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Examining the influence of Confucianism on the socioeconomic development of the Confucian Culture Area

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Introduction

Unlike what are termed ‘world religions’, Confucianism cannot be characterised with the same precision in terms of its doctrines and practices, or the countries and regions in which it is predominant. While we can refer to ‘Christian-majority’ or ‘Muslim-majority’ countries, we cannot do the same for ‘Confucian-majority’ countries. This obviously means that generalising or suggesting the influence of Confucian ideas on socioeconomic development of countries or regions is rather more tenuous in comparison with other religions. Despite this difficulty, there is, nevertheless, a broad strand of opinion that accepts the existence of such an influence with respect to China and other East Asian countries, which notwithstanding their differences, is given the epithet of the Confucian Culture Area. We shall refer to several authors who take this stance as well as examining the core ideas of Max Weber in regard to Confucianism and development. In this paper, we aim to explore whether there are attributes of Confucianism that are conducive to economic growth and development and others that are an impediment. This is an important topic for discussion in that the East Asian economies that comprise the Confucian Culture Area are generally considered successful in regard to economic and social development in the post-colonial era. A well-known World Bank report published as far back 1993, in the aftermath of a widespread recession, termed this success as the ‘East Asian miracle’ (World Bank, 1993). This paper attempts to tease out the role of Confucianism in this supposed economic ‘miracle’.

Key Confucian precepts

Confucianism stems from the philosophy of Kung Fu Tzu (Master Kung, Latinised as Confucius [551-479 BCE]) and his followers. Its roots predate Confucius and reside in the teachings of the ancient scholar class (*ju*) who performed rituals of the official cult of nature worship and ancestor reverence. Richard Wilhelm (1972, p. 96) points out that Confucius himself wrote nothing: his aim was to be an interpreter of the scholar class and ancient traditions rather than an innovator. The central feature of Confucian philosophy is that of social and political stability which require perfecting social and individual life. In contrast to religions generally, adherence to Confucianism does not entail a physical burden as regular prayers, fasting or pilgrimages are not required. The family is a vital institution for achieving social harmony as all virtue starts with the family, which is fundamental to the good life and beginning of good government (Gill, 1997, pp. 98, 101).

If there is one characteristic which informs the entire history of the development of Chinese religion, it is a 'consciousness of concern' and that high heaven itself has concern for the well-being of the people. This makes Chinese religion profoundly different from Judaism, Christianity or Islam where a sense of awe or dread of supreme power informs religious consciousness (Berthrong, 2005, p. 395). Though other religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam also make the claim of 'concern for the well-being of the people, it can be argued that, in comparison, Confucianism is rather more focused on the material world than the spiritual. Confucianism does not dwell upon or recognise the existence of a deity, and nor does it have a church, priesthood, or a holy book for which fundamental reasons it is often not considered a religion. But in that it has elements of rituals, worship, and sacrifice, it

possesses characteristics of a religion, indeed there is merit in Tu Wei-ming's (1989, p. 67) description of it as a 'civil religion'.

Confucius believed in Heaven, the transcendental power that protected him and gave him virtue: 'Heaven is the author of the virtue that is me' (cited in Berthrong, *op. cit.*, p. 397). He also recognised transcendent spiritual values, and emphasised the importance of being reverent and respectful in making sacrifice to spiritual beliefs. However, his attitudes towards spirit and life after death were humanistic: one could not possibly serve spirits without first serving humans, and one could not possibly understand death without first understanding life (*ibid.*). Perhaps the first and central concept of Confucius' teaching was the importance of manners or good behaviour (*li*) which encompasses the ceremonial, or ritual, aspect of good behaviour in its broader sense, including funerals, sacrifices, music, and daily life. In these rituals Confucius saw the value of moral growth and spiritual development (Gill, *op. cit.*, p. 102). Though Confucianism does not have a prophet in the sense of a messenger of God, the enormous influence of the ideas of Confucius are akin to those of a prophet. Moreover, according to Gill, from the 7th century CE, a Confucian temple was common in all major cities in China and public observance of Confucianism was compulsory (Gill, 1997).

Confucianism offers guidance and assurance for people in an uncertain world by combining material and spiritual elements in order to bring a degree of certainty and stability. It advocates that all people should act in a humane and considerate manner to bring about a unified and integrated society. The family is the bedrock of society, and respect for parents and elders is of paramount importance. What is desired is the *Ren* – the noblest form of behaviour and this applies particularly to the upper echelons of society so that a political leader should always act with care and sensitivity to ordinary members of society. In turn, the

people should support their leader and demonstrate an understanding of his or her position (Oliver, 2007, pp. 25-26).

Tu Wei-ming makes the interesting point that the Confucian theory of the Mandate of Heaven, based on the ethic of responsibility of the elite, is more congenial to democratic polity than the divine right of kings. The Confucian ideas of benevolent government, the duty-consciousness of the elite, and the right of the people to revolution are all consistent with democratic demands for civility, impartiality, and public accountability. If the Mandate is rescinded, a ruler can be justly overthrown. Moreover, the Confucians are noted for their commitment to cultivating the value of reasonableness in ordinary daily human interaction, given their belief that true social harmony is attainable only through communication and negotiation (Tu, 1996, p. 35).

In *The Analects*, Book 13 (on ‘chiefly concerning government’) verse 3, Confucius proffers this guidance:

A wise man, in regard to what he does not understand, maintains an attitude of reserve. If terms be incorrect, then statements do not accord with the facts; and when statements and facts do not accord, then business is not properly executed; when business is not properly executed, order and harmony do not flourish; when order and harmony do not flourish then justice becomes arbitrary, the people do not know how to move hand or foot (Confucius, 2010, p. 74)

Confucius placed high priority on people having faith in their ruler as is made strikingly clear in *Analects* 12.7:

When Tzu Kung asked what were the essentials of government, the Master replied: ‘Sufficient food, sufficient forces, and the confidence of the people’.

‘Suppose’, rejoined Tzu Kung, ‘I were compelled to dispense with one, which of these three would I forgo first?’

Forgo the forces was the reply.

‘Suppose’, said Tzu Kung, ‘I were compelled to eliminate another, which of the other two should I forgo?’

‘The food’, was the reply; ‘for from of old death has been the lot of all men, but a people without faith cannot stand’.

Relegating food to confidence in the ruler seems most odd, at least for the modern, democratic, mind, but this is consistent with Confucian thinking about the supreme importance of a stable society; the achievement of which is the primary task of the ruler serving under the mandate of heaven. Hence, a core ideal that distinguishes Confucianism from others in China is that of *ching-shih* or ‘setting the world in order’. This assumes that only a minority (the Confucian noblemen – who are akin to Plato’s philosopher-kings) with the requisite moral qualities can govern, and whose responsibility it is to set the world in order from a position of leadership with the imperative of public service to society. At the root of *ching-shih* is the inner-worldly orientation of Confucianism – in contrast to the other-worldly focus of other competing traditions, notably Buddhism and Taoism. Such an orientation gives emphasis to the ethics of virtue, intellectualism, ritualism, meditative practices and especially asceticism. The explicitly political aspect of noblemen is distinct from the ‘calling’ in Protestantism and the Hindu *karma yoga* (Hao, 1996. pp. 72-75).

In Tseng’s comments on *The Great Digest [Learning]*, Confucius stresses the centrality of virtue: ‘the *virtu* is the root; the wealth is a by-product’ (X, 7, p. 73). Virtue enables the ruler to ‘have the people with him; having the people, he will have the territory; having the land, the product will be under his control, and controlling this wealth he will have

the means to act and make use of it. Rake in wealth and you scatter the people. Divide the wealth and the people will gather to you' (X, 6, 9). So, though hierarchical, Confucianism has elements of egalitarianism in its core doctrines and, moreover, it is assumed that a fair distribution of a society's riches will materialise in a stable society. This might be so, but does not detract from the timeless problem of overcoming the Malthusian difficulty of raising output exponentially when confronted with a rising population.

Confucian ideas and values penetrated not only China but also peripheral countries including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore so much so that the pre-modern (that is, prior to colonial intrusion), East Asia could be characterised as the 'Confucian age' and these countries, in combination, are deemed to comprise the Confucian Culture Area (CCA). Even if people do not regard 'being Confucian' as a primary mark of their identity in the manner of other religions, nevertheless attributes of Confucianism are thought to have seeped into society and the people in which it was once dominant.

Confucian ethics affect not only the countries of the Confucian Culture Area but also the diaspora. This stems from the ability of the East Asian entrepreneurs to utilise human capital – be it family loyalty, disciplined workforce, or supportive staff – a product of the Confucian way of life. Tu considers that East Asian societies are "fiduciary communities" implying that the long term well-being of the people is a fundamental goal; moreover, the public good is not in conflict with private interests (*ibid.*, p. 76). The Confucian compact thus purportedly guarantees increased wealth of both the state and its citizens. It is this Confucian dynamic, Tu argues, that provides a core explanation for the phenomenon of the modern developmental state; one that is underpinned by the positive interaction between leaders and the population.

Even if this seems persuasive, one is left with the difficulty of establishing exactly how Confucian values affect the economic variables: its ‘soft’, ‘fuzzy’ nature militates against demonstrating causality, despite the intuition that a positive association exists. But how close is the ‘Confucian bond’ between leaders and the people? Or, to put it more directly, how truly concerned are the leaders, supposedly immersed in Confucian precepts, for the well-being of the people? Given that the East Asian developmental states, after five decades of impressive growth and attendant modernisation, still do not have universal welfare – unlike West European countries – we can aver that such concerns have indeed not been of paramount importance; and will only demonstrably be the case when they have been into transformed into welfare states.

Tu Wei-ming (1996, p. 38) points out that the view that Confucianism is incompatible with science and democracy, the two defining characteristics of the modern West, renders it inconsequential or irrelevant to China's modernisation. This has been the consensus of the Chinese intelligentsia, representing a variety of ethical-political persuasions (such as pragmatism, liberalism, anarchism, socialism and constitutional monarchism) since the May 4th Movement in 1919¹. Such reasoning has been challenged over the past three decades and though by no means a new consensus, there is the belief that this 20th century thinking was too harsh and that aspects of Confucianism are conducive to development and modernity (this is discussed further, with relevant sources, in the section ‘Confucianism, Asian values and modernity’ below).

Weber and Confucianism

¹ This refers to the student-led nationalist movement of May 4th 1919 that rose up against the Versailles Treaty which would have ceded territories to Japan. C.P Fitzgerald (1964, p. 55) argues that ‘[i]t was an event of much significance ... the first recovery of sovereign rights from a western power’.

In *The Religion of China*, Max Weber (Weber, 1964 [1951]) analyses Confucianism and Taoism with the aim of explaining why the ideas subsumed in them did not generate a 'spirit of capitalism'. Up to the sixteenth century China was arguably ahead of Europe during which period Confucian ideas were ubiquitous and influential yet China slipped behind markedly in the next four centuries as capitalism took hold in Europe.

In China, popular religion was pluralist and deprived of official status. The commendable Confucian emphasis on peace, order, and tranquillity however had the crippling effect on the ability of religion to challenge the unified power of the state. Accordingly, there was neither a priesthood nor an independent religious force strong enough to introduce radical innovations into the socioeconomic order as required by capitalistic development (Yang, 1964, p. xii). Rather than a priesthood it was the bureaucracy that held power. It was certainly meritocratic whereby membership was not derived from birthright or divine grace: recruitment was made by examinations and this did engender a rational approach unlike other religions. Yet the rational effectiveness of the bureaucracy was reduced by the Confucian rejection of specialisation as an appropriate quality of the educated gentleman. Moreover, the Confucian gentleman, though dignified, distrusted others as generally as he believed others distrusted him. Such distrust handicapped all credit and business operations and contrasted with the Puritan's trust (Weber, 1964 [1951], p. 244).

Weber considered members of the bureaucracy as generalists – specialised tasks were the preserve of the clerical staff. 'For the Confucian, the specialist expert could not be raised to truly positive dignity, no matter what his social usefulness ... This core of Confucian ethics rejected professional specialization, modern expert bureaucracy, and special training; above all, it rejected training in economics for the pursuit of profit' (*ibid.*, p. 246). Given the vast

territory of the empire and limited transportation and communication, the ability of the central administrative apparatus to guide local authorities was inevitably curtailed. Hence there was a weak socio-political and legal order at the local level which acted against the taking of risk and the establishment of market-oriented enterprises (*ibid.*, p. xiii).

It is in the concluding chapter that Weber makes insightful observations and remarks when he compares Confucianism and Puritanism. Whereas under Taoism in which all scientific knowledge was lacking, a rational economy was deemed to be out of the question, Confucianism did possess a rational ethic which reduced tension with the world to an absolute minimum (Weber, 1964, pp. 225, 227). Prefiguring Leibniz and Dr. Pangloss, the world is the best of all possible worlds. But what was a major obstacle to impersonal rationalisation and an economic mentality was that individuals were tied to their sib [wider family] members and not to functional tasks – hence this was an impediment to rationalising the religious ethic. Importantly, this was done by the ruling strata in order to maintain their position. ‘It is of considerable economic consequence whether or not confidence, which is basic to business, rests upon purely personal, familial, or semi-familial relationships as was largely the case in China’ (*ibid.* p. 237).

This is in marked contrast with the ascetic sects of Protestantism which established a community of faith in opposition to a community of blood, that is, the family; which had economic benefits as business confidence was based on ethical qualities of the individual based on his work – in China, such an ethic did not develop as personal, familial, or semi-familial bonds dominated (*Ibid.*, p. 236). Accordingly, there was no capital formation and the formation of capitalist enterprises in the manner of the late medieval period in Europe. Rather, Chinese capital was predominantly the capital of mandarins that was accumulated

through extortionist practices in office. ‘There was no rational method of organized enterprise in the European fashion, no truly rational organization of commercial news services, no rational money system – the development of the money economy did not even equal that of Ptolemean Egypt ... there was no genuine, technically valuable system of commercial correspondence, accounting, or bookkeeping’ (*ibid.*, pp. 242-243).

In a clear comparison with Puritanism, Weber provides the following cogent summary as to why capitalism – and indeed modernisation in all its manifestations – did not develop in Confucian China:

Confucian rationalism meant rational adjustment to the world; Puritan rationalism meant rational mastery of the world. Both the Puritan and Confucian were “sober men”. But the rational sobriety of the Puritan was founded in a mighty enthusiasm which the Confucian lacked completely; it was the same enthusiasm which inspired the monk of the Occident. The rejection of the world by occidental asceticism was insolubly linked to its opposite, namely, its eagerness to dominate the world... Nothing conflicted more with the Confucian ideal of gentility than the idea of a “vocation”. The “princely man” was an aesthetic value; he was not a tool of a god. But the true Christian, the other-worldly and inner-worldly asceticist, wished to be nothing more than a tool of his God; in this he sought his dignity (Weber, 1964 [1951], p. 248).

Weber’s work on China has been subjected to criticism. One such is that of Andreas Buss who argues that Weber’s thesis belongs to a ‘bye-gone era’; that it was of a ‘sketchy character’ hampered by his inability to read the sources in their original language (Buss, 1985, Introduction). While acknowledging these shortcomings, the present author nevertheless considers Weber’s work as providing illuminating insights that aid the understanding of China’s religion and its links with socioeconomic development.

In regard to the creation of wealth, Confucius provides guidance in various remarks, most notably in the following three analects:

4.5 ‘Wealth and rank are what men desire, but unless they be obtained in the right way they may not be possessed’;

4.12 ‘He who works for his own interests will arouse much animosity’;

7.16 The Master said: ‘With coarse food to eat, water for drink, and a bent arm for a pillow – even in such a state I could be happy, for wealth and honour obtained unworthily are to me as a fleeting cloud’.

Confucius points to the tension in his philosophy regarding wealth creation. Whilst recognising that acquisition of wealth is permissible, it can only be done in accordance with Confucian principles, otherwise it cannot be possessed or enjoyed. And self-interest is thought harmful – quite contrary to Adam Smith’s invisible hand. Such a strong injunction against the making of personal gain – or profit – suggests that Confucianism is not conducive to profit-making writ large which is the central dynamic of capitalism. But public virtue and righteousness, so important to the Confucian order, may be compatible with the making of personal profit provided such profits are utilised for the public good – which can simply mean the production of goods and services that are offered to the public at a reasonable price, at a profit. Hence, on a softer reading of these analects, commercial activity is legitimate providing that it is conducted in a transparent manner without cheating, dishonesty, and other underhand tactics – the sort of malfeasances that have long been outlawed in advanced market economies. In reality, without the incentive of personal profit, an entrepreneurial-minded individual may not embark on productive activities that entail risk-taking; hence the

drive to invent and innovate is curtailed, which is what took place in China notwithstanding important advances that were made.

What would, however, be unrighteous and a danger to the Confucian order would be the rise of those making considerable profits through commercial activities, such as merchants and traders, so that they present a political challenge to the ruler and the bureaucratic caste. Such a vista did not materialise at any point in China's history, but there were strong disincentives for it being realised. In other words, a nascent capitalist class did not arise and, as argued by Weber, could not have done so under an inhospitable political and social terrain.

Tu Wei-Ming argues that 'even if Weber was correct in assuming that Confucianism had impeded the development of modern industrial capitalism in traditional East Asia, the thesis that the Confucian ethic is incompatible with the spirit of capitalism is untenable. On the contrary, it has been shown that the Confucian ethic is not only compatible with the capitalist spirit but may actually have helped industrial East Asia to develop a different form of modern industrial capitalism' (Tu, 1996, p. 29). Nevertheless, Chen Wing-tsit makes the interesting observation that given that the whole Confucian tradition is strongly imbued with the spirit of scepticism, this should be a stimulus to scientific inquiry; but Confucianism never developed rational science even after Jesuit priests introduced western scientific knowledge into China in the 17th century. The reason for this neglect was that Confucianists were primarily interested in social and moral problems and did not desire knowledge for its own sake. Rather than understanding and mastering nature, priority was given to studying the classical Confucian texts to the neglect of scientific inquiry and experimentation (Chen, 1970, p. 309).

Thus, in regard to the main fields of scientific inquiry – physics, optics, mathematics – Toby Huff comes to the conclusion that the Chinese lagged behind both the West and the Arabs around the eleventh century. Why was this? Huff provides the following explanation:

Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries experienced a profound social and intellectual revolution that placed social life on an entirely new footing. At the center of this revolution was a legal transformation that redefined the nature of social organization in all its realms – political, social, economic, and religious. As a result of the legal reforms a variety of new, legally autonomous collectivities emerged. These included residential communities, cities and towns, universities, economic interest groups, and professional guilds such as the surgeons and other medical specialists ... In effect, the first vestiges of *neutral space*, a relatively independent space free from the interference of religious and political censors, began to emerge ... When we enter Chinese civilization, these organizational possibilities are absent, and a very different metaphysical outlook prevails ... China never embarked on the path of causal thinking as did the West (Huff, pp. 242, 251, 253).

So while accepting that significant advances were undoubtedly made in China this, nevertheless, does not negate Weber's thesis. A modern, capitalist, economy required sustained innovations that were ubiquitously applied and this did not happen. If we assume that Confucian ideas were conducive to the advances that were made, so we must infer that Confucianism was implicated in the inability of China to make the breakthrough in its development from the 17th century until the end of the 20th century.

China's economic performance since 1CE

Prior to the advent of the industrial and scientific revolutions of the 18th century onwards, it is instructive to see how the Chinese economy performed in comparison with other regions of the world, including Western Europe when, during much of this period, the ideas of Confucius were prevalent.

This section examines provides data from the 1st Century to the present day with the aim of providing insights regarding whether Confucianism's role was positive, negative or neutral in economic matters.

Table 1 provides GDP per capita data on China in comparison with other regions of the world from 1CE to 2003CE:

Table 1: GDP per capita (dollars) for various countries and regions from 1CE-2003 CE

Year	Western Europe	China	India	Japan	Latin America	Africa	Western Offshoots	World
1	576	450	450	400	400	472	400	467
1000	427	450	450	425	400	425	400	450
1500	771	600	550	500	416	414	400	566
1700	997	600	550	570	527	421	476	616
1820	1202	600	533	669	691	420	1202	667
1870	1960	530	533	737	676	500	2419	873
1913	3457	552	673	1387	1493	637	5233	1526
1950	4578	448	619	1921	2503	890	9268	2113
1973	11417	838	853	11434	4513	1410	16179	4089
2003	19912	4803	2160	21218	5786	1549	28039	6516

Source: Maddison, 2007, table A.7, p. 382; in 1990 international dollars; Western Offshoots are, in the main, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Southern Africa

Despite China's GDP per capita being very similar to all the regions of the world, Angus Maddison argues that in the 10th century China outperformed Europe in levels of technology, the intensity with which it used its natural resources and its capacity for administering a huge territorial empire; an advantage China held until the 15th century. In the following three centuries, Europe gradually overtook China in real income, technological and scientific capacity (Maddison, 2007, p. 15). Table 2 shows China's relative decline in terms of its share of world GDP: down from a third in 1820 to 5% in 1952; table 3 shows that while China grew at a faster rate than Europe in the 18th Century, from 1820 to the mid-20th century, its economy was virtually stagnant, growing at just 0.22% p.a. By contrast, since 1978, China's growth rate has been four times that of Europe. But China led the way in bureaucratic modes of governance: already by the tenth century, it was recruiting professionally trained public servants on a meritocratic basis. The bureaucracy was the main instrument for imposing social and political order in a unitary state over a vast land mass.

Table 2: Shares of world GDP 1700-2003 (%)

	1700	1820	1952	1978	2003
China	22.3	32.9	5.2	4.9	15.1
India	24.4	16.0	4.0	3.3	5.5
Japan	4.1	3.0	3.4	7.6	6.6
Europe	24.9	26.6	29.3	27.8	21.1
USA	0.1	1.8	27.5	21.6	20.6
USSR	4.4	5.4	9.2	9.0	3.8

Source: Maddison, 2007, table 2.2a, p. 44

Table 3: Rates of growth of world GDP 1700-2003 (%)

	1700-1820	1820-1952	1952-1978	1978-2003
China	0.85	0.22	4.49	7.85
India	0.17	0.56	3.85	5.28
Japan	0.25	1.74	7.86	2.53
Europe	0.58	1.71	4.37	2.00
USA	2.72	3.76	3.61	2.94
USSR	0.69	2.05	4.50	-0.40

Source: Maddison, 2007, table 2.2b, p. 44

Though China's GDP per capita was static, output increased sufficiently to maintain a four-fold increase in population from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century (*ibid.*, p. 16). Whilst Confucianism had a positive impact on agriculture, helping to sustain the rising population, it did not do the same for commerce, trade, and industry. Hence, apart from agriculture, imperial China was more a rent-seeking than a producing society. The ruling bureaucracy and gentry dominated urban life and kept a tight control of the regulatory structure so that entrepreneurial activity was restricted; thus, public, state monopolies dominated. Inevitably, the motors of nascent capitalist development, the merchants, bankers, and traders could not flourish in the manner of their European counterparts. The legal framework and secure property rights was not sufficient to engender risk-taking. Absence of international trade and contacts with the outside world debilitated innovation and technological upgrading. There was no equivalent of the renaissance, Enlightenment, and scientific revolution.

The scientific revolution robustly challenged the religious basis of European education whence reason, experimentation, and evidence became the fundamental pillars of epistemology with a concomitant diminution of holy texts. China, by contrast, was steeped in ancient classics, notably Confucian, and bureaucratic dogmas that were derived from them. Therefore, the building blocks of science were never put in place and without scientific advancement, major and sustained breakthroughs in technological know-how were not possible. The closed nature of society prevented trading and intellectual exchange with other countries (Maddison, *ibid.*, pp. 16-17). While Confucian ideas deeply permeated Chinese society, they were unable to prevent incessant strife and internal disorder. Furthermore, the weakness of the productive forces translated into poor defences so that when colonial powers intervened, China did not possess the wherewithal in the economy and military capability to ward off the external threat.

By 1820, Japan, which had also come under the influence of Confucianism, had overtaken China in terms of GDP per capita but, like China, had fallen further behind Western Europe. Thereafter, Japan forged ahead of China and by the second half of the 20th century had caught up and then overtaken Western Europe. There are a multitude of variables for this of which one is thought to be Confucian values. In stark contrast, China's economy was stagnant – indeed, by the time of the communist revolution of 1949, its GDP per capita was estimated to be the same as year 1CE. Between 1820 and 1952, world product rose more than eight-fold and world per-capita income three-fold. US per capita income rose nearly nine-fold, European income four-fold and Japanese more than three-fold. By contrast, China's per capita product fell as its share of world GDP fell from a third to one twentieth – and per capita income fell from 90 per cent to less than a quarter of the world average.

However, since the reforms of 1978 (Deng's 'four modernisations')², China's economy has grown at an historically unprecedented rate. Whether this astonishing turnaround is in any way due, at least in part, to Confucianism is an extremely contentious issue for which no definitive answer can be given.

Key socio-economic indicators of the Confucian Culture Area

Table 4 gives a breakdown by religion of the Confucian Culture Area (CCA) countries – which totals 1.7 billion people or 24% of the world's population. Somewhat contentiously, in surveys of religion, Confucianism is not accorded the status of religion so there is no category for it, including by Pew which conducts the most extensive surveys on religion. What is also striking is the high percentage of those who are 'unaffiliated': in China, Hong Kong, Japan, and North Korea, they constitute the majority and in South Korea they are almost half the population. Moreover, the major religions of the world are largely irrelevant; though Singapore has significant percentages of Christians (18%) and Muslims (14%); while Christians comprise 15% in Hong Kong and 29% in South Korea.

Table 4: Religious breakdown of Confucian Culture Area countries (data for 2012 in %)

	Unaffiliated	Buddhism	Folk	Other	Christianity	Islam
China	52	18	22		5	
Hong Kong	56	13	13		15	
Japan	57	36				
North Korea	71		13	12		
South Korea	46	23			29	
Singapore	16	34		10	18	14
Taiwan	13	21	44	16		
Vietnam	30	16	45		8	

Source: Pew Forum (2012) 'Religious composition by country'

² In stark contrast to the hitherto austere stance of the Communist Party, 'enrich yourself' became a clarion call. The 'four modernisations' involved the gradual abandonment of the communist command economy and reform of four sectors: agriculture, industry, science and technology, and defence. There was no mention of the legacy of Confucianism holding the economy and society back; rather the cause of China's problems was laid at the door of the Maoist economic system. Equally, however, there was no suggestion at the time that China could develop faster if it adopted certain tenets of Confucian ideology.

Notes: 'Folk' refers to Chinese folk religions; 'Other' refers to various faiths including Shintoism and Taoism

What is a compelling argument is that Confucian values have permeated the thinking and the *modus vivendi* of the society at large, no matter the religion adhered to by individuals or the level of religiosity. But there is good reason to think that this is particularly so for those who are unaffiliated so that there is no direct contestation among beliefs, though there is no hard evidence for this supposition.

Table 5: Socio-economic indicators of the Confucian Culture Area

	HDI Ranking	CPI Ranking	GGP Ranking	Freedom Status	% Male in work	% Female in work	Population (millions)
China	91	100	91	Not Free	78	64	1.37bn
Hong Kong	15	17	n/a	Partially Free	68	51	7.3
Japan	17	15	101	Free	70	49	126.9
North Korea	n/a	174	n/a	Not Free	84	72	25.9
South Korea	15	43	115	Free	72	50	50.6
Singapore	9	7	54	Partially Free	77	59	5.5
Taiwan	n/a	35	n/a	Free	n/a	n/a	23.5
Vietnam	121	119	83	Not Free	83	73	91.8

Source: World Economic Forum *Global Gender Gap 2015* table 5, p. 15; UNDP (2014) *Human Development Report 2014*; Transparency International (2014) *Corruption Perceptions Index 2014*; Freedom Status from Freedom House (2014) *Freedom in the World 2014*; Population from official census data

Notes: HDI: Human Development Index; CPI: Corruption Perceptions Index; GGP: Global Gender Gap

Table 5 provides various socio-economic indicators of the CCA. The Human Development Index rankings vary greatly: the four developed countries rank very high (Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan); and two (China and Vietnam) rank in the medium development category. There is no data for Taiwan which would also lie within the very high ranking and North Korea which will come under the low category. It is this generally high ranking of the 'Asian Dragons' that leads to the view that Confucian values help promote a positive development dynamic. Certainly, in regard to female participation at work, the CCA countries register very high rates.

In the various other indicators shown, the rankings are also highly variable. In regard to freedom, the composite index compiled by Freedom House, combining political rights and civil liberties, there is great variation: three are ranked as 'Free' (Japan, South Korea and Taiwan); Hong Kong and Singapore are ranked as 'Partially Free'; whilst the one-party Communist states of China, North Korea and Vietnam are 'Not Free'. It is the severe curtailment of political rights in the latter three countries that is the primary reason for this whilst the countries ranked as free have parliamentary democracies.

In regard to corruption, as in other countries and regions of the world, there is a strong correlation between levels of development and degree of corruption as collated in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index rankings. Singapore, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea are in the 50 least corrupt countries while China, Vietnam and North Korea (last equal with the Democratic Republic of Congo) are highly corrupt. So, *prima facie*, it is difficult to generalise from these findings whether Confucianism has a protective effect against corruption, or whether its influence is marginal – what is key is the existence of democracy and level of development. In this, however, there is little difference with other major religions: like them, Confucianism decries against corruption but its ethical guidance – in those countries where it resonates – is not always adhered to.

Confucianism and women

In the rankings in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap, no CCA country ranks in the top 50: Singapore at 54 is ranked highest whilst Japan at 101 and South Korea at 115 (out of 142 countries in the sample) are unusually low for developed countries. This is

surprising given that these countries have in the past 5 decades achieved rapid growth and development with the significant involvement of women as attested by their high levels of participation at work. Might Confucianism be implicated in this?

Both the May 4th Movement and the Communists in China firmly rejected Confucianism seeing it as the root cause of China's malaise and inferiority vis-à-vis the West; including the oppression of women. For them, Confucian ideology preached obedience to the values of the distant past and had no remedy for the failures of the present nor offered systematic plans for the future (Fitzgerald, 1964, p. 146); a key prop to a regressive feudal order. In 1940 Mao Zedong identified the Confucian ethical code with a 'slave ideology' with which Communism was 'locked in a life-and-death struggle' and was particularly hostile to the Confucian doctrine of *jen* (benevolence) as he advocated that violence is necessary against 'the reactionary activities of the reactionary classes' (Gregory and Chang, 1979, p. 1088).

A crucial reason as to why the leaders of the Communist Party were hostile to Confucianism is their reference to the 'Century of Humiliation' (*Bainian Guochi*), that is, the period between the first Opium War in 1839 to the coming of power of the Communists in 1949. China's humiliation was reflected in the loss of one third of territory under its control, the collapse of the millennia-old imperial system, with the consequence of internal uprisings, invasions, and civil war (Adcock-Kaufman, 2010, p. 2). Given their enduring prominence, Confucian ideals were thought to be, at the very least, implicated in this catastrophe.

Confucian views on women stem from two sets of metaphors: the first is the well-known *yin* and *yang*, the masculine/feminine dichotomy, with the superiority of the former

and inferiority of the latter; and the lesser known *nei-wai*, that is, inner-outer or private-public distinction. Throughout China's history, the *yin* has been dominant – entirely in keeping with other major religions. Similarly, it is women who occupy the *nei* (within the family as mother, wife, and daughter) while the *wai* is the preserve of men, that is, the world beyond the family.

Despite her sympathetic treatment of Confucianism in *Confucianism and Women* (2006), Li-Hsiang Rosenlee highlights the systematic discrimination against women in Chinese history (she does not cover the other CCA countries). For example, although the *Four Books of Women* were written by a woman, Ban Zhao, and are considered de facto instructional manuals of how the female sex should behave in a Confucian society, women's literary talent has no legitimacy, hence these works are not considered part of Chinese culture (*Ibid.*, p. 96). Indeed, despite the civility and serenity of Confucius' sayings and teachings, China suffered from grotesque abuses of women – these include female infanticide, child-bride/child-servant, concubinage (for production of male heirs), cult of widowhood (that is, widow chastity and prohibition on widows remarrying) and footbinding which practice lasted for a thousand years. Within the sib, there was a strict hierarchy: all married men had equal franchise, unmarried men had only the right to be heard in council, whereas women were excluded from the sib councils altogether as well as from the right of inheritance (having only dowry rights) (Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 89).

But Rosenlee argues that the root of women's oppression in China is not solely due to Confucianism; rather it lies in the institution of the family where the convergence of three cultural imperatives reinforce Confucian familial virtue ethics, that is, the continuity of the family name, filial piety (serving one's family and the state), and ancestor worship.

According to Mencius, the most important of Confucius' followers, the failure to produce a male heir is the most unfilial deed, a view made blatantly clear in an early Han text, *Hanfeizi*: '[I]f a boy is born, the parents congratulate each other, if a girl is born, they kill her. [Both boys and girls] come from the same parents, yet boys are celebrated, girls are killed; this is because they [i.e., the parents] consider the benefits (of having a boy) in the long run' (Rosenlee, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-123).

With such strong bias in favour of the male gender, critics of Confucianism are right to implicate it in the lowly status of women in societies in which it has an influence – including up to the present day. This is, however, not to say that the removal of Confucian ideals is a necessary condition for the achievement of women's equality, rather it is to call for the suppression of familial ethics, Confucian or otherwise, that engender discriminatory practices.

Confucianism, Asian values and modernity

The rapid development of some East Asian countries in recent decades has led to the seeking of a common bond to explain this; sometimes referred broadly as 'Asian values', but more precisely as jointly shared Confucian values. Unlike the highly peculiar Gulf oil-exporting states, these do not have oil or significant amounts of other natural resources yet have managed to develop competitive market economies. The reasons for this impressive achievement is put down to education, training, and raising of skills; to thrift, hard work, and discipline, including respect for authority – prevalent in East Asia and in combination deemed to be a manifestation of the Confucian ethic. Michio Oshima argues that the more rational, pragmatic, and utilitarian nature of Confucian culture was more conducive to

modern economic growth than the social values of either Hinduism or Mahayana Buddhism; hence the differences in economic performance between East Asia and South Asia (cited in Wong, 1996, p. 280). Robert MacFarquhar (1980, p. 70) agrees with this premise to assert that post-Confucian collectivism is better suited to the age of mass industrialisation. Given that Fordism was founded in highly individualistic America, this is a contentious assertion. Other collectivistic societies such as those of South Asia with strong focus on the family and sib have not, to this day, succeeded in fomenting mass industrialised economies.

Koh Byong-ik (1996, pp. 192-193) makes the claim that South Korea is the most Confucian country in East Asia, including China, the Chinese offshoots Taiwan and Hong Kong, and Japan. Paradoxically, however, only 2 per cent of the population identifies itself with Confucianism and there is no reference to Confucian doctrines in the constitution and nor does the school system foster Confucian values and practices. 'Confucianism today is hardly visible on the surface and rarely manifests itself in any organization or institution. It survives only at the most basic level of the popular consciousness and in the routines of daily life (*ibid.*, p. 194).

So how can this putative link be expressed as a testable hypothesis? John Wong rightly asserts that it is not enough just to argue in general terms that the Confucian ethos is conducive to increased personal savings and hence higher capital formation. It must also be demonstrated whether such savings have been productively invested in business or industry or have been squandered on noneconomic spending, such as in the fulfilment of social obligations which is after all also a part of the Confucian social system. It is not enough just to generalise that Confucianism holds education and learning in high social esteem. It must also be shown how Confucian values have actually resulted in effective manpower

development in terms of promoting the upgrading of skills and not in encouraging merely intellectual self-cultivation or self-serving literary pursuits (Wong, 1996, p. 280). Indeed, Confucianism is not clear about the importance of improving efficiency of work, and of improving the division of labour; rather, as noted earlier, specialisation is not encouraged.

Samuel Huntington is also not convinced by the virtuous nature of Confucian; rather, he forcibly makes the case that it is incompatible with democracy and, ipso facto, with modernity:

Almost no scholarly disagreement exists regarding the proposition that traditional Confucianism was either undemocratic or antidemocratic. The only mitigating factor was the extent to which the examination system in the classic Chinese polity opened careers to the talented without regard to social background. Even if this were the case, however, a merit system of promotion does not make a democracy. No one would describe a modern army as democratic because officers are promoted on the basis of their abilities. Classic Chinese Confucianism and its derivatives in Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, Taiwan, and (in diluted fashion) Japan emphasized the group over the individual, authority over liberty, and responsibilities over rights. Confucian societies lacked a tradition of rights against the state; to the extent that individual rights did exist, they were created by the state. Harmony and cooperation were preferred over disagreement and competition. The maintenance of order and respect for hierarchy were central values. The conflict of ideas, groups, and parties was viewed as dangerous and illegitimate. Most important, Confucianism merged society and the state and provided no legitimacy for autonomous social institutions at the national level. In practice Confucian or Confucian-influenced societies have been inhospitable to democracy (Huntington, 1991, p. 24).

Huntington would not be surprised that the Chinese Communist Party significantly changed its stance over Confucianism, at least implicitly, recognising that its core precepts are valuable for an authoritarian regime but which can be served up as long-standing Chinese cultural traits. This was surely the thinking behind former General Secretary Hu Jintao's

report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2007 in which he stated:

Promote Chinese culture and build the common spiritual home for the Chinese nation. Chinese culture has been an unflinching driving force for the Chinese nation to keep its unity and make progress from generation to generation. We must have a comprehensive understanding of Chinese traditional culture, keep its essence and discard its dross to enable it to fit in with present-day society, stay in harmony with modern civilization, keep its national character and reflect changes of the times (cited in Ai, 2009, p. 696).

The Education Ministry has approved courses in traditional Confucian culture and the government supports many Confucius Institutes in more than 52 countries and regions (Fan, 2007). Hu does not make clear by what is considered ‘dross’ but it will indubitably be any traditional doctrine, Confucian or otherwise, that may impede the primary goal of economic development. Maureen Fan is correct to think that for the party, Confucianism is useful in the maintenance of order and to bring legitimacy to its rule, the key pre-conditions of a harmonious society (*loc. cit.*). But though the party’s stance has changed significantly, there is no recognition of Confucian ideas being of value in the pursuit of growth and development; what has been zealously pursued since Deng’s ‘four modernisations’ of 1978 has been the utilisation of the market mechanism as the key driver of economic change and the transformation of China from a command to a market economy.

Contra Huntington, Francis Fukuyama (1995, p. 30) asserts that Confucianism does not necessarily mandate an authoritarian political system – *prima facie* a reasonable point given that several Confucian societies - Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore have successfully made a transition to a democracy. Here the distinction between ‘politicised Confucianism’ and the ‘Confucian ethic’ posited by Tu Wei-ming is illuminating. The former

refers to the power of the state over society, politics over economics, and bureaucratization over initiative, which are classic features of an authoritarian society which Huntington uses as the basis for his critique. The latter, however, is markedly different, and refers to the Confucian traits of self-discipline, working for the collective good, education, personal improvement, and work ethic (Tu, 1984, p. 90). While politicised Confucianism is in direct conflict with democracy, the Confucian ethic can co-exist with democratic structures and by enhancing personal development and integrity, help mould society to be more efficient and productive. In a market economy, what is vital is the smooth completion of contracts – a strong legal framework can enable this. However, recourse to the law is invariably the last course of action where contracts have not satisfactorily been fulfilled.

But the Confucian stress on the centrality of the family risks nepotism on the one hand and, on the other, inculcates low levels of trust between people who are not related to one another (Fukuyama, *op. cit.*, p. 27). This is confirmed by Gilbert Rozman (2002, p. 24) who asserts that ‘in politics and social relations, Confucianism is represented by connections, gift giving, and a model of social exchange focused on favours, not contractual principles. These practices protect vested interests even in democratic settings’. Furthermore, this familial collectivism has spawned the pervasive phenomenon of *guanxi*, meaning social connection, which can enable the formation of an unfair competitive advantage or corruption: more than in meritocratic societies, ‘who you know’ can trump ability. As such, despite the advantages of trust it engenders within the familial network, it is in breach of the ethics of fairness and not conducive to efficiency (Ip, 2009, p. 469).

The issue of corporate social responsibility has become of supreme importance in the past two decades and there is the suggestion that Confucian ethics can be conducive in this

regard, a view made by Edward Romar, who further maintains that it can help improve performance:

Incorporating Confucianism in the organizational values, business processes and leadership behavior would permit management to develop a humane organization through the implementation of a framework where, individuals, whether employees or customers, and society are not simply a means to an end but ends in themselves. Confucianism would require management to set a moral example, implement moral business practices and processes, look long-term rather than short-term, consider the situation of others, and the impact of their behavior on others, and not just themselves. Confucianism permits a view of the organization as more than a single purpose entity. It conceives an organization to be what it truly is: a community with multiple goals including profit, survival, service, ethics and meaning for all workers. Confucianism could contribute to both a moral and a better-managed company (Romar, 2002, p. 129).

There is indeed much that is constructive here; the idealised ‘Confucian firm’ would be characterised by compassion and righteousness in its dealings with key stakeholders, that is, shareholders, employees, customers, suppliers, communities, and the government (Ip, 2009, p. 428). The firm’s goal would be to attain harmony – *prima facie* positive but with limitations. The prevention of disagreements and conflicts that would be required to achieve harmony can dampen down healthy debates, the airing of different viewpoints, and dissent and, by so doing, lead to complacency and stagnation. Po Keung Ip rightly points out that Confucian principles are extremely general in nature and do not grapple with real world conditions. He provides the sobering assessment: ‘When the “Confucian firm” is examined against the norm of human rights and its underlying values, we can readily detect tensions and disharmony. This means that collectivism, paternalism, hierarchism, particularism, and authoritarianism that are constituted of the Confucian firm are incompatible with the values that ground the norm of human rights. Specifically, the notion of human rights presupposes a

concept of equality of persons that stands in opposition in various degrees to the Confucian elements' (*ibid.*, pp. 470, 472).

Concluding remarks

Some concluding remarks are in order. In regard to China, after the sustained and at times vigorous attempts by the Communist Party to remove the influence of Confucianism, it begs the question as to what remains of it. Though various commentators and specialists admit to significant vestiges, no hard evidence is provided. The traits that are characterised as typically Confucian are, to varying degrees, noticeable in other non-CCA countries. A rejoinder to this objection is to leave China out of the CCA and to point to the existence and impact in the remaining CCA countries. This is a reasonable defence but is, nevertheless, hampered once more by lack of unambiguous evidence.

Assuming, however, that Confucianism is alive and well throughout the CCA, it has not forged meaningful solidarity and brotherhood in the region. Tensions between China and Japan have been manifest since the days of Japanese colonisation of parts of China and remain so to the present day – and precisely the same applies to South Korea and Japan (who both, revealingly, are in close alliance with the non-Confucian USA). Korea is partitioned and the hostilities between the two countries are perennially dangerous. Indeed it is incontrovertibly the case that naked nationalist rivalries override any common Confucian roots.

Summing up, in comparison with the dominant world religions, that is, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, it can be argued Confucianism is far less doctrinaire,

coercive, and inflexible. The reason for this thinking stems from the fact that these religions tend to emphasise religious practice as much as ethics whereas Confucianism is far more focused on ethics with much less attention paid to practice. Be that as it may, these attributes were not sufficient to offset the drag effects of its core teachings on economic life and nor did they provide the wherewithal for interrogating and, vitally, improving the material condition in which humans found themselves. Given these severe limitations, Weber's summary conclusion of Confucianism's focus on adjusting to the world, is accurate. Undeniably, the process of adjustment yielded some advances but not sufficiently so to effect a sustained, thoroughgoing, transformation of society. Despite these decisive constraints, we are in agreement with those modern authors who point to the many positive qualities in Confucian ideology and praxis that do not conflict with the espousal of a democratic, meritocratic societies and attendant institutions.

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