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### Confucianism

It has been claimed that utopia is not a universal concept – it arose only from the Hellenistic-Christian world. There are versions of the ideal or perfect society found in non-Western culture, usually of religious significance, but they cannot be called utopia.<sup>1</sup> The assumption is that a secular and literary genre of utopian writing did not exist outside Christian Europe. Perhaps this is because Europe has accumulated enough textual materials to establish an intellectual tradition of utopian writing as a literary genre.<sup>2</sup> After all, it was Thomas More who coined the word “utopia” and thus defined the terms of reference. In fact, Roland Schaer says utopia is strictly speaking a sixteenth-century European invention.<sup>3</sup> Krishnan Kumar also holds that a secular utopia does not exist in non-Western culture.<sup>4</sup>

Be that as it may, the idea of utopia suggests a vision for a better life, which implies a certain degree of dissatisfaction with the present state of things. This desire for change is deeply embedded in our human nature and is thus ubiquitous. There are, of course, differences between Eastern and Western concepts of utopia. Western utopias are identified with life in the city or *polis*, whereas Eastern utopias, especially those of the early

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1. Kumar, *Utopianism*, 33.

2. Claeys, *Searching for Utopia*, 45.

3. Zhang Longxi, “The Utopian Vision, East and West,” *Utopian Studies* 13, no. 1 (2002), 1.

4. Krishnan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 19-20.

Daoists, are closely associated with the rural and agricultural way of life. The Eastern vision of a perfect society lies not in the future but in the memory of the past – “nostalgia for a state of primitive happiness for mankind and for a Golden Age.”<sup>1</sup> Influenced by Christianity, Western utopia generally looks toward the future and the world to come. There were future-looking Chinese utopias, such as the White Lotus Society.

Thomas More’s *Utopia* maintains that through the use of reason, a different and better world is possible. Here rational self-interest is the motivating force in human behavior. Self-interest, however, cannot be relied upon to promote a harmonious society. “Inner morality” which means “doing the right thing when no one is watching” is what matters most.<sup>2</sup> What we need is not just competent and rational government, but ethical and virtuous leaders motivated by the desire to work for the common good.

In this chapter we will explore Confucian understanding of the ideal society because the Sage’s moral and political philosophy has served as the cultural foundation of a number of East and South East Asian societies for centuries till now. Mainland China applied Confucianism to its government bureaucracy for almost two thousand years until the Chinese revolution led by Mao Zedong in 1949. In spite of Marxist criticisms, Confucian philosophy continues to influence virtually every aspect of Chinese culture and the Chinese understanding of human nature. China may have abandoned Confucianism when the Communists took over this vast nation, but the success of tiger economies, such as South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, have been linked to the Master’s influence. This essay concludes that a Confucian utopia can be realized to some extent as revealed by the success story of Singapore.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Jean Chesneau, “Egalitarian and Utopian Traditions in the East,” *Diogenes* 62 (1968), 100. See Jan Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline* (Nanzan Studies in Asian Religions) (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1991).
  2. Kim Young-oak and Kim Jung-kyu, *Great Equal Society: Confucianism, China and the 21st Century* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte Ltd, 2013), 8.
  3. *National Geographic Magazine* reports that Singapore, together with Denmark and Costa Rica, are the world’s happiest places because people in these three countries “feel secure, have a sense of purpose, and enjoy lives that minimize stress and maximize joy.” The researchers in this magazine conclude that happiness is caused by six factors: “strong economic growth, healthy life expectancy, quality social relationships, generosity, trust, and freedom to live the life that’s right for you.” These factors come about through the nation’s government policies and its cultural values. This suggests that “the happiest places incubate happiness for their people.” *National Geographic*, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2017/11/worlds-happiest-places/>.

## Confucius (551-479BC)

The name “Confucius” was actually coined by European Jesuits who entered China in the late 1500s, although they did not manufacture “Confucianism.”<sup>1</sup> His real name was Kong Qiu (孔丘) and the Chinese call him Kongzi (孔子). Confucius was born in the eastern part of China in the state of Lu, which today is the city of Qufu (曲阜) in Shandong province. During the time of his birth, China was split into nine or ten rival states. The Zhou dynasty had ruled the Northern part of China for over 500 years but those peaceful days were gone during Confucius’ time. The great house of Zhou was divided into competing regional families headed by princes, each one claiming to be the legitimate Zhou successor, and to rule by “divine right” given by the spirits of their ancestors. Officials from powerful families appointed by these princes formed networks of allies and fought to expand their political influence. In such political turmoil, there was always the threat of conflict and warfare. This historical era is known as the Spring and Autumn period (722-481BC), a term which reflects the rise and fall of various warring states.<sup>2</sup>

The ruler of Lu claimed to be a descendant of the Zhou Dynasty and was thus able to maintain some kind of legitimacy. Confucius’s father held some political or military post in this regime and thus his family was accepted as coming from a minor aristocratic class. In China at that time, the people were divided into the ruling aristocracy who were educated and the common people who were illiterate and had to do manual work. The aristocrats saw themselves as preservers of traditions and as the natural governing class. As a member of the elite class, Confucius could associate easily with people of privileged families as well as government ministers. He was often consulted on public and official matters.<sup>3</sup>

In 501BC, at the age of fifty, Confucius was given a high government post, which he held for several years. For most of his life, however, he was a teacher who attempted to transmit the “Way” (his vision of life) to his disciples and students who hoped to gain political office. However, the way of *dao* (道) is a bit more expansive than Confucius’ own vision of life – he linked it with the proper human way of moral and political development, grounded in the social and political institutions of the Zhou.

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1. See Nicolas Standaert, “The Jesuits Did NOT Manufacture ‘Confucianism,’” *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine*, no. 16 (1999), 115-32.
  2. Ronald Suleski, “Confucius: The Organization of Chinese Society,” in David Jones, ed., *Confucius Now: Contemporary Encounters with the Analects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2008), 254-55.
  3. *Ibid.*, 255.

It was his role as a teacher that gained him a unique position in the history of the Chinese civilization. In fact, he was China's "first private thinker" who conveyed his vision directly to his disciples, thus avoiding official scrutiny or censorship.<sup>1</sup> Many people regarded Confucius as an embodiment of the Chinese culture and mind-set.

Confucius was respected for his profound understanding of the ancient rites and ceremonies that played a crucial role in official life. These ceremonies were centuries old and existed long before Confucius was born. Thus, strictly speaking, Confucius is not the founder of Confucianism. It was developed during the civilization of the Zhou Dynasty (1046-256BC).

In fact, "Confucianism" is not a Chinese term. Confucius was a *ru* (儒) scholar (an expert in the ancient history and culture of China), and the *ru* tradition is far older than Confucius. Association of the *ru jia* (儒家) or *ru* school with Confucius as its most important sage has a long tradition, but the reference to this school as "Confucianism," associating it with the name of Confucius, is a Western innovation.<sup>2</sup>

The key concepts that are central to Confucianism, such as *ren* (仁), *yi* (義), *li* (禮), *zhi* (智), *xin* (信), were not constructed by Confucius himself. In fact, Confucius has said, "I do not voice my own original ideas but just narrate and expound the ideas of the ancients whom I like most and have deeply believed in."<sup>3</sup>

Tu Wei-ming, a prominent Confucius scholar, argues that just as Shakyamuni, Jesus Christ, and Muhammad founded a new realm in their respective religious traditions:

Confucius also founded a new realm, but his new realm included large parts of the traditional teachings of people like Yao (堯), Shun (舜), Yu (禹), Tang (湯), Wen (文) and Wu (武). He believed he himself could not reach the moral conduct and achievement of these people. Moreover, he believed he was only a translator, an intermediary.<sup>4</sup>

Confucius' plan to restore Lu to its former glory as a ducal state failed, and he was forced to leave his home state. Confucius spent fifteen years with his disciples traveling from state to state in Eastern China, looking

1. Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 60, and ProQuest ebrary.
2. See Lionel Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1977).
3. Gu Zhengkun, "Confucian Family Values as Universal Values in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Family – Nation – World," in Klaus Mühlhahn and Nathalie van Looy, eds., *The Globalization of Confucius and Confucianism* (Zurich: Lit Verlag, 2012), 43.
4. Tu Wei-Ming, "Confucian Encounter with the Enlightenment Mentality of the Modern West," *Oriens Extremus* 49 (2010), 299.

for a ruler who would employ him and adopt his political philosophy. Eno points out that “the *Analects* pictures some key moments in these travels, which ultimately proved fruitless.”<sup>1</sup> Eventually Confucius was able to return to Lu (魯), where he lived his final years teaching young men in the literary, ritual and musical arts which he believed were central to the Zhou (周) tradition. In spite of Confucius’ failure to restore the state of Lu with his philosophy, the *Analects* can inspire those who wish to shape a better future because of its utopian spirit.

## Secular Philosophy

There exists a secular account of an ideal society in *The Analects of Confucius* (論語) and *Book of Rites* (禮記), which proposes a harmonious society where rulers are just and subjects are obedient, where the old are respected and rituals regarding the principles of order are observed. Confucian utopian view is essentially secular in that Confucius is concerned with the reality of this life rather than the life to come. Confucius was never a founder of a religion as Christ founded Christianity or as Muhammad founded Islam. Confucianists describe themselves as followers of “the way of the sages,” or “the way of the ancients.”<sup>2</sup>

In fact, Confucius is rather ambivalent about the gods as he is more interested in serving human beings than spirits. Even though the *Analects* mentions *tian* (天) or heaven, Confucius is more concerned with ethical rather than religious issues. Confucianism is a secular tradition that subordinates the concern for the afterlife to the search for a harmonious society in this present life by means of “individual and collective moral self-rectification.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, I have argued that Chinese culture is more open to other religious beliefs, except perhaps to Christianity because of its association with Western imperialism.<sup>4</sup> Confucianism is essentially a code of behavior and therefore, followers of Confucius can choose a number of different religious commitments, for example, one can be a Christian and Confucianist at the same time.

Some scholars, however, argue that Confucianism has been the source of much resistance to non-Chinese religions, such as Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity, through Chinese history. The “Neo-Confucians” often

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1. Robert Eno, *The Analects of Confucius: An Online Teaching Translation*, [http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Analects\\_of\\_Confucius\\_\(Eno-2015\).pdf](http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Analects_of_Confucius_(Eno-2015).pdf), iii.
  2. Paul H. Beattie, “The Religion of Confucius: The First Humanist,” *Religious Humanism* 22 (1988), 11.
  3. Claeys, *Searching for Utopia*, 50.
  4. See Ambrose Mong, *Guns and Gospel: Imperialism and Evangelism in China* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2016).

endorse Confucianism as a clear response and challenge to Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> The idea that Confucianism is compatible with other religions (and, thus, potentially Christianity) is largely the invention of the Jesuits, who recognized the near impossibility of uprooting Confucianism in China, and instead moved to the strategy of trying to install Christianity in a Confucian context.

In Confucianism there is no sharp division between the material and spiritual worlds. A prominent Confucius scholar, Tu Wei-ming writes:

In the future, every spiritual civilization will have to develop two worlds of meaning, you can also call it two kinds of languages, one is a special language derived from a particular civilization's religious traditions, and the other is a common language derived from the need of addressing the many contesting and problematic developments that exist today. Yet Confucianism has always had just one language.

Tu holds that Confucianism is “inner-worldly” which means it has no special language nor has it any absolute dogma.<sup>2</sup>

Confucius certainly has a more secular outlook on life; he emphasizes serving the people first, before the spirits, and understanding life first, before trying to figure out what death means (*Analects* 11:12). Preoccupied with improving the political conditions of his time by teaching people to pay more attention to moral standards, Confucius' focus is on this world, on the ills of society, which can be remedied by sound teachings.

## New Utopia

Confucius admired the ancient dynasty of Zhou especially under King Wen (文帝). Zhang Longxi (張隆溪) holds that “this nostalgia for a wonderful time in antiquity, the adoration for the benevolence of ancient sage kings, constitute in the Chinese tradition something almost parallel to the lost paradise of Eden.”<sup>3</sup> In the chaotic and corrupt world of his time, Confucius could not find any state that

1. Neo-Confucianism is “the synthesis of Taoist cosmology and Buddhist spirituality around the core of Confucian concern with society and government, a synthesis which predominated in the intellectual and spiritual life of China, Korea, and Japan prior to the modern period.” *Neo-Confucianism*, <https://faculty.washington.edu/mkalton/NeoConfucianism.htm>.
2. Tu Wei-Ming, “Confucian Encounter with the Enlightenment Mentality of the Modern West,” 253-54.
3. Longxi, “The Utopian Vision, East and West,” 8.

might resemble the Zhou state where there was peace and harmony as described in the sacred records and ancient texts such as the *Book of Document* (書經) and *Book of Poetry* (詩經). These texts describe long periods of “relative tranquillity” in China and give us a glimpse of the idyllic past.<sup>1</sup>

Inspired by these ancient classical texts, Confucius wanted to recreate the early Zhou society through its ritual known as *li* (禮), which forms the foundation of his virtue theory. Hagop Sarkissian explains: “the *li* comprised religious rites (ancestor worship) and formal ceremonies (weddings, funerals), as well as the manners and customs, the strictures and prerogatives, the protocols and functions of each social, political and familial station. The *li* would indicate, for example, appropriate dress for ceremonial occasions, as well as appropriate conduct for a father or a son.”<sup>2</sup> They are norms that allow for proper social interaction.

Confucius also understands that strict adherence to conventional rules of propriety is not enough to guarantee a virtuous life. He recognises that there is a difference between acting appropriately and acting virtuously. In fact, strict adherence to rule could be wrong and offensive (*Analects* 3:18) Thus he adds that the individual observing propriety must be sincere in his behavior (*Analects* 3:12, 3:26). It is more important to be honest than to appear to be honest (*Analects* 3:4, 7:11). Confucius is concerned with the moral development of the person, his emotional and psychological maturity.

Confucius’ determination to restore the early Zhou tradition:

seems to be based, however, not only on this shared memory [of an idyllic past] but on a blending of this memory with a conception of the good socio-politico-cultural order which he already finds envisioned in the *Book of Documents* and the *Book of Poetry*. When positive memories based on experience are fused with conceptions of an achieved normative order found in the sacred literature, one can readily understand the all-inclusive idealization to which this may lead.<sup>3</sup>

Roberto Eno holds that “the details of what Confucius saw as legitimate Zhou culture and why he thought its patterns were tools for building a new utopia are the principal subjects of the *Analects*.”<sup>4</sup>

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1. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, 45, and ProQuest ebrary.
  2. Hagop Sarkissian, “Confucius and the Effortless Life of Virtue,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (2010), 2.
  3. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, 65, and ProQuest ebrary.
  4. Eno, *The Analects of Confucius*.

It is likely that Confucius believed there had been an ideal primitive society before civilization and he was committed to re-creating that utopia. For him, restoring the culture of an ideal society is not brought about by any divine intervention but through human effort. The purpose of reviving the ancient past is for the perfection to be achieved in the future and in this sense, the “ideal past has an important presence in social life, it can, and indeed often does, serve as a measure against which the present is judged and criticized.”<sup>1</sup> Confucius’ vision of an ideal society, known as the “Grand Union,” is further outlined in the *Book of Rites*:

When the Grand course was pursued, a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky; they chose men of talents, virtue, and ability; their words were sincere, and what they cultivated was harmony. Thus, men did not love their parents only, nor treat as children only their own sons. A competent provision was secured for the aged till their death, employment for the able-bodied, and the means of growing up to the young. They showed kindness and compassion to widows, orphans, childless men, and those who were disabled by disease, so that they were all sufficiently maintained. Males had their proper work, and females had their homes. They accumulated articles of value, disliking that they should be thrown away upon the ground, but not wishing to keep them for their own gratification. They laboured with their strength, disliking that it should not be exerted, but not exerting it only with a view to their own advantage. In this way selfish scheming was repressed and found no development. Robbers, filchers, and rebellious traitors did not show themselves, and hence the outer doors remained open, and were not shut. This was the period of what we call the Grand Union.<sup>2</sup>

This vision of Confucian utopia is defined as a community where people place the common good above self-interest. In other words, it is “a society where public-mindedness prevails over selfishness.”<sup>3</sup> In this society, the government is honest and competent and the people are disposed to look after the welfare of the community. It is a society that is filled with goodwill and mutual trust. This Grand Union, Confucius believed, can be achieved by cultivating the right leadership through education.

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1. Longxi, “The Utopian Vision, East and West,” 8.
  2. The Li Ki (*The Book of Rites*) Part I, Book 7, Translated by James Legge (1885), <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cfu/liki/liki07.htm>.
  3. Kim Young-oak and Kim Jung-kyu, *Great Equal Society*, ix.

Unfortunately, when the Grand Union breaks down we see people pursuing their own self-interest at the expense of the common good. Once public trust is lost, people become suspicious of one another – not only do people lock their doors, but rulers begin to build walls and stronger defences. Further, the rich and powerful have no qualms about exploiting others to enhance their wealth. Obviously, widespread litigation is a sign that people do not trust one another in a highly materialistic society: “A society without lawsuits is a society where the spirit of cooperation prevails over narrow self-interest; this, in turn, is the very definition of the Great Equal Society.”<sup>1</sup>

## Influence of Confucius

During the many years of teaching and conferring with government officials, Confucius spelt out a number of principles that many Chinese still follow to this day. He believed that human beings are basically optimistic, willing to improve their life through hard work. In a class-conscious society, Confucius taught that one’s social status at birth and one’s innate abilities were less important than this “basic attitude of perseverance.”<sup>2</sup>

Believing that formal education was instrumental in uplifting people to higher social and personal status, Confucius insisted that it should be available to everyone without discrimination. The goal of a Confucian education was to cultivate a true gentleman or *junzi* (君子) – sometimes translated as wise and virtuous person. This concept can be applied to anyone who seeks to act with propriety and dignity. Thus, in Confucius’ opinion, if our society were filled with *junzi*, there would be order, stability and justice.

Confucius insists that young people should respect their elders. In other words, the young should have filial piety or *xiao* in order to receive guidance from their elders who are more experienced in life. As the result of Confucius’ influence, folks in the East tend to show great deference to their elders. These basic principles developed by Confucius have become the core values that guide many people in East and South East Asian societies. Values such as the importance of proper behavior, the respect for education, persistence in the face of hardship, diligence and self-improvement, have withstood the test of time. These values are explicated in *The Analects*.

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1. Ibid., 6.

2. Suleski, “Confucius: The Organization of Chinese Society,” 256.

## Universal Values

*The Analects* of Confucius reflects not only Chinese values from a particular era, but is also universal, an embodiment of sentiments that are relevant to everyone. It has retained its validity for more than two thousand years. In fact, economically advanced societies in Asia, such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and even China recently, have been influenced by Confucian philosophy. Beyond the economic benefits, the utopian spirit in Confucian teaching spurs us to establish a harmonious society by improving our relationship with one another. Confucius is not as dogmatic and authoritarian as often depicted. As we have seen, he is neither stubborn nor ego-centric (*Analects* 9:4); he is not concerned with personal advantage (*Analects* 4:16); and he dislikes competition (*Analects* 3:7).

Confucius' concern for the equitable distribution of wealth parallels Thomas More's concern for social justice in *Utopia*. Advising rulers to develop virtues and culture, Confucius says:

As for me, I have heard that the ruler of a state or the head of a household: Does not worry that his people are poor, but that wealth is inequitably distributed; does not worry that his people are too few in numbers, but that they are disharmonious. Does not worry that his people are unstable, but that they are insecure. For if wealth is equitably distributed, there is no poverty; if the people are harmonious, they are not few in number; if the people are secure, they are not unstable (*Analects* 16:1).

In Confucius' thought, the leader or ruler plays a crucial role in shaping the community.

## Leadership

Only wise and virtuous leaders can govern a civilized society. Leaders need to be educated. Due to the scarcity of resources and personal limitations, most peasants do not have the opportunity to acquire learning that would qualify them for leadership positions. At the same time, not all men of learning are fit to govern. There are also some who inherit positions of power but have no love for learning. Confucius was convinced that only those who possess true knowledge can participate in government.<sup>1</sup> Confucius distinguishes two levels of knowledge: recognizing or memorizing and reflection. The virtuous person should

1. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, 96, and ProQuest ebrary.

have reflective knowledge before acting. The Master said, “There may be those who act without knowing why. I did not do so. Hearing much and selecting what is good and following it; seeing much and keeping it in memory – this is the second style of knowledge [or a lower level of knowledge].” (*Analects* 7: 28) Like Thomas More, Confucius believed in cultivating intellectually gifted and morally advanced persons from all classes of society to be leaders.

The *Analects* describes two types of leadership: the first is that which seeks to make people obey by law and regulations; the second is that which seeks to develop their moral virtues. The Master said:

Lead the people with administrative injunctions (*zheng*) (政) and keep them orderly with penal law (*xing*) (行), and they will avoid punishments but will be without a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence (*de*) (德) and keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety (*li*) (禮), and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves (*Analects* 2:3).

Needless to say, Confucius prefers the ruling of society through virtue and ritual propriety. This method allows the members of the community to develop a sense of shame when they transgress the social contract. When they develop a sense of shame, they will strive to be virtuous:

The principle of righteousness (*yili*) (義理) is universally innate within the human mind. Therefore, the recognition of goodness and the rejection of evil is the same in every Human heart. To teach people through virtue and courtesy is to show them what they themselves already have equally, so that they can reject evil and find their own path to goodness, and thus the ruler does not have to enforce the people’s obedience. If one rules only through laws and prohibitions, and forcefully coerces the people, they cannot but be obliged to follow, knowing it is ordered by the high officials; but since they are not aware of the principle innate in their own mind in the first place, they will never realize the hatefulness of evil – how, then, shall they ever make their way to goodness!<sup>1</sup>

Thus, when a society is led by virtue, people will be motivated to be good and will feel ashamed when they do something bad. A virtuous leader will encourage his followers to be good. The Master said:

1. Quoted in Choi Young-jin and Lee Haeng-hoon, “The Confucian Vision of an Ideal Society Arising out of Moral Emotions, with a Focus on the Sishu Daquan,” *Philosophy East and West* 66, no. 2 (2016), 397.

“Governing with excellence (*de*) can be compared to being the North Star: the North Star dwells in its place, and the multitude of stars pay it tributes” (*Analects* 2:1). In fact, Mencius (372-289BC or 385-c.303BC, a Chinese philosopher often described as second only to Confucius) holds that the sense of shame is the foundation of moral behavior. Shame is a motivation for us to be moral.<sup>1</sup>

Confucian understanding of an ideal society is essentially a moral community where the selfish desires of the individual are held in check by his innate moral instinct and thus he is enabled to work towards the common good. Although economic and military powers are needed to sustain a society, Confucius holds that the most important condition to establish a peaceful and harmonious society is trust (*xin*). In sum, the requirements to maintain a moral society are good leadership with the ability to distribute resources equitably and to control the selfish ambition of its population.<sup>2</sup>

The Confucian ideal world is also “a life community in which all the things living under heaven actualize their nature to the fullest degree possible, so as to form a great, harmonious whole with the Universe.”<sup>3</sup> Its ruler plays an important role by living a virtuous life and thus inspiring the people to be virtuous as well.

### Criticizing Confucius

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was swept into power in 1949 and established the People’s Republic of China (PRC). It seems that Confucian philosophy could be adapted to support Marxism because Confucius demands obedience from citizens towards their government. The early Communist leaders were not overtly anti-Confucianism as they saw the Master as a great teacher and philosopher who had something positive to offer to Chinese socialism. Marxist thinkers, however, regard Confucianism as a product of feudal society based on class exploitation. With its distinct hierarchical relationships, sharp distinction between the aristocracy and the common people, Marxists regarded Confucianism as backward and harmful to China’s future development as a socialist state.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, there was a political campaign (1973 – 1976) started by Mao and led by the Gang of Four to criticise Confucius and Lin Biao (1907-71), a general of the People’s Liberation Army who posed a threat to Mao

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1. Ibid., 398.

2. Ibid., 399.

3. Ibid., 407.

4. Suleski, “Confucius: The Organization of Chinese Society,” 268.

Zedong's supremacy. The campaign accused Confucius of accepting and endorsing oppressive class division during his time. In the same way, Lin Biao was portrayed as a leader, who like Confucius, seemed to work for the interest of the State but in actual fact was only working for his own advantage.<sup>1</sup>

The campaign pointed out that Confucius was a product of the aristocratic class in China who ignore the plight of the poor. Confucius' emphasis on hierarchical relationships as natural means that class division is normative. The class of *junzi* would rule over the people because of their education. Class struggle thus exists between the *junzi* (gentleman) (君子) and *xiao ren* (common person) (小人). Confucius' teaching of *ren* (仁) was considered self-serving and idealistic. Furthermore, Confucius' emphasis of *li* (禮), proper conduct, was a means to separate the privileged class, bourgeoisie, from the masses, proletariats, who toiled for a living. Although Confucius encouraged education, he never took any initiative to extend it to the common people.<sup>2</sup>

Marxist scholars regarded Confucius as a “political swindler” and “a feudal reactionary thinker” who invented the idea of a benevolent government to keep the masses under control.<sup>3</sup> Compared to Confucianism, Communism was presented as a superior form of government that works towards the common good. The campaign to discredit Confucius only reveals how widespread Confucianism was in China. Mao's followers knew that the virtues taught by Confucius were recognizable symbols that would evoke strong emotions among the people. Even after several decades of attempting to abolish Confucianism in Communist China, Confucius' ideas still persist in the collective consciousness of the Chinese. At the official level, there is a revival of Confucianism in the nation. President Hu Jintao has developed the idea of a “Harmonious Socialist Society,” drawing on Confucian ideas. The Chinese government has established a number of Confucius Institutes around the world.

## Promoting Confucius

While Communist China sought to abandon Confucianism as feudal and reactionary, between the 1970s and the 1990s Asian economies, such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, experienced an economic boom. Confucian philosophy forms the bedrock of these

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1. Ibid., 269.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

societies. In fact, many Asian leaders believed that the growth and prosperity enjoyed in their burgeoning economies were made possible by sound Confucian values that formed the basis of Asian culture. Influenced by Confucius' teaching on the importance of family as a basic unit of society, Asians tend to see themselves not as individuals but as members of a community. This helps to promote social cohesion and discourage individualism. Compared to Europeans and Americans, Asians in general tend to work harder to provide for their families and strive to live up to the expectations of their elders. Seeing themselves as members of a wider society, Asians are willing to work for lower salaries, and to avoid strikes for the sake of stability and harmony.<sup>1</sup>

Confucianism, of course, is not one coherent thing straddling different cultures in East Asia throughout millennia. I am suggesting that the Confucian values mentioned earlier were operative, maybe, in some cases central, in the economic success of certain East Asian nations.

The economic success of Confucian societies in countries such as those mentioned above prompts Kim Young-oak and Kim Jung-kyu to write: "We believe both the Asian model and Asian values theories contain elements of truth. . . . But we would like to offer a simpler explanation for the Asian miracle: the quality of leadership, which is another way of saying that it is all about people."<sup>2</sup> Regarding the importance of leadership in Asian countries, these two authors have in mind Lee Kuan Yew who was prime minister of Singapore from 1959 to 1990.

Lee Kuan Yew (1923-2015) was one of the leading advocates of Confucianism. For years Lee worked hard to promote Confucian values in Singapore, a multiracial society with a Chinese majority. He was convinced that Singapore's rapid economic growth was due to its inculcation of Asian values, such as diligence, hard work, and the spirit of self-sacrifice. In the 1980s, Singapore established the East Asian Institute to do research on Confucian ethics and its link to modern society.

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1. "Longer hours, worse jobs: are Asians turning into working machines," <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2022099/longer-hours-worse-jobs-are-asians-turning-working-machines>.
  2. KimYoung-oak and Kim Jung-kyu, *Great Equal Society*, 38. The late Lee Kuan Yew, the *National Geographic Magazine* reports, was responsible for developing this place where happiness and satisfaction flourished. Under Lee's government, all the people in Singapore, including lowly paid workers, were ensured decent housing and healthcare. Singaporeans possess "life satisfactions" which experts regard as the third strand of happiness – this includes being financially secure, having a high degree of status and feeling a sense of belonging. *National Geographic*, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2017/11/worlds-happiest-places/>.

Believing that the secret of success in the country lies in the leader's abilities to channel the economic, social and political energies of the people, Lee formed a strong and paternalistic government. He created a team of technocrats to control and guide the economy towards prosperity for all. As a leader, he did not suffer fools patiently and had little tolerance for dissent. Following the Confucian tradition, Lee believed he knew what was best for the country and he worked hard to achieve those goals that he thought would make people happy and satisfied. According to Confucius, citizens must obey their rulers, who will guide them towards their best interests. In governing, Lee tolerated no opposition, just as a father would not welcome any criticism from his children. A paternalistic ruler, the city-state was like his extended family.

Needless to say, this kind of autocratic and benevolent government is anathema to Western liberal thinking. Critics may regard Singapore as "Disneyland with the Death Penalty."<sup>1</sup> Many people thought that Lee was using Confucian traditions in Singapore to consolidate his power but Chan Heng Chee (Singapore's Ambassador to the US between 1996 and 2012) has remarked that he was "a leader who understood the constraints of a cultural system. He used the positive aspects of it. He also tried to correct aspects of the system too."<sup>2</sup> One may or may not agree with Lee's governing philosophy, but the success of Singapore is obvious.

## Singapore's Success

Under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's government has been wildly successful in many areas, for example, maintaining almost full employment, providing affordable public housing, healthcare, transport, and first-class education for all. The city-state is ranked one of the leading financial centres after London and New York and is considered the most competitive economy in the world. These spectacular achievements drew praise from no less than the late paramount leader of China, Deng Xiaoping, who remarked, "There is good social order in Singapore. . . . We should draw from their experience, and do even better than them."<sup>3</sup>

1. "Disneyland with the Death Penalty" is an article about Singapore written by William Gibson, first published as the cover story for *Wired* magazine's September/October 1993 issue.
2. Tu Wei-ming, ed., *The Triadic Chord: Confucian Ethics, Industrial East Asia and Max Weber* (Singapore: The Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1991), 408.
3. "Go East, Young Bureaucrat," *The Economist*, 19 March 2011, 10. "One of the first things that Xi Jinping did after being anointed in 2010 as China's next leader was to drop in (again) on Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's minister-mentor, who ran the island from 1959 to 1990, and his son, Lee Hsien Loong, who has been

A former British colony, originally populated by poor immigrants from Southern China, India, and the neighbouring countries, Singapore's success is all the more spectacular because this little island, a mere dot on the map, has practically no natural resources.

Modern Singapore enjoys a low tax rate and a balanced budget. The country has a very successful public housing programme and manages its limited water resources efficiently. Its highly competitive education system caters for students of various abilities, including offering vocational training for those less gifted academically. It has a superb and affordable healthcare system and its infant mortality is one of the lowest in the world.

The success of Singapore is mainly due to its ability to attract top talent to its civil service and to the ruling party (the People's Action Party). Besides being highly educated and competent, those recruited to the government must also be people of high integrity. Lee said, "You need people who are inoculated against corruption. . . . Once we are corrupt, we are finished."<sup>1</sup> Some of the candidates the Singapore government has recruited have excellent track records in the private sector and have made sacrifices to join the civil service or to enter politics. The high caliber of Singapore's leaders has given people great confidence in the government, to the extent of being too dependent on official initiatives.

Success, of course, comes with a price. It is a "fine" city: there are fines imposed for offences such as littering, spitting and not flushing public toilets after use. There is growing income inequality and limited freedom of expression. Be that as it may, the success of Singapore is enviable. Certainly Confucius' philosophy has a role to play in promoting the kind of political climate that produces leaders who are competent and free from corruption. It is a philosophy that emphasizes the importance of family in nation-building which Lee sought to implement.

## Family-Nation

Confucius showed how the ancient values from the rites (*The Rites of Zhou*) would build the sort of character that is required by a family-oriented society. Confucius' view of good government is described as "family-like" in that it embodies the values of clans and tribes. Nurtured by *ren* or love,

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prime minister since 2004. The Chinese are looking at other places, too – most obviously Hong Kong, another small-government haven. But it is hard to think of any rich-country leader whom China treats with as much respect as the older Mr Lee." Ibid.

1. Lee Kuan Yew and Han Fook Kwang, *et al.*, *Lee Kuan Yew: Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2011), 124.

members of the society would see themselves as belonging to one big family guided by ethics and rites. In times of crisis, members who adopted these family-oriented attitudes display a high degree of unity.<sup>1</sup>

In Singapore, families have been urged by the government to seek to preserve cultural values and to inculcate in their children the virtues of a “rugged society,” such as resilience, diligence, the spirit of sacrifice, and the quest for excellence. Taking on the intermediary role between the individual and the state, the family is seen as serving as an important tool for achieving economic and social progress in the nation. In this way, the family has become an active agent of economic and social planning.<sup>2</sup>

In Confucius’ tradition, the government was not chosen by regular elections, but by recruiting people possessing the highest level of virtues. To qualify for positions in the civil service, potential candidates had to sit the rigorous imperial examinations to test both their intellectual and moral qualities, and so this Chinese-style technocracy is “a government ruled mainly by virtues.”<sup>3</sup> Thus in Ancient China, the family-like government had an emperor who acted like the head of a household. He had thousands of officials, drawn from the common people, who had passed the imperial examinations. This examination system ensured that only highly intelligent and morally upright persons would be chosen for the civil service. The civil service examination system had its origin during the Sui dynasty (581 – 618 BC) and was fully established during the Qing Dynasty. It played an important role in education, government and society throughout the Qing period. The examination system during this period was based on the Confucian classics and authorized commentaries on the classics.

Although Singapore holds regular elections, the system Lee created reflects the Confucian model in many ways. In an interview with Fareed Zakaria, Lee said, “Again, we were fortunate we had this cultural backdrop [Confucianism], the belief in thrift, hard work, filial piety, and loyalty in the extended family, and, most of all, the respect for scholarship and learning.”<sup>4</sup> Lee also suggested that cultures that do not possess Confucian values would not be able to compete successfully:

1. Gu Zhengkun, “Confucian Family Values as Universal Values in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Family – Nation – World,” in Mühlhahn and van Looy, eds., *The Globalization of Confucius and Confucianism*, 57.
2. Trevor O. Ling, “The Weberian Thesis and Interpretive Positions on Modernisation,” in Tu Wei-ming, ed., *The Triadic Chord: Confucian Ethics, Industrial East Asia and Max Weber*, 75.
3. Ibid.
4. Fareed Zakaria and Lee Kuan Yew, “Culture Is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew,” *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 2 (1994), 114.

Getting the fundamentals right would help, but these societies will not succeed in the same way as East Asia did because certain driving forces will be absent. If you have a culture that doesn't place much value in learning and scholarship and hard work and thrift and deferment of present enjoyment for future gain, the going will be much slower.<sup>1</sup>

Some scholars have put forward the “post-Confucius thesis,” which holds that the set of values with which people grow up, conventionally labelled Confucian, provides them with the right mentality and work ethic believed to be conducive to economic development.”<sup>2</sup> While Western individualism worked well during the early years of industrialisation in Europe and the United States, “post-Confucian collectivism” may be more appropriate to the age of mass-production.<sup>3</sup> Protestant work ethic is said to have contributed to the success of Western capitalism in the past. I believe Confucian work ethic has the same effect on Asian economies in the twentieth century. Confucian ethic pushes the individual to work hard for the welfare of his family and the society in which the person belongs.

Further, Western-style democracy does not seem to be working very well in many parts of the world, especially in Third World countries. Perhaps this family-oriented kind of government with its strict examination system to recruit civil servants may be more suited to developing countries. Humane and rational, this system is based on the collective effort of millions of people who desire a peaceful place to work and raise their families.

Confucian values, a heritage of East Asia, can help to unify the world because they help us to see the world as one family. Globalization has sharpened our awareness that we are interconnected. The Confucian spirit certainly merits our consideration. We may not agree with Lee Kuan Yew's draconian style of government. Nevertheless, the nation-state he created shows that the wisdom of Confucius is still relevant and can help to make this world a better place to live. The spectacular success of Singapore reveals that a Confucian utopia is not a far-fetched idea.

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1. Ibid., 116-17.

2. Ambrose Y.C. King, “The Transformation of Confucianism in the Post-Confucian Era: The Emergence of Rationalistic Traditionalism in Hong Kong,” in Tu Wei-ming, ed., *The Triadic Chord: Confucian Ethics, Industrial East Asia and Max Weber*, 204. Chinese intellectuals, during the 1915-21 New Culture Movement (or May Fourth Movement), however, asserted that China's backwardness was largely due to the feudal Confucian family value system. Ibid., 205.

3. Hwan Kwang-kuo, “Dao and the Transformative Power of Confucianism: A Theory of East Asian Modernization,” in Tu Wei-ming, ed., *The Triadic Chord: Confucian Ethics, Industrial East Asia and Max Weber*, 232.