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Confucius in Beijing: The conference of the International Confucian Foundation

Abstract
Extract:
The International Confucian Association(ICA) held its inaugural meeting in Beijing between the 5th and 8th of October 1994 to celebrate the 2545th anniversary of the birth of Confucius.

Keywords
International Confucian Association, East Asia, Beijing, scholarship

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CONFERENCE REPORT

CONFUCIUS IN BEIJING: THE CONFERENCE OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFUCIAN ASSOCIATION

A Conference Report by ***Reg Little***

The International Confucian Association (ICA) held its inaugural meeting in Beijing between the 5th and 8th of October 1994 to celebrate the 2545th anniversary of the birth of Confucius.

It represented a commitment by all the member communities of East Asia to a serious exploration of the qualities of the Confucian tradition which are producing a range of unique, non-Western approaches to cultural, social and economic organisation amongst the growth economies of East Asia. Among the prominent regional leaders, 300 scholars and 1,000 representatives were Gu Mu, widely credited as a prime architect of Deng's economic modernisation program, Li Ruihuan, Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress, Chou Nan, tacitly understood to be Beijing's 'man' in Hong Kong, and Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's Senior Minister.

Western media reports, however, continue to have some difficulty taking the subject seriously, leading with claims that "Beijing's leadership is turning its back on the future in an effort to save itself". In fact, the China Confucius Foundation (CCF) which organised the October meeting, was founded in September 1984 and has received steady support from the governments of both the People's Republic of China and Singapore, as well as from prominent groups in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the United States and West Germany.

Li Ruihan, in an opening address to the meeting, frequently quoted Mencius, the most liberal of the early Confucian thinkers, in his admonitions for rulers to 'listen to the people'.

An address by Lee Kuan Yew was of particular interest in making it clear that the Confucian tradition, contrary to appearance and many misconceptions, is not just a high but also a low culture, not that merely of a cultured elite, but also that of the common people. His address was as follows: -

> My qualification to be Honorary Chairman of the International Confucian Association is that I have an abiding interest in the subject.
>
> My experience of governing Singapore, especially the difficult early years from 1959 to 1969, convinced me that we would not have surmounted our difficulties and setbacks if a large part of the population of Singapore were not imbued with Confucian values. The people had a group cohesion and a pragmatic approach to government and to the problems in the society.
>
> Confucianist traditions have made Chinese Singaporeans revere scholarship and academic excellence, and also respect government officials when they are chosen on the basis of their scholarship. Encouraged by parents, students take their studies seriously. Every parent and every child knows that education is the great equaliser. Your father may be a coolie or a professional, but you can reach the highest positions in government if you are an outstanding scholar. So we have

been able to build up a civil service based on meritocracy, regardless of race, culture or religion. Meritocracy is accepted even by minorities, because Malay and Indian Singaporeans have been influenced by the British civil service tradition of recruitment by competitive examinations, a practice the British borrowed from the Chinese Imperial Examination System, Fortunately, Malay, Indian and Chinese cultures share some of the values which contributed to Singapore's progress.

This strong faith in the value of scholarship and knowledge to improve a person's prospects in life is especially valuable in an age of fast technological change. Successful societies need to have their people well-educated and able to keep on learning through life. This is why Japan produces superior quality goods, out-performing the Americans and the Europeans. Their workers have a higher level of education, knowledge and skills than America's and Europe's, although in research and development the Japanese are not superior to the West. Indeed, many East Asian scientists, researchers and doctorate students choose to work in American institutions.

Seventy-six percent of Singapore's population were Chinese whose culture placed great store on the 'wulun' or five relationships; between father and son, there should be affection, between sovereign and minister, righteousness; between husband and wife, attention to their separate functions; between old and young, a proper order; and between friends, fidelity. They accepted that the interests of society were above that of the individual. They did not believe in the unlimited individualism of the Americans.

As long as the leaders take care of the people, they will obey the leaders. This reciprocity is basic. It was the people's respect for their leaders which made them accept tough, Singaporean government policies. They worked hard, saved and sacrificed for their children's future. They had a passionate belief in education and scholarship. They believed in the ideal of the Junzi (gentleman), and wanted their children to be upright, moral and well-mannered. They believed that their young children should be nurtured through training, discipline and education. They hoped that when the children grew up, they would bring glory to the family. Some of the most talented go into the Civil Service and politics. This is in keeping with the Confucianist belief that good self-cultivation, regulation of the family, governing of the State will bring peace under heaven.

They supported two years compulsory National Military Service, even though allowing a good son to be a soldier was and is against traditional Chinese attitudes. Above all else they were practical and recognised the security problems Singapore faced.

To attract foreign multi-nationals, we changed the law so as to give back to employers the right to hire and fire and promote their workers, so that companies would regain the power to manage free from trade union interference. They were pragmatic and saw the need to change past practices to overcome the economic difficulties which came when Singapore left Malaysia in 1965 and became independent on its own.

Because we had this broad consensus and support of the people, we were able to take tough measures and we overcame our problems. In the process, we became a more cohesive society and built up a concentration of people with increasing skills and knowledge. This helped to accelerate our growth. The discipline necessary for growth also made for an orderly society with low crime rates and with no major problems with drugs, large scale illegal gambling and secret societies or mafia.

A point worth noting is that most Chinese Singaporeans are descendants of immigrants, mostly poor and uneducated. They were not scholars or intellectuals who as a result of the May Fourth Movement rejected Confucianism. The people at large had no formal instruction in Confucianism, that is high culture, but practiced Confucianist precepts in their daily lives. What they had was the low culture or folk culture, based on practices learned from parents and relatives,

encapsulated in proverbs and sayings based on Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism.

In 1970, we did a survey of attitudes of National Servicemen, 18 to 20 year olds. It revealed strong traditional Chinese values and attitudes towards parents and authority, siblings and friends, marriage and pre-marital sex.

However, in the middle 1980s we noticed a change in young people. They appeared less Confucian and placed more emphasis on individual rights and the freedom to "do their own thing". Rapid development and growth had increased incomes and increased exposure to Western media, and Western tourists. Many families travelled on holidays abroad. They were not as traditional in their values and attitudes as their elder brothers of 10-20 years ago. So we decided to reinforce family influence with formal lessons in schools to teach Confucian ethics and the different religions. The objective was to restrict the Westernisation of Singapore society.

Unfortunately, this led to an outburst of Christian missionary zeal, seeking conversions. This provoked a reaction from Buddhists and Muslims who also increased their missionary fervour. So we had to stop all formal teaching of Confucianism and religions. We now only teach civics and good citizenship from Primary One to Secondary Four, that is from age six to sixteen.

Forty years of experience in government has convinced me that moral values and ethical standards are vital for a sound and stable society. The original Confucianism of 2,500 years ago was evolved in and for an agricultural society. It cannot apply unamended to an industrial society of today, with instant mass communications. For example, our daughters are not subordinated to our sons; both are equally educated and have equal job opportunities. So the relationship between man and wife has to change.

Government is now not by feudal princes, and its functions have expanded. So the relationship between Sovereign and Ministers, or rather between government and people, has to be redefined. Nevertheless, I believe if a society retains the core values, especially those embodied in the five relationships, we will foster good and orderly relations within families, between families, and between families and governments. The basic context and importance of these relationships have not changed. Industrialisation and technology have not made them irrelevant.

It is not difficult to recognise some qualities which are common throughout East Asia. In fact participants in conferences focusing on the Confucian tradition are beginning to identify a number of organisational qualities which are of importance to anyone wanting to do business in Asia and, indeed, to anyone interested in the future of the global economy.

As a Singaporean economist, Dr. Tan Kong Yam, put it at a conference in early 1990: -

As no more new frontiers in the world exist for the cowboy to conquer, as international competition becomes less atomistic and more oligopolistic, as the economic and efficient scale of production and R & D becomes large and long term strategic and group perspective are often needed to be competitive in the international market place, the Anglo-American model of individual capitalism might have reached its limit. Its early strength of unorganised vitality, individual dynamism and innovativeness has now become its weakness in the face of its lack of ability to mobilise and take a group-cohesive, long term, strategic perspective. The East Asian culture, with its inherent group cohesiveness, primacy of political or bureaucratic leadership, and a propensity towards long term perspective, is uniquely suited for an era of global oligopolistic competition and strategic positioning in industrial development and upgrading.

The views being articulated in the context of studying the Confucian tradition of civilisation are raising a number of issues of importance for anyone studying the development of the global economy and the shifts in global political influence.

Professor Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis[1] was an object of frequent reference and some substantial criticism at the meeting. A major thrust of comments was the need for improved understanding and communication between different traditions of civilisation and a new type of maturity among Western communities in recognising the viability of alternative traditions of value and organisation.

While initial meetings of Confucian scholars in the 1980s often struggled to escape from past stereotypes the ICA promises to become a source of new and vital perspectives on the evolving character of the Asian growth economies, their underlying strategies and their basic organisational principles.

It is also likely to look with fresh eyes on other traditions of civilisations. Most important of these, of course, will be the Anglo-American world, which still assumes a type of global leadership role while remaining largely the offspring of the great thinkers of the Enlightenment who, working with traditions inherited from Greek antiquity, put in place the intellectual foundations of modern science, democracy and capitalism - the three major pillars of contemporary achievement and faith in future progress.

The tendency for science to unpick or deconstruct the texture of life and society, for democracy to promote an ill-matched homogenisation and fragmentation of personal existence, and for capitalism to generate communities which are uncompetitive, indebted and increasingly inclined to gamble with their future prosperity is much more clearly perceived from the perspective of an alternative sense of human civilisation.

Indeed, a knowledge of Confucian and associated Daoist values suggests that contemporary Western thinking may need to look again and critically at some of the legacies of the Enlightenment which still tend to predetermine Western behaviour and notions of progress. It may even be that, viewed against the panorama of history and civilisation, the mechanical principles of Isaac Newton, the liberal political instincts of John Locke and the commercial ethos of Adam Smith come to look a little like the horsemanship of Genghis Khan - genius, releasing raw energy capable of conquering the world, but in another time.

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[1]. HUNTINGTON, Samuel P. "The Clash of Civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993, pp22-49