

World Religions and Democracy

THE IRONIES OF CONFUCIANISM

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The ideal modern polity is a securely unified nation-state that boasts a free-market economy and a democratic political system. Outside of Western Europe, its former settler colonies, and Japan, the effort to adopt or develop all these essential features of well-ordered modernity has often been a frustrating struggle. Some countries have achieved national unity but have yet to experience significant economic and political development. Others have succeeded in achieving a degree of prosperity, but have yet to undergo a democratic transition. Still others have even established democracies, but usually of the worryingly fragile sort that look likely to buckle under the inevitable buffets of time and circumstance. Precious few countries have managed to gather unity, prosperity, and democracy into one stable edifice.

The East Asian countries that have been strongly influenced by Confucianism—the loosely organized tradition of spiritual and ethical teachings associated with the Chinese sage Confucius¹ (ca. 551–479 B.C.E.)—offer an interesting variation on the theme of halting development in the so-called Third World. Consider how they have fared as regards the three modern challenges of unity, prosperity, and democracy. First, all the Confucian countries of the region, including massive China as well as the smaller societies of Taiwan, the two Koreas, Vietnam, and Singapore, have succeeded in establishing powerful, centralized, bureaucratic states undergirded by robust national sentiments. Second, many of them have succeeded, often dramatically, at the task of generating economic growth: Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore have become famous as “tigers” while more recently China has been astonishing the world in this field. Third, South Korea and

Taiwan have not only maintained stable governance and economic development, but have made full-fledged transitions to democracy with all that implies in the way of free and regular elections, peaceful handovers of power, a vibrant civic life proceeding freely under freely made laws, and the panoply of rights and liberties that make democracy liberal and distinguish it from a mere dictatorship of the majority. If one puts Japan back into the picture, it becomes apparent that, aside from Western Europe and the lands of its wider historic ambit, no region has been more successful than East Asia when it comes to achieving political and economic modernization.

What explains the exceptional performance of the region as a whole? Ever since the Newly Industrializing Countries (NICs) of East Asia began recording high economic-growth rates in the 1970s, Confucianism has been cited—and debated—as a possible cause.² Questions of causation are notoriously slippery, but no one can deny that there is a strong observed correlation between a society-wide Confucian legacy and a capacity for rapid and sustained economic development. China is only the most recent case out of several stretching back all the way to late nineteenth-century Meiji Japan. Many scholars have also noted the connection between Confucianism and the “developmental states” of this region.³ In this account, the Confucian emphasis on loyalty and tradition of strong centralized bureaucratic rule, based upon relatively meritocratic civil-service examinations, has buttressed modern nation-states.

When the topic is Confucianism and *democracy*, however, the story takes on a different tone. Even among those who affirm the association between Confucianism on the one hand and state-building and economic development on the other, there is a strong consensus that Confucianism correlates negatively with self-government and modern political liberty. The continuing repressiveness of the regimes in China and Singapore, to say nothing of Vietnam and North Korea, deepens this impression. For many intellectuals, the “Asian values” discourse of the 1990s—much of which originated in Singapore and peaked not long before the East Asian financial crisis late in that decade—created the impression that Confucianism, whatever its happy economic effects, is an antidemocratic worldview.⁴ In their effort to find alternatives to the “liberal-individualistic” version of democracy, the proponents of Asian values made Confucianism seem all too open to use by governments that fell well short of the democratic mark. Given this, Samuel P. Huntington’s remark is perhaps understandable: “Confucian heritage, with its emphasis on authority, order, hierarchy, and supremacy of the collectivity over the individual, creates obstacles to democratization.”⁵

Is Confucianism so fundamentally opposed to democracy that the former must be overcome before the latter can take root? Are Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan just lucky exceptions? Is the democratization

of Singapore and China, not to mention Vietnam and North Korea, a forlorn hope?

The Encounter with Modernity

Confucian civilization was the last of the world's major cultural realms to come into sustained contact with Western modernity. While lands and peoples shaped by Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism had come to know the West much earlier through some combination of trade, travel, intellectual exchange, invasion, conquest, and colonization, it was not until the nineteenth century that the Confucian world had to begin contending with modern civilization. The initial reaction of the Confucian world—one it shared with most other civilizations—was emphatic rejection of Western influence and ways. Fiercely proud of the culture and tradition that they had spent centuries cultivating, Confucian elites in China, Korea, and Japan all denounced and resisted the onslaught of the Western “barbarians.”

Total resistance, however, did not last long. Defeat at the hands of Britain in the Opium War (1839–42) led China's rulers to have a try at reforming their dying imperial system. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries they labored to salvage aspects of Confucian tradition while adopting modern technologies, methods, and institutions. Mostly they failed. By the time a republican revolution ended the Ching dynasty in 1911, few in China advocated carrying on with Confucian learning and institutions in any form. With the May Fourth Movement of 1919, there began a long assault on the traditional modes of thought that Confucianism typified. Adherents of the nationalist and the communist models of modernity would struggle for control over the next three decades, with Confucian traditionalism thoroughly sidelined.

Under the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603–1868), Japan adopted an isolationist stance qualified only by limited trade with Korea and a Dutch enclave in Nagasaki. The U.S. gunboat diplomacy carried out by the 1853 visit of Commodore Matthew Perry's “black ships” to Tokyo Bay sparked an intense intra-Japanese debate over how to deal with the foreigners and their technologically formidable civilization. A civil war in the late 1860s settled the dispute. The winners favored reopening the country and learning from the West. Their toppling of the Tokugawa regime and restoration of imperial rule under Emperor Meiji (whose adopted name means “enlightened government”) set Japan decisively on the path to modernization.

Vietnam as well initially rejected Western encroachment. The Vietnamese state that first threw off Chinese rule in the tenth century C.E. and fitfully extended its sway southward over most of the country's present-day territory was a centralized, Confucian-influenced entity. From the seventeenth century onward, succeeding dynasties tried to isolate their

lands as much as possible from European influence, permitting only a single Portuguese trading mission near what is now the port of Da Nang, as well as limited Catholic missionary activity. Until the triumph of French colonialism in 1885, Vietnam's ruling system had remained Confucian in nature, with Confucian-style civil-service examinations enduring as late as 1921. Yet colonialism's arrival had represented a decisive victory for modernity. After 1885, even the most dogged elements in the anticolonial resistance would never return to Confucian tradition, but would instead adopt Western ideas and ideologies such as Marxism and nationalism in the very act of framing resistance to Western rule. In the seventeenth century, a French Jesuit missionary transcribed written Vietnamese from Chinese-style characters into a modified version of the Roman alphabet, and not even Ho Chi Minh ever tried to undo the change. Similarly, Vietnam's pursuit of modernization under whatever guise has never involved a reversion to Confucian ways.

The Yi dynasty that ruled nineteenth-century Korea also spurned the West. Prince Regent Tae Won-gun (r. 1864–73) oversaw a centuries-old, thoroughly Confucian state in a land so resolutely closed off that it was known as the Hermit Kingdom. He rejected Western trade and diplomatic overtures and persecuted Roman Catholics. Several times in the late 1860s and 1870s, Korean shore defenses resisted punitive or probing expeditions by French and later U.S. naval forces. Common folk and elites alike supported their country's Confucian civilization. An energetic minority of modernizers managed to stage what they hoped would be a Meiji-like coup in 1884, but they soon failed. The heavy price to be paid for such antimodern attitudes became clear in 1910, when a rapidly industrializing Japan, fresh from victorious wars against China and Russia, invaded and seized the Korean peninsula, ruthlessly exploiting it until Japanese power was crushed in the Second World War. Korea since then has been divided between a communist-totalitarian North and a once authoritarian but now democratic-capitalist South. Deep as their differences may run, neither has ever looked back from modernity to a premodern Confucianism.

What is striking about the history of East Asia over the last century and a half is Confucianism's relative feebleness as a wellspring of resistance. When compared to traditional beliefs or value systems in other civilizations that have had jarring encounters with modernity, Confucianism barely registers as a source of organized opposition to new and foreign ways. East Asian societies did produce theoretical critiques and practical movements aimed at stopping one or another aspect of political, economic, or social modernization. Yet after the initial "Confucian reaction" failed, these countermodern trends almost always drew their inspiration from Western ideologies (such as anarchism or the aforementioned Marxism and nationalism) and not from Confucian figures, writings, or institutions. How could Confucianism, seemingly so firmly

entrenched in all these lands for six centuries or more, have become so irrelevant so easily? How was it that a civilization which had sunk deep philosophical and ethical roots and undergirded key political, economic, and social institutions could be so soon forgotten? Why is there no “Confucian fundamentalist” reaction despite the rapid and at times brutal modernization and “secularization” of East Asia?

One reason is that Confucianism took so much of the blame for the humiliations that the region’s countries suffered at Western hands. Confucian institutions and values, many critics claimed, blocked the kinds of sweeping changes that would have made resistance feasible, and that arguably saved Japan from foreign domination. But this explanation raises another question, for there is a related dynamic of reform and reaction, seen in other regions and cultures, which East Asia has never experienced in a sustained or far-reaching way. In many places other than East Asia, tense encounters or outright conflicts with technologically superior Westerners led to humiliations: The Ottoman-Mameluke army’s defeat by Napoleon’s much smaller French force at the Battle of the Pyramids in July 1798 might be thought of, for instance, as a rough cognate of China’s defeat in the Opium War or Tokugawa Japan’s inability to make Commodore Perry’s squadron leave Tokyo Bay. Such setbacks spurred efforts to imitate or borrow Western ways in the name of contending against the West on a more equal footing. As Bernard Lewis says in regard to the Muslim world,

Some of the movements of revolt against Western rule were inspired by religion and fought in the name of Islam. But the most effective at that time—those that actually won political independence—were led by Westernized intellectuals who fought the West with its own intellectual weapons. Sometimes indeed they fought the West with Western help and encouragement.⁶

After the first wave of imitative innovation for the sake of resistance there often came a second, fundamentalist wave. Antimoderns reacted against the imitative reforms and their discomfiting effects or side-effects, taking aim not only at foreigners and foreign influences, but also at domestic actors associated with modernization. To fundamentalists, adopting repugnant Western ways as the price for resisting Western political domination seemed to pose an intolerable dilemma. Caught on its horns, the antimoderns lashed out against both the West and its local imitators-cum-competitors. (Islamic fundamentalists, for instance, hate not only foreign “infidels” but also the relatively modernist secular autocrats who rule so many Muslim countries in the name of nationalist or national-socialist ideologies with roots in resistance to Western colonialism.) The Confucian culture realm has seen modernization aplenty, often of a wrenching sort, yet has never witnessed the rise of a second-order, mass-based fundamentalist backlash like those seen in many other parts of the world. Why not? At least part of the

answer lies in the peculiar way in which Confucianism has traditionally been organized institutionally. One of the features that distinguish Confucianism from other religions (if indeed Confucianism is properly classified as a religion, a point which scholars still debate) is its obvious lack of visible and autonomous institutional structures. Instead it takes the form of what sociologists call a “diffused” religious or quasireligious system. There is no priesthood or clerisy whose sole mission is to preserve and propagate Confucian tenets, perform Confucian rituals, and uphold the Confucian “faith.”

The Twin Pillars of Family and State

Instead, traditional Confucianism rests on two pillars: the extended family and the state. Classically and ideally, the male head of the Confucian family is the closest analogue to a priest, since to him above all falls the duty of cultivating reverence toward ancestors. The officials of the state (who are also, significantly, the heads of families) are the leading students of Confucianism, whose very mastery of the great Confucian texts, as proven in competitive examinations, raises them to important public posts. The family’s due is filial reverence (*xiao* in Chinese, *hyo* in Korean, and *kou* in Japanese). The state’s due is political allegiance (*zhong* in Chinese, *chung* in Korean, and *chu* in Japanese). These virtues of filio piety and loyalty are arguably the two Confucian desiderata *par excellence*, the values that give life to the family and the polity. Confucianism recognizes no realm separate from the family and the state that can be enshrined in a separate institution and guarded by an independent clergy.

Confucianism did not become the cognate of an “orthodoxy” or “established religion” in China, Korea, or Vietnam because monarchs chose to support some clergy-like body of Confucian adepts. Rather, the monarchies that ruled these countries were Confucian institutions through and through. Likewise, since Confucianism makes no distinction between the sacred and secular or eternal and temporal realms, the Byzantine or Eastern Orthodox Christian notion of caesaropapism—of religious and political authority as different types of rule nonetheless exercised by a single person—is another concept that simply does not exist in Confucianism. Questions such as those of the “city of God” versus the “city of man”; of the “two swords” of temporal and spiritual authority, respectively; of “the throne and the altar”; or of how to follow Jesus’ command to render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s while rendering unto God what is God’s have never haunted the Confucian imagination, for the sacred-secular dichotomy that they all assume is a premise which Confucian thought simply does not share.

The reverencing (worship may be too strong a word) of ancestors that is ubiquitous in Confucian theory and practice is a sign of how grand a place the family occupies in the Confucian scale of values. The patriarch’s

role was to ensure the family's continuity across the generations by guaranteeing its physical, political, economic, and social well-being. This project could require passing the civil-service examination and rising in the official bureaucracy, through employment in which a man could not only serve his state but secure the fortunes of his family. A Confucian patriarch also nurtured family piety in a highly self-conscious way by presiding over rituals held to honor the ancestors in household shrines. In these rites, Confucianism assumed its most liturgical and religious form. Through them, the living generation of the extended family or clan remembered and reaffirmed its place along the continuum afforded by the ever-receding generations of ancestors, on the one hand, and the ever-extending generations of descendants to come, on the other.

This linchpin of the Confucian family-and-state system was the ideal Confucian scholar-bureaucrat. Steeped in the Confucian classics as preparation for government service, he also oversaw the cult of the family and its ancestors. Perhaps the closest parallel to such a hieratic official in the Western tradition would be the ancient Greek or Roman male who was both the master of his household and a citizen of his city. The parallel is imperfect, for while the classical citizen was expected to prize his city's good even above his family's, the Confucian literati were offered no such clear rule for resolving tensions between family piety and political loyalty. Hence balancing the claims of the family and the state, not of the sacred and the secular, became the central preoccupation of Confucian political theory and practice.

Because of Confucianism's "secular" nature, the advent of modernity did not bode well for it. The coming of the modern nation-state model to East Asia deprived Confucianism of one of the two institutional supports that had sustained it for centuries. The family continued to be the single most important repository and transmitter of Confucian values, but in the larger political order the family could not by itself sustain the predominance of Confucian ways. The widespread impression that Confucianism had shown itself powerless to protect traditional regimes against Western encroachment caused a crisis of loyalty, with allegiances shifting relatively quickly to the new modern state. The hollowing out of the old Confucian order and the rise of the modern state was the deeper process that underlay the myriad civil wars, revolutions, rebellions, and coups that swept East Asia from the mid-nineteenth century on.

There was irony at work as well, for while the modern state swept Confucian polities aside, that very same state also owed much of its triumph to the Confucian value of loyalty. The case of Japan, the most important model for other East Asian countries since the second half of the nineteenth century, reveals how modernizing elites hit upon the idea of fostering potent synergies between Confucianism and the new nation-state. In Japan, modernizing change traveled under the guise of a restored monarchy. The return of the monarchy's authority, if not its

real power, in the person of Emperor Meiji gave nationalist feeling a strong focus and rallying point, just as those who engineered the restoration hoped it would. The imperial house became the symbol of the nation and provided continuity and coherence amid reforms that turned traditional Japanese life upside down. The abolition of the old class system, the adoption of compulsory universal education and military service, the establishment of modern property rights, and the promulgation of a written constitution (modeled on Prussia's and granted by the emperor in 1889)—changes so deep and disturbing that they provoked manifold rebellions by peasants as well as samurai—all went forward in the emperor's name. At the same time, Confucian values played a role, as in the 1890 imperial rescript on education that not only made schooling mandatory and universal but also ordered it to inculcate family piety and loyalty to the emperor.⁷

The Meiji strategy of using distinctively Confucian cultural resources to buttress a powerful modern state associated with nationalist ideology was suppressed in Japan after that country's defeat in the Second World War. Yet the strategy would prove handy to such modernizing Asian strongmen as South Korea's Park Chung Hee, Taiwan's Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo, and Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew. In all these cases, Confucian rhetoric extolling filial piety and political loyalty accompanied the building of a strong, centralized, intrusive, and bureaucratic state capable of generating momentum for modern industrial development.⁸ Today, the nominally Marxist rulers of China, Vietnam, and North Korea seem to be adopting this approach, despite prior communist claims that Confucianism is "reactionary."

For the most part, East Asia's modern nation-states have been hugely effective at fostering growth. The sheer speed and success of economic modernization under authoritarian governments ready to quell dissent may have helped to stop any possible fundamentalist reaction before it could start. In Japan and South Korea, the only serious critique has been Marxist. The very success of industrialization and urbanization provided fodder for leftist denunciations of consumerism and various capitalist derelictions and excesses. Because Confucianism never took the form of anything resembling a church (in the broad sense of a religious body conceptually and institutionally distinguishable from the state), the modern nation-states that have arisen in Confucian or post-Confucian societies are as close as one can come to pure specimens of the "secular state" idealized by modern liberal theorists. But without a church to champion a realm of awareness or action over against the realm controlled by the state, these societies also found themselves inordinately threatened by state totalitarianism. The modern state, in effect, became a new and more powerful type of emperor in a region where no popes or "turbulent priests" had ever been on hand to challenge even the older and weaker representatives of the imperial breed. This has meant

that East Asia has mostly had to do without the liberalizing influence of what Alfred Stepan calls the “twin tolerations,” whereby the political and the religious authorities strike a double-barreled bargain that bolsters freedom as they agree to avoid dictating to one another.⁹

The historically Christian West developed its “twin tolerations” only after enormous difficulty and violence, including the Wars of Religion that wracked Europe from the 1520s to 1648. Yet these very conflicts were instrumental in midwifing the liberal and secular ideals that undergird modern democracy. More recently, the role that the Roman Catholic Church has played in helping to overthrow repressive regimes and defend human rights from communist Poland to the Marcos-era Philippines and East Timor under Indonesian misrule shows how effective a church that stands apart from and at times even defies the state can be at promoting democracy, tolerance, and pluralism.

In Confucian societies, the lack of an independent and culturally indigenous “church” aided the rise of the state and with it socioeconomic modernity, yet left this same state too often unchallenged by countervailing authoritative sources. The new state could define the whole public realm as the nation, and then claim that state control of this realm drew justification from the government’s role as supreme bearer of national goals and aspirations. Post-Confucian states freely articulated and imposed national ideologies. The Japanese state even invented its own religion, Shintoism. Underlying legitimacy came from the overriding goal of preventing foreign domination, Western or otherwise (not all the imperialism in East Asia has come from the West, as any review of Korean or Vietnamese history will attest). Meiji Japan marched under the slogan “rich nation, strong army.” Korea’s Park Chung Hee, the Kuomintang party of Nationalist China, and many others echoed that call. At its worst, this could decay into brutal militarism of the sort that swept aside democratic groups such as the Japanese “liberty and popular rights” movement of the “Taisho Democracy” era (1912–26) before the third decade of the twentieth century. The authoritarian-imperialist path down which Japan’s militarists drove their country ended in mushroom clouds. But the U.S. occupation of 1945 to 1952 gave liberal democracy a powerfully assisted new start amid the ashes, with results that endure today. In Kim Il Sung’s North Korea, Mao Zedong’s China, and Ho Chi Minh’s Vietnam, post-Confucian communist states committed far greater assaults on freedom than were seen in the capitalist-authoritarian states of Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore at their worst. Both the totalitarianism of the communist states and the authoritarianism of the capitalist states may be described as being, in part at least, legacies of Confucianism.

How, given the power of the state and the politically problematic Confucian heritage, did democracy replace authoritarian capitalism in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan? The importance of economic development and

the rising middle classes that it underwrites cannot be gainsaid, especially given the absence or relative weakness of religious supports for an autonomous civil society and a tradition of opposition to government authority.

Japan's path through militaristic hypernationalism and the loss of a catastrophic war to a recovery of nascent liberal-democratic traditions with roots in the Meiji period is a unique tale. South Korea's case, too, has its *sui generis* aspects. South Korea is the only country in East Asia where a large share of the populace—almost half—professes Christianity. Korea's churches, Protestant as well as Catholic, have played a major role in democratization since the 1970s.¹⁰ Clerics such as Seoul's Catholic archbishop Stephen Cardinal Kim, Christian youth-group members, Christian students, and other Christian citizens have often been at the forefront of those peacefully challenging official repression and calling for democracy.

Taiwan's special circumstance is the "ethnic" cleavage between the Kuomintang mainlanders who fled to the island to escape Mao's forces in 1949 and the "native" Taiwanese whom the mainlanders found there. The natives have provided a ready-made basis for political opposition to Kuomintang dominance, with feeling especially dwelling on the natives' greater tendency to favor a clear and final declaration of independence from China. In a roughly similar fashion, interregional tensions within ethnically homogeneous South Korea helped to fuel oppositional politics and hence democracy.

Democracy "Despite" Confucianism?

One thing notable about all these forces for democratization is how little any of them have to do with Confucianism. We have seen how Confucianism has served the cause of (usually authoritarian) state-building and the cause of economic development. Can Confucianism ever serve democracy? Indeed, is it compatible with democracy at all, or does democratization require the rejection of Confucian ways?

In practice, Confucianism has always seemed to flourish best under autocracy. In China, Korea, and Vietnam, Confucian political theory served the monarchy. The post-Confucian states that have harnessed Confucianism for their own ends are far from exceptional in this regard. Yet at the same time, Confucian history features many examples of opposition to despotism. Confucianism, we must remember, privileges not warriors and kings, but literati or scholar-bureaucrats. They are the true defenders of civilization and the most fit to govern. Yet others have more power. The potential for tension with rulers should be apparent. This is nowhere better illustrated than in the opening lines of Confucianism's most famous book, the *Analects*:

The Master [Confucius] said: "Having studied, to then repeatedly apply what you have learned—is this not a source of pleasure? To have friends come from distant quarters—is this not a source of enjoyment? To go

unacknowledged by others without harboring frustration—is this not the mark of an exemplary person (*junzi*)?”¹¹

On the surface, this appears to be an exhortation to study hard, maintain good human relations, and be humble. Read from the perspective of a classical Confucian *junzi*, flourishing at a time when he and his fellow literati held elite official positions throughout East Asia, these words read like a calm counsel to a certain kind of *noblesse oblige*: As a leader of others, one must never stop studying or seeking self-improvement, and as an acknowledged member of society’s elite, one does well by being friendly and unassuming. Yet when Confucius uttered this teaching, he and his peers and students were anything but elite figures. On the contrary, they were functionaries hired by monarchs and grandees to work as scribes and clerks, to perform rituals meant to show off the splendor of royal and noble households, and to tutor aristocratic offspring.

Only when we grasp this can we understand the third exhortation, which recommends inner calm in the face of recognition denied. Unless they deliberately disguise themselves, emperors and nobles are never in danger of going unrecognized. Their grand clothes, conveyances, retinues, and houses ensure them recognition, whether they deserve it or not. Elites live in state; Confucius and his fellow literati live in shade. They study arduously and constantly to master the ancient texts and rituals that form the essence of civilization, yet find themselves condemned to remain a nameless, powerless servant class. With this exhortation, Confucius is telling his fellow scribes to be proud of themselves, to maintain a steady self-respect even though the outside world and its rulers will never justly recognize them.

The meaning of the second exhortation then also becomes clear. The literati are civilization’s keepers, a band of brothers with ideas that can repair the world. Yet only their peers rate them accurately. Thus a visit from a true friend—one of those rare people with whom one can share one’s deepest hopes, dreams, and frustrations—is a joyous occasion indeed. When friends are not at hand, what is a scholar to do other than practice the rituals and seek the true meaning of the classics? As keepers of the faith, the literati must constantly hone their skills and refine their understanding of the civilizing mission that the powerholders neglect. This also explains the first exhortation, to study and then apply the fruits of study. Whatever the unwise ruling classes do, the learned sage must stand ready to advance the cause of civilization if he gets the chance.

Properly understood, then, this opening passage from the leading Confucian text is not a string of calm moral commonplaces, but rather a postcard from the edge, the agonized *cri de coeur* of a frustrated, overlooked intellectual whose true grasp of civilization, its desperate plight, and the means to save it is shared by no one or almost no one with any

power. Perhaps the supreme irony in all of Confucianism's ironic history is that this "voice in the wilderness" teaching eventually became the supreme established orthodoxy of the East Asian world. What happened to bring about such a dramatic reversal? Four centuries after Confucius died, the Han emperors of China made Confucian teachings the center of the official religion. The vast empire needed highly educated bureaucrats, and Confucian scholars formed the biggest pool of available talent. The Confucian classics dominated the training of aspiring bureaucrats, whose lives were focused on doing well in the civil-service examination, which tested mastery of Confucian lore. A political theory replete with exhortations to filio piety, loyalty, and the rule of virtue was just what the empire was looking for as it went about molding a docile corps of administrators.¹²

King's Men or King's Conscience?

Thus was the put-upon Confucian literatus reborn as one of the grand scholar-bureaucrats who ran China on the emperor's behalf. Yet the Confucian mandarins' sense that they were not merely the king's men but also the true bearers and defenders of civilization never completely left them. In fact, the more deeply the imperial system entrenched itself, the stronger this consciousness became. Many literati continued to challenge the emperor's right to rule. In the eleventh century, a new "neo-Confucian" account claimed for the literati a much more central role in governing the empire.

Despite Confucian criticisms of imperial claims, Confucians never imagined a political system other than monarchy. In this, they were hardly an exception. Yet Confucianism did attempt, within the confines of the monarchical system, to limit autocratic prerogatives and excesses. Confucian family piety, to name one example, can be understood at least in part as flowing from a wish to counterbalance the claims of the imperial state. Another important Confucian institution was the "classics mat." Most literally put into practice in Korea, this was a mandatory series of lectures—often consisting of three two-hour talks per day—through which leading literati instructed the crown prince in key Confucian texts and themes. Even sitting kings and emperors sometimes submitted to such tutoring, which became an important traditional means of teaching rulers such central Confucian values as moderation, self-discipline, and concern for the welfare of one's subjects.

Another set of institutions designed to check the monarch's power were the Confucian-inspired "private academies" that literati set up as alternatives to state-run higher education. These academies extended Confucian instruction to places where the state's resources did not reach. More important still, they offered havens where Confucian doctrines could be more or less freely discussed, and sometimes became power

bases for alumni serving in the imperial administration. In Korea, certain Confucian academies became so influential that kings sometimes took the extraordinary step of waiving the required civil-service examination in order to recruit academy graduates directly into the royal service. During the regency of Tae Won-gun, the abolition of these private academies came to symbolize the “reforms” that sought to strengthen the power of the monarchy.

Under Confucian “community compacts,” moreover, whole groups of adjacent villages could reorganize themselves on the basis of Confucian teachings. Literati drew up these compacts, which typically reinforced their superiority over villagers. Yet the compacts diffused Confucian teachings outward and down along the sociopolitical scale. Over time, such a compact could become the basis for autonomous local rule. There were many cases of compacted communities becoming so independent that they would reject magistrates sent by the central government as unwanted interlopers in local affairs.¹³

Few or no traditional religions, considered in their “pristine” state (that is, before they come under pressure to reach some sort of accommodation with modernity), seem to offer a particularly promising purchase to liberal-democratic principles and ideals. Confucianism was actually exceptional in the degree to which, at least in theory, it took a stand against absolutism and autocracy. Yet Confucianism never had much more than gossamer-thin institutional means with which to buttress principled opposition to monarchs who had armies of soldiers and legions of officials at their beck. That slenderness of practical means, plus the ease with which state power could coopt Confucian ideals such as loyalty, meant that any Confucian-inspired attempt to check autocratic power would be an uphill battle.

The history of Confucianism is a tale of powerful central states repeatedly appropriating key Confucian tenets for state ends. Indeed, the premodern autocracies of East Asia might be looked upon as global pioneers in the art of coopting belief systems to serve a political agenda. Modern autocracies in East Asia have followed suit. But in another, admittedly more subdued light, Confucianism appears to have always borne within itself the theoretical basis for a stance of opposition to or at least suspicion of state power. It will not do to think of the Confucians as protodemocrats: They never recognized anything like the right of the common man to have a say in how he was governed. But by the same token, it might make a certain amount of sense to call the Confucians protoliberal, at least in a functional sense. For they did care—in large part, of course, because they cherished their *own* authority as men of superior wisdom—about keeping the king from thinking that he could simply do as he pleased.

What does this mean then, in terms of the relationship between Confucianism and democracy? In East Asia, democracy is plainly a

recent import from the West. Here we note the final irony in an essay that has listed several: Confucianism is not very democratic, nor democracy as such very Confucian. Yet it may be that liberal democracy has now, in some East Asian countries (soon to be joined, one hopes, by others), opened up a free space in which Confucianism can truly come into its own for the first time ever. Confucianism in the past was always bound up with political autocracies and social hierarchies that barred it from imagining a political arrangement under which the Confucian tradition of serious thought and ethical reflection could give free rein to its own potential. Liberal democracy, which tames and balances the power of the state and frees the realm of spiritual awareness from undue political entanglements, may be just what Confucianism has been looking for.

The oppositional potential of Confucianism has been proven time and again in China, Japan, and South Korea. The spontaneous rise of students and intellectuals in these post-Confucian countries whenever the opportunity arose is a clear demonstration of this potential. In South Korea, the students and intellectuals were instrumental in bringing down authoritarian regimes. The Tiananmen Square student protestors whom the Chinese communist regime suppressed so brutally in 1989 made a point of using Confucian as well as Western symbols and rhetoric to press their case for freedom, justice, and self-government in the world's largest country.

This record suggests a harmony between the currents of democratization and those of a renewed and freer Confucianism. In that sense, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan may not be the exceptions within East Asia after all, for no cultural influence in this region runs deeper or wider than Confucianism. This is not a matter of expecting "Confucianism" in some concrete institutional sense to stand up to tyrants and bring about democracy. Confucianism is just not built that way, and the tyrants in question command, as we have seen, powerful post-Confucian states that Confucian values and habits helped to build. Yet Confucianism has already done indirect work in paving the way for democracy by helping to build the region's coherent nation-states, by speeding these states down the path to economic development, and by showing a potential for stirring opposition to illiberal, undemocratic regimes. One may expect that if East Asia continues predominantly to tread the path of economic modernization—and all indications are that it will—then prospects for democratization will improve, and with them the opportunities for a truer flowering than the Confucian tradition has ever had within its reach. So after the "First Epoch" of classical Confucianism and the "Second Epoch" of neo-Confucianism, we may witness the rise of a "Third Epoch" featuring a "free at last" Confucianism whose self-renewal and self-realization will have been directly made possible by the triumph of democracy across East Asia.

NOTES

1. Also known as Kung Fu-tzu or Master Kong.
2. David Aikman, *Pacific Rim: Area of Change, Area of Opportunity* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1986); Roy Hofheinz, Jr., and Kent E. Calder, *The Eastasia Edge* (New York: Basic, 1982); Gilbert Rozman, ed., *The East Asian Region: Confucian Heritage and Its Modern Adaptation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); and Tu Wei-ming, ed., *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity: Moral Education and Economic Culture in Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).
3. Chalmers A. Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle: The Growth of Industrial Policy, 1925–1975* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); and *Japan: Who Governs? The Rise of the Developmental State* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996).
4. On the “Asian values” debate, see Francis Fukuyama, “Confucianism and Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 6 (April 1995): 20–33; the symposium on “Hong Kong, Singapore, and ‘Asian Values’” by various authors in the April 1997 issue of the same publication; and Mark R. Thompson, “Whatever Happened to ‘Asian Values’?” *Journal of Democracy* 12 (October 2001): 154–65.
5. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 238.
6. Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Perennial, 2003), 61–62.
7. See, for example, Samuel Hideo Yamashita, “Confucianism and the Japanese State: 1904–1945,” in Tu Wei-ming, ed., *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity*, 132–54.
8. For a more detailed argument on this point, see Chaibong Hahm and Wooyeal Paik, “Legalistic Confucianism and Economic Development in East Asia,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 3 (September–December 2003): 461–91.
9. Alfred C. Stepan, “Religion, Democracy, and the ‘Twin Tolerations,’” *Journal of Democracy* 11 (October 2000): 37–57.
10. Korean Protestants—Presbyterians and Baptists especially—have played an important role as change agents ever since the late nineteenth century, when many intellectuals turned to Christianity as an alternative to Confucianism. Over the last century and more, Christians have founded numerous universities, schools, and hospitals that continue to flourish across South Korea.
11. Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine, 1998), 71.
12. Hahm Chaibong, “Family Versus the Individual: The Politics of Marriage Laws in Korea,” in Daniel A. Bell and Hahm Chaibong, eds., *Confucianism for the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 334–59.
13. Chang Yun-shik, “Mutual Help and Democracy in Korea,” in Daniel A. Bell and Hahm Chaibong, eds., *Confucianism for the Modern World*, 90–123.