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Confucianism in International Relations: Tradition, Statecraft, and Chinese Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Confucianism, far from being a static relic, functions today as an active ideological resource shaping governance, society, and international relations in East Asia. In China, the revival of Confucian thought since Deng Xiaoping has provided the Communist Party with cultural legitimacy, reinforced social order, and inspired distinct schools of international relations theory that challenge Western paradigms. In Japan, the wartime instrumentalization of Confucianism discredited it as a political framework, though its legacy persists in cultural practices. In Korea, Confucianism has evolved from state orthodoxy into a diffuse moral language, underpinning both social ethics and economic modernization while remaining contested in contemporary debates. By situating Confucianism within global politics, the paper demonstrates its continuing relevance as a culturally rooted alternative to Western universalism.

INDEX

1. A first encounter with Confucianism 4
2. Origins of Confucianism 7
3. Neo-Confucianism 9
4. Korean Confucianism 11
5. Japanese Confucianism or Edo-Neo-Confucianism 14
6. The resurgence of Confucian thought 18
7. Practice in East Asia 22
8. Final Reflections 30

BIBLIOGRAPHY 34

1. A first encounter with Confucianism

Confucianism is a philosophical tradition that originated in China, centered on the teachings propagated by Confucius and his disciples. Some regard it as a human-centered value system, some as a religion, and others as a social code.[1] It comprises ethical conduct, political doctrine, an academic heritage, and a manner of living that has deeply influenced the Chinese for over two millennia.[2] This tradition, from its earliest forms to modern interpretations, consistently emphasizes the pursuit of harmony within individuals, families, society, and the world, viewing it as both a fundamental ideal and a dynamic process.[3]

Although often categorized alongside major historical religions, Confucianism distinguishes itself by its lack of an organized institutionalized structure. Nevertheless, it propagated to other East Asian nations influenced by Chinese literate culture, profoundly shaping spiritual and political life. While ritual holds significant importance in Confucian practice, there is relatively little emphasis on the afterworld or eschatological concerns[4]. There are no Confucian deities, nor does it address the creation of Earth. Consequently, it does not align with the Western conceptualization of religion.[5]

The core sources for Confucian thought include the *Analects*—a compilation of Confucius' teachings compiled by his students and revised over generations—[6]together with the Four Books and Five Classics, which later became the canonical foundations of the tradition. It is important to note that, much like in Ancient Greek philosophy, Confucius' disciples often elaborated upon the writings of their master and attributed those contents to Confucius himself.[7] Central to Confucius' philosophical understanding are several foundational values: filial piety (*xiao*, 孝); rites and moral conduct (*li*, 禮); humaneness or benevolence (*ren*, 仁); the practice of self-cultivation (*haoxue*, 好學); and the pursuit of moral nobility (*junzi*, 君子).

Filial Piety (*xiao*, 孝) is often considered Confucianism's central tenet, influencing not only its political current but also its social and ethical theories. Chen Lai, a prominent

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[1] Edward Y. J. Chung, *Korean Confucianism: Tradition and Modernity* (Seongnam, Korea: The Academy of Korean Studies Press, 2015), 19–20.

[2] Tu Weiming, "Confucianism," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2018, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Confucianism.

[3] Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 12–13.

[4] "Confucianism," *World Religions: Exploring Diversity* (Jacksonville, FL: Florida State College at Jacksonville, n.d.), https://fscj.pressbooks.pub/worldreligions/chapter/confucianism/.

[5] National Geographic Society, "Confucianism," *National Geographic Education*, March 6, 2024, https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/confucianism/.

[6] Daniel K. Gardner, *Confucianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

[7] Ronnie L. Littlejohn, *Confucianism: An Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), 11.

contemporary scholar of Confucian philosophy, explains that filial piety involves a deep sense of gratitude and emotional reciprocity toward one's parents, expressed through care, respect, and the repayment of their affection.[8] One first learns how to interact with others within the family, and this extends to broader social relationships and ultimately to state-level governance. In Chinese culture, a well-constructed and gracious society is established upon the institution of the family. In the case of the state, the relationship between ruler and subject is often conceptualized as a familial bond. Furthermore, just as a parent cares for his children, a ruler should look after his subjects with the same care. This emphasis on familial relationships is further observed through the five cardinal relationships: parent-child, husband-wife, sibling-sibling, friend-friend, and ruler-subject. These relationships constitute the basis of any good sociopolitical order.[9]

In Confucianism, *li* (禮), often translated as rites, rituals, and morality, refers to specific behaviors that demonstrate moral correctness and refined manners in both relationships and ceremonial practices. They exhibit the mannerisms of a sophisticated and morally upright person (*junzi*, 君子). According to Confucius, one must observe the rites to be able to cultivate humaneness (*ren*, 仁). Without the guidance of the rites, carefulness turns into timidity, courage becomes recklessness, and straightforwardness shifts into impoliteness. In contrast, adhering to the rites will foster spiritual development.[10] In Confucian thought, the virtues of righteousness (*yi,* 義), moral knowledge (*zhi*, 智), and trustworthiness (*xin*, 信) are grouped under the principle of *li*, which together support humaneness (*ren*).[11]

Ren (仁) is often translated as humaneness, benevolence, compassion, and true goodness.[12] It stands as the highest virtue in Confucian thought.[13] In the *Analects*, Confucius describes a *ren* person as someone who is able to endure both hardship and prosperity with equal composure; someone who possesses the ability to discern between truly good and evil without prejudice; someone who is free from any desire to engage in immoral actions; and someone who stands apart from those who deviate from righteousness.[14] These qualities highlight how *ren* represents the pinnacle of moral excellence in Confucianism. Certain definitions of *ren* bear similarities to Christian teachings, particularly the principle of humaneness, occasionally defined as treating

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[8] Chen Lai, "Historical and Cultural Features of Confucianism in East Asia," *Confucianism in Context: Classic Philosophy and Contemporary Issues, East Asia and Beyond*, ed. Roger T. Ames and Peter D. Hershock (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 103.

[9] Ronnie L. Littlejohn, *Confucianism: An Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), 25.

[10] Ibid., p. 27.

[11] Ibid., p. xxii.

[12] Ibid., p. 28.

[13] Daniel K. Gardner, *Confucianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), 22.

[14] Ronnie L. Littlejohn, *Confucianism: An Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), 29.

others in a way one would want to be treated. This is related to the concept of empathy (*shu,* 恕), which is considered a pathway to the realization of *ren*.[15]

Self-cultivation (*haoxue*, 好學) as a process plays a crucial role for every individual in contributing to the creation of a harmonious sociopolitical order.[16] Confucius claimed that we are not born fully human, but we become human through self-cultivation.[17] All individuals are encouraged to partake in moral refinement since every human being has the power to exert a positive moral influence on others.[18] Confucius emphasized that all adherents are required to prioritize self-cultivation as the foundation of their pursuit of the True Way, regardless of their social, political, or economic standing. It serves as the foundation for the committed Confucian's effort to rejuvenate civility, peace, and ritual grace within Chinese society. The objective for the individual engaging in the self-cultivation process is to attain the status of a *junzi* (君子).[19]

A *junzi* (君子) represents a person of moral nobility, an exemplary individual in Confucian philosophy. To be a *junzi*, during Confucius's time, literally denoted "ruler's son" and typically referred to the aristocratic elite of the Zhou, signifying birth into the social elite. Confucius used the expression and redefined it to signify someone of moral rather than sociopolitical nobility. Confucius contrasts this morally superior individual with the *xiaroen* (小人), the ethically inferior one. The small man is one who neglects to adhere to the moral way. Confucius noted, “The superior man understands righteousness; the small man understands profit.” A *junzi* exemplifies *ren*, the highest virtue of humaneness. By adhering to the ritualistic norms of tradition, this moral exemplar demonstrates respect and dignity towards others while striving for traits such as humility, honesty, trustworthiness, righteousness, and compassion.[20]

At the core of Confucianism’s political doctrine, and central to understanding the moral authority of its leaders, lies the concept of the Mandate of Heaven (*tian ming*, 天命).[21] In the Confucian classics and imperial religious practices, Heaven (*tian*, 天) is referred to as a divine being who controls and determines the human world.[22] This powerful idea, grounded in the Way of Heaven (*tian dao*, 天道), provided the moral and political justification for dynastic rule, asserting that a ruler’s legitimacy was not based on coercion but on their ethical leadership and virtuous conduct.[23] As the “Son of Heaven,” the

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[15] Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 213.

[16] Daniel K. Gardner, *Confucianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), 18.

[17] Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 210.

[18] Daniel K. Gardner, *Confucianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), 16.

[19] Ibid., p. 18.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 46.

[22] Ibid., p. 143.

[23] Ronnie L. Littlejohn, *Confucianism: An Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), 3.

emperor was believed to govern with divine approval, reinforcing the notion that only one legitimate ruler could preside over the realm at a time.[24] Heaven signaled its approval or disapproval through blessings like good harvests or punishments such as disasters and famine—signs that a ruler had retained or lost the Mandate of Heaven.[25]

Although the Mandate of Heaven granted rulers considerable authority, it was not unconditional. Their legitimacy depended on their moral performance and the well-being of their people. Ethical leadership, in this view, entails attentiveness to public opinion, equitable governance, and the promotion of the common welfare—principles that resonate with modern democratic values.[26] Mencius even went as far as to argue that the removal, or even execution, of a tyrant was justified, since a ruler who fails to serve the people forfeits his right to rule and can no longer be considered a true king.[27]

2. Origins of Confucianism

Confucianism is fundamentally an East Asian tradition, deeply rooted in Chinese culture. To fully grasp Confucianism as a way of life or a traditional value system, it is essential to explore its origins and evolution within its native context. A common approach to understanding the Chinese Confucian tradition involves dividing its history according to the various Chinese dynasties. Its trajectory was significantly shaped by the prevailing political, social, economic, religious, and cultural contexts. During periods of societal breakdown, Confucianism responded by becoming either more flexible or more dogmatic.[28]

Kong Qiu, widely known in the Western world as Confucius (551–479 BC) and traditionally referred to in China as Kong Fuzi (Master Kong), lived during the Spring and Autumn periods of the Zhou Dynasty (770–476 BC). This period was a time of major upheaval, during which the system of feudal states established by the Zhou Dynasty began to disintegrate due to the weakening of central power. As the Zhou rulers' authority declined, the vassal states increasingly defied the commands of the central government and competed for supremacy.[29]

For most of his lifetime, Confucius endeavored to preserve and transmit traditional wisdom in a period of instability in the hope of bringing about a new era of enlightenment.[30] By his passing, 25 centuries ago, his teachings had extended across the

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[24] Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 167.

[25] Ibid., p. 144.

[26] Nicholas Spina, Doh C. Shin, and Dana Cha, "Confucianism and Democracy: A Review of the Opposing Conceptualizations," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 12, no. 1 (2011): 146.

[27] Ibid., p. 148.

[28] Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 4.

[29] Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 21–22.

[30] Ronnie L. Littlejohn, *Confucianism: An Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), xix.

state and beyond.[31] His ideas significantly shaped the *Ru* tradition, a scholarly doctrine dedicated to moral refinement, ritual, and learning that had existed prior to his time.[32] As Zhang Binglin, a prominent late Qing and early Republican scholar, observed, those who have taught and passed down the Confucian classics are nowadays designated as *ru* scholars.[33]

Mencius (Mengzi, 372–289 BC) is considered Confucius' successor, who refined and systematized Confucianism into a more comprehensive ethical and political framework.[34] His philosophy is fundamentally built upon the assertion that human nature is inherently good, rooted in four innate moral principles found in every person: commiseration (benevolence), shame and dislike (righteousness), modesty and complaisance (propriety), and approving and disapproving (knowledge).[35] According to Mencius, the highest goal of moral self-cultivation is to find joy in being moral, performing actions naturally or spontaneously from these internal virtues.[36]

Politically, Mencius strongly criticized rulers who focused on personal or state profit, arguing that such an emphasis leads to conflict and endangers the state.[37] He stressed that true goodness (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*) should be the sole guiding principles in governance, and that people need material well-being before they can be effectively taught virtue.[38]

Confucianism was first established as the state ideology during the Han Dynasty (206 BC–8 CE), solidifying its central role in the Chinese Empire order. Yet Confucian learning often developed independently of government control, with many schools operating outside the direct influence of the imperial court, posing challenges to official authority. As Wm. Theodore de Bary, a leading American Sinologist, claimed, "Confucianism was less dependent on the state for survival than the state on it."[39]

The shift from a feudal society to an ethical one was fueled by the introduction of Confucian values, especially the moral ideal of *ren*.

With the fall of the Han Dynasty and the subsequent three and a half centuries of continuous warfare and political instability, widespread unrest and dissatisfaction

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[31] Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 16.

[32] Ibid., p. 17.

[33] Ibid., p. 19.

[34] Chang, Carsun, "The Significance of Mencius," *Philosophy East and West* 8, no. 1/2 (1958): 37.

[35] Ibid., p. 46.

[36] Yong Huang, "Confucius and Mencius on the Motivation to Be Moral," *Philosophy East and West* 60, no. 1 (2010): 69.

[37] Daniel K. Gardner, *Confucianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 56.

[38] Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 185.

[39] Ibid., p. 4–5.

emerged in China. Consequently, Confucianism was gradually supplanted by Daoist and Buddhist philosophies, which gained influence amid the turmoil. This widespread dissatisfaction led many to question Confucianism's efficacy, thereby allowing Daoism and Buddhism to flourish.[40]

3. Neo-Confucianism

The origins of Neo-Confucianism can be traced back to the late Tang Dynasty (618–907).[41] However, it is during the 11th century, in the Song Dynasty (960–1279), that a cluster of Confucian thinkers began reinterpreting the teachings of their classical predecessors.[42] This intellectual movement emerged in response to the long-standing dominance of Buddhism and Daoism in Chinese philosophical thought. As a result, Neo-Confucianism arose as a synthesis of these traditions, blending Confucian ethics with Daoist cosmology and Buddhist metaphysics.[43]

At the time, Confucian scholar-officials throughout the Song dynasty had the perception that society was experiencing a crisis on multiple fronts, including politically, intellectually, and morally.[44] Some scholars also argue that the emergence of Neo-Confucianism was partly motivated by a renewed emphasis on civil governance over military rule, particularly in response to the warlordism that destabilized China in the late ninth and early tenth centuries.[45] By the thirteenth century, it had been established as the official state orthodoxy, serving as both the guiding framework for the Chinese imperial administration and the basis of the civil service examination system, a role it would continue to fulfill until the early twentieth century.[46]

Unlike classical Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism engaged with metaphysical questions concerning the origins, nature, and structure of the universe. It explored concepts that had traditionally fallen under the jurisdiction of Buddhism and Daoism, and its development can be seen, in part, as a reaction to Buddhist metaphysics and Daoist cosmology.[47]

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[40] Tyson J. Yost, "The Historical Setting for the Forming of Neo-Confucianism in Classical China," *Studia Antiqua* 2, no. 2 (2003): 114.

[41] Harold M. Tanner, "Focus on Neo-Confucianism for the World History Curriculum," *World History Connected* 4, no. 1 (2006), https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/4.1/tanner.html.

[42] Wm. Theodore de Bary, "Neo-Confucianism," *Berkshire Encyclopedia of China*, vol. 5 (Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire Publishing Group, 2009), 1576.

[43] Tyson J. Yost, "The Historical Setting for the Forming of Neo-Confucianism in Classical China," *Studia Antiqua* 2, no. 2 (2003): 113.

[44] Daniel K. Gardner, *Confucianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), 71.

[45] Wm. Theodore de Bary, "Neo-Confucianism," *Berkshire Encyclopedia of China*, vol. 5 (Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire Publishing Group, 2009), 1576.

[46] Daniel K. Gardner, *Confucianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), 70.

[47] Morris Rossabi, *A History of China* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 182.

Furthermore, on the basis of this system of metaphysics, it created a structured program of self-cultivation, a step-by-step template for attaining sagehood.[48]

This system reached its most developed form in the work of Zhu Xi (1130–1200), widely regarded as the principal architect of Song Neo-Confucianism. Following Mencius, Zhu affirmed the essential goodness of human nature but also sought to solve a persistent question: if humans are born good, how does evil arise? Like Mencius, he held that all people are born with the potential for four cardinal virtues: humaneness (*ren*, 仁), righteousness (*yi*, 義), moral knowledge (*zhi*, 智), and ritual propriety (*li*, 禮).[49]

In contrast to Western traditions that emphasize rationality as the defining feature of humanity, Confucians have long identified *ren* as the essential moral capacity distinguishing human beings from other beings.[50] Zhu grounded this in a comprehensive metaphysical framework. For him, the entire universe is made up of *qi* (氣), often translated as material force, and governed by *li* (理), translated as "principle" or "moral principle." All things are made of *qi*, the unifying force of the universe, making all things—living and nonliving—fundamentally interconnected.[51] While this shared *qi* establishes a connection among all beings, it also accounts for difference: each individual is born with a unique quality and quantity of *qi*. Though human beings generally receive *qi* in its most clear and pure form, variations can obscure their naturally good nature.[52]

However, *qi* is not the source of human beings' innate goodness. Just as all things in the universe are constituted of *qi* (material force), they are also governed by *li* (理), commonly translated as "principle" or "moral principle." As defined by Fung Yu-lan in his *History of Chinese Philosophy* (1953), *li* is the law or principle that governs existing things.[53] Human nature is identical with *li*, and therefore good by definition. Zhu Xi explains that if *qi* gives a thing its particular psychophysical form, *li* is the metaphysical principle that determines what the thing is and the rule to which it should conform.[54] Moral failure, then, arises not because *li* is lacking, but because *qi* clouds its expression. Since each individual receives a unique allotment of *qi*, differing in clarity and density, this variation either allows a person's innate moral nature to shine through or prevents it from fully manifesting.[55]

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[48] Daniel K. Gardner, *Confucianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), 72.

[49] Ibid., p. 73.

[50] Yong Huang, "Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian Metaphysics of Human Nature: Explanatory, Not Foundational," *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Justin Tiwald (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 357.

[51] Daniel K. Gardner, *Confucianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), 73.

[52] Ibid., p. 74.

[53] Hansang A. Kim, "The Primacy of Li (Principle) in the Neo-Confucian Philosophy of Zhu Xi: Significance for Contemporary Korean Society." *Korea Journal* 59, no. 4 (December 2019): 198.

[54] Daniel K. Gardner, *Confucianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), 75.

[55] Ibid., p. 76.

Zhu Xi sought to reconcile the tension between *qi* and *li* through the process of self-cultivation, by which the individual refines their *qi*, allowing the goodness inherent in their human nature to manifest. This cultivation involved, especially, the investigation of things, a disciplined effort to move beyond appearances and grasp the particular expressions of principle (*li*) within the world, thereby uncovering deeper moral truths.[56] This process ultimately aimed at attaining sagehood—a life of moral clarity, social responsibility, and harmony.

Zhu Xi's influence extended beyond metaphysics. He edited and systematized classical texts, promoting educational and local reforms that facilitated the dissemination of Confucianism through print. His teachings became the foundation of the Chinese civil service examination system until it was abolished in 1905 and were officially adopted by both the Mongol Empire and the Joseon Dynasty in Korea.[57] For his unparalleled influence, he was honored with the title *Zhu Fuzi* (Master Zhu), a distinction shared only with Confucius and Mencius.[58]

4. Korean Confucianism

Korean Confucianism has unique qualities that distinguish it from its Chinese and Japanese counterparts.[59] Prior to the arrival of Western influence, China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam formed what is commonly referred to as the Sinosphere—a cultural sphere unified by the use of classical Chinese script, reverence for Chinese canonical texts, and a shared foundation in Confucian moral education. Even if their natural settings and lifestyles differed somewhat, all countries in the Sinosphere emphasized Confucian virtues such as *ren* and *xiao*. However, despite this shared foundation, national goals and social structures often diverged, resulting in significant differences in ideology, politics, and worldview among the populations shaped by their respective educational systems.[60]

Classical Confucianism first entered Korea during the Three Kingdoms period (57 BCE–668 CE), as records reflect.[61] Later, in the late thirteenth century, Neo-Confucianism was introduced primarily through interpretations transmitted from Yuan China (1271–1368). With the establishment of the Joseon Dynasty (1392– 1897), Neo-Confucianism was formally adopted as the state ideology. As noted by David C. Kang, a scholar of East

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[56] Ibid., p. 77–78.

[57] Wm. Theodore de Bary, "Neo-Confucianism," *Berkshire Encyclopedia of China*, vol. 5 (Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire Publishing Group, 2009), 1578.

[58] Ronnie L. Littlejohn, *Confucianism: An Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), 105–106.

[59] Chen Lai, "Historical and Cultural Features of Confucianism in East Asia," in *Confucianism in Context: Classic Philosophy and Contemporary Issues, East Asia and Beyond*, ed. Roger T. Ames and Peter D. Hershock (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 102.

[60] Ibid., p. 108–109.

[61] Asia Society, "Historical and Modern Religions of Korea," *Asia Society*, 2019, https://asiasociety.org/education/historical-and-modern-religions-korea.

Asian international relations, Korea, in some respects, became "more Confucian than China itself," reportedly having almost ten times as many Confucian academies (*sowon*) per capita.[62] The emergence of Neo-Confucianism precipitated the abrupt decline of Buddhism in Korea. Over time, Neo-Confucianism became deeply intertwined with Korea's political and social systems.[63]

At the same time, it sparked considerable political conflicts. The *Shilin* school, composed of Confucians, struggled for social reform and justice, clashing with the *Jiuxun* school, which defended the interests of the aristocracy. These disputes culminated in constant literati purges during the late 15th and 16th centuries, resulting in widespread political persecution and the execution of Confucians, a phenomenon uncommon in other East Asian countries.[64] The massacre of Confucian intellectuals ignited the steadfast spirit of Korean Confucianism, with the ethical principle of "righteousness" or "appropriateness" (*yi,* 義) at its core. The *Shilin* Confucians' unwavering commitment to moral convictions amidst political adversity fostered a unique Confucian ethos in Korea.[65]

Additionally, Korea's history of repeated invasions by foreign powers, from the Khitans and the Mongols during the Goryeo era (918–1392) to the Japanese and Manchus during the Joseon dynasty, further reinforced the Confucian ideals of loyalty and righteousness (*zhongyi*, 忠義) among the Korean people. Confucian scholars played a pivotal role in mobilizing military recruits, exemplifying profound loyalty and patriotism, and thus became a source of national pride. These scholars transformed the concept of righteousness into a national spirit of resistance against injustice and aggression.[66] Centuries later, this enduring Confucian ethos reemerged during Japanese colonial rule, when the continued practice of Confucian traditions was regarded as an act of resistance to Japanization and cultural suppression.[67]

Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century, Confucianism has remained a controversial topic in Korean society. The rapid proliferation of Christianity in recent decades has ostensibly transformed the nation's spiritual landscape, while two contrasting perspectives on Confucianism continue to persist in modern Korea. The conservatives emphasize the pivotal role of Confucianism in the development of highly advanced

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[62] David C. Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks." *International Security* 27, no. 4 (2003): 37.

[63] Yong Chen, "The Presence of Confucianism in Korea and Its General Influence on Law and Politics," *Corea. Una visión jurídica y geopolítica en el siglo XXI*, ed. Gustavo López Montiel (Ciudad de México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2021), 78.

[64] Chen Lai, "Historical and Cultural Features of Confucianism in East Asia," in *Confucianism in Context: Classic Philosophy and Contemporary Issues, East Asia and Beyond*, ed. Roger T. Ames and Peter D. Hershock (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 107.

[65] Ibid., p. 108.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Tomasz Śleziak, "The Role of Confucianism in Contemporary South Korean Society," *Rocznik Orientalistyczny*, no. 1 (2013): 39.

civilizations in premodern eras, take pride in the accomplishments of Neo-Confucian philosophers in the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1897), and state that Confucianism embodies the core of Korean culture and national identity. On the other hand, the liberal or anti-traditionalist faction asserts that the core of Korean national identity resides not in Confucianism but in the indigenous folk customs and beliefs of the general population, attributing all societal issues to Confucianism and perceiving it as a significant obstacle to progress in society.[68]

At the same time, the legacy of Confucianism is evident in the growing interest among Koreans in funeral rites—a trend that gained popularity in the 2000s, shaped by a combination of Confucian and Christian influences. Additionally, the Confucian principle of filial piety also remains significant in contemporary Korean society; for instance, students address their teachers by title rather than by name, using the term *seonsaengnim* (선생님). Other cultural practices, such as the traditional tea ceremony, also reflect deep Confucian roots.[69]

Beyond the cultural sphere, scholars have also linked Korea's modern economic success to its Confucian heritage. Alongside Japan, the Four Asian Tigers have been analyzed through the lens of "industrial Confucianism" or "Confucian capitalism," concepts that highlight how Confucian values, particularly a strong commitment to education, self-discipline, diligence, and collective productivity, have provided favorable cultural conditions for rapid industrialization and sustained economic growth.[70] Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's founding Prime Minister and architect of its rapid modernization, likewise stressed the importance of culture, crediting Confucian traditions with instilling the discipline and social cohesion that underpinned East Asia's developmental achievements.[71]

While its institutional authority has long since faded, Confucianism endures in Korea not as the elite orthodoxy that once shaped Joseon's political and social order, but as a diffused moral and cultural framework. Its legacy remains embedded in values, customs, and collective attitudes, continuing to inform Korean identity even as the nation modernizes and diversifies its ideological foundations.[72]

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[68] Yong Chen, "The Presence of Confucianism in Korea and Its General Influence on Law and Politics," *Corea. Una visión jurídica y geopolítica en el siglo XXI*, ed. Gustavo López Montiel (Ciudad de México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2021), 78.

[69] Nicolas Levi, "Confucianism in South Korea and Japan: Similarities and Differences," *Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia*, no. 26 (2013): 189–190.

[70] Edward Y. J. Chung, *Korean Confucianism: Tradition and Modernity* (Seongnam, Korea: The Academy of Korean Studies Press, 2015), 88.

[71] Fareed Zakaria and Lee Kuan Yew, "Culture Is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew," *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 2 (1994): 125.

[72] Edward Y. J. Chung, *Korean Confucianism: Tradition and Modernity* (Seongnam, Korea: The Academy of Korean Studies Press, 2015), 144.

5. Japanese Confucianism or Edo-Neo-Confucianism

Confucianism spread to Korea during the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–9 CE, 25–220 CE) and was later transmitted to Japan during the 5th century AD, according to *Kojiki* (712 CE).[73] The influence of Classical Confucianism began to decline, eventually being relegated to a marginal activity with the introduction of Neo-Confucianism during the Muromachi period (1336–1573). Nevertheless, Japan's dominant fusion of Zen and Confucianism initially prevented Neo-Confucianism from being recognized as a distinct ideological framework. At the time, Zen monks advocated Confucianism not to endorse its tenets but to underscore the supremacy of Zen philosophy. This strategy, known as "The Combination of the Three Religions," framed Zen as an ideal amalgamation of Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian teachings.[74]

During the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1867), both the Samurai and merchant classes adopted Neo-Confucianism in order to address their respective economic and political needs,[75] with the Samurai, in particular, embracing it as a means of finding meaning in their lives within the new, peaceful Tokugawa order.[76] Confucianism became deeply intertwined with the Tokugawa state's governance, with its principles shaping not only state ideology but also institutions, personnel, and essential fields, including education, medicine, and science. The Tokugawa feudal structure, resembling the hierarchical order of the Zhou Dynasty, made Neo-Confucian values especially relevant. Over time, the philosophy began to detach from Zen and gradually evolved into a dominant ideological system.[77]

This intellectual development led to the emergence of three factional trends within Japanese Neo-Confucianism: the "Scholars of Zhu Xi Learning" (*Shushigakusha*), the "Scholars of Wang Yangming Learning" (*Yomeigakusha*), and the "Scholars of Ancient Learning" (*Kogakusha*), the latter being particularly tied with indigenous Japanese currents. Japanese Confucianism is mostly examined through the perspective of these three schools.[78]

Edo-Neo-Confucianism underwent two notable intellectual transitions: from dependence on innate, universal principles based on natural order ("nature") to the deliberate

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[73] John Tucker, "Japanese Confucian Philosophy," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta (Stanford University, May 20, 2008), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/japanese-confucian/.

[74] Ren Jie and Lyu Hongbo, "The Absorption and Transformation of NeoConfucianism during the Edo Period of Japan." *Forum for World Literature Studies* 13, no. 1 (March 2021): 183.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Kiri Paramore, *Japanese Confucianism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 44.

[77] Ren Jie and Lyu Hongbo, "The Absorption and Transformation of NeoConfucianism during the Edo Period of Japan." *Forum for World Literature Studies* 13, no. 1 (March 2021): 183.

[78] Kiri Paramore, *Japanese Confucianism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 43.

formulation of systems and norms adapted to the complexity of human society ("artificiality"), and from prioritizing external etiquette and hierarchical roles ("respect") to emphasizing internal moral integrity and authentic emotional expression ("sincerity").[79] These shifts aimed to reinterpret Confucian values to correspond with Japanese cultural and social needs more effectively.[80]

The transition to "artificiality" prioritized the utilization of human-created principles to confront social reality, moving beyond the direct extraction of norms from the natural order. Meanwhile, the shift to "sincerity" underscored the growing importance of personal integrity and emotional authenticity. "Sincerity," as interpreted by Japanese Confucian scholars, referred to "emotion," emphasizing sincere feelings towards others that were expressed through honest conduct.[81]

In Japan, Confucianism's primary manifestation was religious, as its influence on politics, culture, education, and other domains depended on its spiritual practices. Kiri Paramore, professor of Asian Studies and author of *Japanese Confucianism: A Cultural History*, argued that the more Confucianism was expressed through religious practices, the broader its societal impact, especially on politics.[82] Historically, its strength in Japan can also be attributed to its interaction with Shinto, the country's indigenous and most widely practiced religion. The ethical framework of Shinto drew partly from Confucian teachings, and in turn, Shinto's spirit reinforced the Confucian foundation in Japanese society.[83]

While Confucianism's religious rituals were fundamental to its societal influence, this position underwent a significant transformation following the collapse of the Tokugawa dynasty. With the rise of the Meiji government (1868–1912), Neo-Confucianism, which had once served to legitimize the social order under Tokugawa rule, rapidly lost its status—not merely due to a loss of authority, but because it had become so deeply embedded in the practices, institutions, and personnel of the Tokugawa state that the Meiji reformers sought to dismantle it. As Japan sought to emulate the Western models of Statecraft by promoting the separation of politics and religion, concerns about perceived moral disorientation emerged. In this context, many Meiji oligarchs considered Confucianism the epitome of the mixture of politics and religion, further justifying its

[79] Ren Jie and Lyu Hongbo, "The Absorption and Transformation of NeoConfucianism during the Edo Period of Japan." *Forum for World Literature Studies* 13, no. 1 (March 2021): 184.

[80] Ibid., p. 188.

[81] Ibid., p. 184–185.

[82] Kiri Paramore, *Japanese Confucianism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 3–4.

[83] Nicolas Levi, "Confucianism in South Korea and Japan: Similarities and Differences," *Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia*, no. 26 (2013): 188.

marginalization. Many intellectuals also attributed this decline to its inability to address the changing social realities of the 1880s.[84]

Despite its decline during the Meiji Era, Confucianism was successfully reintroduced as a philosophy and repositioned within the framework of Western academic thought. Inoue Tetsujirō played a central role in this effort by drawing on not only traditional Asian philosophy but also contemporary Western philosophical and sociological paradigms. By redefining Confucianism as a philosophy, Inoue concentrated on the idea of a "national morality", transforming it into an instrument for advancing ethical principles that bolstered Japan's growing nationalism. Thus, although Confucianism experienced a significant decline during this time, it successfully adapted to Japan's emerging philosophical frameworks, which addressed the era's changing needs.[85]

Numerous scholars regard the Meiji period as the point at which Confucianism lost its meaningful influence in Japan. Aside from trite allusions, the lack of in-depth academic discussions on Confucianism in modern Japan reflects the common view among historians and religious studies scholars that Confucianism was essentially dead in Japan from this point onward.[86]

However, the landscape changed after World War I. The depiction of European barbarism challenged the notion that Western modernity embodied civilization and order. This was also the time at which most pro-Confucian scholarly associations merged, forming the *Shibunkai*. This more politically engaged activist organization played a key role in the revival and societal integration of Confucianism in Japan in the decades that followed. The Confucian perspective served as the ideal standpoint from which to denounce the darker aspects of Western modernity revealed by World War I. Confucianism came to be used as a framework for assessing the shortcomings of Western modernity while also functioning as a means of legitimizing nationalist goals in a modern context. At this stage, Confucian political activism remained firmly rooted in support for democratic frameworks.[87]

The new theoretical framework surrounding Confucianism exhibited a conservative anti-labor bias while also displaying egalitarian tendencies. In certain interpretations, it was a sincere effort to comprehend and address the significant social turmoil resulting from late industrial capitalism. The emergence of this new conservative Confucianism had traits that made it vulnerable to subsequent authoritarian and fascist appropriation. With the growing reach and impact of the Shibunkai's initiatives, Confucianism became deeply

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[84] Ralph M. Reitan, *Making a moral society: Ethics and the state in Meiji Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009, 1–6.

[85] Kiri Paramore, *Japanese Confucianism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 149–152.

[86] Ibid., p. 147.

[87] Ibid., p. 153–156.

intertwined with national morality, state institutions, imperial expansion, and, in particular, the military. The Confucian ritual scheme was reinstated as an official state ceremony in Japan, but this incorporation also subordinated it to governmental authority. As a result, Confucianism became closely tied to the state's politico-religious inclinations, making it particularly vulnerable to the ideological disarray and systemic collapse that would ultimately affect the Japanese state.[88]

Following the institutionalization of Confucian nationalism in the previous years, Confucianism in Japan became increasingly entangled with fascist ideology as scholars and state actors reframed its principles to serve authoritarian rule, emphasizing moral discipline, social hierarchy, and national loyalty. Despite Inoue Tetsujirō's efforts to frame Confucianism within the realm of philosophy, by the 1930s, the state had reclassified it as a religion, aligning Confucian groups with Buddhist, Shinto, and Christian organizations in their deployment for imperial and colonial purposes.[89]

As Japan intensified its wartime mobilization, Confucianism's religious and intellectual dimensions became increasingly subordinated to its role as an instrument of state indoctrination. After Japan's surrender in 1945, the association of Confucianism with imperial propaganda and wartime atrocities rendered it politically untenable. During the postwar American occupation, efforts to democratize Japan led to the systematic dismantling of state-supported Confucian institutions, transforming what was once central to Japan's national identity into a cultural and intellectual taboo.[90]

In the decades following the war, attempts to revive the conservative, practical Confucianism of early twentieth-century Japan faced significant challenges. These efforts struggled to detach Confucian ideals from the nationalist and fascist connotations they had acquired during the war.[91] Those who openly engaged with Confucianism—whether outspoken figures like Nobel Prize-nominated Yukio Mishima or low-profile institutions such as the Shibunkai—were often marginalized by the mainstream and treated as taboo.[92]

Ruth Benedict, a renowned anthropologist known for her cultural analysis of Japan, asserted that *ren* (仁) never attained the same level of prominence in Japan as it did in China. While *ren* is regarded as the fundamental Confucian virtue in China, Japanese Confucianism places greater emphasis on the idea of gratitude (*baoen*, 报恩) toward the emperor and one's parents as the central, unconditional moral obligation. This concept of *baoen* seems to draw from the Confucian values of loyalty (*zhong*, 忠) and filial piety

[88] Ibid., p. 156–157.

[89] Ibid., p. 157–158.

[90] Ibid., p. 164–167.

[91] Ibid., p. 171.

[92] Ibid., p. 182.

(*xiao*, 孝), both of which originate in China but are not considered absolute, as they remain subordinate to *ren*.[93]

According to Robert Bellah, a distinguished scholar in the sociology of religion, the Confucian virtue of loyalty (*zhong*, 忠) dominated all moral ideals in premodern Japan. This understanding of loyalty was so deeply rooted in Japanese society that individuals prioritized allegiance to a specific system or group over universal values such as justice and unconditional love. This loyalty had its origin in the characteristics of the Japanese feudal system during the Edo period. Unlike Chinese and Korean societies, where the literati formed the social foundation, the Samurai class in Japan lacked land and was heavily dependent on their lords, making loyalty an essential virtue instead of an optional one. This feudal structure resulted in a distinct adaptation of Confucianism in Japan, where loyalty to one's lord took precedence over the broader Confucian values observed in China and Korea.[94]

6. The resurgence of Confucian thought

Confucianism still lives today, although not in the same political or philosophical forms it once took. Contemporary Chinese realities have transformed their meaning and significance.[95] Before European influence reached East Asia, the Western notion of religion was unknown in China. Rather than being treated as distinct, concepts were primarily defined in relation to one another.[96]

In the 19th century, Confucianism had successfully persisted as the official orthodoxy of the Chinese regime.[97] However, it faced significant challenges, primarily due to the expansion of Western capitalism and imperialism, as well as internal rebellions. The Qing Dynasty, having suffered devastating losses in the First and Second Opium Wars (1840–1842 and 1856-1860), was compelled to initiate a Self-Strengthening Movement (1861–1895) that revolved around the idea of reflecting on Confucian tradition in an attempt to restore the dynasty's strength and stability.[98]

At the same time, the Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864) and the Nian Rebellion (1853–1868) occurred. Essentially, the Taiping Rebellion dismissed Confucianism and adopted

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[93] Chen Lai, "Historical and Cultural Features of Confucianism in East Asia," *Confucianism in Context: Classic Philosophy and Contemporary Issues, East Asia and Beyond*, ed. Roger T. Ames and Peter D. Hershock (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 105–106.

[94] Ibid., p. 106.

[95] Sam Crane, "Confucianism Is Not an Obstacle to Democracy." *The useless tree*, July 26, 2012, https://uselesstree.typepad.com/useless_tree/2012/07/confucianism-is-not-an-obstacle-to-democracy.html.

[96] Sébastien Billioud and Joël Thoraval, "The Contemporary Revival of Confucianism. Anshen Liming or the Religious Dimension of Confucianism." *China Perspectives*, no. 2008/3 (July 2008): 93.

[97] Jun Li, "Confucianism," *Encyclopedia of Modern China*, ed. David Pong (Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2009), 1.

[98] Ibid., p. 2.

a variant of Christianity as its ideological foundation.[99] On the other hand, the Nian Rebellion (1853–1868) was an uprising that united several local militarized groups in response to widespread poverty, natural disasters, and government neglect. However, the Nian Rebellion did not explicitly reject Confucianism, but rather posed a challenge to the social order upheld by the Qing Dynasty.[100]

China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1895 confirmed the failure of the Self-Strengthening Movement and indicated the urgent need for comprehensive political and social reforms. This defeat not only exposed the limitations of previous modernization efforts but also represented Confucianism's most significant challenge since the introduction of Buddhism in the 2nd century.[101]

The rapid introduction of this new framework, facilitated in part by Meiji-era Japan, led to a clash between Confucian heritage and the emerging category of religion. The first stage of that friction was characterized by the resistance of Confucianism, rooted in the imperial state's and the literati's deep commitment to Confucian tradition. However, at the turn of the twentieth century, the imperial state was challenged in its decline by a set of institutions, including churches, religious sects, universities, and political movements. Therefore, the last years of the imperial era witnessed a brief and striking differentiation of the cultural and religious dimensions of ancient heritage.[102]

The abolition of the imperial examination in 1905, which had lasted nearly a millennium, marked the collapse of a foundational institution within the Confucian cultural order. Paradoxically, even as Confucianism's traditional role diminished, it was simultaneously elevated as a religious and ideological pillar amid social upheaval. This transformation was characterized by the unprecedented promotion of the cult of Confucius, which was granted a status equivalent to the imperial ritual worship of Heaven and Earth.[103]

After the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 and the establishment of the Republic, defenders of the Confucian legacy emerged, such as Kang Youwei, often considered the Martin Luther of Confucianism. Kang proposed a reform of Confucianism that embraced progressivism and egalitarianism, drawing inspiration from earlier developments in Meiji Japan.[104] Despite political and social upheaval, Confucianism endured until it was fiercely challenged during the May Fourth Movement in 1919, which was part of the

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[99] Ibid.

[100] Yang Zhang, *Insurgent Dynamics: The Coming of the Chinese Rebellions, 1850–1873* (Chicago: Knowledge UChicago, The University of Chicago, August 2016), 5.

[101] Jun Li, "Confucianism," *Encyclopedia of Modern China*, ed. David Pong (Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2009), 3–4.

[102] Sébastien Billioud and Joël Thoraval, "The Contemporary Revival of Confucianism. Anshen Liming or the Religious Dimension of Confucianism." *China Perspectives*, no. 2008/3 (July 2008): 93.

[103] Ibid.

[104] Ibid.

broader New Culture Movement (1915–1921), aiming to replace traditional Confucian values.[105]

Ignited by the Treaty of Versailles, the May Fourth Movement prompted a profound reassessment of the role of Confucianism in the development of Chinese civilization. The movement, which included nationwide student protests, led to intense opposition to and rejection of Confucianism and traditional values.[106]

Contrary to these waves of political mobilization, Liang Shuming (1893–1988), often referred to as the last Confucian, argued that Confucianism should evolve by integrating Western democracy and technology. He believed Confucian ethics serve as the foundation of sociopolitical life, a substitute for religion.[107] Liang's efforts to modernize Confucianism influenced Chiang Kai-shek's launch of the New Life Movement in the mid-1930s.[108] Through this campaign, the Kuomintang sought to replace grassroots revolutionary change linked to the New Culture Movement with state-controlled social mobilization, preserving the existing social structure while advancing state interests.[109]

Beginning in the 1950s, Confucianism in Mainland China suffered a steady decline as the CCP, extending the anti-traditionalism of the May Fourth Movement to an extreme, sought to replace it with communism as the new state orthodoxy.[110] It was frontally attacked during the 1960s and 1970s in the context of the upheavals brought about by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). During this time, political and ideological movements and struggles eroded traditional culture in all its forms, including Confucianism. As part of this new wave of ideological repression, the last remaining Confucians were persecuted and forced to convert to Maoism.[111]

The resurgence of Confucianism occurred through gradual recovery after China experienced an end to the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s, along with the emergence of Deng Xiaoping as the country's leader.[112] This recovery included a "sinification" of the CCP, driven in part by Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic leadership.[113] As part of this shift, the

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[105] Jun Li, "Confucianism," *Encyclopedia of Modern China*, ed. David Pong (Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2009), 4.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Ibid.

[108] Ibid., p. 5.

[109] Arif Dirlik, "The Ideological Foundations of the New Life Movement: A Study in Counterrevolution." *Journal of Asian Studies* 34, no. 4 (1975): 947.

[110] Guoxiang Peng, "Inside the Revival of Confucianism in Mainland China: The Vicissitudes of Confucian Classics in Contemporary China as an Example." *Oriens Extremus* 49 (2010): 225–226.

[111] Jun Li, "Confucianism," *Encyclopedia of Modern China*, ed. David Pong (Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2009), 5.

[112] Ibid.

[113] Yao Yang, "The Confucian State: An Ideal Type of Governance for China? (2020)," *China and the West: A Pragmatic Confucian's View* (Singapore: Springer, 2023), 146.

party also began to reintroduce elements of political meritocracy. To support this change, Deng implemented a retirement rule and opened the way for younger officials to rise within the party hierarchy.[114]

Despite experiencing severe repression in Mainland China during the mid-20th century, Confucianism remained highly influential in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other overseas Chinese communities through the emergence of New Confucianism.[115] In 1958, the *New Confucian Manifesto* was published, aiming to rejuvenate Chinese culture by emphasizing its philosophical roots, particularly Confucian views on the mind and human nature. It argued that revitalizing Chinese culture ultimately required the rehabilitation of Confucianism and sought to revive Chinese culture by demonstrating the value of Chinese tradition in addressing the challenges facing the West.[116] The manifesto critiques the West for the imperialistic nature of its rationale, which seeks to universalize reason while disregarding the uniqueness of other cultures, attributing this tendency to its neglect of inner virtues, persistent individualism, and endemic materialism.[117]

From the 1980s onward, Confucianism in Mainland China gradually recovered its status in both scholarly circles and political domains. Confucius is again regarded as a wise thinker and cultural symbol. Universities have established research centers and graduate programs, while prominent individuals disseminate Confucian ideas through literature and the media. Despite the apparent revival of Confucianism, the extent of this resurgence remains to be seen.[118]

Several factors have contributed to the resurgence of Confucianism. In Mainland China, the decline of official Communist ideology has prompted many political leaders and intellectuals to turn to Confucianism as a resource for addressing spiritual and moral crises and for fostering social harmony. China's growing global influence has also revived appreciation for Confucianism, fostering a sense of national pride after prolonged periods of Western dominance. Furthermore, the economic success of the Asia-Pacific region since the 1980s has been attributed, in part, to business practices rooted in Confucian values. Additionally, Chinese socialist leaders have leveraged Confucianism to counter capitalist deficits by focusing on order and hierarchy as mechanisms for maintaining political stability.[119]

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[114] Ibid., p. 147.

[115] Jun Li, "Confucianism," *Encyclopedia of Modern China*, ed. David Pong (Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2009), 5.

[116] Jiyuan Yu and Lei Yongqiang, "The 'Manifesto' of New Confucianism and the Revival of Virtue Ethics." *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 3, no. 3 (2008): 318–319.

[117] Ibid., p. 320.

[118] Jun Li, "Confucianism," *Encyclopedia of Modern China*, ed. David Pong (Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2009), 5–6.

[119] Ibid., p. 6.

7. Practice in East Asia

While often associated with ethics and governance, Confucianism has also influenced how states in East Asia conduct their foreign policy and structure relationships with other nations. This section examines how Confucian values such as hierarchy, harmony, and moral authority have continued to shape interstate behavior in both historical and contemporary contexts. Through a series of case studies, it becomes evident that Confucianism continues to exert a subtle yet persistent influence on diplomatic norms and statecraft, particularly in China.

The tributary system

Beginning in the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 CE) and lasting until the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911,[120] the tributary system was the traditional framework for China's foreign relations, envisioned as an outward extension of its hierarchic political and social order, rooted in Confucian thought.[121] It constituted a manifestation of Chinese cultural egocentrism. Ever since the Bronze Age, Chinese rulers viewed their civilization as more culturally advanced and morally superior. Surrounded by societies that were not as advanced, the Chinese developed a strong sense of centrality within East Asia. Such was its influence that all of Eastern Asia—Korea, Japan, Siam, and Annam—became culturally affiliated with the Middle Kingdom.[122] In Mandarin, China is referred to as Zhongguo (中国), meaning "Middle Kingdom," a name that reflects the historical perception of China as the civilizational center of East Asia.

This way, the expansion of the Chinese Empire also entailed the expansion of a way of life. Through contact with neighboring societies, the Chinese came to see their superiority not merely in material terms, but in the realm of culture. Two central markers of this civilization's identity were the Chinese written language—which dates back to 1400 BCE and is one of the oldest continuously used writing systems in the world[123]—and the Confucian moral and social code of conduct, whose civilizational gravity was so strong that even the surrounding societies gradually assimilated aspects of it, drawn into China's cultural orbit.[124]

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[120] Jerry Feng, "Evolutionary History of the Chinese Tributary System," *China Hands*, April 11, 2025, https://chinahandsmagazine.org/2025/04/11/evolutionary-history-of-the-chinese-tributary-system/.

[121] John K. Fairbank, "A Preliminary Framework," *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 2.

[122] John K. Fairbank, "Tributary Trade and China's Relations with the West." *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (1942): 129.

[123] "How Did We Get Here? The Fascinating Evolution of Written Chinese." *Language Learning Resource Centre*. March 10, 2025, https://carleton.ca/llrc/2025/evolution-of-written-chinese/.

[124] John K. Fairbank, "Tributary Trade and China's Relations with the West." *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (1942): 130.

Rooted in Confucian tradition, the Chinese emperor was regarded as the "Son of Heaven," the moral mediator between humanity and the universal power of Heaven. He ruled under the Mandate of Heaven, which conferred legitimacy not through coercion, but through right conduct and moral example as the basis for his authority.[125] As the embodiment of moral authority, the emperor's virtuous example was believed to exert an almost magnetic influence, attracting surrounding societies—often referred to as barbarians—into the orbit of Chinese civilization.[126] At the same time, Imperial China's limited ambition to impose its worldview enabled neighboring states and cultures to reinterpret and adapt Chinese concepts to fit their own needs.[127]

The historical East Asian tribute system emerged from a clear asymmetry in power and culture between China and its neighbours.[128] China, by virtue of its overwhelming power and resources, conducted foreign relations on its own terms; backed by power, Confucian norms became the rules of the game. For Confucians, hierarchy was considered the natural order of the world, and foreign relations were expected to reflect this structure.[129]

Most mainstream International Relations theories are rooted in European historical experiences, emphasizing state sovereignty, the balance of power, and frequent interstate conflict. However, these frameworks struggle to adequately explain the relative peace and stability that characterized premodern East Asia under the Confucian-informed tribute system. The Sinocentric order challenges Eurocentric assumptions by demonstrating that a hierarchically organized system, grounded in moral authority and ritual, can produce enduring interstate stability.[130] The East Asian historical experience calls for a broader analytical lens in IR, one that accommodates non-Western models of international order.

Vassals periodically dispatched embassies to pay tribute to the Chinese emperor. Within the Confucian worldview, such missions not only affirmed the hierarchical structure of interstate relations but also reinforced the legitimacy of the emperor's rule, symbolizing his status as the universally acknowledged sovereign under the All-Under-Heaven (*Tianxia*, 天下) system—often demonstrated through the ritual act of *kowtow*. In return, tributary states gained political legitimacy through formal recognition and investiture by

[125] Ibid., p. 131.

[126] Ibid., p. 132.

[127] David C. Kang, *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 25.

[128] Yuan-kang Wang, "Explaining the Tribute System: Power, Confucianism, and War in Medieval East Asia." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 13, no. 2 (2013): 208.

[129] Ibid., p. 211.

[130] David C. Kang, *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 2.

the Chinese court, an arrangement that, in many respects, anticipated modern practices of state recognition.[131]

While the tributary system was fundamentally hierarchical and non-egalitarian, political interactions between China and subordinate states were, as international relations scholar Qin Yaqing describes, "unequal but benign," resembling the Confucian parent-child relationship.[132] As tributary states acknowledged Chinese supremacy in East Asia affairs, China had little incentive to engage in military aggression. This vassal relationship—deference in exchange for security—fostered what became known as *Pax Sinica*, a period of sustained peace and stability in East Asia that only unraveled when Chinese authority weakened and the system fragmented.[133]

Ultimately, the collapse of the tribute system can be attributed to the Chinese government's inability to adapt to the emerging dynamics of global maritime trade. During the modern period, Confucian bureaucrats continued to treat Western trading powers as mere tributaries. For the Chinese court, the emphasis remained on the ritual and moral symbolism of tribute, whereas Western actors prioritized the material benefits of trade. This disconnect revealed a deeper structural weakness: the traditional diplomatic framework, rooted in Confucian moral order, was ill-equipped to accommodate the dynamics of global commerce.[134]

Despite having endured for centuries as the dominant framework for East Asian diplomacy, the tribute system unraveled within a matter of decades as European colonial expansion intensified in the late nineteenth century.[135] Ironically, it was the commercial success of Chinese maritime merchants that undermined the very tributary system the court sought to preserve, leaving the empire unprepared for the emerging global order.

China's Confucian political model

Liberal democracies, especially in the Western tradition, often trace their origins to the contractual theories of Hobbes and Locke, where political legitimacy stems from the consent of equal individuals. In contrast, Confucian political thought begins with the assumption that people are born with varying moral capacities. Society, in this view, consists of morally superior individuals (*junzi*) and those who are self-serving (*xiaoren*). This assumption about human nature informs the Confucian idea of governance: not as a

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[131] Yuan-kang Wang, "Explaining the Tribute System: Power, Confucianism, and War in Medieval East Asia." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 13, no. 2 (2013): 212.

[132] Qin Yaqing, "Why Is There No Chinese International Relations Theory?" *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 7, no. 3 (2007): 330.

[133] David C. Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks." *International Security* 27, no. 4 (2003): 66.

[134] John K. Fairbank, "Tributary Trade and China's Relations with the West." *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (1942): 139.

[135] David C. Kang, *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 160.

negotiated agreement between equals, but as a moral hierarchy led by those who embody virtue.[136]

That being said, Confucians do not necessarily deny the pursuit of equality. Daniel A. Bell, a leading scholar of Confucian political thought, made a distinction between good hierarchies and bad hierarchies. Bad hierarchies, such as the caste system, perpetuate social divides and are oppressive; good hierarchies, on the other hand, allow for upward mobility and encourage people to improve themselves. While acknowledging that people are born differently, Confucians encourage people to better themselves by self-restraint and self-learning.[137] In fact, until the Qing dynasty,[138] historical China was one of the traditional societies with the highest degrees of upward mobility due to the imperial examination system.

This emphasis on merit also influenced broader social expectations within Confucian traditions. Rather than expecting the state to provide equality of outcomes, individuals have long recognized that, in order to improve their personal lives, they must rely on themselves, not the government. At the same time, the management of public affairs was largely entrusted to government authorities, who were presumed to be morally cultivated and thus fit to rule. This division reinforced a pattern of political obedience and deference to hierarchy, often mistaken by outsiders as evidence of collectivism. In return, the authorities are required to take a proactive role in the public sphere to better the collective welfare.[139]

However, one of the enduring challenges within this model is the absence of institutional mechanisms to hold those in power accountable—an inherent feature of liberal democratic systems.[140] As a result, China is often assessed through the lens of competitive democracy, which can limit critical engagement with the country's governance by overlooking the distinctive historical and ideological contexts that shape it.[141]

This Confucian understanding of governance continues to inform elements of China's contemporary political thought, most notably in the building of the Social Credit System.[142] The Chinese government has framed the development of the Social Credit

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[136] Yao Yang, "The Confucian State: An Ideal Type of Governance for China? (2020)," *China and the West: A Pragmatic Confucian's View* (Singapore: Springer, 2023), 142.

[137] Ibid., p. 143.

[138] Zerui Chen, Wei Li, and Guo Zhan, "A Study of Social Mobility under the Imperial Examination System in Qing Dynasty Based on Bourdieu's Theories," *SHS Web of Conferences* 180 (2023): Article 01003, 4.

[139] Yao Yang, "The Confucian State: An Ideal Type of Governance for China? (2020)," *China and the West: A Pragmatic Confucian's View* (Singapore: Springer, 2023), 144.

[140] Ibid., p. 145.

[141] Ibid., p. 148.

[142] Patryk Szczotka, "Influence of Confucianism on the Chinese Political System: A Case of Social Credit System and Socialist Core Values," *Institute of New Europe*, October 24, 2022,

System as part of a broader effort to promote social trust and moral behavior—ideals that are often associated with Confucian virtue ethics. Designed as a high-tech system of social control and incentivization, it rewards individuals who demonstrate state-sanctioned "trustworthy" conduct (such as being granted loans on preferential terms) and penalizes those who violate norms or rules through restricted access to services (for example, banning citizens from buying plane tickets).[143] Another driving factor was the overall strategic shift of CCP governance towards morals to counter the moral vacuum which the CCP had diagnosed.[144]

To ensure harmony, prosperity, and social stability, elements of the traditional Confucian duty-based system have been adapted into a modern framework of social trust, where individuals are encouraged to conform to shared moral standards, and violations are met with severe sanctions. Although most people may lack a formal or philosophical understanding of Confucianism, many still share a common sense familiarity with its core values.[145]

By framing these ideas as rooted in longstanding Chinese values, the CCP reinforces its legitimacy within the population, portrays itself as a guardian of Chinese civilization, and presents a distinct ideological alternative to Western universalism.[146] This becomes particularly relevant in light of ongoing tensions between China and the Western world regarding human rights and the rule of law.[147] The integration of Confucian ideas serves not only to promote social stability and harmony, but also to project an image of a coherent, thousand-year-old tradition that has been modernized under the leadership of the PRC.[148]

Confucianism in Chinese foreign policy and IR thought

China has long portrayed itself as a peace-seeking and stability-oriented actor in international relations, emphasizing its role as a guardian of harmony and order—an image that resonates with Confucian principles of hierarchical structure and social

https://ine.org.pl/en/influence-of-confucianism-on-the-chinese-political-system-a-case-of-social-credit-system-and-socialist-core-values/.

[143] Marianne von Blomberg, "The Social Credit System and China's Rule of Law," *Mapping China Journal* 2018, no. 2 (2018): 79–80.

[144] Ibid., p. 86.

[145] Michael Gow, "The Core Socialist Values of the Chinese Dream: Towards a Chinese Integral State," *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 1 (2017): 109.

[146] Ying Miao, "Romanticising the Past: Core Socialist Values and the China Dream as Legitimisation Strategy," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 49, no. 2 (2020): 181.

[147] Michael Gow, "The Core Socialist Values of the Chinese Dream: Towards a Chinese Integral State," *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 1 (2017): 111.

[148] Patryk Szczotka, "Influence of Confucianism on the Chinese Political System: A Case of Social Credit System and Socialist Core Values," *Institute of New Europe*, October 24, 2022, https://ine.org.pl/en/influence-of-confucianism-on-the-chinese-political-system-a-case-of-social-credit-system-and-socialist-core-values/.

harmony.[149] At the same time, Confucian political thought has also deeply influenced the foundations of Chinese international relations theory.

The Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhao Tingyang reconstructed the theory of *Tianxia* (all-under-heaven, 天下), originally rooted in the political order of the Zhou Dynasty (1046–771 BC)—a concept grounded in a hierarchical system of governance with China positioned at its apex, around which all other states revolved. Despite the power asymmetry between the Middle Kingdom and the periphery, the system was not based on coercion but rather on the establishment of mutually beneficial relationships among participating states.[150]

For Zhao, this theory serves as a model for the formation of a new world order governed by a universally accepted institution, whose objective is to transcend the failed Westphalian system—a system he characterizes as a world mired in chaos.[151] Qin Yaqing, a leading Chinese IR theorist, has argued that the *Tianxia* system would be politically justified as long as the global governance benefited all nations harmoniously.[152] This theory has been described as a form of Chinese exceptionalism, as it seeks to universalize traditional Chinese political practices.[153]

The concept of *Tianxia* has served as a starting point for the development of IR theories rooted in Chinese traditional thought and social practices. At the same time, this framework has transcended the academic realm and influenced the political agenda of CCP leaders, such as Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping.[154] Such was its impact that Hu Jintao, former General Secretary of the CCP, adopted the notion of a "harmonious world" (和谐世界) as a central component of China's foreign policy discourse—drawing directly from *Tianxia* ideals.[155]

Another Chinese scholar, Yan Xuetong, head of the Tsinghua School of International Relations, developed the theory of Moral Realism, a neoclassical realist approach that offers an alternative response to China's rise and the future of world order by combining

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[149] Quansheng Zhao, "The Influence of Confucianism on Chinese Politics and Foreign Policy," *Asian Education and Development Studies* 7, no. 4 (September 10, 2018): 324.

[150] Lluc López i Vidal, Iván González-Pujol, and Ferrán Pérez-Mena, "The Contributions of the Chinese and Japanese Academy in the Theory of International Relations: Beyond Western Domination," *UNISCI Journal* 51 (October 2019): 342.

[151] Ibid.

[152] Qin Yaqing, "Culture and Global Thought: Chinese International Theory in the Making," *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals* 100 (December 2012): 72.

[153] Lluc López i Vidal, Iván González-Pujol, and Ferrán Pérez-Mena, "The Contributions of the Chinese and Japanese Academy in the Theory of International Relations: Beyond Western Domination," *UNISCI Journal* 51 (October 2019): 342–343.

[154] Ibid., p. 343.

[155] Ding Sheng, "To build a 'harmonious world': China's soft power wielding in the global south," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 13, no. 2 (August 2008): 193.

elements of realism and Confucian ethics—an approach that contrasts sharply with conventional Western IR paradigms.[156]

On the one hand, this morality, upheld by the state, not only justifies the political leadership of a rising power but also entitles it to shape the development of new international norms. Moreover, it facilitates the use of soft power strategies that reinforce the state's moral image and influence its international perception. The ultimate goal of this strategy is to cultivate military, economic, and cultural partnerships with which China engages.[157]

Continuing the discussion of the state's moral legitimacy, Yan Xuetong revives Xunzi's typology of states, developed in the third century BC during the Warring States Period (475–221 BC).[158] Kenneth Waltz, the world's most relevant Neorealist scholar, argued that states are like units that perform similar functions and only differ in capabilities or terms of power.[159] Differing from Waltz, Moral Realism argues that distinguishing between different categories of states is essential to understanding why a change in hegemonic power can lead to shifts in international norms and even in the structure of the global system.[160]

To support this view, Yan draws on Xunzi's classification of dominant states into three types: *Wang* (humane authority, 王), *Ba* (hegemon, 霸), and *Qiang* (tyrant, 強).[161] Humane authority represents the ideal government archetype—one in which legitimacy is universally accepted and mutual understanding exists between the rulers and the governed.[162] Yan argues that this should be the normative goal of the state, but criticizes Xunzi for overlooking the importance of grounding humane authority in hard power.[163] The hegemonic model involves the use of force, which undermines its moral legitimacy. Although not ideal, it constitutes a form of governance that subjects may still accept. The tyrannical model, by contrast, relies on violence to a far greater extent than the other two. For Yan, tyranny represents the most deplorable type of state, as it reflects a complete

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[156] Lluc López i Vidal, Iván González-Pujol, and Ferrán Pérez-Mena, "The Contributions of the Chinese and Japanese Academy in the Theory of International Relations: Beyond Western Domination," *UNISCI Journal* 51 (October 2019): 344.

[157] Ibid.

[158] Ibid.

[159] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 96.

[160] Yan Xuetong, "Political Leadership and Power Redistribution," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 9, no. 1 (March 2016): 15.

[161] Ibid.

[162] Lluc López i Vidal, Iván González-Pujol, and Ferrán Pérez-Mena, "The Contributions of the Chinese and Japanese Academy in the Theory of International Relations: Beyond Western Domination," *UNISCI Journal* 51 (October 2019): 344.

[163] Quansheng Zhao, "The Influence of Confucianism on Chinese Politics and Foreign Policy," *Asian Education and Development Studies* 7, no. 4 (September 10, 2018): 325.

lack of legitimacy and endangers political stability.[164] Ultimately, Yan proposes that China should strive to become a *Wang* in order to legitimize its rise and reshape international norms through moral authority rather than coercion.[165]

According to Xunzi, the relevance of these three models lies in their sources of moral legitimacy, as they ultimately shape the norms and values that sustain the international system.[166] By adopting this typology as a framework for reinterpreting shifts in global order, Chinese scholars aim to demonstrate, once again, the universality of traditional Chinese political thought.[167]

Since the onset of Confucianism's gradual revival in mainland China, its public rehabilitation has been strategically leveraged to enhance China's national image abroad. A major turning point in China's soft power strategy—historically a point of weakness—came with the establishment of the Confucius Institutes in 2004, which serve as channels for promoting interest in Chinese culture. These Institutes, set up in partnership with local universities, promote Chinese language, culture, and values, and offer scholarships and study abroad opportunities in China. Beyond cultural promotion, Confucius Institutes function as tools of soft power, projecting a positive image of China while embedding themselves within academic institutions.[168]

Confucius Institutes have long been the subject of controversy. As of April 2025, six Australian universities have closed their Institutes due to concerns that the Chinese government was using them to promote political propaganda and monitor Chinese international students.[169] In a 2019 report, Human Rights Watch described Confucius Institutes as "extensions of the Chinese government," asserting that they censor discussions of politically sensitive issues on behalf of Beijing.[170]

Some advocates of Confucianism revivalism in China, such as Kang Xiaoguang, have gone further as to claim that the Leninist party-state is ultimately unsustainable, and that the only way to resist the global dominance of neo-liberal capitalism is through a third

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[164] Lluc López i Vidal, Iván González-Pujol, and Ferrán Pérez-Mena, "The Contributions of the Chinese and Japanese Academy in the Theory of International Relations: Beyond Western Domination," *UNISCI Journal* 51 (October 2019): 344.

[165] Quansheng Zhao, "The Influence of Confucianism on Chinese Politics and Foreign Policy," *Asian Education and Development Studies* 7, no. 4 (September 10, 2018): 325.

[166] Lluc López i Vidal, Iván González-Pujol, and Ferrán Pérez-Mena, "The Contributions of the Chinese and Japanese Academy in the Theory of International Relations: Beyond Western Domination," *UNISCI Journal* 51 (October 2019): 344.

[167] Ibid., p. 343.

[168] Quansheng Zhao, "The Influence of Confucianism on Chinese Politics and Foreign Policy," *Asian Education and Development Studies* 7, no. 4 (September 10, 2018): 325.

[169] Yang Tian, "Confucius Institutes: Six Australian Universities Close China Centres," *BBC News*, April 1, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/czx1dyxyg10o.

[170] *World Report 2019: Rights Trends in China*, Human Rights Watch, January 17, 2019, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/china.

path: Confucianism as a form of conservative cultural nationalism rooted in Chinese traditions.[171] This way, Confucianism offers not only moral legitimacy for domestic governance, but also a foundation for a non-Western model of political modernity.

More broadly, Samuel Huntington argued in *The Clash of Civilizations* that future global conflicts would be driven by fundamental differences in cultural and religious identities, marking a shift away from the Cold War's ideological divide.[172] Although Confucian and Islamic civilizations differ in many respects, Huntington identified a connection between them rooted in a shared antagonism toward the West and a common challenge to Western interests, values, and global influence.[173] This framing has influenced how Confucianism is perceived internationally—not only as a cultural identity but also as a counterweight to Western universalism. Reflecting this sentiment, Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi stated in 1994 that Muslims should support China in its struggle against their common adversary.[174]

8. Final reflections

Since becoming the state ideology during the Han Dynasty (206 BC–8 CE), Confucianism has undergone continuous transformation, from Confucius' revival of ancient traditions and his pursuit of a new era of moral enlightenment, through Mencius' contributions, to the Neo-Confucian reforms of Zhu Xi, and finally to its deep integration in the political systems of East Asia.

Far from being a relic of the past, Confucianism has evolved from a classical ethical and philosophical system into a foundational cultural and political framework that has shaped East Asian statecraft for over a millennium. Today, it remains a living tradition—most visibly in China—informing governance models, social ethics, and foreign policy. Its enduring adaptability to shifting political and social realities has ensured its continued relevance.

In Japan, the instrumentalization of Confucianism as a tool for state indoctrination during WWII severely undermined its prospects for postwar survival, particularly following the American occupation and the dismantling of all institutions subordinated to the fascist imperial state. In the aftermath, Japanese scholars and politicians largely adhered to what became known as the post-1945 "Maruyama rule" on Confucianism—deliberately avoiding explicit references to it and favoring Western-oriented cultural frameworks

[171] Xiaoguang Kang, *Xin bao shou zhuyi zheng lun ji*, quoted in Kiri Paramore, *Japanese Confucianism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 185.

[172] Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22.

[173] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 185.

[174] Ibid., p. 239–240.

instead.[175] Those who openly engaged with Confucianism were often pushed to the margins.[176]

However, the legacy of Confucianism in Japan survives only in limited and largely symbolic forms. For example, the modern word for "university," *daigaku*, derives from the Chinese *daxue*, the title of the first of the Four Books of Neo-Confucianism, *The Great Learning*.[177] The most enduring Confucian influence on Japanese cultural practice is arguably its impact on funeral rites. As of 2025, nearly 90% of Japanese follow Buddhist funerary practices,[178] which remain deeply infused with Confucian traditions of mourning and ancestral veneration.[179]

Notably, scholars have drawn parallels between Japan's prewar instrumentalization of Confucianism and its contemporary resurgence in China, where intellectuals such as Jiang Qing advocate re-centering Confucianism as the ideological foundation of state authority. This reflects a legitimizing strategy reminiscent of those pursued in imperial and wartime Japan.[180]

In Korea, Confucianism has undergone a distinctive evolution, shifting from its role as the official state ideology of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1897) to a diffused moral and cultural framework that continues to shape national identity. Although its formal authority as a governing philosophy has long faded, its ethical and social principles remain deeply embedded in everyday life. Korea has even been described as the "most Confucian part of the world," effectively drawing on this tradition to underpin aspects of modern national development.[181]

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[175] Kiri Paramore, *Japanese Confucianism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 180.

[176] Ibid., p. 182.

[177] Nicolas Levi, "Confucianism in South Korea and Japan: Similarities and Differences," *Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia*, no. 26 (2013): 190.

[178] Nippon.com, "Funeral Etiquette in Japan," *Guide to Japan*, March 19, 2025, https://www.nippon.com/en/guide-to-japan/gu020007/#:~:text=Formality%20of%20dress%20depends%20on,often%20wears%20semi%2Dformal%20attire.

[179] Kiri Paramore, *Japanese Confucianism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 35–36.

[180] Jiang Dongxian and Shaun O'Dwyer, "Universalizing 'Kingly Way' Confucianism: A Japanese Legacy and Chinese Future?," in *Handbook of Confucianism in Modern Japan*, ed. Shaun O'Dwyer (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 193.

[181] Tomasz Śleziak, "The Role of Confucianism in Contemporary South Korean Society," *Rocznik Orientalistyczny*, no. 1 (2013): 28, citing Byong-Ik Koh, "Confucianism in Contemporary Korea," in *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity: Moral Education and Economic Culture in Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons*, ed. Tu Wei-Ming (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 191.

At the social level, the family remains the core institution in Korean society, where individuals are educated in traditional roles and respect for the elderly.[182] This extends to strong intergenerational support, with parents providing extensive financial and emotional backing for their children's success.[183] These Confucian ethics played a decisive role in Korea's rapid industrialization, as the emphasis on education, discipline, and collective responsibility translated into a highly skilled workforce and a culture of diligence and effort that fueled the nation's growth.

Today, Confucianism remains a subject of controversy in Korean society. Conservatives highlight its foundational role in shaping Korea's cultural identity and take pride in the intellectual achievements of Neo-Confucian scholars during the Joseon period. By contrast, liberal and anti-traditionalist voices often portray Confucianism as responsible for historical stagnation, gender inequality, and the persistence of undemocratic hierarchies that hinder modernization.

Advocates of a renewed Confucianism in Korea, such as Mark Peterson, a renowned scholar in Korean studies, have argued for stripping away its historical distortions, particularly the rigid hierarchies, the male dominance, and the patrilineal orientation of the family, while calling for a return to its core ethical teachings and the abandonment of cultural accretions accumulated over time, not only to ensure its survival but also to achieve its revival.[184]

In China, the revival of Confucianism began under Deng Xiaoping's reforms, when modernization policies created space for reengagement with traditional culture after decades of suppression and persecution. From that point onward, Confucianism was gradually reframed as a philosophical framework and cultural resource and heritage that could support national rejuvenation after the decline of official Communist ideology. What had once been dismissed during the Maoist era as an obstacle to revolution re-emerged in the reform period as a resource for addressing China's moral crisis, enabling the Chinese Communist Party to reinforce both domestic legitimacy and civilizational continuity.

In contemporary China, Confucian principles continue to shape governance and social ethics, particularly through recurring themes of meritocracy, virtue-based leadership, and the priority of harmony. Policies promoting social trust, discipline, and moral conduct, whether through ideological campaigns or through mechanisms such as the Social Credit

[182] Tomasz Śleziak, "The Role of Confucianism in Contemporary South Korean Society," *Rocznik Orientalistyczny*, no. 1 (2013): 33.

[183] Ibid., p. 34.

[184] Mark Peterson, "The Life and Death of Confucianism in Korea," *The Korea Times*, October 10, 2023, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/opinion/20231010/the-life-and-death-of-confucianism-in-korea.

System, reflect this Confucian legacy. In this way, Confucianism functions once again as an instrument for sustaining social order and legitimizing state authority.

Supporting China's efforts to articulate alternatives to Western political and international systems, Confucianism has significantly influenced the development of the Chinese school of International Relations. Its influence has been key to the creation of two of China's most relevant IR theories: Zhao Tingyang, with his reconstruction of the ancient concept of *Tianxia* (all-under-heaven), and Yan Xuetong, with his theory of Moral Realism, have turned the Confucian tradition into a challenger to the Westphalian order, proposing a new vision of global governance. At the same time, China's selective use of Confucian concepts in its foreign policy discourse serves to legitimize its expanding global influence and to project an image of itself as a culturally rooted power committed to harmony and peaceful development.

Yet the revival of Confucianism in China is not without controversy. Critics contend that its deployment serves as a veneer for authoritarianism and the entrenchment of hierarchical power structures, while advocates see it as the recovery of a philosophical tradition capable of offering a culturally rooted and morally informed framework for governance. It is evident that China is the country where Confucianism continues to exert the greatest political significance, not merely as cultural heritage but as a living ideological framework shaping its governance, society, and international posture.

Looking ahead, two predictions about the future of Confucianism in Mainland China seem safe. First, despite past attempts to suppress it, Confucianism will continue to endure as a source of cultural pride and moral reference, sustained by its deep historical roots and its resonance with Chinese identity. Second, it is unlikely to reclaim the preeminent position it once held; like many other major religions and philosophical traditions, its influence has declined in the modern era and now coexists with alternative ideologies and philosophies.[185]

[185] Shaohua Hu, "Confucianism and Contemporary Chinese Politics," *Politics & Policy* 35, no. 1 (2007): 150–151.

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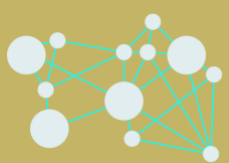

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