

Introduction

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Published online: 15 October 2008
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Confucianism played a determinant role in shaping the political ideology, social structure, intellectual outlook, human relationship, and general way of living among people in China and other East Asian countries during the past two millennia. Although with the demise of imperial China in 1911, the influence of Confucianism might have dwindled, its vitality has been continuously present in Chinese society and in societies in many parts of the world. For instance, many scholars attributed the rise of the East Asian economy in the 1980s to the virtues of this age-long tradition. In sharp contrast to its treatment of Confucianism during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), China has recently begun to sponsor Confucian studies, restore Confucian temples, emphasize the importance of Confucian ethics, and rapidly establish Confucius Institutes overseas. Quite a few civil groups, including religious ones, both in China and Taiwan have been enthusiastic about promoting the recitation of the Confucian classics with the aim of retrieving what is fundamental in their cultural and spiritual heritage. As a living tradition and with a quick growth in importance, Confucianism has indeed assumed a new face in our global context that deserves our serious reevaluation.

In view of the complexity and new significance of Confucianism, how then do we once more understand this tradition? Are there new perspectives from which we can more pertinently assess it and relate it to our modern concerns? What might be a better focus which could draw scholars of different disciplines to engage in a fruitful dialogue about this tradition? As the incumbent of the European Professorship Program in Chinese Studies in 2006–2007, a chair jointly set up by the Ministry of Education of ROC and the International Institute of Asian Studies (IIAS) of the Netherlands, I was privileged to convene a workshop in Leiden, May 23–25, 2007, to explore these challenging questions. I named the workshop “Confucianism among World Religions,” harboring the purpose of examining Confucianism from a global and comparative perspective. My intention was to emphasize the religious dimensions of this tradition in its modern transformation. For this, I organized the workshop around contributions from 12 scholars in Asia, Europe, and the United States. To have a better focus and sharpen overall discussion, I invited Professor TU

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Weiming, foremost spokesman for contemporary Confucianism, as the keynote speaker and general respondent, hence the subtitle of this workshop: “A Dialogue with TU Weiming.”

The workshop was productive and stimulating. Participants offered their opinions from different angles, ranging from the definition of religion, nature, or prominent features of Confucianism, modern development of Neo-Confucianism, to diverse expressions of Confucianism in Korea and Japan. However, far more than half of the workshop papers are centered on TU Weiming and his philosophy in our global context. Tu’s conception of Confucianism in general and his reinterpretation of Confucian religiosity in particular are indeed consequential in our discussion of this tradition today. His longtime effort to bring Confucianism into dialogue with other world religions has expanded our vision about what this great tradition is and can be. A few paper presenters talked about Tu’s exegetical work on the *Zhongyong* 中庸, one of the Confucian *Four Books* and most directly related to Confucian religiousness, by employing Western hermeneutic theories. Some explored connections between Tu and his Neo-Confucian predecessors or his indebtedness to other Western philosophers and theologians. Others focused on Tu’s characterization of Confucianism as a form of immanent transcendence, comparing it with other world religions that manifest the theology of transcendence or creativity. Still others questioned whether Tu’s Neo-Confucian agenda is too rational and programmatic or whether his coinage of “Confucian modernity,” in contrast to general or Western “modernity,” is a valid approximation. All in all, whether sympathetic or challenging, the workshop participants applauded Tu’s contribution to the reinterpretation and expansion of the Confucian tradition vis-à-vis the rise of our global community. His thought can serve as a heuristic background against which we can understand the Confucian past and from which we can test its future.

The workshop papers exhibited very high quality. As our theme and most of its presentations were focused and thought-provoking, I, in consultation with TU and some other colleagues, decided to choose from among these papers and publish them as a collection. This plan was supported by HUANG Yong, the chief-editor of this journal. The result is this special issue in front of us. After a long process of reviews and revisions, six papers now appear as excellent articles in this issue. In addition, TU Weiming wrote his general “Response” to these papers and made the entire discussion more complete. The reader can judge the strengths and weaknesses of each by himself or herself. I trust that this special issue does not only mark a memorable academic event but also that it provides some useful directions which scholars of Chinese studies may want to consider for their future research.

Lastly, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the participants of the Leiden workshop. My special thanks go to Professors TU Weiming, Heiner Roetz, LIN Chen-kuo, YAO Xinzhong, WAN Sze-kar, and John Berthrong, without whose collegial support and contributions, this special issue would never become possible. My deep appreciation also extends to HUANG Yong for his editorial advice and patience.

Acknowledgement To the following workshop sponsors, I want to express my gratitude: IIAS, Universiteit Leiden, Modern East Asia Research Center, Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies, Stichting Issac Alfred Ailion Foundation, Taipei Representative Office in the Netherlands, and Taipei Representative Office in Belgium.