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The Shared Ethical Core of Confucianism and Western Civilization

Writing in his 2000 book *Confucius Lives Next Door*,¹ T.R. Reid presents a powerful thesis: the sustained economic prosperity and pronounced social stability witnessed across East Asia—which the author labels the "Asian Century" (5)—are fundamentally rooted in the influence of Confucianism, or a collection of associated ethical principles often termed "Asian values." The text asserts that even following economic downturns beginning in 1997, East Asian nations consistently exhibited higher economic growth rates than Western powers (6), coupled with admirably low crime statistics, minimal drug use (9), and remarkably stable family structures (10), achieving a social "miracle" built upon a more egalitarian distribution of wealth (7).

The core argument identifies Confucian values as the catalyst for these societal outcomes. This system places social harmony as the ultimate goal of human endeavor (11), prioritizing the good of the group over individual desires. This framework relies heavily on a *shame culture* as the primary defense against improper conduct, contrasting with the West's reliance on *internalized guilt* (11). Education and community virtues are given paramount importance, with public schools devoting substantial effort to moral lessons and the idea that all students can succeed through hard work (10). Furthermore, within this social system, loyalty and group

membership are deeply valued, contributing to lower unemployment rates where companies bear the cost to maintain societal stability (11).

At the heart of the philosophy are the teachings of Confucius himself, who focused on ethical behavior, good government, loyalty, and truth (12). Confucius believed that a morally upright leader sets the standard for the entire population. He championed the cultivation of the *Chun Tzu*, the "gentleman" or "superior man," asserting that this noble status must be earned through moral development rather than birthright. This moral power of the leader is likened to the wind, with the common people as the grass that "will always bend in the direction of the wind" (244). Social order is maintained through the Five Basic Relationships (12), which organize loyalties between individuals, such as ruler and people, and parent and child. He also emphasized the "rectification of names"—the insistence on speaking the truth about a thing and resisting the use of misleading euphemisms (12).

The most profound element of Confucianism, and the one that best illustrates its universality, is the moral principle of *shu*: "do not impose on others what you do not want for yourself" (244). This is the Confucian articulation of the Golden Rule, taught by Confucius some five centuries before its appearance in the New Testament (244). Moreover, his great disciple Mencius developed upon the concept of the Mandate of Heaven, concluding that a ruler who is not benevolent and fails to protect his subjects can and must be replaced, arguing that the authority to rule is "bestowed only by the people being governed" (244). This concept anticipates the political principles of popular consent later championed by Thomas Jefferson, who wrote that "governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the

governed" (244). Ultimately, the book concludes that despite superficial differences, the great ethical teachings of the East "track precisely with the ideals that are considered elementary principles in western civilization" (244), confirming that the principles required for a safe, successful, and civil society are universally applicable.

Works Cited

1. Reid, T R. *Confucius Lives next Door: What Living in the East Teaches Us about Living in the West*. New York (N.Y.), Vintage Books, Cop, 2000.