua University (who actually titled one of his books *China's New Confucianism*⁸), Tu Wei-ming of the Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies at Peking University and Wm. Theodore de Bary, an Emeritus Provost at Columbia University. The advocates of New Confucianism are matched by scholars such as Qing Jiang of Yangmin Academy, who believes New Confucianism has been unduly influenced by Western ideas like democracy, and by others like Joseph Chan of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, who push for a fuller integration of ancient Chinese political theory with arguments and theories developed in the West.

A religion?

The residual life of Confucianism as a grassroots mode of social cognition should be sufficient to establish a *prima facie* case that, regardless of any quibbles over whether it is technically a religion, it is worthy of being treated as such for the purposes of understanding its relationship to politics because it has the capacity to exercise social power comparable to that of a religion.⁹ Indeed, in its pre-modern forms it was, as Turner articulates, primarily a state religion, though one that also conveyed an expression of 'a sense of human dependency on the spiritual realm'.¹⁰ It has now been thoroughly deposed from exercising direct state power, but it still retains elements of both the public and the private dimensions of its original character. It is true that in both spheres it is substantially subservient to other religions and world views (e.g. capitalism, democracy and some hollow vestiges of communism), but then this is only a variation of the historical record whereby Confucianism has always found itself in porous relationships with rival religions and ideologies; hence the prevalence of syncretism in East Asia, with variously Legalism, Daoism, Buddhism, Shinto and Shamanism sharing social and political hegemony with Confucianism in different times and places.

There are many elements of Confucianism as a religion that are worthy of study, but if we consider it precisely as it articulates with modern politics we can reasonably restrict ourselves to three elements that are identified by Fox as elements specifically relevant to politics:

- religion as a direct influence on policy makers;
- religion as an indirect influence on policy makers because of:
 - the expectations of their constituents;
 - the expectations generated by the 'political and cultural mediums' created by the religion; and
- religion as a tool of legitimation for governments and for those who oppose them.¹¹

Fox's interest is in religion as a phenomenon rather than Confucianism itself, but the same cannot be said of Tu Wei-ming. Tu was for many years a Harvard-based scholar of Confucianism who, since the early 1980s, has also been a tireless international advocate of Confucian ethics and philosophy, having been intimately involved in state-sponsored campaigns to revive Confucianism, first in Singapore and then in China. During his advocacy in Singapore he argued that there are three distinct but related forms of Confucianism at work in the modern world:

- Confucianism as an ideology;
- Confucianism as a mode of scholarship; and
- Confucianism as a system of personal ethics.¹²

To study the role of Confucianism in modern politics I suggest that we need a framework based essentially upon Tu's, but which is more open to answering the questions raised by Fox.

With these parameters in mind I propose to interrogate the relationship between Confucianism and modern politics through three conceptual prisms:

- Confucianism as a tool for manipulation by political elites.
- Confucianism as a subject of study by scholars of Confucian texts, ethics and philosophy, and any scholars who are wont to become participants in state-sponsored Confucian revivals.
- Confucianism as a generic term for the many traditional East Asian forms of social cognition related to family, education, scholarship, society and governance that – despite significant variations between them – can be loosely described as 'social Confucianism'.

At all three levels, Confucianism continues to influence the conduct of politics in Chinese and East Asian societies. This can be seen most clearly in the recent history of China and Singapore, where the elite manipulation of Confucianism for political ends and legitimation is most overt, but it is also apparent in the 'informal' politics of South Korea, Taiwan, Japan and Vietnam because of the strength of social Confucianism. I postulate that Confucianism at all three levels will continue to influence Chinese and East Asian societies, but its impact on politics will not be constant or uncontested, first because the political sponsorship waxes and wanes according to regimes' contingent needs, and second because the stakeholders (elites, scholars and the various East Asian societies) have differing and to some extent contradictory interests and no one stakeholder has sufficient moral or political force to monopolise a single national agenda, let alone the international discourse.

Political elites

The most obvious point of articulation between Confucianism and politics is in the way particular political leaders have attempted to revive something of the spirit, if not the working detail, of Neo-Confucianism, and to harness it for their own ends. Political elites have sometimes been tempted to market Confucianism as a basis of state and political legitimacy. In recent decades this has happened in two places in particular: the largest and the smallest national repositories of Chinese society, China and Singapore. In each case the resurrection of Confucianism was prompted by the collapse of a previously useful basis of legitimation, and – probably not coincidentally – by the emergence of new domestic political threats. In the case of China, the regimes found it convenient in the 1980s to encourage and sustain a resurgence of interest in Confucius and Confucianism that had taken root on its own over the previous decade.¹³ In the case of Singapore it was part of a broader, even more contrived state effort to instil defences against 'Western decadence'.¹⁴ It was particularly ironic to see this activity taking place in China, where the state set out to purge society of Confucianism both under the Nationalists in the 1920s–1930s and again during Mao's pathological anti-Confucian campaigns that began in the 1950s and reached their zenith in the Cultural Revolution of the 1970s.¹⁵

In the case of Singapore, which had its 'Confucian' heyday in the 1980s, the particular triggers were the forced withdrawal of Singapore from the Socialist International in 1976, and the

electoral resurgence of opposition parties.¹⁶ Yet behind both these immediate causes lay a more remote one: then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's Chinese 'turn', whereby he apparently 'discovered' his Chinese roots and set out to make 'Chineseness' the centrepiece of his personal life, his statecraft and Singapore's successful pursuit of economic growth.¹⁷ He saw the public promotion of 'Confucianism' in schools, in the media and in social welfare, family and housing policy – along with speaking Mandarin, and celebrating 'Chinese culture' and history – as central to this re-articulation of the Singapore national project.¹⁸ A particularly unsavoury aspect of Singapore's Confucian turn in the 1980s was the cover that it provided for the transformation of both Singapore's national elite and its society more generally from being one based on a thoroughly multicultural ideal (as befits a Chinese-majority society where non-Chinese make up more than a quarter of the population) to one that is thoroughly Sinocentric.¹⁹ Singapore's Confucian experiment had slipped to the background of the broader Sinicisation project by the late 1980s, but it continues today at a less intensive level. Overt references to 'Confucianism' and kindred concepts (such as 'filial piety', 'meritocracy', deference to those in authority), are now thoroughly integrated into most mainstream public discourses in Singapore.

China

The resurgence of officially sponsored Confucianism in China had tentative public beginnings in 1983 with the restoration of Confucius's tomb, came fully into the open in 1989 (the first year in which Confucius's birthday was celebrated in the People's Hall in Beijing) and emerged officially in 1994, which was the year in which the International Confucian Association was launched with a gala international conference in Beijing. During this period Deng Xiaoping's embrace of capitalism was in full force throughout Eastern China, the widespread unrest of 1989 (culminating in the Tiananmen Square massacre) was a fresh memory and China was facing severe diplomatic-cum-trade pressure from the United Nations and the United States over its human rights record.²⁰ The subsequent success of China's economic development programme did much to overcome the regime's 'legitimation deficit', but the unintended consequences generated a new set of challenges in the form of peasant and worker protests. The Ministry of Public Security has reported a massive increase in the number of what it calls 'mass incidents' over the decades of China's capitalist success. It reported over 180,000 mass incidents in 2010, up from 32,000 in 1999.²¹ Most of these mass incidents were relatively small in scale, but between 2003 and 2009, there were 248 that involved more than 500 people, with protest causes including industrial issues, land confiscation and forced relocation, and official corruption.²² In March 2005 the National People's Congress (NPC) publicly declared the increase in public protests as a primary reason for the renewed emphasis on the Confucian virtue of 'harmony'.²³ This NPC meeting also proved to be something of a turning point in official attitudes to mass incidents, whereby news media were encouraged to display a new level of sympathy towards protesters.²⁴ Regardless of the immediate cause, the accumulation of challenges from these disturbances indicated a major crisis of legitimacy for the government because in the Confucian order, peasant satisfaction is a vital sign of legitimacy, and peasant unrest is one of the signs that an emperor has lost the right to rule (i.e. lost the 'Mandate of Heaven').²⁵

The year 2010 turned out to be the final year in which the government issued official figures so we cannot now ascertain whether the rate of incidents is continuing to rise. Certainly the number of media reports about mass incidents is superficially suggestive that the numbers stopped rising part-way through 2010, and either dropped or began flattening in about April (see Figure 4.1), but the suddenness of the drop in the press under the tightest government

control suggests that this is more due to a deliberate change in the rate of reporting rather than a change in the rate of incidents. Unofficial figures based on first hand reporting by the Hong Kong-based *China Labour Bulletin* indicate that the rate of worker strikes doubled from 2013 to 2014,²⁶ so it may be wishful thinking to hope that the number of mass incidents is really dropping. Yet this is not the point: the reason for the government’s sensitivity about peasant protests in particular is the challenge it poses to the legitimacy of the government.

Former President Jiang Zemin responded to the challenges of the 1990s by overtly promoting Confucianism, both as a stabilising factor and as a new rationale for the legitimacy of the regime. His efforts culminated in his 2001 call for the study of Confucian classics in Party schools, and his publicly voiced aspiration to see the imposition of a ‘rule of virtue’ in China to complement the widespread but half-hearted campaign to introduce the rule of law.²⁷ A sceptic might interpret this as Jiang calling for the existing ruling elite to be recognised as virtuous, thereby bestowing Confucian-inspired legitimacy on the regime. The response of his successor, Hu Jintao, extended and refined Jiang’s approach: he made a strategic decision even before taking over the full reins of the leadership to make ‘harmony’ the key concept of his rule so that he was able to launch his strategy in his nationally televised acceptance speech immediately after being elected President of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).²⁸ After

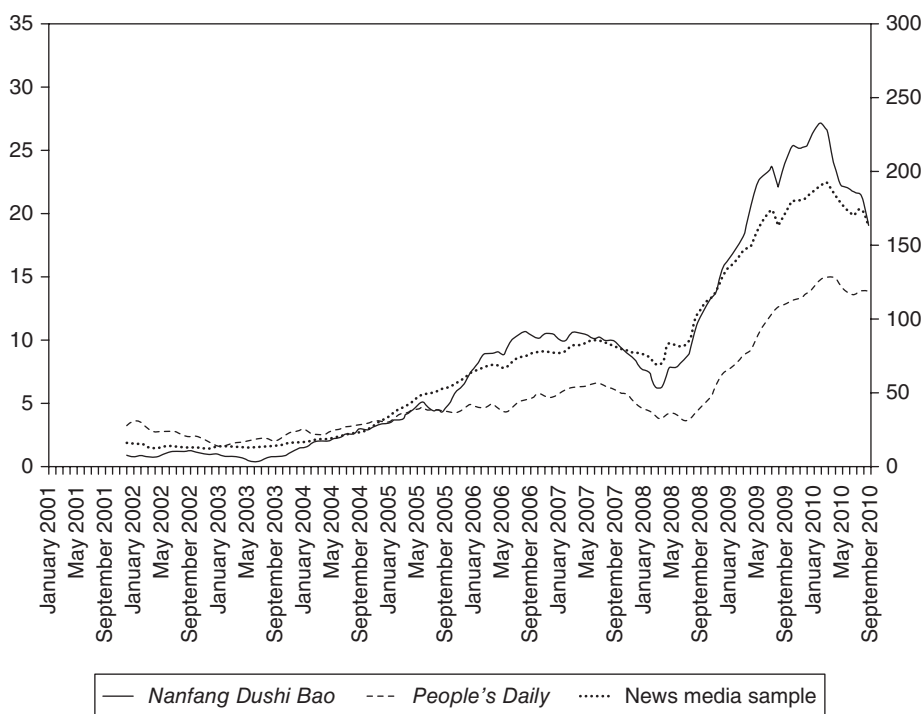


Figure 4.1 ‘Mass incidents’ in the Chinese news media (12 month moving average), 2001–2010

Source: Steinhardt, ‘From Blind Spot to Media Spotlight’, 127.

Note: Values represent the monthly frequencies of news media reports containing the term ‘mass incident’ in two daily newspapers, *People’s Daily* and *Nanfang Dushi Bao* (left axis), and in a sample of 34 Chinese news outlets (right axis). Two synonymous ways to write ‘mass incident’ in Chinese were used. The author is grateful for H. Christoph Steinhardt’s permission to reuse this chart, which first appeared in his article in *Asian Studies Review*, Volume 39, Number 1, 2015.

that, his promotion of 'harmony' and a 'harmonious society' became ubiquitous, with Hu's speeches and those of other members of the political elite containing so many references to these concepts that it would be tedious to cite them individually. Suffice to say that the promotion of a harmonious society quickly became the officially designated top priority of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).²⁹ By October 2006 harmony had been listed as a direction for the country, on a par with the quest for prosperity, democracy and a civilised society.³⁰ In strictly Confucian terms this was perhaps an odd choice of concept because Confucian harmony is not so much a virtue to be practised or a state to be imposed, but a good outcome to be applauded. Harmony is the social benefit derived from rule by virtue and the proper functioning of society, but here it was being presented as the pre-condition, not a result, of a good social order.³¹

The succession of Hu Jintao by Xi Jinping towards the end of 2012 changed the tenor of the official rhetoric drastically. Talk of harmony disappeared overnight as if it had never been, and Xi all but dropped the Confucian imagery, replacing it with a narrative that evoked Chinese pride and nationalism – the 'Chinese dream' of the restoration of China's former glory. Confucian roots could still be identified in his anti-corruption campaigns, but they were mostly assumed and unstated, not needing constant and explicit exposition. Xi does still make public displays of devotion to Confucianism, yet even on such occasions he denies Confucius a full starring role. One such example was his keynote address to the International Confucian Association in September 2014, when he said:

Confucianism, along with other philosophies and cultures taking shape and growing within China, are records of spiritual experiences, rational thinking and cultural achievements of the nation during its striving to build its home (emphasis added).³²

A perusal of Xi's little white book, *The Governance of China*, confirms the pattern that is suggested by this extract.³³ Its 497 pages contain only seven explicit references to Confucius or Confucianism, a single reference to the Book of Rites, and not a single explicit reference to the Analects, harmony, filial piety or the five relationships. As in his address to the International Confucian Association, Xi's book consistently diminishes Confucius and Confucianism by presenting it in a much broader, even eclectic context: Confucius and Lao Zi (the founder of Daoism);³⁴ Confucianism and Buddhism and Daoism;³⁵ Confucius and a string of other Chinese sages;³⁶ Confucius, Goethe and Shakespeare.³⁷

In stark contrast to Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, Xi has reduced Confucius to an emblematic figurehead; little more than a mascot whose statue fronts Confucius Institutes throughout the world. Selected aspects of Confucianism do survive in Xi's discourse. Most are in the background but a closer read of *The Governance of China* uncovers one that is very prominent: upholding the virtue of study and the related Confucian notion that virtue is acquired through study.³⁸ The former is generic and common among many cultures, but the latter is particular to Confucianism.

The reduction of Confucius to a mascot while concurrently accepting much of the social cognition provided by Confucianism is not fully ingenuous, but it is still refreshingly honest compared to the recent decades during which Confucianism was presented in parody by his predecessors.

Singapore

Turning to Singapore, we find that its Confucian revival of the 1980s was mapped out in explicit detail in a series of 'Confucian Ethics' textbooks designed for use in Singaporean

schools and was reinforced by rhetoric from the political elite. The messages were constant and quickly became predictable: the ideal of the *junzi*; the importance of education and meritocracy; the virtues of a supposed ‘Confucian work ethic’; the central role of filial piety and the importance of the extended, three-tier family; ‘family values’; social responsibility; the need for consensus, co-operation and political restraint from sectional and political interests; social harmony; respect for elders; and deference to those in positions of authority. The cynicism with which this rejuvenation of Confucianism was approached was indicated in a research interview that I conducted with Goh Keng Swee, Singapore’s former Deputy Prime Minister and the man who founded the research institute that spearheaded the Confucianism revival of the 1980s. I asked him whether Lee Kuan Yew was really a ‘Confucian gentleman’. He replied:

[Lee Kuan Yew] is not a Confucian. He can’t be a Confucian gentleman. But he did say that societies that were under a Confucian theory have certain attributes – Japan, Korea, China, and overseas Chinese – and these attributes were useful. Like saving money, working hard and education.

(Author’s interview with Goh Keng Swee, 1 October 1996)

The spirit of the regime’s approach is revealed in an anecdote that this same Goh Keng Swee – then speaking as Deputy Prime Minister – recounted in 1972:

Recently I had an interesting after-dinner discussion with a widely travelled American banker. . . . He asked what my choice would be if I had to recommend one single prescription to solve the economic problems of a poor country. I said I would recommend that the population be converted to some demanding, narrow-minded, intolerant form of the Protestant religion, such as one of the more extreme Calvinist sects. This would bring about the end of easy-going thriftless habits among the populace and the beginning of scrupulous honesty in public administration.

This fanciful idea puts, in an extreme way, the view that a firm moral order need be established in a society which seeks economic progress.³⁹

Converting Singapore to Calvinism was never an option, but Confucianism was clearly considered to be a viable substitute.

Singapore’s experiment with a Confucian revival reached its most public and official zenith in the country’s five official ‘Shared Values’, which were adopted by Parliament in 1991. The final version of the values reads:

1. nation before community and society before self;
2. family as the basic unit of society;
3. community support and respect for the individual;
4. consensus, not conflict; and
5. racial and religious harmony.

The ‘Shared Values’ were consciously designed through the prism of Confucianism, which is indicated by the fact that the Government White Paper that paved the way for their adoption explicitly invoked the Confucian ideal of ‘government by honourable gentlemen’, *junzi*.⁴⁰ Yet the political intent of these ‘values’ is revealed in another episode in their gestation. At one point the government considered, but rejected, a proposal to amend Shared Value 1 to read ‘harmony or balance between individual and community interests’.⁴¹ This change would have

weakened the conceptual supremacy of the state over the individual and community, and so was rejected by the government.

At this point it is worth noting that Lee Kuan Yew, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao are not the only rulers of Confucian societies to conscript Confucianism for their own ends. In the 1930s the Kuomintang leadership of Nationalist China overtly invoked Confucianism under the banner of the New Life Movement, and as recently as 2004, South Korean President Roh Moon-Hyun donned classical Confucian garb (literally) and very publicly withdrew from public life in the style of a Korean emperor of old as part of his strategic (and successful) response to impeachment proceedings initiated by the parliamentary opposition parties.⁴² These examples of overt political usage of Confucianism demonstrate the latent potential for this type of exploitation across East Asia, but in most countries of the region the role of Confucianism in politics is much more subtle and takes the forms that are more properly explored in the section on 'Social Confucianism' below.

Scholars

Scholars play a ubiquitous but uncomfortable role in political Confucianism. Ubiquitous because scholars and scholarship are and always have been intrinsic to Confucianism, to the point where Confucian revivals cannot achieve any level of credibility without the co-operation of scholars. Uncomfortable because modern Confucian scholars are generally well-meaning humanists who believe that Confucianism, properly understood, can be an active agent for humanistic virtue and civility among rulers and ruled alike (and who generally argue that Confucianism is compatible with democracy and human rights), but who routinely find themselves as the handmaidens of authoritarian regimes. Take the case of Tu Wei-ming and the other North American Confucian scholars who were brought to Singapore in the 1980s to facilitate the government's Confucian revival. They came and they wrote and delivered scholarly papers. They took part in televised discussions and gave advice to the government, but the crucial task of writing the Confucian Ethics textbooks and workbooks went to a team of Singaporeans, none of whom has any record of scholarship or publication on Confucianism outside the confines of the Singapore 'Confucianism' project. The final product of these courses was didactic and conservative, predictably emphasising the social hierarchy of the Confucian world view and projecting society as a conflation of the family.⁴³ The Secondary Three Confucian Ethics textbook described the relationship between the ruler and the ruled using Confucius's analogy:

The grass must bend when the wind blows across it. . . . In other words, just as healthy green grass sways naturally and gracefully with the breeze, so good citizens will spontaneously respond to the good policies of virtuous leaders.⁴⁴

The Secondary Four textbook goes further: 'Fulfilment begins with the cultivation of the individual self. . . . The leaders must show the way. That is why the virtuous and able are elected to office.'⁴⁵ No wonder Tu Wei-ming now disassociates himself from the revival movement that he helped to start.⁴⁶

The scholars of the PRC's revival find themselves in a similar position, with the added complication that many of them have academic positions in China itself, which means that they cannot question, among other things, the leading role of the Party in China. These academics, whether from Asia, North America or Europe, have played crucial and very direct roles in the Confucian revival in China. Hu Jintao's strategic decision to use 'harmony' as

the central conceptual tenet of his regime was itself the result of representations over a long period of time by Confucian scholars and ‘think tanks’ operating within Chinese academic institutions. During Hu’s rule, scholars remained crucial to the development and perceived legitimacy of the Confucian revival, and scholars within China were routinely co-opted into the government’s overtly political Confucian programme. This involved not just scholars of Confucianism and related topics attending conferences on Confucianism and themes related to ‘harmony’ (of which there are many), but the whole academic community. The scope and dimensions of this programme were indicated in March 2005 when the city of Beijing announced that its 11th Five-Year Plan would downplay economic growth for the first time in years, and would instead ‘strive to achieve harmonious development’.⁴⁷ This shift of focus, together with the ‘preliminary investigations’ needed to begin giving distinct shape to this vague new direction, involved over 600 researchers from 57 institutions: not just scholars of Confucianism and the humanities, but, according to *China Daily* (31 March 2005), specialists covering ‘a wide range of local social and economic development issues, including industrial development, communications network construction, environmental protection, heritage preservation and social security’. This academic involvement is a form of co-option. In saying this I do not wish to imply passivity or submission on the part of these academics. When harmony became the mantra, money and sponsorship was laid on for scholars, and the Chinese Academy of the Social Sciences and most universities studied aspects of harmony at length. Even in Hong Kong universities harmony became a major research theme in the social sciences and humanities. I took part in one such exercise sponsored by City University of Hong Kong in June 2006: the discussion was as critical as one could desire and the research output consisted of a high-quality edited volume published by Routledge,⁴⁸ and yet we all contributed, however indirectly, to Hu’s discourse on harmony.

It is important to note that whether they were scholars of philosophy, ethics, politics or civil engineering, the academics that were pro-actively contributing to Hu Jintao’s harmonious society were generally operating from benign motives, including from a desire to contribute to the common good. They saw themselves in the mode of the classical Confucian scholarly advisers to emperors, and insofar as they had an agenda to influence government, it was mostly one that idealises a humane, beneficent administration. The fact that an authoritarian regime was able to cherry pick its way through this academic discourse to find the bits that suited its own agenda was generally accepted with equanimity. Even today, when Confucianism is no longer at the forefront of political discourse, the top academic institutions in China still abound with departments and institutes hosting proponents of what is sometimes called ‘the Confucianism’, for example the Advanced Institute of Confucian Studies at Shandong University, the Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies at Peking University and the Department of Philosophy at Tsinghua University. This repository of talent is not going anywhere, and will keep working away, gnawing away at intractable questions of governance, ethics and culture and publishing sophisticated books on political philosophy, and hopefully contributing positively to elite thinking on issues of governance, rights and social values.

Social Confucianism

The aspects of Confucianism that have been canvassed thus far are easily the most public and quantifiable elements of Confucianism as a factor in politics, but perhaps the most significant in terms of endurance, consistency and profundity is the more mercurial aspect of Confucianism’s impact on the political cultures of the countries that come under its influence; aspects that are identified by Dittmer *et al.*, as the ‘informal politics’ of East Asia,⁴⁹ and

described in their volume as 'interpersonal activities stemming from a tacitly accepted, but unenunciated, matrix of political attitudes existing outside the framework of legal government, constitutions, bureaucratic constructs and similar institutions (the latter being the domain of formal politics)'.⁵⁰ It is remarkable, for instance, how easily the resonance of Confucianism can be identified in the familial and social actions of generations of nationalist, communist and post-communist Chinese, who have tended to remain locked in Confucian patterns of thought and habit, often despite their conscious intentions. Even in matters of statecraft, the legacy of Confucianism still flourishes just below the surface throughout East Asia. In Vietnam, not only has the politics of the educated Mandarinate been reproduced under the guise of the Leninist bureaucratic state, but centuries-old Vietnamese classics on the art of Confucian statecraft have been re-published and have enjoyed a major resurgence.⁵¹ Even during the worst barbarities of Mao Zedong's rule, Maoist political rituals and education replaced only the dogma of Confucianism: it retained the template in which the dogma lived. The Confucian emphasis on personal virtue (*de*) was retained, but it was aligned according to 'redness' and revolutionary purity, rather than to the virtues of the Confucian gentleman.⁵² And when the concept of 'good' and 'bad' class replaced that of lineage, one's class was still determined by the traditional method: patrilineal descent.⁵³ A strong, almost tangible tribute to Confucianism's perseverance is the fact that China's modern student-dissidents of the 1980s and 1990s, who grew up decades after Confucianism's supposed eradication, constructed their dissent according to classical Confucian precepts, and operated substantially according to Confucian expectations of how scholarly dissidents should act. This included presenting deferential petitions to the rulers, and holding their worker and merchant allies in contempt.⁵⁴ Perhaps it is just as extraordinary that the Communist Party leadership also followed Confucian patterns of action when dealing with these students: receiving students' petitions relatively graciously, and showing relative leniency towards the student-dissidents, but attacking worker-dissidents savagely. On one occasion Jiang Zemin (then Mayor of Shanghai) apologised for police brutality against a student, explaining that police had mistaken the student for a worker.⁵⁵

A survey of the rest of East Asia elicits a similar picture, though without the extremes found in China. In Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, the formal study and practice of Confucianism died during the twentieth century, as it faced the various challenges of modernity, rising levels of prosperity and education levels, Christianity, capitalism and communism.⁵⁶ Yet in all these cases the low cultural influence of Confucianism is overt and inescapable at all levels of society and governance – though admittedly it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the influences of Confucianism *per se* and Confucianism's various accommodations with local cultures. It is surely not a coincidence that China, Vietnam, Japan (at least as it operated until 1993) and Singapore are all governed by Mandarinate that are basically distorted versions of the traditional Confucian Mandarinate of old. One of the differences between the old Mandarinate and the new is that today the personnel staffing the Mandarinate and advising governments are generally not *junzi*, schooled in Confucian humanism as verified in Confucian examinations, but engineers, scientists, lawyers, doctors, town planners and other professionals.

What I am describing here is not an attempt to paint a two-dimensional picture of supposedly 'Confucian East Asians' reacting in Pavlovian fashion to stimuli according to an equally two-dimensional view of 'Confucian culture'. Hopefully such distorted pictures died with the 'Asian Values' discourses of the early 1990s. I am actually arguing a much more modest case: that popular, grassroots assumptions of 'good' that have survived persecution and attacks from a myriad of modern and pre-modern enemies continue to inform constituencies at all levels of these societies. This affects how these constituencies expect members of their societies

to behave – including their political leaders, their students and their academics. Not only are political leaders influenced directly by the same expectations, but they also have an incentive to be seen to be behaving in such a fashion.

Most of this chapter has focussed on authoritarian uses of political Confucianism, but at the level of social Confucianism, Confucian democracies need also to be considered. Scholarly opinion varies over how social Confucianism is affecting the development and stability of democracies in East Asia, with scholars shifting their opinions over the years as the evidence or their thinking changes. For instance Doh Chull Shin argued in 2006 that Confucian influence is on balance a negative influence on the operation of democracy but six years later presented a more nuanced argument that citizens in democratic Confucian societies are engaged in an ongoing project of producing a new form of democracy, responding to different expectations to that which operates in liberal societies.⁵⁷ Oknim Chung argued on similar lines when writing about the early years of South Korea's experiment with democracy, pointing to the continuing prominence of Confucian notions of what is 'humane', 'just' and 'moral'.⁵⁸ L.H.M. Ling and Chih-yu Shih argued the same case, using newly-democratic Taiwan as their example:

Politicians may hinge their moral leadership on appearance more than fact, rhetoric more than action. But mass and elite alike demand a ritualised demonstration of selflessness for the common good as the critical standard for public office.⁵⁹

Given the hierarchical, elitist, communitarian and conservative character of Confucianism, it does seem unlikely that on balance it will be a positive force. Yet there is every reason to think that democracy will nevertheless accommodate itself to Confucian societies and vice versa, thus producing forms of democracy that are genuinely democratic while still being distinctively Confucian in character.

The adaptation of democracy into a Confucian culture is neither mysterious nor profound. Just as different Western cultures have developed different democratic cultures that reflect, for instance, a spirit of individualism (such as in the US) or a culture of consensus (such as in Scandinavia),⁶⁰ East Asian democracies are acculturating democracy to suit the proclivities of their societies. This is in the nature of democracies. If constituencies in a democracy expect, for instance, the Confucian virtues of consensus, harmony and deference to those in authority, then of course politicians will be seen to be trying to deliver it.⁶¹

Conclusion

In this survey we set out to examine the role of Confucianism in politics through the prisms of the political elites, scholars and social Confucianism. Through this tripartite approach we hoped to find answers to the questions that Fox asked about religions more generally: religion as a direct influence on policy makers; religion as an indirect influence on policy makers; and religion as a tool of legitimation for governments and for those who oppose them.⁶² It is clear that in all three forms, Confucianism continues to influence the conduct of politics in Chinese and East Asian societies. This can be seen most clearly in the recent history of China and Singapore, where the elite manipulation of Confucianism for political ends and legitimation has been very overt, but it is also apparent in the 'informal' politics of South Korea, Taiwan, Japan and Vietnam because of the strength of social Confucianism.

Political rulers of all hues can be expected to continue their efforts to exploit Confucianism for their own ends, though it seems to be authoritarian rulers who find the most sustenance in Confucianism – reflecting its conservative, elitist roots. Yet despite its anti-democratic

tendencies, scholars, democratic politicians and the grassroots of Confucian societies find Confucianism and democracy to be companionable bedfellows, able to live comfortably in the one culture and the one polity.

Notes

- 1 Turner, 'Religion and politics', 212.
- 2 Kim, 'Confucianism, moral equality and human rights', 150, 179.
- 3 E.g. Shin, *Confucianism and Democratization in East Asia*.
- 4 E.g. Bell, *Confucian Political Ethics*; and de Bary, *The Great Civilized Conversation*.
- 5 Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism*.
- 6 Qing, *A Confucian Constitutional Order*.
- 7 Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy*.
- 8 Bell, *China's New Confucianism*.
- 9 Sun, *Confucianism as a World Religion*.
- 10 Turner, 'Religion and politics', 112.
- 11 Fox, 'Religion as an overlooked element', 61–7.
- 12 Tu, *Confucian Ethics Today*, 204.
- 13 Dubois, 'Religion and the Chinese state', 344–58.
- 14 Barr, *Cultural Politics and Asian Values*, 32–9.
- 15 Mitter, 'Mao Zedong and charismatic Maoism', 94–8.
- 16 Barr, *Cultural Politics and Asian Values*, 30–1.
- 17 Barr, *Lee Kuan Yew*, 164–74; and Barr and Skrbiš, *Constructing Singapore*, chapter 5.
- 18 Barr and Skrbiš, *Constructing Singapore*, chapters 6–10.
- 19 *Ibid.*, chapters 5 and 11; and Barr, *The Ruling Elite of Singapore*, chapter 5.
- 20 Barr, *Cultural Politics and Asian Values*, 51–63.
- 21 O'Reilly, 'China's "mass incidents"'
- 22 Tong and Lei, 'Large-scale mass incidents in China', 24, 25.
- 23 Xinhua News Agency, 8 March 2005.
- 24 Steinhart, 'From blind spot to media spotlight', 127.
- 25 Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism*, 72, 109. Also see Shin, *Confucianism and Democratization in East Asia*, 116.
- 26 'Strike map', *China Labor Bulletin*.
- 27 *South China Morning Post*, 20 February 2001.
- 28 Xinhua News Agency, 17 March 2003; BBC, 18 March 2003.
- 29 Xinhua News Agency, 20 February 2005.
- 30 *South China Morning Post*, 12 October 2006.
- 31 Hu, quoted in Xinhua News Agency, 27 June 2005.
- 32 CCTV News, 25 September, 2014.
- 33 Xi, *The Governance of China*.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 304.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 286.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 64.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 492.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 55, 64, 194, 195, 202.
- 39 Goh, *The Practice of Economic Growth*, 46.
- 40 Government of Singapore, White Paper: *Shared Values*.
- 41 Mauzy and Milne, *Singapore's Politics*, 63.
- 42 *The Straits Times*, 2 April 2004.
- 43 Grosse, *Confucian Ethics: Secondary Three*, 101, 102; and Grosse, *Confucian Ethics: Secondary Four*, 124.
- 44 Grosse, *Confucian Ethics: Secondary Three*, 124.

- 45 Grosse, *Confucian Ethics: Secondary Four*, 92.
- 46 *Asian Wall Street Journal*, 28 May 1993.
- 47 *China Daily*, 31 March 2005.
- 48 Tao *et al.*, *Governance for Harmony*.
- 49 Dittmer, Fukui and Lee, *Informal Politics*.
- 50 Pike, 'Informal politics in Vietnam', 281.
- 51 Woodside, 'Exalting the latecomer state'.
- 52 Shirk, *Competitive Comrades*, 1–23.
- 53 Stockman, *Understanding Chinese Society*, 83–134.
- 54 Perry and Fuller, 'China's long march to democracy', 667–71.
- 55 Perry, 'Casting a Chinese "democracy" movement', 155.
- 56 For an intensive quantitative analysis of the severe impact of factors such as rising incomes and education levels on the approaches to democracy and Confucian approaches to politics, see Wang, *Democratization in Confucian East Asia*.
- 57 See Park and Shin, 'Do Asian values deter popular support?', 341–61; Shin, *Confucianism and Democratization in East Asia*; and Wang, *Democratization in Confucian East Asia*.
- 58 Oknim Chung, 'Values, governance and international relations', 105, 106.
- 59 Barr, *Cultural Politics and Asian Values*, 66.
- 60 Pierre, 'Consensual but not Confucian'.
- 61 Barr, *Cultural Politics and Asian Values*, 64–71.
- 62 Fox, 'Religion as an overlooked element of International Relations', 61–7.

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