

Introduction

The Problem of Confucian Heritage

In February 1942, as Japan was consolidating its hold on its newly conquered territories in Malaya, a new military administrator arrived in Singapore. He brought with him an adviser on Chinese affairs who scorned the humanitarian attitude of his predecessor in the military administration, Shinozaki Mamoru. Many years later, Shinozaki described his successor's contrasting administrative philosophy:

Mr. Takase claimed to be a Confucian, as well as an authority on China and all things Chinese. He based his claim upon his stay in China and Manchuria. He mistakenly assumed that the Chinese community in Singapore behaved like the Chinese in China and observed the same customs. He wanted to rule by force backed by Confucian guidelines. What he failed to understand was that many Chinese in Singapore were born in Singapore, had been educated in English language schools, and could not read or write Chinese characters. They knew little about Confucius.¹

In accordance with his philosophy of "force backed by Confucian guidelines," Takase proceeded with a scheme to extort fifty million yen from the Singapore Chinese community.

This account must come as a surprise to those who believe that Singapore is a "Confucian Heritage Culture," its ethnic Chinese citizens the often unreflective legatees of primordial Confucian values such as filial piety, harmony, and deference to government authority, passed down to them since their ancestors immigrated from their homelands in China. We know

from numerous sociological studies that Singapore's "Confucian" culture has a heritage of recent vintage. It arose out of campaigns in the early 1980s by Singapore's ruling People's Action Party to promote Confucian moral education and a communitarian national identity to legitimize its rule and foster social cohesion.²

Yet if the pseudo-scholar Takase ignored the cultural heterogeneity between mainland Chinese and diaspora Malay Chinese in the 1940s, today's new Confucian scholars are sometimes as guilty of ignoring the cultural heterogeneity between contemporary East Asian societies and the profound changes in their ethical and political life since the late nineteenth century. Some have also been naïve about the alacrity with which autocratic rulers have adopted a cultural identity politics of "Confucian values" to foster national unity, and reactive self-definition against "the West."

This book proposes to disentangle philosophically significant discussion of ethical and political concepts in modern Confucian thought from such empirically undetermined assumptions about East Asian cultural identity. There are strong reasons for thinking that East Asian societies are *not* accurately described as Confucian societies. This is not to say that East Asian societies alone have endured the consequences of modernization. Following steep declines in participation in the ritual and communal life of Christianity since the 1960s, Western European nations cannot be meaningfully described today as *Christian* societies either. The respective Confucian and Christian heritages of these societies is not in question—nor is the continued, if diminishing, influence of values derived from those heritages.

Nevertheless, in pluralistic Western Europe and East Asian today, neither Christianity nor Confucianism is ever likely to regain the institutional dominance and cultural legitimacy it enjoyed in the past. Acknowledgment of this fact can provide a more realistic basis for scholarly examination of the value that both ancient and modern Confucian thought, alongside other East Asian intellectual traditions, can have for today's more pluralistic societies. Such acknowledgment can also provide a more realistic basis for political philosophical examination of the kinds of political order within which revived Confucian religious, political, and ethical practices can flourish. In line with that acknowledgment, this book urges a shift in primary ethical focus from the good of associations, including the family, taken by some Confucians to be an ongoing locus of primordial Confucian values, to the good of individuals, attainable through a variety of affiliations, ways of life, and identities.

Articulating an Ethical Individualist Standpoint

An ethical individualism will inform the conceptual analyses this book will undertake of Confucian ethical ideas and political philosophical proposals, for which the focus of ethical concern is the good of the individual. Given the antipathy for individualism sometimes evinced in contemporary Confucian scholarship, an empirically based observation will go some way to explaining both the character and pertinence of this ethical individualist standpoint in an East Asian context. That observation is, that for young rural Chinese women in the twenty to thirty-five age bracket, the disintegration of one of the material supports for the practice of conventional filial piety and conjugal obedience—the extended rural patriarchal family and its patrilineal property relations—has likely been a good.

Suicide rates among rural Chinese women under the age of thirty-five were among the highest for this age and gender group in the world up to the late 1990s, at 37.5 per 100,000, according to a *Lancet* study in 2002.³ A nationwide study of suicide rates conducted in 2014 found this suicide rate had dropped to 3 per 100,000 by 2011;⁴ a longitudinal twenty-year survey in Shandong Province also found that suicide rates had decreased by 95 percent for rural women under the age of thirty-five between 1991 and 2010, from 49 per 100,000 to fewer than 5 per 100,000.⁵ No improvements in mental health care provision could be cited as an influence on this dramatic decline. But two intriguing correlations suggest a different explanation. One is that this dramatic fall in suicide rates coincided with the movement of tens of millions of young rural women into paid employment, often through immigration to cities far from their rural homes. The other is that as urbanization has reached some 50 percent of the population over the past twenty years, national suicide rates have fallen by 63 percent.

It would be easy to jump to conclusions about this correlation—that after centuries of suicide epidemics occasioned by the oppressions of the “three obediences and the four virtues,” young Chinese women have finally been liberated by waged labor and urbanization. However, it cannot be established conclusively whether these suicide rates are only a modern phenomenon, since easily-accessed pesticides in modern rural households have expedited impulsive suicide attempts in ways that would not have been possible in the premodern past.⁶ Young working-class Chinese women have also discovered that, much like their Japanese sisters in the early twentieth century and their Korean sisters in the 1960s, they are vulnerable to appalling sweatshop

labor conditions, though the associated communal living conditions have also facilitated trade union activism.⁷

Yet certain reliable conclusions can, and have been, drawn. Against those communitarian-minded Confucians who decry the breakup of communal, rural life in East Asia, there is something to be said for the emancipation of young rural women from the bonds of obedience to and financial dependence upon parents, husbands, and in-law families, where, as the authors of one study on rural youth suicide put it, “psychological strain, resulting from conflicting social values between communist gender equalitarianism and Confucian gender discrimination was associated significantly with suicide in young rural Chinese women.”⁸ There is also something to be said for their movement into urbanized settings and waged labor where they can exercise greater freedom of choice over their lives, and discover a measure of financial self-reliance that buffers them from the arbitrary dictates of families. Geographical separation of young women from the families that would bind them to traditional expectations, and financial independence, have enabled a more voluntaristic attitude to what were once the unchosen life vocations of marriage, childbearing, and care of aged parents-in-law, which subordinated personal interests to those of the family.

Such, I would say, has also been the discovery of young rural women experiencing industrialization the world over. The tragedy of their industrial exploitation, and their struggles against it, are inextricably mixed with their emancipation from patriarchal family relations and economic dependence. Confucian and communitarian philosophers might recoil at the materialistic, individualized way of life many such women have historically embraced, or have felt compelled to adapt to, in conditions of rapid industrialization as once conventional life vocations cease to be viable. But they need to make their case with acknowledgment of the dramatic improvements in life choices, opportunities to earn personal incomes, and life expectancy that rapid industrialization—and social atomization—has also brought for those once subordinated under older, communal ways of living.

This empirical insight lays the ground for the distinctive perspective adopted in this book. While recognizing the value of the philosophical contributions that Confucian thought—and its modern advocates—can make to pressing global moral and political questions today, an important evaluative standpoint of this study is its ethical individualist “capabilities approach” to human flourishing. If not yet universally applicable, I take this standpoint at least to have potential for being made universal. The gist of this standpoint, derived from the thought of Amartya Sen and Martha

Nussbaum, is that moral and political values, principles, and conceptions of the good, as instantiated in practices and institutions, are to be evaluated according to whether they enhance, or inhibit, the fundamental capacities “for truly human flourishing” in individual human beings. These capabilities include health, bodily integrity, educational attainment, practical wisdom and deliberative freedom, and control over one’s environment sufficient to provide for one’s own and dependents’ sustenance.⁹ Such capabilities can be understood as “being-able-to’s,” realized in “functioning” appropriate to the particular ends and goals people value, living within diverse affiliations and associations—*being able to* be healthy, to be in control over what happens to one’s body in a variety of interpersonal contexts, to be educated in the skills and knowledge one needs for one’s chosen and valued life pursuits, to make decisions meaningfully affecting one’s own and one’s dependents’ goods, to earn an income or be assured of financial support sufficient to fulfill one’s needs and interests and those of one’s dependents.

While much has been said about the Aristotelian basis of Nussbaum’s development of the capabilities approach, in its conception of a distinctive human flourishing realized through exercise of the central capabilities, also lying back of this approach are some fundamental Kantian and Marxian insights into human dignity. Deprivation of capabilities, whether willful or through the diffuse effects of economic deprivation and political marginalization, leaves human beings vulnerable to being used as means to the ends of others, rather than being respected themselves as ends.¹⁰ As the Japanese novelist Natsume Sōseki famously observed over a century ago, it is an insight like this that makes individualism ethical. The *condicio sine qua non* for ethical individualism is not merely “refrain from coercion” but also “refrain from using superior power or status to render another as a mere means to one’s ends,” thereby obstructing him “from developing his individuality as he pleases for the sake of his own happiness.”¹¹

This capabilities approach dimension to ethical individualism still requires further explanation, however. Capabilities can be further distinguished into *basic*, *internal*, and *combined* capabilities. Basic capabilities are innate physical, mental, and emotional powers that naturally differ among individuals. Internal capabilities are personal traits, abilities, and skills acquired through familial health and social nurturance, support and education, including education and training of basic powers and talents. Combined capabilities are the “substantial freedoms” or opportunities people have to exercise, practice, and further cultivate their traits, abilities, and skills in a particular political, economic, or social situation.¹² To suggest an example pertinent

to the cases of the sweatshop workers discussed above, an impoverished, rural young woman may have developed sufficient literacy, numeracy, and practical decision-making capabilities to manage her intimate life circumstances and affairs independent of the direction of significant others, and have a desire to do so. A factory job and residence away from her family home enables her to exercise these capabilities as combined capabilities, and *function* in ways that life in a communal, patriarchal community would not permit her to—to earn, spend, and save an income as she pleases; to form relationships, including sexual relationships, with others; to become a trade union activist; and so forth.

Conventional ideals of filial piety and obedience, as embodied in the traditional rural patriarchal family, demonstrably inhibited the development of those capabilities in large numbers of rural Chinese women, and so on this view there is little to regret in the decline of the rural patriarchal family with early twenty-first-century mass migrations of young rural people to urban employment. This conclusion is consonant with the ethical individualist position taken in this book.

The Focus and Plan of this Book

This book will focus primarily on the English language literature on Confucianism. This focus takes into account the efforts of some Anglo-American scholars to recommend Confucian thought as a source of global insight into moral and political philosophical problems beyond East Asia. It also enables light to be shed on the communitarian-liberalism controversy in Anglo-American academia as a background inspiration for some scholars recommending Confucianism as an alternative to liberal individualism and liberal democracy.

Chapter 1, “The Vicissitudes of Confucianism,” overviews historical discussion of the dissolution of institutional and discursive Confucianism in the early twentieth century in China and Korea, and the effects of compressed modernization on ethical life in East Asian societies in the second half of the twentieth century. The chapter asks how different contemporary Confucian philosophers have responded to these transformations. It argues for a more eclectic approach to the philosophical heritage of East Asia and its bearing on contemporary ethical and political philosophical problems, and for a more critical review of contemporary Confucian arguments for a primordial “Confucian heritage”-based cultural identity for East Asian societies, differentiated from the “liberal West.”

Chapter 2, “Ibsen’s Nora and the Confucian Critique of the Unencumbered Self,” takes issue with a metaphysical preoccupation in communitarian Confucianism with an “encumbered self” whose embeddedness in unchosen social roles, relations, and obligations is supposedly connected with a richer and more meaningful moral life than that led by the liberal individualist “unencumbered self.” Analyzing the global popularity of Ibsen’s individualist play *A Doll’s House* and the responses to it by Japanese feminists a century ago, the chapter argues for a conception of a “disencumbered self” that *A Doll’s House* heroine Nora represents for cross-cultural audiences and readers—a self that unburdens itself of unchosen obligations and roles that impede the development of human capabilities for intellectual and economic independence across different societies.

Chapter 3, “Confucian Ritual, Hierarchy and Symmetrical Deference,” takes up a neglected Mohist criticism of Confucian ritual propriety (*li* 禮): that there is an inherent deficit of righteousness (*yi* 義) and humaneness (*ren* 仁) in the extravagance and hypocrisy of Confucian rites, and in their unthinking, customary practice. I reinterpret this criticism in the context of modernized, pluralistic East Asian societies to argue that rites can enact and rigidify status inequalities, exacerbating rather than ameliorating consciousness of inequality, and fueling status conflict; that such enactment infringes upon contemporary, increasingly global values of individual dignity and equality; and that the aesthetic value of socially “thick” rites practices is likely to dissipate in pluralistic social conditions where such conflict occurs. I offer an alternative, socially “thin” and egalitarian conception of rites and deference applicable in both contemporary Eastern and Anglo-American social contexts.

Chapter 4, “Filial Piety in East Asia and Beyond,” engages with some dubious arguments made for filial piety (*xiao* 孝) as a distinctly East Asian virtue, or for the rejection of virtue ethics attributions to Confucius’s and Mencius’s thought, in favor of a distinctive role ethics within which *xiao* represents a “virtuosity” in practice rather than a virtue. Comparatively analyzing conceptions of filial piety in early and modern Confucian thought with eighteenth-century English theological thought and literature, the chapter argues for a more flexible, intercultural interpretation of filial piety as a virtue grounded in universal moral psychological traits associated with profound interhuman dependence.

Chapter 5, “The Unity of Loyalty and Filial Piety: An East Asian Horror Story,” occupies the middle ground in this book’s assessment of Confucian ethics and political philosophy, investigating projects to moralize the ruler-subject relation in the context of modern nationalism in East Asia, through unifying the Confucian virtues of filial piety and loyalty. Japanese

philosopher Inoue Tetsujirō's early twentieth-century modernizing interpretations of Edo period Confucian slogans such as "The National Polity" (*Kokutai* 國體) and "the unity of loyalty and filial piety" (*chūkō ippon* 忠孝一本), and the legitimacy these interpretations gave for Japan's nationalism and militarism in the 1930s, illustrates one troubling political trajectory for this Confucian conceptual relation in East Asian states. This trajectory merits attention in a time of growing nationalist hostilities and geopolitical rivalry in East Asia.

Chapter 6, "Epistemic Elitism, Paternalism, and Confucian Democracy," represents the turn in this study to political philosophical concerns. It adopts a fresh epistemological perspective on the claims, central to the early Confucian tradition, that exemplary persons' moral cultivation and wisdom legitimate their entitlement to rule insofar as they can know the good of those whom they rule and can deliberate and act for that good on their behalf. The chapter accepts that certain Confucian values are compatible with representative democracy today in such countries as South Korea and Taiwan. However, some contemporary philosophical recommendations for a Confucian democracy founder because they hold too closely to Confucian epistemic elitism and paternalism, in the face of increasingly educated and restive East Asian publics. Others founder because they dispense with it or modify such elitism and paternalism, embracing a more participatory conception of democracy associated with Deweyan pragmatism—at the cost of any credible pragmatist or Confucian identification.

Chapter 7, "Perverse Doctrines and One Hundred Schools: Confucianism's Place in Pluralistic Societies," finalizes my challenge to Confucian scholars seeking the establishment of Confucian democracies in East Asia. The chapter argues that the best conditions for the open discussion of Confucian ideas, for the public advocacy of Confucian-inspired policy proposals and for unconstrained pursuit in ethical practice of the conceptions of the good they advocate, are those provided by a liberal democratic order recognizing liberal freedoms and capabilities, as is currently found in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. What these conditions also permit is a phenomenon that many modern Confucians implicitly or explicitly resist: a *gesellschaft* of competing ideas, beliefs, and lifestyle practices, tolerant of ways of living that some of its members regard as immoral and depraved. Within this social order, differently reformulated Confucianisms can flourish as reasonable comprehensive doctrines informing civil society activism, Confucian religions, and a conviction-based politics.