Political Values in Singapore: A Confucian Perspective

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Political Values in Asia, the ASEAN Political Security Community, and Confucius’ Philosophy

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A. Introduction

In the ASEAN Charter, all member states are committed to common political values such as human rights, fundamental freedoms, democracy and the rule of law. These political values, as well as related political institutions and structures, are predominantly of Western origin. There is a need to recognize alternative models of organizing state and normative orders in Asia. One alternative is the political values that are derived and adapted from Asian philosophies. This paper critically discusses political values in Asia with a focus on the relevance of Confucius’ philosophy to the ASEAN political security community. The paper begins by examining the formation of ASEAN, ‘Asian values’ and ‘ASEAN Way’. This is followed by highlighting the key characteristics, challenges and future of the ASEAN political security community in the 21st century. The second part of the paper focuses on the political philosophy of Confucius and its potential contributions towards the flourishing of the ASEAN political security community.

B. ASEAN, Asian Values, and ASEAN Way

On the 2nd of July 2013, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) convened its 20th meeting in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam. This meeting was a remarkable accomplishment in the history of international relations. The ARF has no equivalent in any part of the world or in any epoch of human history. It exists as the longest and only multinational organization that includes key representatives of the Southeast Asian region (all the ASEAN member nations), countries of the modern western world (i.e. Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the European Union, and the United
States), established East Asian economies (Japan, and South Korea) as well as the biggest nations that form part of the Non-Aligned Movement (i.e. Bangladesh, the People's Republic of China, India, North Korea, Mongolia, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Russia, East Timor and Sri Lanka). The longevity of the ARF is a testament to the distinctive set of international relations norms championed by its nerve centre – the ASEAN – and also the greater region of Asia.

Aside from its growing diplomatic influence, ASEAN and the greater region of Asia have also evolved into an economic giant. On the one hand, Asia has been described as an emerging “significant economic player” in the international arena of trade and business. And on the other hand Southeast Asian nations, known traditionally for having “low income levels” accompanied by “relatively high stocks of human capital, and past success at improving labor productivity” were projected to eventually reach the economic levels of more developed East Asia. At the dawn of the 21st century, these predictions have come to reality. The ASEAN and the greater region of Asia otherwise known as the assemblage of nations described as belonging to Developing Asian economies has arisen to be an undisputed economic powerhouse in contemporary times:

The region’s real GDP in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms climbed from about $3.3 trillion in 1980 to an estimated $24.5 trillion in 2009. That is an increase of 7.5 times, compared with just three times for the world economy during the same period.

With its diplomatic record evidenced by the enduring ARF and incipient economic might demonstrated by a steady and galloping GDP increase, how have these characteristics of Developing Asia been

1 See Association of Southeast Asian Nations, *Chairman's statement of the 20th ASEAN Regional Forum*, Jakarta 2013.
3 See Bloom, Canning and Malaney, “Demographic Change and Economic Growth in Asia,” 1999, p. 34.
4 Developing Asia includes the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong, China, India, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, Taipei-China, Thailand and Vietnam. These economies account for about 95% of emerging Asia’s GDP, and are thus representative of regional trends.
translated to political values and influence? More specifically, what is the status of fundamental political values in Asia namely: human rights, democratic freedoms and the rule of law in the world’s most dynamic region?

One unmistakable feature of the region is that it is made up of “different mixtures of Confucian, Buddhist, Western, and other values”\(^6\) such that Asian societies do not necessarily share similar levels of urgency and acceptance in relation to political and social concerns. The region portrays a very varied picture of how political values are played out. For instance, a developing country with a huge population like the Philippines, prides itself in upholding a vibrant democracy, yet suffers from “systemic corruption”\(^7\) that has a debilitating impact on society. The small Singapore city-state that is known for its exceptional record of governance and its hard-nosed anti-corruption stance is typified by a wealthy society with one of the highest per capita GDP in the world that “blends almost seamlessly with stunted political activism.”\(^8\)

Systematic studies on the levels of civil and political rights in Asia provide interesting facets pertinent to the region. A comparative empirical survey on human rights in Asia, France and the US revealed that “Asian countries, especially East Asian countries, tend to do poorly on civil and political rights relative to others in their income group”\(^9\); this confirms what some scholars claim as the region’s drab performance record in terms of upholding fundamental democratic entitlements. The same report states, however, that “Asian countries tend to do much better” in comparison to other nations with similar income groups on other valid human development measures such as “education, infant mortality, life expectancy, law and order and social stability.”\(^10\) The emerging gap between conventional political values – which are usually western-centric – as opposed to other values pertinent to a broader understanding of human development, becomes more pronounced in Asia. In fact, some commentators have attempted to describe this gulf as the basic opposition

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8 Reyes, “Social Media Networks and Tactical Globalization: An Exploratory Case Study of Contesting Political ‘space’ in Singapore,” 2013, p. 34.
between (1) individual civil rights which are championed in the West and particularly in liberal democratic societies and (2) communitarian perspectives that recognize and accept certain “democratic rights” as long as these “contribute to strengthening ties to such communities as the family and the nation.” Other commentators have described this difference by using the terms liberal (pertaining to full-fledged electoral democracies) and semi-liberal or illiberal (referring to electoral democracies that do not fulfill all the features of full-fledged electoral democracies). There are some others who have explicitly stated that “‘illiberal’ or ‘semi-liberal’ democracies” which possess “formal procedures of electoral democracy” combined pragmatically with “autocratic characteristics” are regimes that “are more accurately categorized as ‘defective democracies’.”

Given the great disparity which is characteristic of the nations in Asia and the intricate tapestry of political values in the region, would it be possible to describe a fundamental set of beliefs that sets the region apart? Would it be plausible to imagine a set of ‘Asian values’?

I. Is There Such a Thing as ‘Asian Values’?

The rhetoric of Asian values gained currency at the height of the Asian economic boom. It was identified as the ethos that explained the economic progress of the region that was characterized by strong regimes that were very different from the western notion of liberal democracies. The ‘Asian values’ purportedly represented aspects of western liberal beliefs of capitalism combined with features of autocratic rule that was the more prevalent mode of governance in the region. After the crippling 1997 economic crisis that started in Asia and spread like a crippling contagion worldwide, the rhetoric about Asian values receded. With the resurgence in the economic might of the region, revisiting the rhetoric around the Asian values may be imperative. Is there really such a thing as Asian values?

Given the wide diversity of religion, language and culture in Asia, it is doubtful that a set of common values could be devised. The proponents of the “Asian values” argument imposed this concept upon the whole of Asia
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in order to give the West a holistic view of Asia. However, as not all Asian leaders support the argument, “Asian values” as a concept is not a reality. It is merely a myth created by some Asian leaders as a political tool against challenges from both within and outside the states.  

Commentators have convincingly argued that the circumstances and chronicles of nations in the region have an immense variety. Most of the Asian region admittedly has strong links to Confucianism but these are not unanimous. Indonesia and Malaysia as well as the south of Thailand, the Philippines and Western China have very strong Islamic influences. Furthermore, communist China and Vietnam officially spurned Confucianism while “other philosophies such as Taoism and Buddhism have been interwoven” into the history of peoples and societies in Asia. Another very compelling argument proposes that Asian values served as a powerful and normative creation used by elites – such as leaders, scholars and policy makers – to delineate Asia with the imagined “Other” represented by the West. In this sense, Asian values emerged as a created mode of development that works well in the unique context of Asia:

“Asian values” as a doctrine of developmentalism can be understood as the claim that, until prosperity is achieved, democracy remains an unaffordable luxury. This “Protestant ethic” form of “Asian values” attributes high growth rates to certain cultural traits. These characteristics include hard work, frugality, discipline, and teamwork. Western democracy hinders rapid development, authoritarian rulers in the Asia Pacific claim, and thus must be delayed until substantial development has been achieved.

This inquiry argues that one of the more analytically illuminating positions to take in relation to the question of Asian values is to see it more from a descriptive perspective. It may be more worthwhile to depict Asian values not as a “particular set of attitudes, beliefs and institutions which all Asian people share in common but rather to refer to the great diversities which characterize Asian values.” Shifting the focus from what is common and instead opening the gaze to various possibilities that may emerge from the great divergence of Asian values provides greater avenues for a deeper understanding of components that contribute to this

divergence. Scrutinizing the experience of the ten nations that form part of the ASEAN in its pursuit of understanding the differences in the histories and conditions of their member states reveals the emergence of a way to manage these differences: the ASEAN Way.

II. The ‘ASEAN Way’

The great disparity between the ASEAN nations is not something new. When the original ASEAN members consisting of the representative foreign ministers of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand decided to group themselves together on the 8th of August 1967 to sign the Bangkok Declaration that formalized the organization, each signatory was fully aware of the great divergence of each nation. In order to circumvent the potentially sensitive political economic dynamics that could arise in relation to how a diverse set of actors would operate in a regional grouping, a key foundational aspect of the ASEAN was institutionalized – the ASEAN way. This is a modus operandi, a way of operating that governed ASEAN when it was first constituted some forty years ago, and which continues as the glue that binds its diverse members. To be more specific, this unique organizational mechanism consists of “Mushyawara (consultation) and Mufakat (consensus) and the foundational principle of non-intervention of ASEAN nation-states into each other’s domestic affairs.”

The history of the nation-states of Southeast Asia is excruciatingly mired in warfare and conflict emerging primarily from colonial experiences. As a result, the creation of the ASEAN needed to strategically take into careful consideration this troubled past:

The founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was helped by the common desire of its members to ensure the survival of regimes which had by then retreated significantly from their postcolonial experiments in liberal democracy. This orientation was further institutionalised by ASEAN’s doctrine of non-interference, which helped to shield its members from outside pressures towards democratisation.

17 ASEAN Secretariat, The Asean Declaration (Bangkok Declaration), Bangkok: ASEAN, 1967.
Ever since the creation of the ASEAN and the conception of its unique ASEAN Way, international relations scholars have criticized the organization and its ethos. The main reproach against the ASEAN Way was the absence of institutionally binding arrangements, unlike what can be found in the European Union. Consultation, consensus and non-intervention that distinguished the ASEAN Way from other operating processes of international alliances were often raised as evidence of the ineffectiveness of the Southeast Asian regional assemblage. Yet, more than 40 years after its foundation, ASEAN, notwithstanding its perceived flaw of not having institutionally binding power, remains unchallenged “as the hub of regional multilateral diplomacy” in the entire Asian region. Nowhere is this prowess manifested clearly than in the experience of the ARF which political analysts claim “helped manage the demise of the Soviet Union, the rise of China, and the draw-down of U.S. military forces” and has also become instrumental in allowing regional political cooperation in the areas of “peacekeeping, disaster relief, and the further development of Confidence Building Measures (CBMs).”

The continued and ever increasing political significance of the ARF, under the guidance of the ASEAN, paved the way for members of the regional organization to aspire towards the creation of an ASEAN Security Community “proposed in 2002 by newly democratic Indonesia and officially adopted by ASEAN a year later” with the goal of promoting a just, democratic and harmonious Southeast Asia. This development was a portent of a future trajectory in the region: the emergence of an ASEAN security community.

C. An Emerging ASEAN Security Community

In 2012, the population of the ASEAN was nearly twice that of the United States of America, one fifth more than that of the European Union and

22 Acharya, “Asean at 40.”
23 This corresponds to the European Union of 27 states or EU-27.
nearly five times that of Japan. Among the ten very diverse countries of
the ASEAN, six nations have emerged with more mature economies:
These are the ASEAN 6 comprising of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore,
Thailand, the Philippines and Brunei Darussalam. These six economies
within the ASEAN have “grown rapidly and had become industrially
competitive.” On the other hand the newest members of ASEAN,
consisting of Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar, collectively known
as CVLM, despite being unmistakably resource-rich countries continue to
display various manifestations of economic vulnerabilities. Despite these
huge disparities in each one’s economic standing, the ASEAN 6 and
CVLM have joined forces to create one of the most durable regional
groupings in the world – the enlarged ASEAN. The natural progression of
the expanded regional organization was to go beyond its economic and
diplomatic milestones and to move into a much more ambitious goal of
greater cohesion. This vision was concretized in early 2000:

To concretize the ASEAN Vision 2020, the ASEAN Heads of States/Governments
adopted the Declaration of ASEAN Concord II (Bali Concord II) in 2003, which
establishes an ASEAN Community by 2020. The ASEAN Community consists of
three pillars, namely the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the
ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural
Community (ASCC).

The first and fundamental step in achieving the lofty vision for 2020
was the adoption of a regional charter. In 2007, during the 13th ASEAN
Summit, a culmination of two years of consultation and consensus led to
the ratification of the ASEAN Charter. The regional agreement is more
than a reassertion of traditional practice. In addition to reaffirming the
established principles that form part of the ASEAN rhetoric, the charter
explicitly lists “to strengthen democracy, enhance good governance and

24 ASEAN, Asean Community in figures (ACIF) 2010, Jakarta: Association of
Southeast Asian Nations, 2010.
411.
1099-1119.
27 ASEAN, Asean Political-Security Community Blueprint, Jakarta: Association of
the rule of law, and to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms as goals to be attained by the organization.

I. Will the ASEAN Embrace Institutionally-Binding Arrangements?

Does the emergence of an ASEAN security community translate into a marked shift in the foundational ethos of the organization? Will the ASEAN move from its unique identity of consultation, consensus and non-intervention towards more institutionally binding arrangements?

In relation to a transformation of its ethos, commentators indicate that the ASEAN has consistently resisted the adoption of “post-sovereign regional norms” and has shied away from issuing official declarations espousing “commitment to democracy and human rights” similar to those enshrined in regional institutions of the West. As to whether the region is moving towards greater obligatory agreements, scholars of the region emphasize that “there is little evidence of a sea-change in attitudes regarding the utility of force” which typifies security communities leading to the inevitable conclusion that “institutional enforcement is a non-issue” in ASEAN’s current state of affairs. An argument can be made that the foundational ethos, in fact, becomes more pronounced with ASEAN members practicing a “relational view of power” that accentuates “consensus among members” while clearly acknowledging constraints this may place on the breadth and width of regional integration. The history of this unique regional organization is unambiguous: Despite the signing of accords, blueprints and action programs, the fact remains that consultation, consensus and non-intervention are still the operating mechanisms of ASEAN. Given the persistence of ASEAN to adhere to its foundational ethos and to avoid institutionally-binding arrangements, what kind of political security community can be envisaged to emerge in the 21st century? Corollary to this would be what are the emerging security threats that face ASEAN in the 21st Century?

30 Garofano, “Power, institutions, and the asean regional forum,” p. 520.
D. Towards an ASEAN Political Security Community in the 21st Century

Alongside the economic strides experienced in Developing Asia, traditional and non-traditional security threats have similarly thrived in the region. Traditional security threats in ASEAN have made it one of the flashpoints of conflict in the 21st century. The increasingly militarized Korean peninsula and the shaky political détente in this part of Asia is a cause for grave concern. The South China Seas and the bickering between China, Vietnam, the Philippines and Taiwan over the Spratly Islands has been one of the critical issues in the region. The more than twenty years of war in Muslim Mindanao in the Southern Philippines has not abated and has even found similar occurrences in the South of Thailand. The increasingly distressing situation of the Rohingya people located in the borders of Thailand and Burma continue to be a hotspot not only for violence but for an escalating humanitarian crisis. These are just some examples of the increasing range of traditional security threats in the region. However, these critical issues are made much more acute with the spread of non-traditional security threats. The resurgence of terrorism particularly in Indonesia and the Philippines, the continued problem of transnational crime and its many forms (i.e. drug and human trafficking) that can be seen in developed states of Singapore and Malaysia as well as in the developing countries of Laos and Cambodia and the possibility of public health epidemics like the crippling Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) that devastated Singapore and Hong Kong and the newer strains of the Avian Flu are a few examples of the emerging non-traditional security threats in the region. Given the increasing complexity of traditional and non-traditional security issues that face ASEAN, member states have seen the necessity of embracing a political security community.

In 2009, during the 14th ASEAN Summit held in Cha-am and Hua Hin, Thailand, the leaders of the regional grouping agreed to establish the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC). One of the main diplomatic objectives of the APSC was to obtain the pledge of all ASEAN leaders to employ exclusively peaceful processes in settling differences in relation to security issues governing the region. The APSC becomes a timely and highly-relevant agreement particularly with the persistence of traditional security threats as well as the appearance of more complex non-security threats. The APSC identified three fundamental provisions:
The ASEAN Political-Security Community envisages the following three key characteristics: (i) A Rules-based Community of shared values and norms; (ii) A Cohesive, Peaceful, Stable and Resilient Region with shared responsibility for comprehensive security; and (iii) A Dynamic and Outward-looking Region in an increasingly integrated and interdependent world.\(^{32}\)

I. The APSC – the ASEAN Way

What is the future of the ASPC? On the one hand, there is overwhelming evidence that the ASEAN Way typified by consultation, consensus and non-intervention remains as the ethos of the member states of this regional organization. On the other hand, the APSC heralds a novel set of values that suggests increased integration and shared responsibility within a “rules-based” scenario. It would appear that the ASPC attempts to steer the ASEAN known more for soft diplomacy towards a “rules-based” or institutionally-binding arrangement. The proposed political security community in ASEAN is undoubtedly fraught with paradoxical tendencies.

A careful review of how ASEAN has addressed traditional and non-traditional security issues reveals how the regional organization manages to paradoxically combine formal rhetoric (i.e. formally signed agreements) with informal networking (i.e. the ASEAN Way). The continued mitigation of the Spratly Islands conflict in the South China Seas is an example of how conflict and peace-building is maintained in this troubled region. One of the key mechanisms that helped diffuse the highly-volatile situation in this part of the world was the convening of South China Sea Workshops (SCSWs) that consisted of ASEAN, China as well as other pertinent stakeholders. \(^{33}\) Formally convened as high-level diplomatic meetings, the SCSWs employed the ASEAN Way of informal networks – through consensus and the upholding of the principle of non-intervention among elite participants – in order to manage the highly-complex traditional security issues. The experience of the ASEAN in addressing the non-traditional security threat of transnational crime of terrorism provides

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\(^{32}\) ASEAN, *ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint*, p. 2.

another example of how a feasible balance between paradoxical consensus and change may be achieved. Scholars and practitioners have identified that the experience of Southeast Asia in addressing terrorism in the region has been met with a “broad general consensus” among the ASEAN members. It has been suggested that this happened with the astute combination of “depoliticising terrorism” (treating terrorism as a technical problem rather than the more sensitive ‘nation and ethnicity’ problem and thereby arriving at a careful consensus) and the application of “ASEANisation” of counter-terrorism policies (the introduction of change via the well-known ASEAN Way).

This chapter argues that in order to better understand the nuances of Asian political values as represented by the ASEAN Way, adopting Confucius’ virtue-centered political philosophy that attempts to balance paradoxical tendencies is analytically illuminating. The succeeding sections elaborate on Confucius’ teachings and their potential contributions to the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC).

E. Confucius’ Political Philosophy

As noted earlier, common political values such as human rights, fundamental freedoms, democracy and the rule of law shared by the ASEAN member states originated from the West. But this does not mean that these political values are incompatible with or sidelined in Asian ideologies. One Asian ideology that has much to say about political ideals and issues is Confucianism. The rest of this chapter focuses on Confucius’ teachings on the concepts of ‘good government’ and ‘political participation’. The views of Confucius are based on the Analects – a collection of the sayings and conduct of Confucius and his disciples.

37 See Tan, Confucius, 2013.
I. Good Government

The first political concept is that of a good government – a topic that is close to the heart of Confucius. The Spring and Autumn Period (c. 722–468 BCE) that Confucius grew up in was a period rife with political and social turmoil, with rulers of different states vying for power and control. Appalled by the political and social chaos in his time, Confucius hoped to restore order and harmony by spreading his teachings and serving in the government. He desired to replace the prevailing harsh rule by law and punishment with the rule by virtue (Analects 2.3; all subsequent references refer to this text unless otherwise stated), through reviving the practices of the sage-kings from the Zhou dynasty (3.14, 8.20, 8.21, 9.5). He expressed confidence that he was able to improve the sociopolitical conditions in any state within one year and deliver results within three years (13.10).

At the heart of Confucius’ political philosophy is his emphasis on virtue. He contrasts two types of government in the passage below:

2.3 The Master said, ‘Lead [the common people] with policies, and keep them in line with punishments, and the common people will avoid punishments but will be without a sense of shame. Lead [the common people] with virtue, and keep them in line through li, and they will have a sense of shame and order themselves.’

Here, Confucius contrasts the rule by law through punishment and policies, and the rule by virtue through li. Li refers to the totality of normative human behaviors that are accompanied by corresponding attitudes and values for all aspects of one’s life. Li covers every aspect of a human life, including looking, listening, speaking and moving (cf. 12.1). Li encompasses a wide spectrum of behaviors, ranging from activities of relatively narrow scope and rigid structure such as ceremonial rites, to activities of relatively broad scope and flexible structure, such as making small talk. Confucius views the rule by virtue as effective for transforming not only the people’s behavior, but also their character. Social order is obtained when the people are capable of and intrinsically motivated to order their lives in accordance with li. When people know and act according to li, they will naturally feel ashamed if their behavior deviates from li, with or without the fear of punishment. Besides this ‘voice of conscience’, the fact that everyone is able to evaluate and correct one another based on the common yardstick of li also produces an external pressure for everyone to conform to li. Governing in accordance with li
implies that a ruler should respect and promote the individual’s human dignity, equality, learning opportunity and resources, as well as everyone’s correlative rights.

According to Confucius, good government is based on *li* (exemplary attitudes, values and behaviors). Confucius maintains that ‘if a person is able to govern a state through observing *li* and showing deference, what more is needed’ (4.13). Confucius’ point is that a good ruler is one who manifests and models desirable attitudes, values and behaviors. On the specific qualities needed for government service, Confucius stresses the need for a ruler to be a *junzi*. The term ‘*junzi*’ literally means ‘son of a lord’ and was historically used to refer to aristocrats during Confucius’ time. But Confucius re-interprets the term to refer to a noble or exemplary person that all human beings should aspire to be. In other words, Confucius adopted a broader and more inclusive definition of *junzi* – one that is based on merit rather than by birth. Everyone, not just the aristocrats, may succeed in becoming a *junzi* if he/she cultivates himself/herself in accordance to Confucius’ teachings. A *junzi* is one who abides in and achieves *ren* (humanity or love) – the central quality that encompasses all other normative qualities of a *junzi*. Confucius avers that “a *junzi* does not violate *ren* even for as long as it takes to eat a meal; he is certain to be with *ren* even if he is in a hurry or distress” (4.5). Confucius further outlines five virtues of a ruler who is a *junzi*: ‘The *junzi* is generous but not wasteful, works [the people] hard without their complaints, has desires but is not covetous, is at ease but not arrogant, and is awe-inspiring but not fierce’ (20.2).

We see from the above that Confucius sees an ideal society as one that is defined by the allocation and performance of specific social roles. But this does not necessarily mean that such a society is paternalistic, authoritarian and elitist. It is not paternalistic in the sense of being interfering and controlling, since the *junzi*-ruler is supposed to govern not by law but by virtue. Far from being authoritarian, a *junzi*-ruler models and encourages the observance of *li* by not being arrogant (20.2), being generous in caring for the common people (5.16) and inspiring the common people to *ren* [humanity or love] (8.2). A *junzi*-ruler takes care of and leads the common people, not in a high-handed manner, but by giving them the necessary rights and freedom to live autonomously and participate actively in public policymaking according to *li*. This naturally entails consultation and consensus-building between the ruler and the subjects. It is noteworthy that a number of writers have argued that
Confucianism is potentially compatible with democracy, civil society, human rights, equality and global justice.  

II. Political Participation

The second concept is that of political participation. Confucian traditions have been blamed (rightly or wrongly) for encouraging authoritarian and corrupt governments. In his survey of governments in the history of East Asia, H. George Frederick observes that “Confucian ideas came to be used to subjugate others, and less-than virtuous bureaucrats were much a part of the decline of government by the scholar-rulers”; and “by the 19th century, the common image of the Confucian was mostly negative, assumed to be the source of many of the ills of totalitarian government in East Asia.”

However, the charge that the Confucian tradition promotes authoritarianism and stifles individuality, personal autonomy and innovation applies more to Confucianism as an ideology than to the teachings of Confucius. The impression that Confucianism advocates the suppression of self-interest for the sake of societal welfare arises from the politicization of Confucianism where its selective teachings are utilized for political agendas. Confucius himself expressed a strong interest in current affairs and did not shy away from correcting the political leaders of his generation. For example, he laments as follows: “One who in occupying high office is not tolerant, who in observing li is not respectful, and who in overseeing the mourning rites does not grieve – how could I bear to look upon such a person?” (3.26). Here, Confucius lamented that the rulers (those who occupying high office) lacked the essential values and attitudes that should accompany the proper observance of li; namely, tolerance, respect and genuine grief (also see 3.1, 3.2, 3.6, 3.10, 5.18, 12.18).

Confucius also encourages his disciples to take up official appointments in states; in his words, “make yourself available when the Way prevails in the world, but remain hidden when it does not” (8.3). The ‘Way’, as mentioned earlier, refers to the Way of heaven as exemplified in the exemplary behaviors, values and attitudes of the sage kings. In other words, the disciples should ensure that the state is one where the Way is valued and adhered to, as evident in the prevalence of stability and order. The expression ‘remain hidden’ reiterates the need to render one’s service only in states where the Way prevails: to remain poor and lowly in a state that promotes the Way indicates that one is not doing one’s part to realize the Way by taking up high official positions in that state. Conversely, to be rich and hold a high rank in a state that does not promote the Way is wrong as it implies that one is not doing one’s part to realize the Way. In such a case, the only way to promote the Way is to leave that state.

Although Confucius counsels his disciples not to enter a state that is in crisis and to remain hidden when the Way does not prevail, he also teaches that they should speak up when they find a ruler saying something that is not right. When asked by Duke Ding if there is a saying that can ruin a state, Confucius replied, ‘If what [the ruler] says is not good and no one opposes him, is this not almost a case of a saying ruining a state?’ (13.15). But it should be clarified that this does not mean that one should criticize a ruler in an aggressive and confrontational way. Keeping in mind 12.1 about being guided by li in everything we think, feel and do, Confucius is saying that one should speak up against a ruler in accordance to li. Confucius himself did not stage a public protest or start a revolution, but expressed his disagreements in a respectful manner and did not impose his views on any state. History also informs us that Confucius, in seeking political office and dissemination of his ideas in various states, chose to leave a state when he faced rejection or disappointment from the political leaders, rather than staying on to launch a coup d’état.

It is evident that Confucius propagates taking an active interest in political affairs. But it should be added here that this does not mean that he believes that the only worthy occupation for everyone is public office. Confucius, when asked why he was not involved in governing, replied: “The Book of Documents says, ‘Filial – by being filial and friendly to one’s brothers, a person is executing the work of governing.’ Doing is being involved in governing. Why must one be ‘involved in government’?” (2.21) As noted by Meng Peiyuan:
Confucius was indeed very concerned about politics, very concerned about society, with strong practical concerns. Furthermore, joining politics was the main employment for someone who pursued studying in ancient society. This is unlike the current situation where there is a variety of occupations and avenues for one to attain life’s value. But from Confucius’ perspective, joining politics is an important avenue but not the only one, and one should not study for the sake of becoming an official’.41

Political participation, according to Confucius, may be expressed in different ways, encompassing not only holding an official appointment but also performing one’s social roles in society. One is involved in governing as long as one demonstrates and promotes ‘civic literacy’ – participating effectively in civic life by staying informed and understanding governmental processes; exercising the rights and obligations of citizenship at a local, state, national and global level; and understanding the local and global implications of civic decisions.42 Civic literacy is essential for the young and old to contribute actively and meaningfully in public policies, both locally and internationally, for the good of humankind.

The specific expression of civic literacy, of course, will depend on the localized social, political and cultural conditions. As discussed earlier, political values take place in Asia against a backdrop of Asian communitarianism and Asian values. The need to express political participation in the Asian contexts in a contextually sensitive manner is where the Confucian concept of yi (appropriateness or rightness) is pertinent. The quality of appropriateness refers to thinking, feeling and doing what is appropriate or right by exercising one’s individual discernment and discretion. The exercise of appropriateness presupposes independent thinking and rational autonomy for one to arrive at an acceptable judgment or decision in a particular situation. That explains why Confucius states that a junzi is “proper but not inflexible” (15.37), and “is not inflexible in his studies.” (1.8)

The quality of appropriateness is intricately tied to the concept of li. We have already learned that li covers every aspect of a human life, including

41 Meng, Meng Peiyuan jiang kongzi [Meng Peiyuan talks about Confucius], 2005, pp. 143-144.
looking, listening, speaking and moving (cf. 12.1). The ubiquity of *li* means that it is impossible for anyone to observe *li* by simply relying on a manual of rigid rules, even assuming that such a manual exists. What is crucial, if we wish to observe *li* accurately and intelligently, is to acquire the wherewithal to do what is appropriate without violating *li*. That is why the possession of the quality of appropriateness is important.\(^{43}\)

The application of appropriateness should be role specific, in line with the idea of *zhengming* (rectification of names). A central passage to explicate the meaning of *zhengming* is as follows:

12.11 Duke Jing of Qi asked Confucius about governing. Confucius replied, ‘Ruler ruler, minister minister, father father, son son.’ The Duke said, ‘Good! If the ruler be not a ruler, the subject not a subject, the father not a father, the son not a son, then even if there were grain, would I get to eat it?’

Confucius explains the meaning of ‘Ruler ruler, minister minister, father father, son son’ in another passage where he claims that ‘when names are not correct, what is said will not be used effectively; when what is said is not used effectively, matters will not be accomplished’ (13.3). The central idea here is that names are not just words for referents; they possess an intrinsic normative force. One who is given a title ought to live up to the expectations commensurate with the title. When titles are incorrectly and indiscriminately bestowed, people would fail to perform the social roles and responsibilities associated with the title. Hence, the phrase ‘what is said is not used effectively’ means that words or titles have lost their meanings and efficacy.

The rectification of names requires us to understand that our names or titles – as a ruler, minister, father, son and so on – come with specific roles and responsibilities that we are expected to fulfill. We should therefore exercise our discretion and judgment by doing what is appropriate for one

\(^{43}\) Cheng Chung-ying suggests that we may analyze the quality of appropriateness (*yi*) in terms of two components relevant to the process of moral decision making: “First, there is understanding or perception of an end on the part of the moral subject. This is the subjective self-knowledge of good truth (or the way). Second, there is a potential state or situation which needs a fitting action to make it a moral state or situation. There is an objective quality in a situation which one must correctly perceive in order to make an appropriate decision and to take a course of action”. Cheng, “On Yi as a Universal Principle of Specific Application in Confucian Morality,” 1972, p. 272.
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another based on our respective social roles and as demanded by the occasion. Pointing out that Confucius’ concept of appropriateness implies certain civil and political rights, May Sim correctly notes that

on account of Confucius’ emphasis on appropriateness (yi) in actions, which actions cannot be achieved without liberty and security, we can imagine his support for the first generation civil and political rights. The right to life, security and liberty are essential not only for acting fairly so that one does not unfairly profit oneself in material goods, honor, power or safety, but also for the other conditions on which Confucius insists for morality, namely, acting with li, proper intention, proper respect (xiao), and genuine self-investment.\textsuperscript{44}

Overall, the quality of appropriateness serves to guide a person – whether ruler or subject – to participate effectively in civic life, exercise his or her citizen rights and obligations, and understand the local and global implications of civic decisions in a culturally sensitive and contextually appropriate manner.

F. Conclusions

Confucius’ political philosophy has the potential to contribute towards the flourishing of the ASEAN political security community in two main ways. First, Confucius’ philosophy supports the ASEAN Way of Mushyawara (consultation) and Mufakat (consensus). As mentioned, Confucius underlines the need of rulers to model and encourage others to observe li by being generous in caring for the common people, inspiring the common people to ren (humanity or love), and giving them the necessary rights and freedom to live autonomously and participate actively in public policymaking. The above implies a process of consultation and consensus-building between the political leaders and citizens. Such a process is also salutary in building harmonious and peaceful relationships among the ASEAN countries by avoiding unnecessary intervention and conflicts,

especially in the highly-complex traditional security issues. Underpinning consultation and consensus is civic literacy and active political participation by the citizens. As discussed, everyone, including both the ruler and subjects, need to possess and demonstrate virtue through *ren* (humanity or love), *yi* (appropriateness) and *zhengming* (rectification of names) in their common quest to become *junzi* (noble or exemplary person).

Secondly, Confucius’ philosophy points to a possible shared political framework for the ASEAN political security – one that is *communitarian* in ideology. Communitarianism essentially highlights the importance of the community in the formation and shaping of the individual’s values, behavior, and identity. The Confucian self is not atomistic or solitary; it is intricately tied to one’s social relationships and interactions with other human beings from one’s family, community and the world. One learns to progressively observe *li* in one’s thoughts, feelings and actions, beginning with one’s family through filial piety, before moving on to people in the community (peers, juniors, and elders) and the world. By beginning with the self and moving on to attachments to a particular family, ethnic group, religion, or neighborhood, individuals are able to develop ‘civic virtue’ – the requisite dispositions and actions that contribute to the good of the community and humankind.

Researchers have noted that an Asian version of communitarianism exists in East and Southeast Asian countries such as China, South Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. This is reflected in their political leaders reminding their fellow citizens to fulfill their duties and responsibilities toward their family and community. The shared communitarian framework for the emerging ASEAN Political Security Community could be derived/adapted from multiple indigenous ideologies such as Confucianism and others in Asia. Commenting on constitutionally established democratic governments such as Japan and Korea, H. George

Frederick observes that the “core Confucian ideas have already been modified to blend the rule of law with the rule of man” and that there is “good evidence that Confucian bureaucracy and democratic self-government are not only compatible with economic growth, but they may also be a powerful mix of economic, bureaucratic, and democratic ideas.”

In conclusion, Confucius’ philosophy in interrogating the shared political values of ASEAN (and the greater Asian region) provides greater analytical illumination. There is no doubt that the economic condition of each of the member of the ASEAN countries is not the only source of great differences in the region; in terms of political history and trajectory the ASEAN countries also possess wide variation. It may even be convincingly argued that the most outstanding distinguishing feature of the ASEAN is the immense diversity that encompasses the political and economic nature of its member countries. This is a distinguishing feature that creates paradoxes with respect to the ideal of achieving greater unanimity among the various member countries. However, a careful scrutiny of the history of the ASEAN in achieving unanimity reveals a careful balancing act of inherent paradoxes: On the one hand, the region seems to embrace a turn towards “rules-based approaches” as evidenced by the creation of the ASEAN Charter and the blueprint for the ASEAN Political Security Community. But on the other hand, the practical application of how diplomacy and political maneuvering actually functions within the ASEAN is still very much governed by informal networks of consultation, consensus and non-intervention. The harmony and balance of paradoxical forces can best be appreciated, as this paper has argued, by recognizing Confucius’ virtue-centred philosophy.

Works cited


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