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Author(s): Tu Wei-ming, Bingyi Yu and Zhaolu Lu

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## Confucianism and Modernity—Insights from an Interview with Tu Wei-ming

On November 6 and December 5, 1997, we visited Tu Wei-ming, professor of Chinese history and philosophy and Director of the Yenching Institute at Harvard University. The questions we brought to Professor Tu were manifold, but we had one concern that was central. It seemed to us that although we are entering a new millennium, the basic human dilemma remains fundamentally the same as it has been through the ages: we must all live together on this planet, but we fight among ourselves for the limited available resources. How can we make this turn into a new century—this turn of the millennium—a genuinely *human* turn in the best sense? What mode of thinking will enable us to create a new world civilization—and not just a new "world order"? How will our past, particularly our many cultural traditions, affect our future? As members of the scholarly community who are Chinese, we are especially concerned with the question of what role Chinese culture, in particular the Confucian tradition, can play in the remaking of our world.

During our two interview sessions, we made known our concerns, and Professor Tu shared some of his most recent thoughts on the relationship between traditional Confucianism and modern civilization. He also elaborated his earlier views on the history of civilization, on the construction of planetary culture, and on the modern relevance of traditional Confucianism. For this article, we have organized some of the results of our interview under three headings: (1) the clash of civilizations and the dialogue of civilizations, (2) Confucian humanism and the "New Humanism," and (3) tradition and modernity.

## The Clash of Civilizations and the Dialogue of Civilizations

In 1993, one of Tu's colleagues, Professor Samuel P. Huntington (at Harvard's Olin Institute of Strategical Studies), published an essay titled "The Clash of Civilizations" (Huntington 1993). In this essay, Huntington claims that international political conflicts and the future of human development can both be explained in terms of a clash of civilizations, and he further elaborates this theory in his 1996 work *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order*. Huntington maintains that historically the sharpest and cruelest conflicts are all deeply rooted in the divergences of civilizations from each other. He claims that in the future a divergence between Western and non-Western civilizations, rather than political and economic differences, will define the battleground where international conflicts arise, and that the clash between traditional Confucianism on the one hand and both Islam and the non-Islamic West on the other will be the focal point of international conflicts. These conflicts will determine the future structure and ori-

© 2000 by University of Hawaiʻi Press entation of international politics. So far, this "clash of civilizations" theory continues to receive a strong response worldwide that is both favorable and critical.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Tu criticized the Huntingtonian understanding of civilization as a rather one-sided point of view that represents a fashionable but unhealthy current that has persisted in American society since the end of the Cold War and is typical of the narrow-minded political model that has come out of that era. Although the "clash of civilizations" theory continues to be widely popular, Tu predicted that its influence will decline, because its very foundation is problematic. First of all, it does not correctly represent the mainstream currents in modern civilizations. Tu emphasized that it is a dialogue of civilizations, not a clash, that appropriately characterizes this mainstream. Moreover, conflict exists not just between civilizations; it arises internally, within each civilization system as well. Countries and regions around the world are confronted with the conflict between improving material life and maintaining moral and spiritual values, between fostering economic growth and preserving the environment, between protecting individual rights and safeguarding the community, between change and stability, and so on. Problems like these are not unique to any one civilization system. The fact that these problems are common to different civilization systems indicates that a wide-ranging dialogue between different civilizational and cultural streams is both possible and necessary.

In the 1940s the German philosopher Karl Jaspers proposed that human civilization experienced a brilliant "Axial Age" roughly between 800 and 200 B.C.E. During this period, cultures and civilizations characterized by a more advanced metaphysical speculation or "spirituality" emerged in India, China, Greece, and Israel, and gave rise to the great religious and philosophical traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Greek philosophy, and Judaism. These traditions constituted the spiritual pillars of human civilization at that time, and out of them came the great philosophers: the Vedic thinkers, Buddha Shākyamuni, Confucius, Lao Tzu, Socrates, and the ancient Jewish prophets. These different traditions, which exhibited distinct features—a particular cultural form, a unique personality, and a special way of crystallizing the universal human concern—jointly gave rise to the first axial age of human history. The cultures of this axial age, later joined by Christianity and Islam, became the sources of the major spiritual traditions of human civilization.

Tu believes that as we enter the new millennium there should be a broader and more effective communication among the different countries, cultural traditions, and civilization systems, so as to form a global dialogue of civilizations and even to bring about another axial age in human history. A wide-ranging dialogue should be carried out among all cultures—involving Christianity in the West; Judaism and Islam in the Middle East; Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism in East and South Asia; and Confucianism, Taoism, and Mahāyāna Buddhism in

China and East Asia. Through such a dialogue of civilizations, Western and Eastern cultures will come to understand and complement each other better for the sake of coexistence and codevelopment. From such a dialogue arises mutuality; from mutuality comes harmony; harmony in turn ensures stability; and stability facilitates coexistence, codevelopment, and the common enjoyment of life. Hence, a dialogue among civilizations is destined to be the foundation of modern global civilization regardless of the inevitable "clashes" between civilizations. It is precisely because a clash of civilizations is possible that a dialogue of civilizations is necessary. Tu views this kind of dialogue of civilizations as an important mechanism underlying human development, and this holds great promise for a new age. He predicts that such a dialogue will surpass in breadth and depth what Jaspers referred to as the first axial age.

Tu believes that Confucian culture still maintains its original spiritual strength from the time it emerged in that first axial age, and it is therefore of relevance, significance, and value to modern life. Tu insisted that Chinese civilization, represented mainly by Confucianism, Taoism, and Chinese Buddhism, should actively participate in the proposed worldwide dialogue of civilizations. Confucianism especially will be instrumental in the construction of a global culture, because its humanistic outlook can inspire us to find a way out of the fundamental human dilemmas that stem from development and cultivate a new humanism that can substitute for the outdated mentality of the European Enlightenment. This new humanism seems to be emerging as a consequence of our current tendency toward introspection, which began at the close of the twentieth century.

## Confucian Humanism and the "New Humanism"

Tu believes that the dominant ideology in the Western world today is still that of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, which provided the foundation for the rise of the modern West. The Enlightenment mentality broke the feudal bonds of the Middle Ages and was, for a time, a great ideological emancipator, effecting the liberation of the mind, for Europe and subsequently for all of humankind. However, this Enlightenment mentality, in its "humanistic" form, has since come to exhibit serious limitations; to a certain extent, it has in a sense brought about a new bondage of the human mind, functioning more and more as a kind of psychocultural cultivator of human self-destruction. Since the eighteenth century, Enlightenment humanism has come to be characterized by a strong anthropocentrism and an instrumentalist rationalism; these tendencies have become so pronounced that this new humanism can perhaps rightly be labeled "the arrogance of rationality." Because it is predicated on the principle of rational choice, the values associated with free will, personal dignity, science, technology, market forces, and legal mechanisms are pushed to their extremes.

In this individualistic humanism, Nature is treated as instrumental and as an object of consumption; spirituality is irrelevant in solving fundamental human problems; communal values are ignored; universal human rights are declared without any thought of human duties; the promise of economic growth and the improvement of living conditions are conceived as limitless; the market model of economy has become the dominant model of society—that is, a market society in which the social-Darwinian model of self-interest and competitiveness is accepted as the only way to achieve success.<sup>2</sup> Tu suggested that the problem is not with those values to which the Enlightenment mentality gives prominent place; rather, it is the conviction that they are the only values of relevance to human development. This is exemplified by the arrogance of attempting to conquer, control, and exploit nature; the blind belief in the limitlessness of natural resources and scientific potential; and the feverish obsession with materiality, instrumentality, technical proficiency, and pragmatic applicability. Ironically, it is the rational, instrumentalist model, with its emphasis on scientific and technological development and materialism, that has engendered the irrational problems that have come to beset human society.

Thus, history calls upon us to reevaluate this Enlightenment mentality. In the West, two approaches toward such an evaluation have achieved prominence. One is postmodernism, which has grown mainly out structuralism and begins with Michel Foucault.<sup>3</sup> According to postmodernism, the movement inspired by the Enlightenment mentality over the past two hundred years, and particularly in its later development, has basically failed and brought disaster upon our world. Postmodernism sees the twentieth century as basically a human tragedy and calls for a fundamental paradigm shift in human thinking and value orientation. Tu believes that the postmodern view has enormous critical and corrective force, but it lacks a proactive stance on how to rescue Western civilization and extricate it from its predicament. This postmodern trend can only degenerate into pessimism and nihilism.

The other trend, according to Tu, which is represented by the writings of Jürgen Habermas,<sup>4</sup> holds that the task of the Enlightenment is in fact far from completed, and that this state of being unfinished explains all of the social problems that have surfaced in the course of modernization. Therefore, our historical task is not to find a new model but to reform the old value system by placing a greater emphasis on the ideas of liberty and equality, and to reconfigure the democratic system so as to assure greater freedom and a fairer distribution of power and wealth; only then can we build a truly modern civil society. Obviously, all attempts to reassess the Enlightenment mentality converge on the problem of modernization.

Similar problems confront the Eastern world, which has already set out on the road to modernization. However, the very idea of modernity, which requires such mechanisms as fair competition, democracy, and the legal protection of individual rights and private property, originated in the Western Enlightenment mentality. If modernization is not to be identified with Westernization, then a critical examination of the Enlightenment mentality with reference to the essential features of local culture and society is a task that is crucial to the modernization of the East. Tu feels that the spirit of Confucian humanism is capable of making important and significant contributions to the completion of this reexamination. It is worth noting that our recent new effort at reflection on the twentieth century has already led to the formation of what may be called a "New Humanism" that is distinctly different from the one rooted in the Enlightenment mentality. This trend toward a New Humanism repudiates narrow-minded anthropocentrism and opposes the undue emphasis on materialism, instrumentalism, technology, and pragmatism. It is clear that Confucian humanism and the New Humanism share the same value orientation.

The Confucian tradition offers profound insights on the relationship between humanity and nature and between individual and society. Its philosophy of the unity of heaven and humanity and its familial model (i.e., that all things form one unified whole and that all human beings are members of one family) confirm that it constitutes a broadly humanistic worldview. Confucian humanism is predicated on the principle of harmony between individual and society, human being and nature, and human heart-mind and the Way of Heaven—and the New Humanism shares precisely the same spiritual orientation. In a history of over two millennia of social transformation, the Confucian tradition has accumulated a wealth of profound insights into the nature of human life, insights that display genuine concern for the welfare of humanity and the pursuit of a grand harmony.

The Confucian ways of Zhong and Shu—namely "one who wishes to establish oneself helps establish others and one who wishes to broaden oneself helps broaden others" (Analects 6/28) and "what one does not desire oneself should not be imposed on others" (Analects 12/2)—are salient examples of the transtemporal, transpersonal, and transcultural nature of Confucianism. The ways of Zhong and Shu contain profound insights vital to remaking a world in which civilizations, cultures, nations, and people can coexist and codevelop in such a way that they "harmonize without imitating" each other (Analects 13/23), and in doing so they constitute a globally applicable norm and code of conduct for interpersonal, intercommunal, interprovincial, and international relations, coexistence, and codevelopment. We can see how the Confucian Way has the power to dissolve clashes of civilizations on the one hand and prevent cultural solipsism on the other, and how Confucian humanism can inspire a New Humanism movement. This inspiration is exactly what is needed for the modernization of civilization. The Confucianism of the pre-Qin dynasty period (221-207 B.C.E.)<sup>5</sup> was a spiritual pillar of the first axial age, and the later Confucianism of the Song (960-1279) and Ming (1368–1644) periods<sup>6</sup> was once the main spiritual source and driving force of East Asian civilization. The history of Confucianism shows that it can creatively transform itself so as to transcend the ages and negotiate its way through a multicultural world. We have every reason to believe that Confucianism is capable of extending beyond East Asia and exerting a global influence.

Tu further noted that while Confucianism can inspire the construction of a global culture, it cannot be the sole driving force in this project. Civilization has displayed a much stronger pluralizing tendency in recent times than in any past historical period. This multicultural environmental restructuring has made possible the recent rejuvenation and rapid development of Confucianism. This new structure constitutes the basic premise under which the modern relevance of traditional Confucianism can be discussed. Other cultural traditions being equal, no civilization system can be the sole driving force in the construction of a planetary culture. Just as Eurocentrism lost ground and modernization is no longer seen as the equivalent of Westernization, the new global civilization should not be identified solely with Confucianism. To say that Confucianism is of great value to modern society is not to say that Confucianism is the only tradition of value to modernization. Other civilization systems, as the necessary constituents of the new global network of civilizations, also have their own distinct contributions to offer. Traditional Confucianism, Tu added, must confirm at the same time that it transforms, in order to serve better the needs of a modern humanity. Therefore, a creative transformation of traditional Confucianism has been the central theme of the contemporary New Confucianism movement.

## Tradition and Modernity

With regard to this promotion of a global dialogue, the nourishing of a New Humanism, and the creative transformation of Confucianism, Tu raised the issue of tradition in modernity. He suggested that we need a richer concept of modernity and emphasized that "tradition" and "modernity" are not incompatible.

Tu pointed out that, first of all, one way to understand the issue of tradition in modernity is to appreciate diversity in modernity. Modernity can be embodied in a variety of models; it does not reduce to one particular model suggested by one particular country or region. It is not reasonable to assume that modernization as it occurred in the West is the only acceptable model of modernity; nor is it reasonable to assume that to acquire modernity means nothing more than simulating the model of a forerunner in the modernizing process—for example Europe or the United States. East Asia and South Asia, including China, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam, have already developed their own distinct models of modernity. To emphasize diversity in modernity is not to imply that a Western model has become outdated, but is rather to call attention to the fact that modernity can be realized in many different ways. Understanding this, we

can legitimately speak of Western modernity, East Asian modernity, Chinese modernity, and so on. For a long time, Westernization has been mistaken for modernization, and a total and uncritical Westernization for a complete and thorough modernization. Discarding this way of thinking would help to liberate humanity from a narrow-minded understanding of modernity.

In general, Western modernity emphasizes the need for a market economy, democratic politics, and individualism. Such an approach has its merits; a market economy and democratic politics are elementary constituents of modern society and have been the expressed intent of the modernization process. However, they have taken different shapes in different regions. So far as the market economy is concerned, we can see that China and other third-world countries are developing a market economy in one way or another—but the market economy in China is obviously different from the one in the United States. It is simply not adequate to say that one is immature and the other mature, or that one operates under a socialist system and the other under a capitalist system. Japan is a capitalist country as well, but its model for a market economy is characteristically different from those of the United States and Europe.

Likewise, different regions implement democracy by adopting different forms of government. It is not feasible, and is perhaps impossible, to insist that all nations model their political systems after those in the West. Moreover, political systems vary greatly among Western countries themselves. As for individualism, the third element of modernity, people from different cultural backgrounds have different philosophies and value orientations and therefore have different attitudes toward individual freedom. While Western countries view individualism as the driving force behind modernization, East Asian societies place a greater emphasis on collective effort as the inspiration for modernization.

Obviously, modernity is not and should not be represented by a single, fixed model. If modernity must be viewed in terms of some sort of model, then it would not be an established, transferable model but a model that is constructed through international and multilingual collaboration. Diversity is the key to a model of modernity. It is this understanding that has led to the recognition of an "East Asian model" and "Asian values" in recent discussions of modernity. Although these concepts have not yet been clearly and satisfactorily defined, their presence signifies that diversity is a definite factor in the development of a new modernity.

According to Tu, if we understand that diversity is what characterizes this new modernity, then it will not be difficult to understand the role of tradition. Diversity is largely the product of diverse cultural traditions that are unique in their particular philosophical orientations, ethical systems, religious rites, national psychological predispositions, linguistic-symbolic systems, sociobehavioral conventions, aesthetic and artistic forms, and general way of life. Each of these

culturally distinct constituents is a developmental thread that runs through a cultural history and helps to preserve a distinct national identity over successive generations. According to the Chinese view, tradition (*chuan tong*) means the unity of those developmental threads that come down to us through the generations and provide cultural continuity. Cultural tradition should not be viewed according to either a purely historical or a purely ahistorical model.

Now, if national vitality and the continuity of national identity are prerequisites for the acquisition of modernity, then tradition is inevitably an integral part of, and important to the shaping of, modernity. For example, an "East Asian model" of modernity has developed among a group of countries in the "Confucian Cultural Rim," where Confucianism has greatly influenced the tradition of each country. The Confucian contribution to modernity is manifold. As mentioned above, Chinese and American market economies differ greatly. Of the non-economic factors that account for the difference, Chinese cultural tradition plays a prominent role. For example, Chinese have traditionally admired the spirit of the "Confucian businessman," which is accepted as a way of actually conducting business and not just as a business ethic. The Confucian businessman embodies the Confucian ideal of a fiduciary society.<sup>7</sup> This ideal emphasizes such traditional values as honoring one's commitments (xin yong), maintaining one's credibility (xin yu), and committing oneself to doing what is right (xin yi). These values are believed to ensure the proper functioning of a market economy and best serve the vast majority of the population. The spirit of the Confucian businessman will gradually assume a modern form and play a definite role in the operation of a market economy in modern China.

Cultural tradition also affects how nations view the relationship between individual and society. Western society stresses individual rights, freedom, dignity, and independence, whereas Chinese cultural tradition (especially the Confucian tradition) emphasizes communal values. Confucianism does not view a member of society as a radically autonomous and isolated individual who naturally inherits rights but no duties. Rather it views an "individual" as "experientially and practically a center of relationships" in a network of human relatedness (Tu 1993b, p. 143). Each person, as such a center, is therefore able to harmonize with other centers, with the community, with society, and with nature. A philosophy of this kind that sees relationality, conditionality, equilibrium, and harmony as important can exert a profound influence over the course of modernization in China in a variety of ways.

Looking back over China's recent history, Tu observed that in modern times, particularly since the May Fourth Movement, he has seen many Chinese intellectuals adopt a radical iconoclasm. Too often in intellectual circles, tradition and modernity are treated as incompatible, and traditional civilization and modern civilization are regarded as contradictory. Such a perceived dichotomy between

tradition and modernity is so pervasive that it seems to have led to the development of an independent conceptual paradigm that is sometimes radical in the extreme, to the point that it is almost nihilistic, holding that China's cultural tradition is like a millstone around its neck and that only by unloading it can China advance. This anti-tradition mindset targets Confucianism by offering a number of hypotheses on the fate of Confucianism in the face of modernity. For example, there is an "Inferiority Account," which claims that Confucianism cannot be adapted to a modern context because as a religion or a source of spiritual cultivation it is inherently inferior in its rational system to other world religions.<sup>8</sup> Then there is also a "Failure Account," which argues that there is an irreconcilable conflict between Confucian society and modern society and therefore that Confucianism has failed—often and badly—to contribute to China's modernization project, and it will continue to fail whenever an attempt is made to introduce it.9 Finally, there is a "Museum Account," which asserts that Confucianism has died and that it has no other meaning than as fragmented pieces of Chinese history suitable only for a museum.10

Ironically, the popular assumption that a nation attempting to modernize must renounce its tradition is not historically valid. This view fails to appreciate the fact that modernity is actually rooted or grounded in tradition; in other words, tradition provides the essential cultural reference to which modernity must refer. Moreover, being ahistorical does not make a stance more modern, since it is still based on a dated concept of tradition, a concept that construes tradition as a dead language whose grammar is no longer functional in a modern context. Testimony to the fact that Confucianism is indeed a basic grammar of East-Asian cultures is the example of Singapore, whose people endured an economic crisis by holding to a Confucian perspective that gave them a sense of unity and national identity while adapting the common value system to the needs of a modern society.

Finally, Tu reminded us that, like all other cultural traditions, the Confucian tradition has had its negative, even destructive, influences on social development because of its conservative and even erroneous assumptions. Particularly when Confucianism is politicized—when it is designated as the official state ideology and utilized for political power to serve the interests of the ruling class—its negative aspects may become manifest and impede social progress, even to the point of destroying the positive social forces instrumental in human advancement. This destructive capacity was recognized by almost all of the serious intellectuals of the May Fourth Movement, who were relentless in their criticism of Confucianism. Even in China today, these negative aspects of the Confucian tradition—vestiges of a feudalist ideology and psychocultural deposits that are deep-rooted in Chinese society—still persist and obstruct the progress of modernization. However, the negative elements in Confucianism by no means invalidate the Confucian tra-

dition altogether; there is today a thriving Confucian philosophical and religious tradition that has been instrumental in providing inspiration for the progress that has been achieved toward a healthy, modern society.

In any event, the fact that Confucianism continues to exert an influence, positive or negative, on society indicates that this tradition still flourishes. We have every reason to believe that through a creative modern transformation, Confucianism will be capable of assuming once again its ancient axial position as a positive driving force, and that it will continue to function as a cultural grammar, making significant contributions to the global dialogue of civilizations and the cocreation of modernity.

Bingyi Yu Institute of Philosophy, Anhui Academy of Social Sciences Hefei, Anhui, People's Republic of China

Zhaolu Lu Tiffin University, Tiffin, Ohio

NOTES When this article was drafted, Bingyi Yu was a visiting scholar, and Dr. Zhaolu Lu was a visiting assistant professor of Chinese philosophy at Hampshire College, Amherst, Massachusetts.

- 1. See Huntington 1996 for the initial debate, and Rashid 1997 for recent responses.
- 2. For a detailed analysis of the Enlightenment mentality, see Tu 1994.
- 3. See Foucault 1965.
- 4. See Habermas 1968.
- 5. Pre-Qin Confucianism refers to the tradition represented mainly by Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.), Mencius (371–289 [?] B.C.E.), and Xun Tzu (298–238 B.C.E.).
- 6. Song-Ming Confucianism is often referred to as Neo-Confucianism, represented mainly by such famous scholars as Cheng Hao (1032–1085), Cheng Yi (1033–1108), Zhu Xi (1130–1200), Lu Jiuyuan (1139–1193), and Wang Shouren (1473–1529).
  - 7. See Tu 1989 for a systematic statement of the idea of a fiduciary society.
  - 8. On the "Inferiority Account," see Max Weber (Weber 1951), especially chapter 8.
  - 9. On the "Failure Account," see Mary Clabaugh Wright (Wright 1957).
  - 10. On the "Museum Account," see Joseph R. Levenson (Levenson 1965).

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