East Asian Approaches: Region, History and Civilization

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ABSTRACT The historical unity of the East Asian region – defined as made up of China, Korea and Japan – is based on three successive phases: the *longue durée* of the traditional Sinocentric order, the ear of imperialist conflicts from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, and the post-war developmentalist turn. The idea of a Confucian tradition or region is best understood as an attempt to superimpose a more emphatic conception of cultural identity on this historical constellation, and to rebuild bridges between past and present. For a critical and comparative analysis of the claims made in relation to Confucianism and its modernizing potential, it is essential to move from the issue of capitalist development to a broader civilizational framework.

KEYWORDS capitalism • civilization • Confucianism • development • East Asia

TRADITIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

Contrary to some recent trends, the following reflections on the East Asian region will be based on a narrow definition of its boundaries and identity. From a historical point of view, it includes three countries – China, Korea and Japan – whose destinies have been interconnected in complex and changing ways. But in contemporary geopolitical terms, we are dealing with five states: Japan, the two Koreas and the two Chinas (i.e. the imperial mainland polity and Taiwan). This constellation has remained unchanged during the second half of the 20th century and outlasted the Cold War; there are good reasons to expect changes, but no plausible ways of predicting their course. Although the unification of Korea would be a return to historical normalcy and a logical result of international developments, incalculable factors

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on all sides are important enough to allow for a variety of possible outcomes. As for a future rapprochement of Taiwan and mainland China, it is not unlikely to come about in one way or another, but there the range of imaginable options is even wider. If East Asia is defined in the above sense, its unity is grounded in three successive layers of historical experience. Prior to the 19th-century intrusion of western powers, enduring geopolitical and geocultural patterns – the predominance of the Chinese imperial centre, even when taken over by conquerors from inner Asia, and the broader influence of Chinese cultural models – had been characteristic of the region. In the very long-term process of Chinese expansion towards the south, empire building and cultural assimilation had gone hand in hand, although not without some significant divergences. By contrast, the inclusion of Korea and Japan in a Sinocentric world was based on cultural superimposition without imperial control, but the two countries developed very different versions of this pattern. An abortive attempt to conquer the Korean kingdoms at the height of Chinese imperial expansion (in the 7th century) hastened the consolidation of an independent unified state; the autonomous Korean polity then went on to combine symbolic recognition of Chinese sovereignty and orthodox elaboration of Chinese ideological paradigms with power structures notably different from those that prevailed in China. In Japan, the 7th century also marks a turning point, but here a perceived Chinese threat was enough to inspire a more original strategy of state-centred transformation and a more complex cross-adaptation of Chinese and native traditions; the Japanese state opted out of the symbolic world order centred on China, and the appropriation of Chinese culture took a reflexive turn which proved compatible with extensive reinterpretations and nativist self-rediscoveries.[1]

There are, of course, significant differences between successive stages of East Asian regional history before the final onset of western expansion, most obviously in regard to the form and degree of Chinese predominance; but for present purposes, the next phase to be considered is the century between the beginning of the Opium War in 1840 and the defeat of Japan in 1945, marked by the presence of superior western power and the development of regional responses to it. Simplistic notions of global westernization – now more popular among critics than among defenders of the west – are still too common for it to be widely understood how unique the East Asian reactions were. Each part of the regional triangle was affected in particular ways, but one of them became most central to historical events during the century in question. In Japan, the mid-19th century encounter with the west triggered an upheaval which transformed this most peripheral state of the region into the most expansive and actively modernizing one. Japan was the only modern imperial power that set out to colonize or at least dominate a geopolitical and civilizational area within which it had previously played a marginal role. This project dominated East Asian geopolitics for the better part of a century, and it had a more decisive impact on the regional dynamic

of modernization than any direct western influences. Its history can, in retrospect, be divided into four stages. The Japanese bid for hegemony began with a unilateral change in its relationship to China: the rules of the old regional order were replaced by a strategy modelled on western forms of interstate competition and more in line with the modernizing lead already taken by Japan. The second stage was marked by military conquest and colonization. Japan annexed the most outlying Chinese province (Taiwan), thwarted Chinese attempts to transform a traditional symbolic authority over Korea into more modern mechanisms of control, and went on to incorporate Korea into its own emerging empire. During the inter-war years, inconclusive attempts to expand an informal empire in China took a new turn with the creation of a client state in Manchuria, through which Japan became a contender in the multipolar struggle between aspiring successors to the defunct Chinese empire. But this third phase quickly shaded off into the last one, an all-out war of conquest against China. The results were catastrophic for the Japanese empire, but the global repercussions were far more significant than previous effects of Japanese expansion: the Pacific War not only brought the American superpower into East Asian geopolitics, but also played a major role in pushing the Chinese revolution towards a Communist takeover.

This last point brings us to the question of Chinese responses to the western inroads that became irresistible after 1840. It has become increasingly common to speak of the Chinese revolution as a long-term process which began with the Taiping rebellion – the bloodiest and most destructive conflict of the 19th century – in 1850, did not finish in 1949, and is still going through a transitional stage. The transformative dynamic set in motion by the joint impact of internal crises and external defeats is the most salient non-European counterpart to the great revolutions of the West (nothing remotely comparable occurred in other major Asian civilizational spheres), but also the most instructive counter-example to theoretical models which tend to overgeneralize the European pattern. Analogies between historical landmarks in China and the West have proved difficult to sustain. What occurred in 1911 was neither a bourgeois nor a democratic revolution (the old order fell apart, but no new power elite, social force or institutional set-up was ready to replace it), and 1949 differed from other Communist takeovers in that it was preceded by a phase of rivalry between alternative foci of imperial reconstruction, during which Chinese Communism began to develop some of the distinctive characteristics which were to pit it against the Soviet centre and prevent it from stabilizing along Soviet lines. But more detailed comparative analyses of the different relationships between revolutionary episodes and long-term power restructuring, as well as between structural dynamics and social actors, have yet to be undertaken.

The Chinese response was thus very different from the Japanese one, but no less original and important for comparative history. As for the Korean

experience during this historical period, it stands in stark contrast to both the other parts of the triangle. No other country with a comparable cultural legacy, historical continuity and strength of ethnic identity was as abruptly transformed into a battleground for imperial rivalry. After the enforced end of Korean isolation, the internal attempts at change – ambiguous and limited in any case – were overshadowed by the three-cornered contest between Russia, China and Japan; Japan's victory over the two other powers led to outright colonization and finally to a drive for cultural assimilation which has few if any parallels in the recent history of imperial power; finally, the collapse of the Japanese empire and the consolidation of two global blocs led to the division of Korea into two states whose separate survival was assured by external forces. There was, however, another side to this sequence of disasters from without: the experience of colonial rule gave rise to a particularly tenacious and pervasive cultural nationalism (reflected, among other things, in one of the most nationalistic offshoots of the communist movement). This factor was to prove crucial to the strategy and outlook of the two post-war Korean regimes.

The third and most familiar defining phase of East Asian history is the late 20th-century record of exceptional economic growth. It began with the 'Japanese miracle', increasingly visible from the early 1960s onwards, and continued with the rise of South Korea and Taiwan as economic powerhouses; the most recent stage is the post-Communist take-off of the mainland Chinese economy. It is generally accepted that these successive breakthroughs add up to a regional trajectory, based on the legacy of the Japanese empire (Cumings, 1984) as well as on lessons drawn from the Japanese experience of post-imperial development, but more specific connections are a matter of debate. Here we can only note the geopolitical background to economic changes. The post-war emphasis on growth and development reflects a regional shift from military to economic power. Most importantly, the Japanese developmental state revised its project and gave first priority to economic strength; the retreat from imperial visions did not mean an end to global strategy, but the reorientation was more radical than any measures taken since 1868. The two Korean states remained much more overtly militarized than Japan, but the protracted stalemate after 1953 forced them to engage in economic competition as war by other means. In the Chinese case, the overwhelming strength of one side made all comparative assets of the rival regimes less relevant than the global causes of division; it is, however, beyond doubt that the Taiwanese version of the developmental state took shape as part of a strategy for long-term political survival. As for mainland China, the paradox of post-Communist economic policies accompanying the reconsolidation of party dictatorship can only be explained in terms of strategic readjustment: Maoist-style political and ideological mobilization had failed to produce the expected self-strengthening results, and economic modernization was seen as a more promising alternative.

These successive conversions to developmentalism were in large measure due to changes in the global context of regional history. The partial imposition of American hegemony after the Second World War put an end to intra-regional imperialism and resulted in the internationalization of two civil wars, albeit in different conditions and with different consequences. The post-imperial Japanese state was not created by American reformers (in that sense, the comparison of the occupation with the Meiji Restoration and the 7th-century Taika Reform (Cohen, 1987) seems misguided), but it was the outcome of innovative adaptation to new rules set by a victorious power. The Japanese model was, in other words, transformed in response to an American input, whereas the two other countries were divided between allies and adversaries of the American order. In China, the civil war was internationalized in its very last phase (with the official inclusion of Taiwan in the American zone of strategic interest) and as a result of more direct intervention elsewhere, and the geopolitical effects were therefore limited. The only lasting outcome was the insulation of a province which had been a late addition to the Chinese empire and then part of the Japanese one for half a century; it now became a sanctuary for the non-communist version of Chinese nationalism and its experiment in self-reinvention. By contrast, the Korean conflict was internationalized in an early phase and with momentous results for both sides. Although war broke out between separate states in 1950, the two regimes drew support from antagonistic social forces, aspired to unify the country and rejected division as incompatible with national sovereignty; it is therefore appropriate to speak of civil war (Lone and McCormack, 1993: 93). Intervention from abroad stabilized the rival states and put an end to outright war, but the subsequent pattern of competition differed from other divided countries. For a long time, the contest between the two Koreas was much more open than in Germany or Vietnam; both states could effectively claim nationalist legitimacy; and the strong nationalistic stance helps to explain the unusual ability of both sides to pursue autonomous policies despite structural dependence on stronger powers.

THE CONFUCIAN IMAGE: RENAISSANCE, REFORMATION OR REINVENTION?

Definitions of East Asia as a region often go beyond the above set of historical traits and postulate a more self-contained cultural identity. The most familiar construct of that kind is the idea of a Confucian tradition, region or civilization. Such claims have been made from inside as well as from outside the East Asian world; here we are, to begin with, mainly concerned with the insiders. The overtly Confucian turn in East Asian definitions of identity is of recent origin, and its impact within the region varies widely. In the early 1980s, official use of – or allegiance to – Confucian principles was most characteristic of states marginal to the contest for hegemony, especially

Taiwan (then less prominent as a developmental showcase than it has now come to seem) and Singapore (a partially East Asian enclave within Southeast Asia). Confucian themes were much less central to Japanese ideology building, because of the enduring concern with uniqueness and the adaptability of nationalist attitudes; in Korea, general awareness of Confucianism's key role in the old order went together with doubts and disagreements about its role in modernity. But the most important shift towards an official reinstatement of Confucianism began in mainland China after the demise of Maoism and became more visible as the regime moved further away from the ideological commitments of the Cold War era. Confucianism has not formally replaced Marxism-Leninism, but the reorientation is marked enough for some observers to speculate on the possibility of 'national Confucianism' as a new orthodoxy (Béja, 1996; this author draws attention to the importance of Singapore for post-Maoist Confucians). The Confucian turn has thus unmistakably progressed from the periphery to a more central part of the region.

The idea of a Confucian world is best understood in relation to the historical experience recapitulated above. Confucianism appears as a guarantee of continuity throughout the modern vicissitudes of the region; it has, on this view, survived the derailment of East Asian history by Western expansion, resisted the ideological inroads of rival western models and reasserted itself through the more autonomous and distinctive developmental strategies of recent decades. A temporarily submerged tradition is thus credited with a renaissance which has reactivated its core values as well as a reformation which has brought them into more effective contact with the modern world. The Confucian legacy is, furthermore, expected to aid a reunification of the region across barriers created by Cold War geopolitics. Last but not least, the appeal to Confucian sources and foundations helps to give more than a purely geographical meaning to the claim that a previously ascendant region is now re-emerging as a potential successor to Western hegemony.

The obvious connection between resurgent power and revalued traditions has led some observers to describe the Confucian revival as a reinvention, grounded in contemporary trends rather than in a genuine return to the sources. One of the most uncompromising diagnoses in this vein dismisses the new Confucianism as a product of 'global capitalism' in search of ideological models for new growth areas, and at the same time as a strategy of 'intellectuals . . . who serve as brokers of power within the new configuration of capitalism' (Dirlik, 1992: 230–1). Here the illusion of regional autonomy is put on a par with the self-projection of ideological superstructures, and both are reduced to window-dressing of a capitalist world economy. But to the best of my knowledge, no convincing attempt has ever been made to explain the specifics of post-war East Asian growth in terms of world-systemic mechanisms. As for the somewhat less obviously untenable equation of Confucianism with ideology, the first objection that comes to mind is that the ideological discourses in question have drawn on a broader and more

open-ended set of debates. There is no denying that active shapers, more or less official spokesmen and participant observers of East Asian modernizing regimes have become interested in the ideological potential of Confucianism, but this does not entail a uniform use of it. More importantly, the debates that unfolded against this background were accompanied and to some degree influenced by two other developments. On the one hand, received views of a Chinese history in general and Confucianism in particular, widely accepted within the sociology of modernization and development, were challenged by historians who presented a more multidimensional image of the old order (Metzger, 1977 was one of the most seminal works) as well as theorists in search of a more adequate comparative framework, often through a critical dialogue with Weber (Eisenstadt, 1983). In both cases, more nuanced interpretations of the Confucian tradition drew attention to critical and transformative trends, incompatible with the Weberian account of Confucianism as an ethic of adaptation. On the other hand, Confucian thought had been overshadowed but not eliminated by the rival ideologies of westernization and revolution; the question of its continuing presence in the Chinese world and beyond became more relevant as Chinese communism lost its appeal and other versions of Chinese modernity began to take shape.

The 'new Confucianism', as its adherents called it (an intentional twist to the Western term 'neo-Confucianism', originally applied to much earlier developments in Chinese thought) was neither tied to the old order nor aligned with any particular contender for revolutionary leadership; after 1949, it could more easily survive in Hong Kong and Taiwan than under the communist regime, although some important figures stayed on the mainland. The most ambitious thinkers of this school combined a 'meta-moral ontology' (Vandermeersch, 1991) with more Western-style techniques of argumentation and system building. As for their views on China and the West, a programmatic text written before the self-destabilizing turn of Chinese communism is of particular interest (Chang, 1962: 455–83). To begin with, the authors criticize two contradictory but often combined Western misunderstandings of China. Overdrawn parallels with materialist and rationalist philosophies of the Enlightenment have obscured the religious aspect of Confucianism; on the other hand (and often at the same time), the culture dominated by Confucian ideas and values has been seen as conducive to closure and stagnation. But if – as the authors argue – the Confucian vision of humanity and its place in the cosmos has a religious core, different in form and content from the religious systems more familiar to Western thought, a culture based on such foundations is by the same token capable of an active quest for permanence, rather than the inert continuity perceived by western observers. It is not being suggested that the spiritual dimension and the creative potential of Chinese civilization were equally evident at all times: the philosophical thought of the Song and Ming periods (i.e. roughly speaking, from the 11th to the mid-17th century) is presented as the most authentic part of the Confucian legacy.

This reassessment of the past throws new light on the question of learning from the West. China's earlier technological achievements are cited to prove that Chinese culture is by no means alien to the spirit of modern science, but it is admitted that to catch up with the West, a clearer grasp of the autonomy and legitimacy of intellectual – as distinct from moral – inquiry is needed. Similarly, the Chinese tradition is credited with a proto-democratic conception of popular support as essential to legitimacy, unique among traditional regimes, but this falls short of the modern Western idea of constitutional democracy. In short, the need to appropriate the results of Western breakthroughs in the cognitive as well as the political dimension is acknowledged; at the same time, the authors insist on indigenous preconditions for an autonomous strategy. Finally, Chinese Communism is – 10 years before the cultural revolution – dismissed as a failure on both counts. Its alienation from the Chinese tradition, together with its fundamental misunderstanding of the West, make it incapable of solving China's problems and therefore unfit for survival.

TOWARDS A COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK

It should be clear from the above summary that meaningful questions about Confucianism and its relationship to modernity were being raised well before the emergence of 'industrial East Asia', and that they were posed in a way which did not fit into any ready-made ideological strategies. With this background in mind, we should now return to the problematic of Confucianism and modernization and explore some ways of linking it to comparative perspectives. The discussion will begin with some reflections on the putative links between Confucian tradition and capitalist development (1) and move on to consider the case for Confucian values as social and cultural counterweights to the dynamic of capitalism (2), as well as the more far-reaching visions of a Confucian civilizational framework that might serve to re-embed a fragmented and disoriented modernity (3). All these issues are, in the first instance, related to the Chinese context.[2]

(1) Those who would like to show that the Confucian ethic made a positive contribution to the spirit of capitalism do not always focus on the same factors. It may even be difficult to distinguish clear-cut positions: for example, one author stresses first 'the devotion to education and the emphasis on savings' and then 'an affective model of economic development, which emphasizes human emotional bonds, group orientation, and harmony' (Tai, 1989: 3, 7). But the theme that comes closest to a common denominator is probably the rationalizing and mobilizing potential of meritocratic hierarchy. Confucianism – at least in its more action- and reform-oriented mode – is supposedly conducive to loyal acceptance of committed and knowledgeable authority, and such attitudes help to reorient society towards sustained growth, even if that was not their original rationale. Since this argument seems to

reverse Weber's well-known verdict on Confucianism in a very abrupt way, sceptical commentators have seen the about-turn as a reason to cast doubt on both the traditional and the revised view: interpretations of cultural traditions seem to be adaptable to the changing facts of economic life. But the claims made in relation to a Confucian ethic differ from the *Protestant Ethic* thesis in at least four fundamental ways (these contrasts seem to have been neglected by both sides to the debate). First, the point of contact between Confucian mentality and modern capitalism is located on the level of inter-human relations, not – as in the other case – within the horizon of human relations to the world. For Weber, the breakthrough due to the Protestant ethic is inseparable from the 'rationalism of world domination', i.e. the interpretive and practical attitude that turns the world into an object of control through calculation. No such interpretation of Confucianism can be imagined; more generally speaking, there are no episodes in its history that can be understood as radical transformations of a traditional world view. Second, the goals of gainful work and self-perpetuating accumulation are less internal to the Confucian ethic than they were – in Weber's view – to the Protestant one. Weber's analysis of this point is notoriously ambiguous, but it is at least clear that he wanted to derive a new cultural definition of economic activity from the encounter of religious reform with a changing social context. By contrast, the theorists of the Confucian ethic have in mind the adaptation to and incorporation of a goal coming from outside the tradition and first encountered in conjunction with other aspects of a rival cultural model. Opinions vary on how far the subtradition of 'merchant Confucianism' may have gone in legitimizing commercial activity, but the perceived novelty and otherness of Western-style capitalist accumulation is not in dispute. This line of argument links up with a hypothesis suggested but never developed by Weber: he hinted at the possibility that the constellation which had blocked a capitalist breakthrough in China might be less resistant to the import of capitalism from elsewhere, and that some aspects of Chinese culture might even be conducive to such a response. Third, the distinctively paradoxical character of the Weberian connection between Protestantism and capitalism has no parallel in the Confucian case. As Weber saw it, a radicalization of religious ethics had paved the way for a self-sustaining systemic process – capitalist growth – which in the long run undermined not only all religious claims to authority over economic life, but also the very possibility of inner-directed conduct in the economic domain. No such self-destructive turn is ascribed to or predicted for the Confucian ethic: the economic virtues attributed to it are defined in terms which suggest at least the possibility of a durable and mutually reinforcing symbiosis with capitalism. Finally, the Confucian contribution to capitalist development is at the same time seen as a cultural matrix for a particular type of capitalism. The Confucian primacy of relations (linked to a strong emphasis on the family as a social microcosm and in some cases to the defence of a more specific family-based communitarian model) serves to explain the network-based rather than

entrepreneurial character of East Asian capitalism, and thus to provide a background to facts noted by many observers of the region.

(2) If the unfolding argument about Confucian sources of modern East Asian capitalism is in some ways comparable but far from identical with the debate sparked by Weber's *Protestant Ethic*, it may be useful to consider affinities between the broader perspectives that have in both cases been opened up beyond the question of economic change. S. N. Eisenstadt (1968) redefined the problematic of the *Protestant Ethic* in terms of a general 'transformative potential' (i.e. a capacity to initiate, articulate and legitimize institutional innovations) rather than an exclusive link to the ethos of capitalist pioneers. The most obvious field to examine from this angle is the whole complex of political transformations which marked the road to modernity; given that the East Asian region was, on the whole, less receptive to the political aspects of Western modernity than to the economic ones, any corresponding extension of the Confucian problematic must take a different course. So far, two main themes seem to have emerged. On the one hand, the conspicuous role of the developmental state in East Asian modernization, and its ability to adapt political and economic strategies to each other, has prompted some analysts to look for traditional sources of its strength. Nobody would think of postulating a Confucian model of the developmental state, but attempts have been made to show that aspects of the Confucian tradition lend themselves to reorientation in a new global context, and thus could help to rationalize and legitimize the developmental state. Léon Vandermeersch (1985: 186–203) argues that a functionalist conception of statecraft was built into the Confucian mode of thought: the state was part of a socio-cosmic order and its practical tasks within that framework were defined in administrative rather than political terms. This premodern version of functionalism left an adaptable legacy which facilitated the building of a modern bureaucratic state, insulated from political conflicts and committed to developmental goals. Vandermeersch's thesis reflects the condition of the mid-1980s: developmental states on the erstwhile East Asian periphery had proved their viability and mainland China was visibly moving in the same direction after a revolutionary crisis which had – as Vandermeersch saw it – been all the more prolonged because of the fundamentally anti-revolutionary patterns of Chinese society. A more cautious and qualified line was taken by Thomas Metzger (1989), whose analysis of the Taiwanese experience stresses the necessity as well as the difficulty of far-reaching revisions of the Confucian legacy. For Metzger, the developmental state is crucial to Chinese modernization, and it can draw on Confucian sources, but its success presupposes a thoroughly non-Confucian conversion to instrumental rationality, as well as more contingent favourable conditions, and the dangers inherent in the Confucian mindset are exemplified not only by the later imperial mirage of an intact tradition annexing Western rationality as a purely technical device, but also by the disastrous Maoist phantasm of a complete fusion of wisdom and rulership.

On the other hand, political changes in Taiwan and South Korea, as well as the much less successful demands for democratic reform in mainland China, have raised questions about the relevance of Confucian traditions to modern democracy. Here the connection must – if it can at all be claimed – be more tenuous than in the case of the developmental state. No critical analysts deny that ideological and institutional obstacles to modern democracy were integral to the Confucian tradition; the case for more positive influences can only be made in indirect terms, i.e. on the basis of established or potential links between Confucianism and the constitution of civil society. Such affinities might then be seen as contributing causes of democratization. The debate on this issue has so far been very inconclusive, not least because of the notoriously unfocused use of the concept of civil society (it tends, here as elsewhere, to shift without warning from minimalist and descriptive claims to strong and normative ones), but we can at least note some markedly different approaches. At one end of the spectrum, Edward Shils' speculations on Confucianism and civil society centre on the intellectual content of classical sources; neither the differences between Confucius and Confucianism nor the interaction between Confucian traditions and Chinese society are taken into account. The upshot of Shils's argument is that the Confucian paradigm has no place for the institutions of civil society (in particular, there is no notion of citizenship or the rule of law, and the public sphere is as absent as the problem of conflicting interests), but some bearing on the virtues most needed in civil society, especially those that can be subsumed under the notion of 'civility' in the sense of concern for the common good. The 'obligation of the highly educated to serve society' (Shils, 1996: 71) is crucial.

The wholly ahistorical stance of this interpretation casts doubt on its value, and the same can be said about its dependence on an idealized Western model (civil society is, in the end, equated with 'liberal democratic national society'). At the opposite extreme, Metzger's reflections on the Taiwanese experience throw light on a very specific situation but do not lead to strong generalizations. In Taiwan, a differentiated Confucian culture was integrated into a pluralistic 'mix of ideologies' (Metzger, 1989: 186) which also included liberalism and statist nationalism; in this context, Confucian orientations could reinforce the demand for moral consensus and economic justice as indispensable complements to modernization, and thus help to strengthen societal counterweights to state-centred development.

The most promising way to broaden the terms of this debate would be to link it to recent controversies about the rise of civil society and a corresponding public sphere in imperial China, not only during the late imperial phase which preceded the collision with the West, but (in a less continuous fashion) over the much longer period of time that began with the 11th-century shift to a more commercial, less aristocratic and at the same time less directly state-controlled society. Some of the most interesting recent work in comparative history has been devoted to this problematic; although

new perspectives have certainly been opened up, the need to rethink basic concepts and avoid over-generalizations of European patterns. The most original (and to my mind most convincing) models proposed to make sense of the Chinese constellation are those of the 'stretched empire' (Chevrier, 1996) and the 'third realm between state and society' (Huang, 1993). The former refers to the more flexible and diversified patterns of imperial control which evolved in response to growing social complexity. Power was delegated, elites were co-opted, and interests as well as identities accommodated in various ways, but within a framework which allowed no question of the centre or of its cosmological symbolism. A ritual, rather than formal-legal, mode of regulation served to integrate the diverse components of the power structure. At the same time, a wide range of unofficial, i.e. formally uncodified, arrangements and practices was tolerated, but effectively prevented from coalescing into an alternative social sphere. The latter model highlights a specific aspect of the former: the 'third realm' was a complex of judicial, administrative and other public activities, delegated to local elites in an informal and often improvised fashion, without ever – during the imperial phase – becoming a field of confrontation between state and society. Both lines of argument are directed against the thesis put forward by various historians that an endogenous development of civil society and the public sphere, in a more or less European sense, was taking place in late-imperial China before the encounter with the west. There is no denying the significance of socioeconomic changes during the phase in question, but as Chevrier and Huang argue, the imperial mechanisms of containment, including the cultural ones, were too resilient and comprehensive for the sociopolitical impact to measure up to models derived from a more transformative process.

Intellectual and social history still tend to progress on separate tracks, and these debates have therefore not been closely linked to new perspectives on the Confucian tradition (work in that field has drawn attention to distinctive metaphysical approaches, shifts towards a stronger emphasis on the self as a source of insight and initiative, and changing attitudes to textual foundations). But some recent contributions (Elman, 1990; Wakeman, 1998) suggest that reorientations of Confucian thought were related to changing relations between imperial power, officialdom and local elites.

(3) These ramifications of the Confucian problematic raise a more general question: to what extent can we think of Confucianism as a comprehensive civilizational pattern and how relevant is that viewpoint to the East Asian ways of mixing tradition and modernity? There are, at first sight, some good reasons for a sceptical answer. As Mark Elvin notes, comparison with world religions leads to a clear-cut conclusion: 'of all the great pre-modern systems of belief, Confucianism is the only one that has to all intents and purposes disappeared' (Elvin, 1996: 352), at least in the sense that its canonical texts have – in contrast to the sacred books of surviving religious traditions – lost their scriptural status. On the other hand, Vandermeersch (1985: 156) argues that the very

obsolescence of Confucianism as a belief system makes it more mobilizable as a cultural resource: 'to fertilize change, tradition had to transform itself into a wholly devitalized humus'. This claim is, however, based on tacit assumptions about prior trends at work within the traditional order. The metaphor of the 'humus' makes no sense if it does not refer to cultural orientations and behavioural patterns which survived the collapse of their original text-based framework and can be adapted to a new context.

The two diagnoses can be construed as complementary rather than opposed (Elvin speaks of a 'psychological momentum', left behind by the defunct doctrine and all the more difficult to assess or measure because of its free-floating condition; this post-traditional residue would seem comparable to Vandermeersch's notion of operative remnants). Contemporary attempts to reformulate the Confucian paradigm take issue with both aspects of the argument. For those who seek to reconstruct a philosophical and/or *sui generis* religious core of the tradition, the texts remain open to more detached readings after the demise of the social order that they served to defend, and the cultural potential of the Confucian ethos is not exhausted by its contribution to the material infrastructures of development. On this view, the distinctively Confucian conception of the relationship between humanity and the cosmos has some mutually instructive affinities with organic paradigms in modern and contemporary western thought; the corresponding vision of the social world acquires new meaning in context of the search for communitarian alternatives. The writings of Tu Wei-ming (1989, 1993) are perhaps the most representative works in this vein.

Further discussion of the prospects and credentials of neo-Confucian thought is beyond the competence of the present writer. But to conclude, we should briefly return to the question of comparative perspectives; divergent views on the legacy and afterlife of the Confucian tradition often seem to reflect an unstated disagreement or uncertainty on its civilizational status and that issue must be seen in a broader context. Here we can do no more than indicate the most relevant classical source and the most promising contemporary project in the field. Max Weber's interpretation of China cannot be left out of account, and although it has been subjected to more telling criticism than most other parts of Weber's work, its core idea is still a useful foil for alternative views. Weber's cardinal error was to equate the absence of Indian or Western-style 'religious rejection of the world' from Chinese culture with a cognitive as well as a moral failure to move beyond the magic universe; as a result, he vastly underestimated the role of scientific inquiry, ethical reflection and political protest in the history of Chinese civilization. Eisenstadt's theory of the 'axial transformation' is designed to incorporate Weber's insights while avoiding his fixation on particular religious traditions as well as his dismissive treatment of cultures which took a different course. For Eisenstadt, the Chinese pattern reflects a specific response to problems posed by landmark developments in major cultural centres during – roughly speaking – the

second third of the last millennium BC (the other exemplary cases are India, ancient Greece and ancient Israel). The structural similarity of these new constellations is no less striking than the chronological parallels: the shared 'axial' experience may be described as a previously unknown rupture and problematization of order, and the uniform core of the interpretive answers consists of a distinction between transcendental and mundane order. Cultural models built on this basis have far-reaching consequences for the legitimation of power, the articulation of social conflicts and the institutionalization of dissent. The otherworldly orientation which Weber described as a religious rejection of the world can then be seen as one variant among others within this framework; for Eisenstadt, China represents another distinctive type, characterized by a strong this-worldly vision of order achieved through social and cosmic harmony, a uniquely privileged role of the political centre in implementing this model, and – as a result – a 'far-reaching fusion of the cultural and the political' (Eisenstadt, 1983: 388). There is no doubt that both the general idea of the axial transformation and the specific interpretation of China need further debate and more detailed analyses of changing configurations. Critical responses to Eisenstadt's work (Elvin, 1986; Metzger, 1984) have raised questions about the adequacy of the idea of transcendental order, as well as about the complex and contested relationship between the imperial centre and other sociocultural forces; they have also emphasized counterweights to the official alliance of culture and politics. The axial model is thus a far cry from scholarly consensus, but it is hitherto unrivalled in its capacity to relate the key questions of Chinese history to more general problems of civilizational theory.

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Notes

1. Although it is relatively easy to define the core and the periphery of the East Asian region, it should be noted that its outer boundaries are less clear-cut. Because of its traditional cultural and institutional dependence on the Chinese model, Vietnam is sometimes seen as a part of East Asia, but it is better understood as a composite of East Asian and South-east Asian elements. Its cultural traditions contain strong indigenous currents which had some effect on the institutional structure created after separation from China; as an independent state, it became a part of the South east Asian geopolitical constellation, and together with most of the rest of South east Asia, it came under Western colonial rule. All things considered, the South east Asian connection would seem to have been more decisive for Vietnam's modern history than the Chinese one. Another demarcation problem – which will not be discussed here – has to do with the

Central Asian conquests of 18th-century imperial China, inherited but still not fully assimilated by the communist successor regime.

2. It seems clear that the changing roles of Confucianism in the two other countries can only be understood in the light of both prior and parallel developments in China. Obvious deviations stand out against the imperial Chinese pattern. Attempts to identify a distinctive Japanese brand of Confucianism and credit it with a key role in the making of modern Japan (e.g. Morishima, 1982) have not withstood criticism; in the Japanese combination of religious traditions, Confucian elements always played a less self-contained and less central role than in China (although their relative strength grew in the early modern phase), and after the transition to advanced modernity, they were adapted to the language and ideology of integral nationalism. Moreover, the Japanese variants of Confucianism were – as all other aspects of the Japanese tradition – from the outset shaped by interaction with a more dynamic and innovative process of state formation than in China. As for Korea, a sweeping attempt to implement and institutionalize a Confucian programme – which had no parallel in Japan – began at a relatively late date and could therefore draw on the systematizing efforts of Chinese neo-Confucianism, but was in practice forced to compromise with an indigenous power structure; as a result, the early modern Korean mixture of monarchy, bureaucracy and aristocracy proved particularly resistant to change and unresponsive to Western interventions in the region, but the critical and reformist impetus of Confucian thought remained strong enough to sustain a less official current whose relevance to later developments remains a matter of debate (Palais, 1997). After the destruction of the old order, fragments of the Confucian tradition survived in a context dominated by the Japanese colonial regime and the nationalist response to it.

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