



How Should China (and the World) Think?

**A Confucian Proposal to Save the World
(and China)**

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The Fate of Chinese Traditions in the Past 150 Years

It is often said that to understand how Chinese think, we should understand the Chinese traditions. Even if there are connections between Chinese traditions and how *traditional* Chinese think, whether Chinese traditions are relevant to how *contemporary* Chinese think is rather dubious, owing to the simple fact that Chinese people today live in a cultural environment which is the result of 150 years of radical anti-traditional movements.

Since the Bronze Age, China has been the dominant civilization in the “*tianxia* (天下)” or “all under Heaven” or the world known to the Chinese. It encountered superior military powers in the case of various nomadic invaders, and more rarely, equivalent cultural powers such as Buddhism, but almost never both. The encounter with the British in the first Opium War in 1839 was thus particularly significant. However, only a few among Chinese realized the significance and started the so-called “Self-Strengthening Movement (洋务运动)” to catch up with Western technologies. The result was the defeat of China by the Japanese in 1894, who, until then, had been regarded as “pupils” of Chinese culture by the Chinese. The shock brought about by this defeat was much more widely felt, and even though the “Hundred-Day Reform (百日维新)” failed, the need for a deeper, political and institutional reform quickly became a consensus. But this reform did not seem to be successful, and finally, the consensus became that the most fundamental reform or revolution was necessary. That is, China needed a “new culture,” and launched the “New Cultural Movement (新文化运动)” in 1915 and the famous

slogan “demolish the Confucian store (打倒孔家店)” in the May Fourth Movement in 1919. Both the Nationalist and the Communist Parties were radically anti-traditional parties, with the latter even more radical. This anti-traditional movement had its peak in the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, and some even wonder whether 30 years (under the rule of Chairman Mao Zedong) are greater (with regard to the influence on the contemporary Chinese psyche) than 5,000 years (the duration of the Chinese civilization).

The good news for Chinese traditions is that China’s economic miracle over the past four decades has given some Chinese newly found confidence in Chinese traditions (although the rapid infrastructure development has also led to the destruction of many remaining traditional buildings and neighborhoods). Moreover, the spiritual vacuum following Mao's death has created an opportunity to the revival of traditions. On a more theoretical level, the economic rise of East Asia has debunked the Weberian thesis that Protestantism was crucial to the development of capitalism, while Confucianism and other Chinese traditions were an obstacle.¹ Furthermore, the democratization of Chinese Taiwan and South Korea, two regions with stronger Confucian heritage than mainland China, has challenged Samuel Huntington’s thesis of the clash of civilizations, especially the incompatibility between Confucianism and liberal democracy. These developments have also contributed to the revival of Chinese traditions.

1 This thesis is attributed to the German sociologist Max Weber, but whether this is really Weber’s claim can be debated.

In addition to offering an (old and new) identity to the Chinese, it makes China's rise a distinctly Chinese phenomenon, rather than just another Westernized, capitalistic, and faceless nation. Is there anything else the revived interest in Chinese traditions can be constructive to? As a philosopher, I am more interested in this issue, and in the following, I will show how proposals inspired by (early) Confucianism can address challenges both to China and the rest of the world.

Troubles with the Western Orders

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, liberal democracy and a liberal international order have been widely believed to be “the end of history”, the goal each country should strive for. However, newly democratized countries are often plagued to ethnic violence, and developed liberal democracies also fail to face up to many challenges, such as the recent financial crisis, the growing inequality that is linked to globalization and technological advancements, and, as a result, the rise of populism on both the left and the right. The election of Donald Trump as the American president is only the most recent and the most striking example so far.

Internationally, the Western model of nation-state is a root cause of two World Wars and many other conflicts, and also a root cause of the concern with a rising China. Ironically, the language that the Chinese government uses is precisely from the West, the language of nation-state. However, if the history of nation-states tells us anything, it is that nation-states do not rise peacefully, and so it is not surprising that few

believe in the Chinese government's repeated claim of its peaceful rise.

In response, there are cosmopolitan attempts to transcend nation-states, but they, too, are increasingly questioned. A more aggressive form of cosmopolitanism is guided by the idea that human rights override sovereignty, which leads Western countries to intervene with many human rights violations, crude oppressions and even mass killings or genocide. But recent interventions, such as those in Iraq, Libya, and Syria, seem to have created new and even more miseries that they intended to eliminate. To make things right seems to be so demanding on the Western countries that oftentimes they can only give lipservice to the principle that human rights override sovereignty, leading to skepticism and cynicism.

A less aggressive form of cosmopolitanism, such as the formation of the EU and the creation of a world market, does not seem to do too well, either. For it leads to serious domestic problems, such as the aforementioned rising economic inequality, and the apparently incurable political instability, which is caused by the failure to assimilate a large group of people with different cultures and religions. Examples are abundant: the trouble of maintaining the EU because of the European sovereign debt crisis (PIIGS); in France, the problem with a large and economically depressed minority that is culturally distinct and almost impossible to assimilate; the refugee crisis both within a single state and among European states; and the Brexit. On the grandest scale, even economic globalization, an even more moderate form of cosmopolitanism, has been under siege, and again, the election of Trump who partly ran on an isolationist and mercantilist platform,

is a telling symptom of this trouble. However, it is not surprising that globalization is in trouble, for globalization which is meant to transcend nationstates, has actually been led by nation-states; so, when these states feel that their interests are threatened by globalization, they will threaten globalization in response.

It is perhaps time, then, to reject the myth that history has already “ended” and to explore new political models with an open mind. In the following, I will argue that Confucianism may offer some promising alternatives.

The Questions of Political Modernity for Early Confucians

Confucianism is a 2,000-year tradition with different thinkers and sometimes drastically different interpretations, and I understand it as a political philosophy that is meant to be universal, not something applicable only to the Chinese. This is how Confucius and other early Confucians understood their teachings: they were for all civilized peoples, and not only for those from their home states. Indeed, Confucius even said that if he lived among barbarians, he was confident that they would follow his way. Although I will not provide references in the following, most of the ideas can be traced to or are consistent with a founding text of Confucianism, the *Mencius*.

The founders of the Confucian school lived in a time of great transformation, from 770 B.C. to 221 B.C.. Before this transition, the old “world order” was built on a hierarchy of nobility, and through the pyramid of nobility, a large empire was divided into small, close-

knit feudal communities. The noblemen ran their fiefdoms with some autonomy, and their legitimacy was derived by their pedigree. This order resembles that of Medieval Europe. However, it collapsed during the transition, and through wars of all against all, large, populous, well-connected, and plebeianized societies of strangers emerged. A few *de facto* sovereign states emerged in the newly globalized “world,” the world known to the Chinese. This transition may be seen as a forerunner of the European transition to modernity, and even of the globalization in our times. Common to all these transitions is the need to answer three key political issues in this new world: the bond of a large state of strangers, the principles of international relations among independent states, and the selection of the ruling members of the state and even the world (and the legitimacy of the selection). These questions were also faced by early modern European thinkers, and in a sense, our contemporary world is but an enlarged version of the Chinese world for early Confucians. But Confucians offered their own answers, different from the ones offered by the Europeans. We should investigate these answers before we ponder how history will and should end.

The Confucian New *Tian Xia* Order for Global Governance

To address the issue of a new social bond, Mencius, an important Confucian thinker (372 B.C.-289 B.C.), argued for the universality of the sentiment of compassion, a sense of care toward strangers. To show this, he presented a famous thought experiment. He asked

whether people would feel a sense of alarm and distress upon seeing a baby about to fall into a well and be killed. It is a beautifully designed experiment for many reasons. It uses a baby that embodies innocence, rather than an adult who might have done something to deserve his fate; it asks for our immediate rather than calculated response; and it asks us how we feel, not how we will act. It is hard to answer “no” to such a well-designed question.

But Mencius also realized that this sentiment, though universal, is also very fragile. In order for it to be strong enough to hold strangers together, it needs to be cultivated, and family is the first and most important institution in which this cultivation can take place. Family, biological or otherwise, is a universal institution, and is something considered private. At the same time, family is also the first place for us to transcend our mere selves, when, for example, we are asked to save a piece of candy for our baby sister. This is why familial care is so important to Confucians. Confucianism is not the philosophy of Don Corleone, the God Father (“never go against the family”), as some have criticized. Rather, family is an institution where we learn to care about others by first learning to care about family members. This care then extends from family members to neighbors, from neighbors to community members, and so on, like ripples caused by throwing a pebble into a pond, which can spread to cover the whole surface of the pond. The expanding concentric circles of care can eventually embrace every human being, past, present, and future, and even animals, plants, and things in the world. Family is key to the Confucian path to transcendence and to become God, and in this transcendence, the

world of strangers is united.

But even at this stage of universal care, however, Confucians think that one still does and should care about those closer to oneself more than those more distant. Just imagine, even if you are this ideal person of universal care, whom would you save first if your daughter and a stranger are drowning? The Confucian moral ideal is universal but unequal love.

Therefore, through compassion the whole world can be bonded together, but at the same time, one is justified in caring about one's own state more than other states. Moreover, early Confucians also suggested that the identity of a state be based on culture that is particular to each individual state, but not on race/"nation." Culture as an identity differs from nation (race) in that the former is inclusive, while the latter is not. Through the cultural identity and the hierarchical care, patriotism is thus justified. However, while caring about one's own state first, one should not completely disregard the interests of other peoples because, as human beings, we also care about other people. Therefore, patriotism is also limited.

Moreover, all humane states should form an alliance that protects the civilization of these states, and they should play the role of humane and benevolent "world police." They should never fight wars against each other because they are civilized and compassionate, and fighting against another state for material gains is an act of beasts, not humans. That is, for Confucians there is civilized peace, not democratic peace. However if the people of another state suffer greatly from a bad regime, the alliance of civilized states should intervene, including the use of

military forces, although the latter must be used cautiously.

Indeed, Mencius argued that only when the suffering is so bad that the people are ready to welcome the “invaders” can the liberation be carried out and justified. In short, the Confucian world order is a compassion-based hierarchy.

The principle underlying this world order is that for Confucians, humane duties (rather than human rights) override sovereignty. However, unlike cosmopolitanism, a radical version of liberalism, according to which everyone should be treated equally (with equal care?) and states should eventually be abolished, Confucians consider the existence of states legitimate, and the Confucian model places a state's interest above other states'. But different from the nation-state model, this priority is not absolute. The sovereignty of a state is conditioned on how humanely the state treats its own people and (to a lesser extent) other peoples. In the real world, the Confucian model is different from the UN model where each state is treated equally, or the five permanent members of the Security Council are the *de facto* dominant forces due to historical contingencies, but it is based on how humane they are.

If we understand that the idea of nation-state was introduced in the Western modernity in order to answer the question of bonding a large state of strangers together, a question early Confucians also faced, and the cosmopolitan model is an attempt to correct the wrongs of the nation-state model, then we should compare all three models with each other before we can claim which one is the best. From a Confucian perspective, the nation-state model is too demeaning to human beings

because it treats human beings as solely self-interest-driven animals, and the cosmopolitan model is too demanding of human beings because it treats human beings as selfless angels. Thus, the Confucian *tianxia* model is more realistic than the cosmopolitan model and more idealistic than the nation-state model. It is a “realistic utopia” that strikes a golden mean between the two.

The Confucian Hybrid Regime for Good Governance

Domestically, early Confucians firmly embraced the *de facto* equality that emerged in a post-nobility world. Mencius passionately argued for the equal potential of everyone to become the morally ideal human being; and he believed that equal opportunities should be offered to everyone to actualize this potential. As mentioned above, the legitimacy of the state lies precisely in its humaneness, understood as offering these opportunities to its people, including meeting their material needs and providing basic education and healthcare to all. The state should be held accountable for the service it provides, and whether the service is satisfactory or not has to be determined by the people themselves. If the service is inadequate, a failed regime can be removed, even by force.

The Confucian embrace of equality and accountability may sound democratic, but early Confucians were no democrats. Like the democrats, they believed that all human beings have the equal potential to govern themselves, and are the best judge of whether they are happy with their life or not. But unlike the democrats, they also believe that