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Edited by Daniel A. Bell: Confucian Political Ethics

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Chapter One

CONFUCIAN CONCEPTIONS OF CIVIL SOCIETY

V

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Classical Chinese intellectual traditions (which were not confined to China proper, but had enormous influence throughout East Asia, particularly in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam) did not even have words for civil society, much less a theory of it. In Chinese, for instance, the word for society (*shehui*) is a neologism from the West, introduced into China via Japan in the late-nineteenth century.¹ Though based on classical Chinese characters, it was a new combination of characters, used in a new sense, to name a modern phenomenon—the development in Treaty Port cities of a separate societal sphere of life that could be at least analytically distinguished from separate economic and political spheres, which were also denoted by words new to the Chinese lexicon. The term *civil* is even newer, and less well established in modern Asian lexicons. In contemporary Chinese, for example, there are no fewer than four words that are used to translate the *civil* in *civil society*.² Alternatively, Chinese intellectuals today call *civil society* *shimin shehui*, which literally means “city-people’s society”; or *gongmin shehui*, “citizens’ society”; or *minjian shehui*, “people-based society”; or *wenming shehui*, “civilized society.” These are all attempts to name phenomena and to articulate aspirations that have arisen in an urbanizing East Asia linked to a global market economy. In this confusing, transitional context, many intellectuals are feeling the need to develop new theories of *civil society* and new ways of developing such a society, even if they are not completely sure what to call it and how to link it—if it can be linked at all—with their cultural traditions.

Those traditions are complex, pluralistic, and full of conflicting and contradictory ideas about how to live a good life in a well-ordered world. Major strands include the Daoist celebration of natural, virtually anarchistic spontaneity, the Legalist pursuit of centralized political order through carefully controlled allocation of rewards and punishments—and the “thinking of the scholars,” to which Western Sinologists in the nineteenth century gave the name “Confucianism.” Systematized by great philosophers such as Zhu Xi into a comprehensive framework of ideas

during the late Song Dynasty in the eleventh and twelfth centuries C.E., the “Neo-Confucian” tradition blended some metaphysical ideas from Buddhism with the moral teachings of Confucius (551–478 B.C.E.) and his disciples (particularly Mencius, 390–305 B.C.E.), which advocated a middle way between Daoist anarchism and Legalist authoritarianism.³

Unlike the Daoists, the Confucians searched for a stable political order. But unlike the Legalists, they insisted that such order had to be based on moral principles, not simply on power. Scholars in this tradition had vigorous disagreements about how people could know these principles and learn to apply them. On one side of these debates were what Wm. Theodore de Bary has called a relatively “liberal” interpretation, which would be consistent with many of the standards for human rights advocated by modern Western liberals—or at least “liberal communitarians.”⁴ But there were also authoritarian interpretations of the Neo-Confucian traditions. In East Asia today, apologists for authoritarian governments like that of Singapore invoke the Confucian tradition to suppress much of what would be considered part of civil society in the West. At the same time, prominent Asian intellectuals like Tu Wei-ming invoke more “liberal” strands of Confucianism to build a base for relative openness in East Asian societies.⁵

If there is to be a meaningful dialogue between modern proponents of Confucian thought, on the one hand, and theories of civil society that derive from the Western Enlightenment, on the other, it will, in my view, have to draw upon those relatively liberal strands of the Neo-Confucian tradition. These are the strands that I will emphasize in this chapter.

INGREDIENTS: WHO, AND WHAT, DOES CIVIL SOCIETY INCLUDE?

This question seems to envision a social framework that can gather together certain individual parts while excluding others. If this is so, the question fails to make sense in a Confucian context. Confucian thought does not conceive the world in terms of delimited parts.⁶ The great social anthropologist Fei Xiaotong has given the following vivid account of the difference between Confucian and Western ways of thinking about the configuration of relationships that constitute a society.

In some ways Western society bears a resemblance to the way we bundle kindling wood in the fields. A few rice stalks are bound together to make a handful, several handfuls are bound together to make a small bundle, several

small bundles are bound together to make a larger bundle, and several larger bundles are bound together to make a stack to carry on a pole. Every single stalk in the entire stack belongs to one specific large bundle, one specific small bundle, and one specific handful. Similar stalks are assembled together, clearly classified, and then bound together. In a society these units are groups. . . . The group has a definite demarcation line."⁷

The configuration of Chinese society, on the other hand, is "like the rings of successive ripples that are propelled outward on the surface when you throw a stone into water. Each individual is the center of the rings emanating from his social influence. Wherever the ripples reach, affiliations occur."⁸

The ripples can eventually reach everywhere. The Neo-Confucian vision was thus holistic. As Tu Wei-ming characterizes it, "[S]elf, community, nature, and Heaven are integrated in an anthropocosmic vision."⁹ Insofar as discourse is driven by this holistic imagination, it is difficult to make the distinctions that are the staple of Western secular civil society discourse: between public and private, and voluntary and involuntary forms of association.

There are words in Chinese—gong and si—that translate as "public" and "private," but in the logic of Confucian discourse the distinction between them is completely relative. Once again, according to Fei Xiaotong:

Sacrificing one's family for oneself, sacrificing one's clan for one's family—this formula is an actual fact. Under such a formula what would someone say if you called him si [acting in his private interest]? He would not be able to see it that way, because when he sacrificed his clan, he might have done it for his family, and the way he looks at it, his family is gong [the public interest]. When he sacrificed the nation for the benefit of his small group in the struggle for power, he was also doing it for the public interest [gong], the public interest of his small group. . . .Gong and si are relative terms; anything within the circle in which one is standing can be called gong.¹⁰

Likewise, the distinction between voluntary and involuntary forms of association is blurry. In the West the family is the prototypical involuntary association; one does not choose one's parents. But in the Asian traditions there is a different way of thinking about the family. Fei Xiaotong again: If a friend in England or America writes a letter saying he is going to "bring his family" to visit, the recipient knows very well who will be coming. But "in China, although we frequently see the phrase, 'Your entire family is invited,' very few people could say exactly which persons should be included under 'family.'" A person can choose to include distant relatives or even friends as part of broadly conceived family. The involuntary relationships that make up

the kinship group are expanded in indeterminate ways by voluntary affiliation.¹¹

A traditional discourse centered on a holistic “anthropocosmic vision” and unable to make fixed distinctions between public and private, voluntary and involuntary forms of association—this would not seem a very promising basis for developing a coherent theory of civil society. Contemporary Chinese and other Asians are faced with social realities that cannot readily be encompassed by this vision. One of the words for civil society, it will be noted, is *shimin shehui*, “urban society.” In modern metropolises like Hong Kong, Shanghai, Taipei, Tokyo, or Seoul, the Asian intellectual has to contend with extreme social fragmentation, industrial or postindustrial divisions of labor, populations influenced by global media and demanding opportunities for free, individualistic self-expression, and a powerful, globalized market economy—all of which put complex demands on the state.

There are those, of course, who think that the only way to confront these new challenges is through “all-out Westernization,” rather than through any appropriation of the Confucian legacy. But others believe that it is neither possible nor desirable to discard that legacy.¹² When those who consider the reappropriation of the Confucian legacy consider the issue of civil society, they look to the intermediate associations between the nuclear family and the state. The logic of Confucianism makes it difficult to make sharp distinctions between the various elements in this intermediate realm. Instead of seeing different kinds of associations as independent entities, like so many separate sticks within a bundle of firewood, each with its own purposes and each at least potentially in competition with each other, they tend to think of the different elements as fluidly interpenetrating each other, like the ripples on a pond. When they use the word *minjian shuhui*—“people-based society”—to translate civil society, they do not usually connote popular groups acting independently of the state. They assume that people-based groups cannot properly exist without the general permission, guidance, and supervision of the government.

At one extreme, those envisioning such people-based groups from top to bottom might see them simply as a “transmission belt” between the state and the lowest realms of the society. (Ideologues in Mainland China and some apologists for the Singapore regime would fall into this category.) Public purposes infuse what we in the West would think of as private matters. At the other extreme, those envisioning people-based groups from bottom to the top are likely to blend what Westerners consider private matters with public affairs. They may think of groups like the family as legitimately being able to influence affairs of state. (Into this category might fall some of those who celebrate familistic, “*guanxi*

capitalism,” in which business deals are regulated by particularistic connections between relatives and friends rather than impersonally applied laws.) But most intellectuals working within the Confucian tradition fall between these extremes. For instance, they recognize the necessity for intermediate associations to maintain a large degree of autonomy from the state. Yet because of the difficulty that Confucian discourse has of offering a principled justification for such autonomy, they advocate it more on pragmatic grounds. An institutional embodiment of this stance is perhaps seen on contemporary Taiwan, which in many ways is witnessing a “springtime of civil society,” with a tremendous proliferation of intermediate associations—religious, ethnic, commercial, environmentalist, feminist. To have a legitimate standing in Taiwanese society, all of these groups must be duly registered with an appropriate government ministry, and thus in principle accept government supervision. But there are now so many of these groups that the government could not regulate them, even it wanted to. For all intents and purposes these groups function as autonomous, voluntary associations. Members of such groups definitely seem to want this practical autonomy. But most seem reluctant to undertake the effort that would be necessary to establish a principled basis for it.¹³

SOCIETY: WHAT MAKES CIVIL SOCIETY A SOCIETY AND NOT A SIMPLE AGGREGATE?

The Confucian vision is radically social. As Herbert Fingarette puts it: “For Confucius, unless there are at least two human beings, there are no human beings.”¹⁴ The relationships that define the conditions for human flourishing were given a classic formulation by Mencius:

Between parent and child there is to be affection
Between ruler and minister, rightness
Between husband and wife, [gender] distinctions
Between older and younger [siblings], an order of precedence
Between friends, trustworthiness¹⁵

This formulation assumes that human persons flourish through performing different, mutually complementary roles. Some roles should take priority over others—for instance, the role of parent is more important than the role of friend. But this formulation does not justify a top-down, authoritarian system in which it is the prerogative of superior people to give orders and the duty of inferiors blindly to obey.

There is another formulation of the basic Confucian relationships that does justify authoritarianism. That is the doctrine of the “three bonds,”

between ruler/minister, father/son, and husband/wife. Today, in common discourse, the core of Confucian teaching is indeed understood in terms of these authoritarian three bonds. According to Wm. Theodore de Bary, however, the three bonds "have no place in the Confucian classics, and were only codified later in [first century C.E.] Han texts."¹⁶ They are of Legalist provenance, products of an age when Confucianism became the ideology of the imperial state. Apologists for Asian authoritarian regimes like to stress the importance of the three bonds. But Zhu Xi and most Neo-Confucians rarely mention them.¹⁷ And when Tu Weiming and other modern Confucian intellectuals try to press Confucianism into the service of creating a democratic civil society, they claim that the Mencian vision of mutuality is the most authentic expression of Confucianism.¹⁸

Even if one tries to build a vision of civil society around the five relationships of Mencius, it would be difficult to avoid making moral distinctions between men and women and older and younger people that would be unacceptable to Western liberals. However, in theory at least, these distinctions would lead not to inferiority but to complementary reciprocity. The emphasis in the parent/child and husband/wife relationship would be on mutual affection and love, expressed energetically and creatively on all sides. The parent should instruct the child, but the child should also admonish the parent if the parent is doing something wrong. In the *Classic of Filial Piety*, the disciple of Confucius asks the Master, "[I]f a child follows all of his parents' commands, can this be called filiality? The Master replied, 'What kind of talk is this! . . . If a father even had one son to remonstrate with him, he still would not fall into evil ways. In the face of whatever is not right, the son cannot but remonstrate with his father.'¹⁹ In the *Classic of Filial Piety for Women*, "The women said, 'We dare to ask whether we follow all our husbands' commands we could be called virtuous?' Her Ladyship answered, 'What kind of talk is this! . . . If a husband has a remonstrating wife then he won't fall into evil ways. Therefore if a husband transgresses against the Way, you must correct him. How could it be that to obey your husband in everything would make you a virtuous person?'"²⁰

A civil society grounded in such notions of creative reciprocity would discourage configurations of power that would prevent weaker members from acting as moral agents in the reciprocal exchanges that bind the society together. It would protect from retaliation members who exercised their duty to remonstrate with those in power. It would encourage everyone to receive the kind of education that would enable him or her properly to fulfill their responsibilities. It was in this spirit that the seventeenth-century Neo-Confucian scholar Huang Zongxi proposes, according to de Bary, "a constitutional program resembling, in some

important respects, the constitutional system of the modern West."²¹ There are two main elements in his proposal for institutional innovation. First is a Confucian justification for a rule of law that would place limitations on the ruler's power. Second is a proposal to strengthen schools and learned academies so that they could increase the numbers of civil servants and prepare them to perform an expanded range of functions in civil government—and could become strong centers for the expression of educated public opinion.²² Huang's "scholarly forum was to be a well-defined, state-supported, fully accredited, and legal function of a duly constituted order, and yet as independent as possible in a society that lacked a middle class, popular press, church, legal profession or other supporting infrastructure independent of the state."²³

Huang was recognized as one of the most learned men of his time, and his ideas resonated with other leading Confucian scholars during the early Qing dynasty. His ideas were not implemented during the Qing, but Chinese revolutionaries and reformers in the twentieth century have drawn upon them in the effort to create a Chinese version of Western constitutionalism. Although the actually existing structure of the imperial Chinese state and society was alien to Western notions of a civil society, the writing of scholars like Huang Zongxi demonstrates that there are intellectual resources within the Confucian tradition for imagining such a society—one based on a constitutionally limited state and on an array of mediating institutions, especially educational institutions.

VALUES: HOW IS CIVIL SOCIETY IMPORTANT? WHAT PARTICULAR VALUES DOES IT OFFER ITS MEMBERS THAT MIGHT BE UNOBTAINABLE IN ITS ABSENCE?

In the Confucian vision, as noted above, human flourishing can occur only if social relations have a proper moral basis. This means that people have to learn to discern what is the right way to behave and that for the most part they voluntarily act accordingly. A community based on force and fear cannot be a good community. But neither can a community based on an amoral clash of competing interest groups, even when this leads to a stable, peaceful balance of power and many opportunities for individuals to choose between rival versions of the good life. The Confucian project requires moral cultivation at all levels of the society.

This cultivation is to develop the mind-and-heart, an inextricable combination of mental and emotional faculties. The goal of this cultivation, as Tu Wei-ming puts it, "is not an idea of abstract universalism but a dynamic process of self-transcendence, not a departure from one's

source but a broadening and deepening of one's sensitivity without losing sight of one's rootedness in the body, family, community, society, and the world."²⁴ This cultivation must begin within the family, and it is sustained at the most fundamental level by the rituals of family life. For most people in imperial China it stayed within the (extended) family. However, the more advanced levels of moral cultivation—the kind required to set oneself on the path to becoming a “gentleman,” capable of responsible political leadership—required a plentitude of intermediary institutions: in the words of Tu Wei-ming, “community schools, community compacts, local temples, theater groups, clan associations, guilds, festivals, and a variety of ritual-centered activities.”²⁵ Each of these institutions had its own integrity—its core practices were seen as ends in themselves, not just means to some larger, universal ends. But Confucian self-cultivation aimed to see these institutions in the widest possible context. With proper self-cultivation, a Confucian could see how a strong commitment to one's family would not be in conflict with commitment to one's community; and commitment to one's local community was not in conflict with commitment to the state. The more intimate commitments indeed should train one to engage properly in the broader commitments.

The challenges of creating stable societies with a common moral basis in the modern urban environments of contemporary Asia are far greater than the challenges facing Confucian thinkers in the predominantly agrarian societies of imperial China. The realization of the Confucian project under modern conditions would require more self-cultivation of more people, especially more of the cultivation that would enable people to place their family and local community commitments in the broadest possible context. This would require an even richer array of intermediary institutions than there were in imperial China. To fulfill the purposes of self-cultivation, these institutions would have to be seen as educational, in the broadest sense of the word. They would have to be based on humanistic principles, not just the pursuit of money and power for their own sakes. Their organizational structure would have to encourage the kind of give and take necessary for effective learning.

It is through such groups that Asian societies could become *wenming shehui*, “civilized societies,” societies full of the values of civility. In the Confucian context, however, civility does not simply mean tolerance for rivals in a world of competitive coexistence—as in the context of the liberal-egalitarian vision of civil society. It means the eventual achievement of a kind of social consensus. The attitude of Huang Zongxi was characteristic of even the most “liberal” Confucian scholars. Huang advocated open discussion of public questions in the enhanced schools and academies that he proposed. “At the same time,” as de Bary puts it,

"it must be noted that by open discussion of public questions, Huang did not mean complete freedom of expression in all matters. As a Confucian he believed the upholding of strict moral standards was necessary to the social and political order; thus he was prepared to ban, on the local level, forms of moral impropriety and social corruption."²⁶

Today, even citizens in relatively liberal East Asian regimes like Taiwan give general support to laws that ban breaches of filial piety. For instance, family law in Taiwan as well as in most East Asian countries mandates that children must take care of their aged parents—something that in Western liberal democracy is generally regarded as a private matter, no matter how desirable such a mandate might be. There is also a fair amount of social consensus in favor of laws formally banning the kind of pornography that would be protected by the First Amendment in the United States (even though in practice there are plenty of pornographic materials available in most East Asian countries). Finally, there is considerable support for government restriction of "irresponsible" (sensationalistic, scandalous) journalism, although intellectuals in the more open East Asian regimes are also concerned about how to protect legitimate criticism of people in power.

This concern for achieving social consensus is also reflected in the ordering of educational systems throughout contemporary East Asia. The assumption is that schools are supposed to develop not just technical skills but proper values and that the state should play an active role in ensuring that the proper values are indeed taught. There are ambiguities within traditional Confucian epistemology about how learning of proper values takes place. One school of thought stresses the need for the learner to absorb proper information. Another—with roots in the ideas of Mencius—sees learning as the unfolding of knowledge that is immanent in the learner. Depending on what side of the tradition one emphasizes, learning can involve greater degrees of indoctrination, on the one hand, and education, on the other. The Maoist government in China, obviously, emphasized indoctrination. From research academies and universities at the top to the "small groups" that honeycombed all levels of society and carried out "study sessions" throughout the grass roots, participants were expected to learn the proper political line and encourage one another, through criticism and self-criticism, to conform to it. In contemporary Taiwan, in sharp contrast, there is extremely lively and open intellectual discussion in universities and research institutes and in the media. (At the primary- and secondary-school levels, on the other hand, there is more of an emphasis on conformity than there would be in the United States.) Throughout all levels of society, a vast assortment of associations and community organizations try to develop and propagate their various visions about cultural, political, and economic issues.

Other East Asian societies, like Singapore, Japan, and South Korea, fall somewhere between these two extremes of emphasizing indoctrination versus education. And they differ similarly with respect to government and unofficial public opinion about how much social consensus is required and how it should be achieved. But even in Taiwan, which currently is probably the most open society in East Asia, there is less principled support for moral pluralism and more of a tendency to equate civility with social consensus than there would be in the classic liberal or the liberal egalitarian visions.

RISKS: WHAT RISKS AND LIABILITIES, IF ANY, DOES CIVIL SOCIETY POSE FOR ITS MEMBERS?

Perhaps the main risk to the Neo-Confucian project over the centuries has been its excessive idealism, its unrealistic assessment of the demands of ensuring social order in a large and complex society. As Tu Wei-ming notes,

[B]y addressing, in a fundamentally humanist way, the meaning of politics, Neo-Confucian intellectuals not only developed their own distinctive style of political participation but also formulated the ritual of exercising power in East Asian politics. To be sure, it is easy to criticize the Neo-Confucian insistence on the inseparability of morality and politics as a failure to understand the political process as an independent arena of human activity. It was perhaps constitutive to their intention to moralize politics that they inevitably experience alienation from the center of power. The interjection of the category of "self-cultivation" into the discourse of realpolitik may seem naïve. Indeed, this has been widely interpreted by modern scholars as characteristic of the Confucian predicament: inner spiritual self-cultivation does not at all lead to positive social and political consequence.²⁷

However, Tu argues that if seen from the proper perspective, the Neo-Confucian position does not have to be naïve. Indeed, Tu might argue that from a Confucian perspective it is Western liberalism that seems naïve, in its notion that political order can be maintained through technically expert management upon a citizenry divided by extreme ethical pluralism and predominantly focused on private pleasures rather than public duties. "The cliché that virtually all Confucian scholar-officials were actively involved in purifying the ethos and revitalizing the spirit of the community suggests that, as self-styled ministers of the moral order, their commitment to social transformation was, in their view, the calling of their political engagement."²⁸ Historically, Tu argues, the Confucians were extremely successful in their calling.

[I]t was in the shaping of the habits of the heart of the East Asian people that the Confucian persuasion exerted its enduring influence. The pervasiveness of the Confucian life-orientation was such that Confucian ethics manifested itself in morality books, peasant rebellions, entertainment, religious movements, and popular literature. . . . The learning of the heart and mind, with emphasis on human nature and feeling, became a grammar of action in East Asian social praxis not necessarily because of its impeccable logic in moral reasoning; its reasonableness in the practical living of ordinary people accounted for much of its persuasive power.²⁹

Throughout the centuries, however, powerful Asian rulers themselves have thought that Neo-Confucianism was naïve about the dictates of power. When faced with the task of holding together a large and diverse empire, and especially when faced with the dangers of internal rebellion and external invasion, they often resorted to the hard-headed *realpolitik* of Legalism although usually without explicitly acknowledging this. In the twentieth century, the problems arising from increased population, increased fragmentation, civil war, and outside aggression have, of course, risen exponentially. It has often seemed to successful political leaders that they could not afford the humaneness of Confucianism. The last political campaign of Mao Zedong's regime, for example, was aimed at condemning Confucius (which was meant as a veiled criticism of Zhou Enlai) and praising the Legalists, whose vision inspired Mao's own form of dictatorship.³⁰ East Asian regimes that suppress dissent and engage in large-scale state-led mobilization are acting very much in the Legalist tradition, which is what remains if the Confucian vision proves itself to be insufficiently robust.

To succeed on their own terms in setting the political agenda in the contemporary world and thus in avoiding the slide into Legalist authoritarianism, Confucians need to find new ways of shaping the "habits of the heart" of the East Asian people. The greatest challenge to doing this, perhaps, is that posed by the development of mass society, atomized by widespread social mobility, distracted from public affairs by a globalized consumer culture, and vulnerable to manipulation by mass media. Confucian self-cultivation requires slow, hard work, difficult to sustain in a frenetic market economy. It requires the development of moral discipline, difficult to accomplish in the face of the self-gratifications promised by consumer culture. Classic Confucian education aimed to produce some "superior persons" whose authority would be respected and accepted by ordinary people—an elitist notion that goes against populist instincts encouraged by mass media and global popular culture, and against the notion of a *gongmin shehui*, a "citizens' society," in which each citizen has an equal right to participate in the polity.

Without creative adaptation, the Confucian vision may fail to be attractive to modern mass societies, and be unable to inspire a civil society possessed of enough civility to sustain orderly forms of democracy. If that happens, perhaps the only viable path toward political democracy would be an adaptation of Western liberal visions. Failing that, the probable outcome might be forms of authoritarianism arising out of indigenous East Asian traditions.

RESPONSIBILITY: HOW IS RESPONSIBILITY FOR HUMAN WELL-BEING PROPERLY SHARED BY, OR DISTRIBUTED AMONG, THE INDIVIDUAL, THE FAMILY, THE STATE, AND PRIVATE ASSOCIATIONS?

As noted above, in the Neo-Confucian vision social order is based on the proper performance of interdependent social roles. If everyone plays his or her roles properly—that is, if parents are good parents and children are good children, if rulers are good rulers and subjects good subjects, and so forth—then there will be peace all under Heaven. Sometimes it may appear that the roles one occupies in one sphere of life come into conflict with roles in other spheres. For instance one's role as a parent might seem to conflict with one's role as a loyal citizen or political subject. The Confucian position is that if one cultivates oneself fully enough and thus understands the responsibilities implicit in these roles deeply enough, one will find that there is ultimately no contradiction.

The roles and their attendant responsibilities are determined by cosmic Principle (Li). This Principle is an objective reality, and insofar as the moral life is to conform to such an objective reality, Confucian thought is like the Western natural law tradition. But there is an important difference. In the natural law tradition, people can know through reason the laws to which they should conform, and then it is the task of moral cultivation to achieve this conformity. But in the Confucian tradition, one cannot simply know the Principle through reason. This requires learning of the mind-and-heart, an embodied form of knowledge that is at least as affective as cognitive. It is the task of the Confucian to cultivate the moral sensibility that would enable him or her to apprehend this fundamental Principle. One becomes moral not by following external rules, but by struggling to develop the self.

The place for such self-cultivation is in the midst of the world. The Confucians, as Tu Wei-ming puts it, were "action intellectuals." It was their responsibility to be immersed in all the political and social con-

flicts of their time. But unlike the liberal who learns to live with conflict by tolerating it, the Confucian aspired to learn through conflict so as to overcome it by changing the rules of the game, so that the exercise of power would be subordinated to moral commitments, rather than vice versa.

In the midst of the world, Confucian self-cultivation involves some combination of academic study of classic literature, sincere participation in family, community, and political rituals, and meditative introspection. There is no pope of Confucianism to define correct interpretation of such things, only an ever-evolving consensus forged through discussion among those who sincerely follow the Confucian Way. There is something almost existential about this, and it helps keep Confucianism from the dogmatism into which the natural law tradition can sometimes fall.

In general, though, the Confucian sense of social responsibility is biased toward the fulfillment of roles at the most fundamental levels of society. The opening statement of *The Great Learning*, the best known and most influential of all the Confucian classics, offers this summary of the Confucian moral and political program:

The ancients who wished to illuminate “illuminating virtue” all under Heaven first governed their states. Wishing to govern their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their personal lives. Wishing to cultivate their personal lives, they first rectify their hearts and minds. Wishing to rectify their hearts and minds, they made their intentions sincere. Wishing to make their intentions sincere, they first extended their knowledge. The extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things. For only when things are investigated is knowledge extended; only when knowledge is extended are intentions sincere; only when intentions are sincere are hearts and minds rectified; only when hearts and minds are rectified are personal lives cultivated; only when personal lives are cultivated are families regulated; only when families are regulated are states governed; only when states are governed is there peace all under Heaven. Therefore, from the Son of Heaven to the common people, all, without exception, must take self-cultivation as the root.³¹

This is a vision of rippling waves of interdependent, mutual responsibility extending through all the levels of the world. But the waves emanate from a center—the self. The cultivation of the self is an end in itself, not simply (as in the Western civic republican tradition, which otherwise has important affinities with Confucianism) a means to achieve a well-ordered polity. Self-cultivation cannot be done alone, however. It requires in the first instance a strong family, cultivation of which is also an end in itself. Eventually, it also requires a well-ordered state. One’s most

basic responsibilities, however, are to those closest to oneself—family and local community. Before there can be proper governance of the state, there must be proper self-cultivation leading to proper regulation of the family. A wise government, therefore, will support the individual, family, and local community in their work of mutual cultivation, but it will not attempt to preempt these functions.

FREEDOM: WHAT IS THE APPROPRIATE BALANCE
BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY AND CONSTRAINTS
IMPOSED BY NONGOVERNMENTAL GROUPS?

For the Neo-Confucian, freedom is not the “freedom to choose.” The fundamental building blocks of a civil society are nonoptional institutions. The foundation of the Confucian project was expanding family virtues beyond the confines of the home. The point of departure is the most nonvoluntary of human institutions, the family. For the Western liberal, even the family becomes like a voluntary association, whose members have easy exit and the ability to affiliate or not if they so please. For the Confucian, on the other hand, even voluntary associations, like learned societies or guilds, should be like families—their members should be bound by loyalties that make exit difficult. In the Neo-Confucian perspective, then, freedom does not consist in choosing which groups one will belong to. It consists in creatively contextualizing those commitments which fate has assigned. It involves more deeply understanding the meaning of one’s roles as parent/child, ruler/minister, husband/wife, older sibling/younger sibling, and friend—so that one can flexibly, even playfully, reconcile these with each other and with all the other confusing roles that one must play in an evolving modern world. This task can provide wide latitude for action and immense challenges for personal creativity, and it can lead to a plethora of individualized responses to particular situations. Under the right circumstances, it can encourage vigorous entrepreneurial initiative. In practice, well-cultivated Confucians would have a great deal of freedom to choose. But in principle, their choices would be directed toward a larger goal, a dynamic, open process of spiritual development leading toward a truly *wenming shehui*, a civilized society of *gongmin*, or public citizens, rich in *minjian*, or people-based associations, within the conurbation of *shimin*, city people in the modern world.