

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Confucian traditions in East Asian modernity: moral education and economic culture in Japan and the four mini-dragons by Tu Wei-Ming

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Book reviews

Tu Wei-Ming, ed., **Confucian traditions in East Asian modernity: moral education and economic culture in Japan and the four mini-dragons**. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1996. xiv + 418pp.

Reviewed by *Alastair Dingwall*

This important new book will be of interest to all students of contemporary South East Asia, if only because the region may in some ways stand as a refutation of many of its arguments; one contributor, Watanabe Hiroshi (“‘They are almost the same as the Ancient Three Dynasties’: the West as seen through Confucian eyes in nineteenth century Japan”), wonders whether the recent economic success of South East Asian countries with Buddhist or Islamic traditions might lead to a theory of a ‘non-Catholic East Asian capitalism’ (although where this leaves culturalist explanations of the Philippine economy turns around he does not say). Another major reason for this volume’s importance to South East Asian studies lies in the central economic role played by Chinese communities in nearly all South East Asian countries.

Max Weber is an explicit or implicit presence in many of the papers and his observation that Confucianism’s emphasis on personal ties was a barrier to the impersonal rationalization required for capitalist development is noted by Ambrose Y.C. King (‘The transformation of Confucianism in the post-Confucian era: the emergence of rationalistic traditionalism in Hong Kong’) among others. Yet the fact that the most famous culturalist of all should have (apparently) got it so wrong should surely give us pause when we hear neo-Confucianists eagerly arguing the opposite case — that the Confucian ‘storehouse’ has been a necessary element for East Asian economic success. As Liu Shu-hsien points out, some Confucian characteristics ‘may actually hinder future progress, such as the tendency to obey authority blindly and a lack of consciousness with respect to protecting human rights and exploring new frontiers’ (‘Confucian ideals and the real world: a critical review of contemporary neo-Confucian thought’).

As with most collections of conference papers, the volume is slightly uneven and some papers address the central theme only tangentially (Chang Hao on ‘The intellectual heritage of the Confucian ideal of *Ching-Shih*’, for example). Yet it is its broad sweep which makes this such a thought-

provoking book. Other single-authored studies (notably those by Lucien Pye and the editor of the current volume) may present more coherent arguments, but the heterogeneity of *Confucian traditions and East Asian modernity* allows a more rounded if less conclusive view. Chang Hao's piece referred to above, for example, is important because it emphasizes the transcendental and inner worldly side of Confucianism that is never acknowledged in the strictly utilitarian discourse of, for example, Lee Kuan Yew.

Nearly all the papers refer to the definitional problems of Confucianism. Even within specific countries, Confucianism has changed its role over the centuries, a point made in S.N. Eisenstadt's excellent paper 'Some observations on the transformation of Confucianism (and Buddhism) in Japan'. Liu Shu-hsien's critique of neo-Confucian thought, 'Confucian ideals and the real world', identifies three possible ways of understanding the Confucian tradition: as philosophical insight, as political ideology, or as storehouse of popular values. Although the Singapore contributions to this volume (discussed below) would seem to argue against Liu's assertion that Confucianism as political ideology 'is at best a remnant of the past', he is surely right that it is best understood as the first and third of his categories; that is as a philosophy or as a storehouse of values — in Edward Shils's phrase 'the *prepolitical sphere*'.

Shils's paper ('Reflections on civil society and civility in the Chinese intellectual tradition') is concerned mainly with the difficulties of trying to combine a notion of civil society with the philosophy of a man who appeared to know or care nothing of freedom of expression, representative institutions, elections; in short all the paraphernalia of what we would now call a liberal democratic society. This is a closely argued and insightful piece, which emphasizes the 'anti-democratic' aspects of Confucian thought, although Shils does point to the civil virtues (tolerance, respect, etc) of the gentleman-scholar.

One of the most telling points made in several papers is the role of the individual in Confucian thought. Both proponents and critics of modern-day Confucian values have tended to stress the subordination of individual and civil society to the state, yet, in Wm. Theodore de Barry's words: 'The Four Books with Chu Hsi's commentary gave the individual a sense of self-worth and self-respect not to be sacrificed to any short-term utilitarian purpose; a sense of place in the world not to be surrendered to any state or party . . .'. He goes on to point out that this emphasis has been refined in much discussion of contemporary Confucianism in which 'the emphasis is usually put on the economic advantages of shared social values, group discipline, and subordination to established authority — in short to a kind of social conformism' ('Confucian education in premodern East Asia'). This is not

to say that the 'Confucianism' as practised in Singapore, for example, is not in tune with the main themes of Confucian thought (Confucius's command in the *Analects*, 'Do not concern yourself with matters of government unless they are the responsibility of your office', matches almost word for word Goh Chock Tong's denunciation of the writer Catherine Lim in 1995) — only that, like politicians everywhere, those in the PAP are selective in their philosophical borrowings.

The two articles on Singapore address aspects of the government-sponsored Confucian revival in the 1980s and are informative and reasonably even-handed, although it is disappointing that neither really grapples with the charge of 'Chinese chauvinism' that has been levelled against the policy. John Wong's article 'Promoting Confucianism for socioeconomic development: the Singapore experience' records the patchily successful incorporation of Confucianism into the religious knowledge curriculum and the attempt to instil values by fiat in the 'Shared Values debate' (which the *Straits Times*, with the unintended irony which is its hallmark, headlined, 'Consensus emerges as the most controversial value'). Eddie Kuo's 'Confucianism as political discourse in Singapore' covers similar ground and points out the difficulty of promoting a moral system, even in a highly controlled society such as Singapore. However, his dismissal of criticisms which point to the happy congruence between Confucian ideology and the government's authoritarian paternalism as 'conspiracy theory' is unhelpful.

How well does this book answer Kuo's parting question: 'Can Confucianism, or some of its elements, be packaged in a changing context and environment and remain relevant to the evolving new economic, political and cultural order?' In some cases, very well. In particular, Thomas Gold's masterful 'Civil society in Taiwan: the Confucian dimension' deserves to become widely read as an example of how Confucianism and autonomous social organizations can co-exist. Other papers offer less clear-cut explanations, yet that is in the nature of a book which the editor describes as 'an interim report'. Nevertheless, in terms of the tightness of the editing, the stimulating contributions and the comprehensive notes and index, this is a sophisticated and erudite contribution to the debate, although one can only speculate on the publishing history of the proceedings of a May 1991 conference which did not appear in print until April 1996.