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Conference report: A Confucian tinge to security

R. James Ferguson

Bond University, james_ferguson@bond.edu.au

Rosita Dellios

Bond University, rosita_dellios@bond.edu.au

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Conference report: A Confucian tinge to security

Abstract

Extract: Security conferences are not what they used to be. Nor are they quite what they could be. Military matters with geostrategic calculations are no longer their core business. Nowadays, both traditional and non-traditional security concerns fill their programs. The latest strategic thinking, 'weapons platforms', the changing face of terrorism, threats issuing from cyberspace, climate change or global financial dislocation are some of the topics that occupy an increasingly crowded security agenda. Even so, there seems little room or relevance for what passes as the arcane. Yet in the widening field of security studies, the study of the ethical systems of a bygone era in non-Western cultures may not seem so far-fetched.

Keywords

Confucian, security, conference

Conference Report: A Confucian Tinge to Security

Security conferences are not what they used to be. Nor are they quite what they could be. Military matters with geostrategic calculations are no longer their core business. Nowadays, both traditional and non-traditional security concerns fill their programs. The latest strategic thinking, ‘weapons platforms’, the changing face of terrorism, threats issuing from cyberspace, climate change or global financial dislocation are some of the topics that occupy an increasingly crowded security agenda. Even so, there seems little room or relevance for what passes as the arcane. Yet in the widening field of security studies, the study of the ethical systems of a bygone era in non-Western cultures may not seem so far-fetched.

This philosophical turn of mind was apparent at a security conference in China where, despite a strong Western presence among the participants, it was easier to bring up the Confucian-Daoist heritage of a country whose own government has endorsed this tradition in the interests of a more balanced existence. ***The 9th Annual East Asia Security Symposium and Conference*** (http://epublications.bond.edu.au/eass_conference/) held in Beijing on 25-29 June 2012, covered most of the regular concerns of security but in relation to the focus on China. Topics included the non-proliferation of WMD, global nuclear disarmament, Sino-American relations in Asia-Pacific, maritime security, and opportunities and challenges in China’s foreign affairs. Sponsored by the Global Studies Program of the University of New Haven in the USA and the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies (CEWCES) at Australia’s Bond University, the event was hosted by the East Asian Studies Centre of China Foreign Affairs University. So, organisationally, it was true to form as an East-West affair. So was some of the discussion.

This occurred in the first instance when Senior Fellow of CEWCES, Alan Chan, addressed the symposium through the spectrum of Confucian values. Speaking in English, but reinforcing key statements in Chinese, he drew attention to the traditional Chinese ethic of reciprocity. It represents the Chinese version of the Golden Rule. In Christianity this is phrased in the positive: ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’ In the teachings of Confucius (551-478 BC), it is expressed in the negative: ‘Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you.’ This shows a ‘live and let live’ mode of thinking, according to Mr Chan. He also pointed out that reciprocity was *shu* in Chinese. It is a homophone for ‘shoe’, and therefore easily remembered as ‘putting oneself in another person’s shoes’. Such empathy was the essence of Confucian humanism.

Founding member and International Relations analyst of CEWCES, Dr Rosita Dellios, carried the theme along similar lines when she addressed the concept of Harmonious Region at a time when the region was still far from harmonious, though not precarious. China’s foreign policy perspective of Harmonious Region – which China’s 2011 white paper on ‘China’s Peaceful Development’ emphasizes as ‘promoting regional cooperation and good-

neighborly relations’- derives from the Harmonious World vision of world order which President Hu Jintao announced at the United Nations in 2005.

Dr Dellios explained that Harmonious World (and its derivatives) was not only a political formulation sanctioned by China’s Communist Party leadership, but also conformed to traditional Daoist and Confucian thinking. ‘It expresses an anti-hegemonic discourse that privileges *wu-wei* (‘actionless action’) and *yin-yang* correlativity,’ she said. *Wu-wei* means not to over-manage a situation – much like the more passive expression of the Golden Rule which Mr Chan spoke about: ‘Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you.’ The *yin-yang* principle is also about reciprocity as it involves a mutually determining relationship that is dynamic across time and circumstances. This matches the Western International Relations theory of Constructivism in which a nation’s identity is seen as being a work-in-progress through mutual interaction and norm formation. Cooperative practices can evolve.



The 9th Annual East Asia Security Symposium, Beijing, June 2012

In thinking about Harmonious Region, Dr Dellios asked whether China is a constructivist state in search of a correlative region. She also reminded the audience that while there is a sense of process-based dynamic change in regional relations, care needed to be taken in how terms are used. ‘For Confucius, the first thing to be done in governing a state is to rectify terminology – that is, to use terms so that they accord with their meaning,’ she said.

‘Harmonious Region as China’s perspective on regional relations should not be an empty phrase, a cover for aggression or lack of policy. Sincerity is required.’

This is not the first time that the philosophical basis of security concepts was addressed at this annual event. In 2008, Professor Tian Chenshan, who is director of the Centre for East-West Studies at the Beijing Foreign Studies University, spoke of different approaches to security that require, in effect, stepping into the other’s shoes. We need to put aside our own concept of security – be it a Western understanding of rights as those of an individual or Chinese notions of the individual as correlative - and try to understand how the other thinks. ‘Many Chinese’, he explained, ‘even impose Western structures on Chinese systems. In doing so we are decontextualising and distorting them.’

At this year’s conference, one speaker pointed out that even Deng Xiaoping’s famous *24-character strategy*, in which he advised the Chinese leadership after the collapse of the Soviet Union not to claim leadership among the remaining socialist states, as being misinterpreted in light of Western perceptions. Deng – the renowned second generation leader who introduced China’s reforms – had said: ‘Observe developments soberly, maintain our position, meet the challenge calmly, hide our capacities and bide our time, remain free of ambitions, never claim leadership.’ This is often interpreted as strategic deception, that China is speaking of peace and harmony but is in fact building up its power for the day it is able to assert its claims – be they the ‘renegade province’ of Taiwan or even those disputed territories in the South and East China Sea. Deng’s strategy, however, reflects the popular idiom of hiding one’s capacities and biding one’s time (*tao guang yang hui*). It refers to classical Chinese thought found in Daoist thinking (such as *wu-wei*, actionless activity) and the Doctrine of the Mean which seeks to avoid extremes and to do what one is capable of rather than overreaching one’s abilities. The *I Ching* (Book of Changes) is also a source of advice for patience and waiting for the right time to fulfil one’s potential in a natural and proper way.

These thoughts are not confined to scholars and their conference settings. China has modernized so rapidly in the urban areas that it is widely believed by some Chinese to have lost much of its ‘equilibrium’ and indeed its way (or *dao*). The wealth gap has increased dramatically since Mao’s egalitarian China. A unique material culture – most noticeable in traditional architecture and neighbourhoods (like Beijing’s *hutongs*) – is giving way to forests of skyscrapers. It had already suffered from an earlier wave of destruction by Red Guards in the 1960s.

The same can be said for the loss of rites, which regulated life in the continuity of the agrarian past. Johnson Chang, an avant-garde art curator, is an example of the preservationists who seek to re-instil within Chinese society the values that can save it from self-destruction through the obsessive pursuit of profit. As noted in an article in the *Wall Street Journal Magazine* (July/August 2012, Asia), Johnston Chang has recreated a traditional village called Jinze on the outskirts of Shanghai, not as a tourist attraction, but as ‘a working center for traditional Chinese artists, craftsmen and musicians’ (p. 34) before their skills are lost forever. He has also sought to revive within the village Confucian rites (*li*)

which are more than rituals and include “everything from etiquette, education and morality to a cosmic vision of a balanced world order’ (p. 45). Johnson Chang is one of many, from different walks of life, who have sought to recover a vanishing China. However the artists are perhaps in the best position to provoke thought. This was dramatically demonstrated by the controversial Chinese artist Ai Weiwei in 1995, when he ‘famously photographed himself dropping a Han Dynasty urn and letting it smash to the ground’ (p. 40).

Academics are not prone to smashing antiquities for didactic purposes, but they too try to make a point when it comes to security issues in the broad sense. That there are alternative philosophical approaches to security itself is becoming increasingly evident with the influence of ‘rising powers’ and engaged publics from diverse civilizational backgrounds. More specifically, with economically-led power shifting from the hitherto dominant West to the rapidly emerging East, an age of wider cultural referents may be expected. It is a phenomenon led by China’s spectacular growth, and the corresponding geostrategic ‘pivot’ to Asia on the part of the world’s paramount power, the United States.

Security conferences may not be what they were, but the Beijing conference provided a Confucian tinge to what such conferences could be under an ‘Asian century’.