

A CONFUCIAN WORLD ORDER?

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We live in the best of times and in the worst of times. Indeed, we have seen many profound advances in technology aimed at solving issues such as world hunger, poverty, or climate change. These issues culminate in what panelists called “the perfect storm”: a series of issues that, if not entirely human-made, are still exacerbated by humanity. Their outcome is zero-sum: either we work to win together or we lose together. Humanity hasn’t effectively addressed these issues, however, mainly due to a lack of will – be it political, moral, or ethical.

It’s clear that we are living in a changing world, and we have extensively debated the economic order we live under. However, we rarely debate changes taking place in our cultural order. There is a great asymmetry between Chinese and Western culture; this is easily seen in the discrepancy between available Chinese philosophical classics as opposed to western ones. While there is an extensive number of works by Aristotle and Plato published in Chinese

(a testament to the Chinese readership demanding this knowledge), the same cannot be said for Chinese classics. As one panelist suggested, “the best minds of China are not available in English translation,” and, most unfortunately, there is no existing readership driving up the demand.

We must consider the reasons behind this lack of demand or interest. For panelists, the likeliest explanation comes from the historical roots of philosophical exchange. Chinese thought was introduced into the Western academy through the work of 18th and 19th century missionaries, when Confucianism was deemed second-rate to Christianity. In addition, this period of great transition witnessed the arrival of modernity to Asia (in the western sense of the term). The Industrial Revolution began and development became imminent. Modernity had become a popular set of ideas, institutions, and ambitions that, vis-a-vis Japan, was introducing a new vernacular to Asian languages. With this context in mind, it is clear why Confucianism (ruxue, 儒学) was left out of the debate.

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On March 20th 2017, Professors Roger Ames and Zhao Tingyang were welcomed to the Bridge Café in Wudaokou (Beijing, PRC) as guest speakers for the 58th event of ThinkIN China.



Nonetheless, Confucianism can still teach us something about world order. We can start by analyzing ruxue itself, which contains multiple meanings. We can find the Confucian value of aspiring to be exemplary not by looking for new paths, but through learning from various experiences and narratives. To live by Confucian ideas is to consider “what to do?” in different situations, such as by considering how our counterpart is experiencing a situation. Understanding someone is only possible when we consider his or her narrative, where he or she has been, and where he or she is going. Doing so reminds us of the dao (道). Usually translated as “the way”, this character can also be read as “our narrative”.

So, what can a critical, progressive, evolutionary, and prospective Confucianism contribute to a changing “world cultural order”? Confucianism offers a human-centric religiousness, not a God-centric one. To draw meaning from this, one panelist argued we must refuse the idea that modernity equals Westernization. The moment when China met western nations was not the inflection point toward modernity.

Confucianism can provide an ethical perspective. It poses a telling critique of both individualism and the idea of “winners and losers” that is prevalent in Western discourse. Admittedly, individualism was liberating and benign for a period of time; now it has become an argument for being individualistic, thus abandoning communal life. As we are one people, we can only flourish as a human being through maintaining and improving our relationships. Everything we do is through association. The Confucian tradition highlights the role of ethics as well as the importance of fulfilling our respective social roles; that is, who we are as a mother, teacher, daughter, and so forth.

The narratives of our lives consist of the paths we’ve followed, the roles we had and have, and where we want to go. Panelists reminded us that Chinese doctrine does not identify something or someone as bad or good, wrong or right in itself or himself. Moreover, attitudes are not ascribed a positive or negative valence, but are considered within the context of a specific role or relationship. This reflects a fundamental difference between Confucian and western values.

Confucianism perceives a more hybrid and inclusive model of cultural change. This coincides with the concept of Tianxia. The popular translation of the word is “all under heaven”, but one of

the beauties of translation is the complexity of the meaning of words. Tianxia is a concept based on three foundations: a trinity made of the physical world, the people’s heart, and the political constitution. Not all scholars agree on the equal significance of these three foundations. However, the general concept is that the political should be justified by the ethical and the ethical should be justified by the political; this creates a mutually supporting and reinforcing circle.

One panelist argued the “all under heaven” theory implies the internalization of the world, thus making it all-inclusive. The best way of creating an all-inclusive system is to reduce externalities, making the world as one. The second idea embedded in the concept is that we need a relational rationality, an alternative concept to individual rationality as claimed in the rational choice theory. The individual rational choices limit a collective rational choice, and thus curb the creation of a collective rationality. Relational rationality in terms of the minimization of mutual hurt is argued to have the priority over the individual rationality in pursuit of the maximization

of self-interest, so it diminishes the importance of self-help and individual rational choice.

The panelists’ final provocation considers the problems proposed as solvable by technology in the future. Humanity’s greatest challenge in the future is the

control of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) system over humanity, where our need for a collective mind, rather than an atomized and individual one is even more important. AI offers the possibility of change. In the Chinese tradition, changes are supposed to be good things, so long as people are flexible. The impacts of AI on the family will be great, as the family structure will probably disappear. In general, what will disappear and what will remain is a question open to debate.



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ThinkIN China is an intellectual community created in Beijing in September 2010 by a small group of young researchers who live and work in China.