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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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Source: *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (May, 1997), pp. 237-238

Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Comparative and International Education Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1188848>

Accessed: 13-05-2019 08:11 UTC

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*Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity: Moral Education and Economic Culture in Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons* edited by Tu Wei-ming. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996. 418 pp. \$45.00 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).

The Confucian tradition is alive and well in East Asia, but its nature, impact, and influence remain hotly debated and controversial. This volume brings together a group of prominent scholars to reflect on the contemporary influence of Confucianism on Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Singapore. *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity* is not easily understood. Its prose is dense and its arguments complex. Yet it rewards the careful reader with useful insights on how Confucian thought has had an impact on the modernization of east Asia and how Confucianism has itself been used by modernizers and others in an effort to harness tradition to serve nation building and economic development. Several of the authors compare the impact of Confucian ideas with the impact of Protestantism on the rise of European and North American industrialism.

One of the contributions of this book is to “unpack” the complexity of the modern influence of Confucianism. It is often assumed that Confucian values fit neatly into a model of east Asian modernization. Contributors point out that Confucianism has been a varied legacy. It has often been criticized by modernizers. Fukuzawa Yukichi, for example, while critical of traditional Confucianism, was at the same time greatly influenced by Confucian ideas and used Confucian terms to press his version of modernization. In an insightful chapter, Watanabe Hiroshi points out that Confucianism did not automatically lead to capitalist development in Japan and that Confucian ideas were used selectively in developing an ideology of nation building and industrialization.

The authors agree that the Confucian ideas underlying the societies discussed in this book facilitated the creation of capitalist economic orders and modern socioeconomic development but that there was a great deal of reinterpretation and, perhaps, manipulation of the tradition to make it fit the needs of the nation builders. Japan, as the first Asian nation to industrialize fully, is naturally featured in a series of chapters. The focus is on the period between the Meiji restoration and the end of the Second World War in the Pacific arena. Samuel Hideo Yamashita argues that Confucian ideas were consciously used in textbooks and other materials, which were developed to serve the government’s desire to link industrialization with the preservation of traditional Japanese respect for family and state.

These same tactics have been used in contemporary Singapore in the 1970s, when Lee Kuan Yew seized upon Confucian ideals as a means of ensuring both modernization and political stability. Confucian values such as emphasis on the family and respect for authority were featured by Singapore’s government in an effort to avoid the pitfalls of what were seen as the ills of Western society (and, not coincidentally, to forestall the rise of political opposition). An effort has been made to elevate a modernized version of Confucianism as a counterweight to Western anomie, political liberalism, and lack of discipline. An emphasis on the family as a basic unit of the social structure is intended to forestall the disintegration of the extended family that has characterized the West. Whether these efforts will be successful in the long run remains to be seen. Certainly, while the basic traditional structures of Japanese society remain strong, they are under attack,

and some of the social problems endemic in Western societies may be gathering strength in Japan. Taiwan also consciously harnessed Confucianism to national development goals, political loyalty, and stability in the period after the Kuomintang fled from the mainland. It is an open question as to whether established ideologies, including but not limited to Confucianism, will be sufficient to maintain stability in the long run.

Confucian emphasis on the family, including the widely extended family, has arguably been significantly responsible for the remarkable success and impact of Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia. Chinese immigrants were largely responsible for the early commercial and industrial development of such countries as Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and, of course, Singapore. The great success of overseas capitalism is tied to Confucian traditions. These overseas Chinese entrepreneurs were able to succeed in part through their commitment to Confucian values and through the family ties legitimated and strengthened by Confucian ideology. It is argued that Confucian ideology managed to survive and change in the context of entirely new circumstances. Confucianism adapted to a context where the state was not necessarily loyal to Confucian ideas, and the tradition resided entirely in the family, in a wider sense of values, and perhaps in links across national frontiers.

Western academic debate is dominated these days by cultural studies, feminist critiques, postcolonial theory, and similar alternative analytical frameworks. None of these frameworks is evident in this book. The analysis would have been strengthened by a wider range of perspectives. Indeed, there is little discussion of how Confucian tradition has affected disadvantaged groups, workers movements, or radical social or political thinking. In many of the countries discussed here, such as South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, there have been influential alternative political and social movements. It would be significant to know how these have reacted to or have been influenced by modern Confucian thought.

Although no one argues in this book that Confucianism is a democratic ideology or that it leads inevitably to parliamentary democracy, neither do the authors claim that it prevents democratic development. Confucianism has its own variation of a civil society, with values of mutual respect and harmony. Current democratic trends in South Korea and Taiwan provide a significant testing ground for the coexistence of Confucianism and democracy. It is unlikely that Hong Kong's promising democratic experiments will last much beyond 1997. The end of the twentieth century is seeing yet another permutation of Confucian thought as the societies that look to the Confucian tradition are again in a period of flux. This volume provides a useful discussion of how Confucianism has adapted and changed and how it has been used by modernizers and others.

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