Confusing Confucius in Asian Values? A Constructivist Critique

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Confusing Confucius in Asian Values? A Constructivist Critique[1]

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Abstract

It is tempting to interpret Confucius as a Realist who believes in coercion as a means of achieving good governance. Parallels can readily be drawn between him and Machiavelli, with *ren* fusing with *virtú* to represent Confucius as obsessed with power and authority. Southeast Asian leaders compound the problem by misappropriating the Sage to justify their intolerance for dissent within the 'Asian values' discourse. This article seeks to reveal a glimpse of Confucius that has been missing in IR literature: that of Confucius as a Constructivist. I argue that *ren* needs to be translated as *honesty* – a behavioural norm required of a responsible member of society. Applied to IR, *ren* not only espouses normative presumptions, but also a realisation of the crucial role played by intersubjectivity in social interactions. This article then uses 'Confucian' Constructivism to critique 'Asian values'.

Keywords: *The Analects, Asian values, Confucius, Constructivism, international relations theory, Realism*

The spectre of the once-conspicuous 'Asian values' discourse seems to have evaporated. Considering the purported Confucian underpinnings of 'Asian values', it is tempting to think that the teachings of the Sage resemble Realism in international relations (IR). The principle of *ren* may be interpreted as 'benevolence' and 'virtue', making it convenient to draw comparisons with the Machiavellian *virtú*, thereby suggesting the possibility of interpreting Confucius as an oriental precursor to political Realism.[2] These superficial readings encourage a sense of Confucius as a Realist who would have endorsed 'Asian values' and its implementation by paternalistic, if not autocratic, governments in parts of Southeast Asia. But is this really a sensible reading of Confucius? Instead, the reconsideration of *The Analects* not only shows that *ren* espouses normative prescription, such as benevolence, honesty and good governance, but it constitutes social analysis in general. It implies, too, that a good ruler listens to his subjects and, *ex aequo et bono*, coercion is forfeited in favour of tolerance, realising people's proclivity to benevolence and honesty.[3] *The Analects* read like a prescription for agents to actively socialise in good will to confer trust upon each other. This indicates that the Realist practice of 'Asian values' needs to be relinquished in favour of a Constructivist rereading of Confucius and its capacity to critique existing institutional arrangements.

This article first addresses the temptation to depict Confucius as a potential classical Realist, given his penchant for 'virtue' and the precarious similarity to Machiavellian *virtú*. In the second section, I analyse the connection between Confucian values

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and the practice of 'Asian values', suggesting that the teachings of the Sage have been perverted in the process of misappropriation. In the third section, I reread *The Analects* to identify a Constructivist streak in Confucius' thinking, exposing the misapprehension of his ideas within 'Asian values'. Finally, in the fourth section, I explore the trajectory of the 'Confucian' Constructivist critique of the 'Asian values' discourse. This double reading is inherently subversive, since utilising Confucian arguments to unravel an 'Asian values' worldview as a self-fulfilling prophecy ultimately exposes its paucity.[4]

Confucius and the Realist temptation

Depicting Confucius as a Realist is tempting. He was primarily concerned with the identification of universal moral principles upon which human relations were based,[5] and while not a political philosopher per se,[6] much of his teaching impinges on the idea of 'good governance', both domestically and beyond. Confucius' ideas centred on the notion of *ren*: on the one hand, *ren* constitutes the basis upon which the maintenance of public order is founded. It is a set of norms, principles and rules that both the ruler and subjects are expected to follow, governing the way in which a polity maintains its legitimacy. On the other hand, the external dimension of *ren* presupposes a universality of morality transcending political boundaries. So long as states are governed by humans, what is relevant *within* borders was considered to be applicable *beyond* them as well. Confucius lived at a time when 'the old feudal order had disintegrated into wavering satrapies',[7] and thus governance of the kingdom *inside* became tantamount to the balance of power *outside*.

The two dimensions of *ren* parallel the Western conception of sovereignty as a dichotomy representing the relationship between domestic integrity and external independence.[8] Confucius called on the rulers to govern their kingdoms by 'treating human beings as human beings, [and that] one must show compassion, practice righteousness (or justice), exhibit appropriate deference of propriety, and call upon the wisdom that discriminates between right and wrong'.[9] His occupation with good governance necessitates the simultaneous undertaking of social control *within* and an astute diplomacy *without*. This is similar to E. H. Carr's reading of Machiavelli. Carr quotes Machiavelli as saying that 'men "are kept honest by constraint"' and that 'Machiavelli recognised the importance of morality, but thought that there could be no effective morality when there was no effective authority. Morality is the product of power.'[10] Martin Hollis and Steve Smith quote Carr as suggesting that Machiavelli was the first important political Realist.[11] To the extent that both Confucius and Machiavelli both recognised the interplay of morality and authority as a prerequisite for good governance, a Realist reading of the two thinkers becomes all the more tempting.[12] Without morality, authority loses legitimacy; but without authority, morality is devoid of substance. Confucius and Machiavelli both recognised the 'reality' of difficulties faced by emperors and princes.

Once Realism becomes the bridge between Confucius and Machiavelli, their resemblance becomes striking. For both, morality is an invaluable tool of

statesmanship, and hence their zealous preaching of *ren* and *virtú*. Just as Carr notes, Machiavelli considers morality to be a function of power, and when *virtú* is put into practice, the prince is expected to follow *realpolitik*. R. B. J. Walker states that 'the concept of *virtú* invokes not only the military qualities of the warrior and civic qualities necessary for citizenship but also the qualities through which the virile hero is able to seduce *fortuna* to prepare the banks and dikes against the oncoming flood'.[13] Charles Beitz argues that 'Machiavelli is not saying that rulers have license to behave as they please, nor is he claiming that their official activities are exempt from assessment.'[14] This is evident in Confucian thinking as well. As William Theodore de Bary notes, 'the presumption is that Confucianism spells authority and discipline, limiting individual freedom, and strengthening the state'.[15] Leonard Shihlien Hsü argues that the:

> end of government is not government itself but social harmony and social happiness . . . The people obey and support the government because they believe that governments can achieve good, that government is able to guarantee peace by preventing external aggression and internal disorder, and that government can do more to carry out the function of rectification than unorganised society.[16]

In a similar vein, there is a strong temptation to locate Confucius within the wider realm of Realism. Joseph Chan points out that:

> there could be a great deal of indeterminacy as to how much one may legitimately be expected to help others and how much one may expect others to help . . . Thus what we are certain of is only that benevolence requires more than familial love but much less the ideal of a sage.[17]

A Realist reading of both Confucius and Machiavelli seems to indicate the prescription whereby the 'end justifies the means': for Confucius and Machiavelli, good governance is the 'end' to be realised through *ren* or *virtú*, depicting the sensitive balance between power and morality by philosopher-kings.

Confucius' teachings are emblematic of the inside–outside dichotomy: *inside*, *ren* is an:

> imperative to do right and to pursue the good in human relations that has been variously translated as 'compassion', 'magnanimity', 'reciprocity', 'humanity', 'propriety', 'commiseration', 'true manhood', 'man-to-manness' or in various other ways that capture the sense of thinking, feeling, and acting appropriately and benignly toward others.[18]

In other words, *ren* refers to 'disciplining oneself and returning to ritual propriety'.[19] *Outside*, good governance and the maintenance of a viable polity require rulers to maintain dignity and stature in the *realpolitik* of feudal China. Confucian inclination towards filial piety and the attendant universalist claim[20] provide a nexus

between inside and outside – a similar recourse to Walker's conceptualisation of Machiavelli.[21]

Hence, there is a potential for the misappropriation of Confucius on theoretical grounds exacerbated by a Realist reading of Machiavelli in which *ren* becomes synonymous with *virtú*. However, the misappropriation is more evident in the 'Asian values' discourse, whose claim to be emulating Confucian teachings is highly questionable, as policy-makers in Southeast Asia defer to the Sage for guidance. Yet this deference provides germinating grounds for the metamorphosing of Confucius into a Realist *practice* steeped in policies that potentially conflict with the original teachings. This is compounded by the particularities of the contemporary political–social–economic situation in Southeast Asia, fuelled in part by the rapid success of the region's economies and the resultant 'hype' over the purported sense of superiority of 'Asian' discipline in stark contrast to the 'decadent' West. When the worst excesses of such misappropriation are revealed, the task of reconfiguring Confucius as a Constructivist becomes an imperative.

Confucius, 'Asian values' and the Realist practice

If the parallels between Confucius and Realism, via Machiavelli, are tempting in theory, then the association becomes more explicit in practice. However, it is also a case of misappropriation rather than identification, such that, while Confucius is recruited as a provider of moral justification for the strong disciplinarian pull in the 'Asian values' discourse, a closer inspection reveals the likelihood of Confucius confounding its prescriptions instead of confirming them. It becomes all the more perplexing why Confucius was hijacked by Southeast Asian autocrats in their quest for legitimacy at the height of the economic boom in the region. The only 'benefit' in aligning Confucius with 'Asian values' was to identify this particular set of principles as a 'non-Western' idea. Otherwise, the misappropriation of Confucius stems from a blatant misrepresentation of his ideas.

i. Confucius in 'Asian values': the concepts

The conjunction between Confucius and 'Asian values' is readily discernible. *The Economist*, for example, argues that the teachings of the Sage constitute a theoretical backbone of the 'Asian values' discourse.[22] Richard Robison states that 'at times it appears that "Asian values" is code for "Chinese" or Confucian values or for the ideals of a highly centralized and regularized regime such as Singapore's'.[23] His contention that its protagonists need to be particularised is crucial. While 'Asian' in name, it is located within a unique body of discourse emerging in the early to mid-1990s from certain Southeast Asian states – namely Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia – in response to their economic success. On the surface, there is no common set of ideologies encompassing the whole of Asia, but as Diane Mauzy argues, there is a 'considerable number of shared values and important commonalities' among East Asian cultures

that makes it feasible to pursue some of them.[24] Francis Fukuyama notes that the economic trend in Southeast Asia during the early 1990s 'happened to dovetail very nicely with the purported fusion between Asian values and Confucianism'.[25] A recourse to Confucius in the age of globalisation is tantamount to a restatement of Southeast Asian self-confidence, as well as a ploy to 'purify' the region of the perceived vagaries of Western values.

To illustrate the misapprehension of Confucius in 'Asian values' and Confucianism, Robison identifies five key concepts outlined in the discourse.[26] First, it considers that the 'focal point of social organization and loyalty is neither the state nor the individual but the family'.[27] Second, and in a rather contradictory manner, it places the interests of community above those of individuals, effectively discouraging individual initiative, deferring authority to the government instead. Emphasising the importance of strong government within the familial imaginary, Anwar Ibrahim argues that small governments 'hardly occur in Asian society precisely because of the crucial role of the government to deliver public goods and to correct social and economic inequalities'.[28] In the process, the notion of 'civil society' is not tolerated, but rather is seen as an impediment to the maintenance of order.[29] Third, 'Asian values' advocate consensual, rather than adversarial, forms of decision-making. Fourth, the discourse calls for 'social cohesion and social harmony [as] priorities, achieved through moral principle and strong government'.[30] How 'consensus', on the one hand, is to be reconciled with 'deference' and 'strong government', on the other, is open to question. But the supporters of 'Asian values' seem to suggest that the mechanism through which it is achieved entails philosopher-kings making decisions for the community as a whole by taking into consideration the various needs of its constituents.[31] Finally, it treats economic growth and development as a 'concomitant of social cohesion and strong government and a right of every citizen and country'.[32]

Therefore, it can be seen from the 'Asian values' discourse that seemingly conflicting views can cohabit. On the one hand, the discourse calls for harmony and unity underpinned by familial imagery. Yet, on the other hand, consensus seems to coexist precariously with discipline imposed by a strong government. As Kishore Mahbubani argues, the nexus between these apparently opposing ideas needs to be seen as 'an effort to define [Asia's] own personal and national identities in a way that enhances the sense of self-esteem when their immediate ancestors had subconsciously accepted that they were lesser beings in a western universe'.[33] As such, 'Asian values' are a testament to Southeast Asia's economic success in the 1990s in light of the region's colonial legacy, sprinkled with disdain towards Western 'decadence'.[34] In effect, the discourse occupies the interstices of the East versus West cultural dichotomy,[35] and Confucius is deployed to provide a theoretical anchorage in an effort at positing what 'Asia' *is*, rather than simply what it is *not*.

ii. The Realist practice of Confucius in 'Asian values'

The proponents of 'Asian values' often invoke Confucius as a conceptual anchorage with which to reveal their disdain for Western principles, while simultaneously

revelling in their own economic success of the 1980s. In other words, Confucius acts as a theoretical device through which the Asian Self is distinguished from the Western Other. At first glance, an allusion to the 'self–other' dichotomy seems to suggest an affiliation with post-Positivist theorising. Indeed, by exploiting the historical construction of 'Asianness' in relation to the Western Other, Pekka Korhonen provides an account of how the politics of 'Asian values' reifies the East–West dichotomy.[36] However, the *practice* of representing Confucius in 'Asian values' resembles some of the core arguments outlined within Realism: treating 'Asia' and the 'West' as distinct and autonomous, yet monolithic, entities reminds us of a Realist unit-level analysis. Just as they do not question the assumption of states as indivisible, *sui generis* units, the 'Asian values' discourse treats the coherence of 'Asia' unified through Confucianism as unproblematic. Realism and 'Asian values' both construct a conceptual framework in which the international system is comprised of antagonistic actors vying for dominance. Amitav Acharya notes that the proponents of 'Asian values':

> rejected the suitability of Western-style liberal democracy for the region and warned that Western efforts to promote democracy would undermine the foundations of regional order in Southeast Asia based on the inviolability of state sovereignty and the doctrine of non-interference in the internal affairs of members.[37]

As such, the reification of both 'Asia' and the 'West' is very much an integral part of its conceptual framework.

Designating 'Asia' as distinct from the 'West' is a favourite theme among the proponents of 'Asian values'. For example, Mahbubani observes that 'relative to most societies in the world, [East Asian societies] are disciplined and cohesive. Social order prevails. The deep value placed on family in Asian societies is not easily erased.'[38] While admitting that there are certain overlaps between East and West, he nevertheless posits that 'although many East Asian societies have assumed some of the trappings of the West, they have also kept major social and cultural elements intact'.[39] Mahbubani opines that the 'West' has so far been 'liberating the individual while imprisoning society', and appears confident that 'the relatively strong and stable family and social institutions of East Asia will appear more appealing' to the Americans, vis-à-vis the West.[40] To underline his point, Mahbubani contends that China 'did not err in its decision to crack down' in Tiananmen,[41] pointing out, instead, the lack of leadership quality in the West.[42] For him, the role of Confucian principles in 'Asian values' is to 'sensitize Western audiences to the perceptions of the rest of the world',[43] since 'Western values do not form a seamless web. Some are good, some are bad'.[44] As a self-appointed spokesperson for Asia, Mahbubani suggests that 'Asians see that Western public opinion – deified in Western democracy – can produce irrational consequences.'[45]

While not as vitriolic as Mahbubani in his observation of clashing cultures, Lee Kuan Yew is nevertheless forthright in pointing out the distinct advantage of 'Asia' over the 'West'. He laments that 'Westerners have abandoned an ethical basis

for society, believing that all problems are solvable by a good government, which we in the East never believed possible.'[46] The 'ethical basis for society' here refers to none other than the Confucian principle of filial piety: he states that 'East Asians . . . share a tradition of strict discipline, respect for the teacher, no talking back to the teacher and rote learning.'[47] Mindful of the criticism that there is no 'Asian model as such', Lee argues that 'Eastern societies believe that the individuals exist in the context of his family . . . The ruler or the government does not try to provide for a person what the family best provides.'[48] Thus, in light of a predefined 'West', the differences within 'Asia' are neutralised to reconstruct a monolithic Self.

Contra Waltz, having tacitly constructed a universal – and unproblematic – image of 'Asia', Lee then places Confucian principles in direct opposition to Western values, as if the two were engaged in a Huntingtonesque clash of civilisations – a conflict with roots in differences of *cultural*, rather than material, capabilities. He notes that 'nobody likes to lose his ethnic, cultural, religious, even linguistic identity. To exist as one state you need to share certain attributes, have things in common'.[49] Lee then adds:

> Let me be frank; if we did not have the good points of the West to guide us, we wouldn't have got out of our backwardness. We would have been a backward economy with a backward society. *But we do not want all of the West*.[50]

For him, the application of Western values is an inevitable process of socialisation into the international system. After all, he should know: his country benefits from a globalised, 24-hour marketplace. Singapore has already learned that even a 'backward' Asia can be prosperous like Japan.[51] *Pace* Waltz, the diffusion of Western ideas is tantamount to Asia, in tandem with the West, becoming 'like units', only differentiated through the distribution of 'cultural' capabilities.[52] In effect, the proponents of the discourse seem to suggest that the success of East Asian economies – at least until 1997 – was a product of cultural exuberance in an anarchic international system.

Mahathir Mohammad extols this Realist practice. He posits that:

> the countries of Asia have not totally succumbed to Western culture along the way; they have retained much of their own distinctive traditions. This will, in the long run, save us from the decay befalling the West today, which has its roots, I believe, in the decline of Western culture itself.[53]

Robison notes that this cynicism towards the West is a familiar feature shared by the leading proponents of the 'Asian values' discourse, namely Lee and Mahathir. According to Robison, they:

> specifically identify the sudden Western interest in trade reforms and the apparently altruistic concerns for human rights and democratic reform as disguised and cynical ploys to destroy the competitive advantages of Asian countries, based on low-wage labour and the unconstrained exploitation of large reserves of natural resources.[54]

Their sentiments parallel Kenneth Waltz's argument that, while states in the international system are functionally alike, what distinguishes them are the 'differences in the constraints and therefore of their capabilities to overcome them'.[55] Lee and Mahathir consider the effects of socialisation under globalisation – and the infusion of Western values upsetting traditional ones – to result in an East–West rivalry. Instead of Waltz's argument that 'socialization reduces variety',[56] they point out that socialisation exposes striking dissimilarities between 'Asia' and the 'West'. In reiterating the Realist argument, they allude to the inevitable clash between Asia and the West since there is nothing to prevent the two cultures from colliding with each other.[57] Their logical conclusion is for Asia to 'inherit' the world from the West.[58]

Confucius and Constructivism

Analysing the intersection between Confucius and international relations in both theory and practice reveals the temptation to identify Realism as Confucius' conceptual kin. Yet, this can be misleading, and its principles are corrupted in practice, since the rereading of *The Analects* exposes the paucity of 'Asian values'. Theoretically, we need to look further than simply equating *ren* with *virtú* and, at the same time, to reflect more deeply how good governance is to be managed and constituted. Practically, we have to question whether intolerance towards dissent, as well as the depiction of the world as consisting of two opposing cultural forces, are both compatible with his teachings. The Constructivist rereading of *The Analects* sheds light on how *ren* can be reconceptualised as both an imperative and a norm of behaviour conducive to the realisation of good governance, not only as a power-political relationship, but also an intersubjective, sociological process; and how it can be applied to international relations, both in theory and in practice.

i. A Constructivist rereading of Confucius

Despite the temptation to associate Confucian teachings with Realism – both in theory and in practice – such rendering becomes tendentious once we embark on a closer inspection. Rather than its superficial similarities to Realism, examination of the teachings of the Sage reveals many affinities to Constructivism; and at the same time, it enables us to re-evaluate the claims of 'Asian values' as a reification of social reality that reproduces the clash between East and West as a self-fulfilling prophecy. A Realist portrayal of Confucius is potentially misleading, since it fails to capture his penchant for the imperatives of human behavioural norms, including how he expects statesmen to rule their subjects, as well as in their relationships with one another. In effect, Confucius preaches obedience to 'the rule of rational reciprocity', whereby leaders are expected to interact with benevolence.[59] Hence, on the one hand, a Realist reading fails to contextualise his firm belief in good governance – both inside and outside – dictated through behavioural norms forfeiting the use of force. Confucius instead argues for moral conviction as an efficient way by which to entice the public into obedience. The difference between Confucius and classical Realists

is that 'psychological power' is not only a potent tool of governance, but it needs to encompass honesty as a norm by which the agents are socialised into a particular intersubjectivity.[60] Just as Michael Williams criticises the power-centric view of classical Realism, Confucius calls for a sociological approach to how behavioural norms can emerge.[61] On the other hand, Realist praxis at the hands of Southeast Asian governments is even more problematic. Their heavy-handed approach to social order does not correlate with Confucian teachings. Rather, their complacency about censuring neighbouring states for human rights infringements, for example, represents recalcitrance rather than subservience to the behavioural norm of *ren*. Again, power is reified into a theology, whereas Confucius' imperatives entail communication and socialisation. Southeast Asian complacency and authoritarianism misconstrue Confucian value which 'declares that the rule of virtue is the safest means of achieving the good social life'.[62] In short, the perversion of Confucius is a veil to conceal intolerance towards dissent.

Realist temptation is understandable given Confucius' concern for good governance by the wise, whose power and authority derives from universalist moral values.[63] Confucius suggests that 'to govern is to be righteous. If you [the emperor] practice virtue [*ren*], the people will naturally follow you'.[64] He notes that the imposition of effective measures, the institution of laws, and the revival of bureaucracy act as guarantees for good governance.[65] While a slippage of virtue/*ren* into a Machiavellian *virtú* remains a distinct possibility, a problem remains, since *ren* seems to embody intersubjective norms of behaviour that cannot simply be explained away as a function of power alone. Put differently, while the Confucian good governance is concomitant with power and authority, it needs to be analysed through the social context legitimising certain practices of power in order to ensure norm diffusion. Hsü argues that 'Confucius emphasizes generosity in government; and so he condemns meanness. He contends that a government without indulgent generosity is a sign of political degeneration.'[66] Just as Alexander Wendt and Daniel Friedheim argue in their assessment of Soviet influence over East Germany, 'power' needs to be seen as a social construct whose legitimacy emerges from intersubjective understandings between a master and an apprentice.[67] In effect, the Realist temptation derives from an overemphasis on 'power', whereas Confucius necessitates equal emphasis on the 'sociological'.[68]

The espousal of Confucian values within the narratives of Southeast Asian leaders takes the notion of good governance a step further, to place coercion as its centrepiece. *Contra* Confucius, the 'Asian values' discourse considers good governance to be a sole function of power, whose moral conviction derives from the power of the mighty. As Kim Dae-jung acidly observes, '[i]n Lee's Singapore, the government stringently regulates individuals' actions – such as chewing bubble-gum, spitting, smoking, littering and so on – to an Orwellian extreme of social engineering'.[69] He adds:

> The fact that Lee's Singapore, a small city-state, needs a near-totalitarian police state to assert control over its citizens contradicts his assertion that everything would be all right if governments would refrain from interfering in the private affairs of the family.[70]

Indeed, Confucius argues *against* coercion. Responding to a question of public obedience, he asks, 'Why kill in order to secure order? If you are honest, the people will follow you. A benevolent leadership is like a wind, and the populace is like grass. Grass follows the wind'.[71] This is also applicable to international politics. Confucius lauds the good relationship between the two neighbouring ancient Chinese states of Lu and Wei, pointing out that their friendship derives from respecting *ren*, likening it to brotherhood.[72] Apparent within Confucius' penchant for various vectors of social relations is the crucial role of intersubjectivity within politics: that both the 'domestic' and 'international' need to be recast as forms of macro-level sociological relationships. In other words, Confucius impels us to strike a balance between hierarchy/order and honesty/benevolence.

Contrary to the 'Asian values' discourse, Confucius understands that coercion is not a panacea and, *contra* Waltz, norms remain firmly within the calculation.[73] Confucius tells us that 'if you follow the rules, the whole world will accept *ren*. Do not expect others to follow it: you must implement it at your own initiative.'[74] In a prescription reminiscent of Kant rather than Machiavelli, he further urges us to 'treat others as your valuable guests; when you [the rulers] want to compel the public into action, you must convince them of your policies; never force others to do what you yourself, would not like to do'.[75] The evolution of co-operation, according to Confucius, derives *not* from coercion, but consultation. This reminds us of Wendt's initial-interaction thesis: intersubjectivity emerges from the particular ways in which the agents interact with one another; and in order to effect an efficient form of governance, one must seek to send correct signals to minimise enmity as much as possible.[76] Confucius not only advocates good intentions, but also considers sincerity to be a necessary condition towards the construction of a viable political community. Value judgements are intersubjective, but Confucius encourages benevolent behaviour towards one another in order to minimise conflicts.[77] As Wei-Bin Zhang notes:

> the true aim of [Confucian] government is not supposed to be brought about by rigid adherence to arbitrary laws, but rather by a subtle administration of customs that are generally accepted as good and have the sanction of natural law . . . Confucius' political thought does not employ negative punishment but establishes positive examples.[78]

Parallels to the English School in IR can be identified in the Confucian construction of a viable international order, being similar in scope to Hedley Bull's construction of international society, by 'maintaining and extending the consensus about common interests and values that provides the foundation of its common rules and institutions at a time when consensus has shrunk'.[79] Confucius' transcendence of the interstices of inside–outside bridged through *ren* is very similar to Tim Dunne's argument that, 'both [domestic and international] societies can be defined, in a Rawlsian sense, as co-operative arrangements for securing the mutual advantage of the members'.[80] Hsü observes that 'Confucius would justify no military expedition even though it

may bring the liberation of a great fallen empire if an act of injustice or a murder has to be committed in order to achieve such an end.'[81] Just as Confucius would argue, Dunne asserts that states 'are not strangers to the moral world'.[82] This opens the way for a Confucian synthesis in IR theory whereby states should co-operate for reasons other than a Neorealist 'double coincidence of wants'; not simply as a result of the long shadow of the future. *Contra* Bill McSweeney's pessimistic assessment of state behaviour in which he says that 'states can cooperate but they cannot become cooperative',[83] Confucius – in his 'Constructivist moment' – takes a step further in opening the possibility that honest cooperation can be engendered through the instigation of *ren*. Indeed, Confucius suggests that 'if you place an honest leader above dishonest ones, the people will follow; but if you place a dishonest one in charge of honest ones, then the people will be disobedient'.[84] While there are limits to how people can exercise disobedience under authoritarianism, Confucius thinks that governance becomes difficult under inefficient or incompetent authority – evidence the 'Ceausescu moment'. Furthermore, he notes that 'if you treat your subjects with honesty, they will respect you'.[85]

The lessons garnered from a closer reading of Confucius are sublimely Constructivist: through iterated interactions, agents reconstruct institutional facts; and such intersubjective structures, in turn, govern agential properties.[86] The Sage suggests that *ren* is an integral part of social life – an imperative in the maintenance of social order.[87] To this end, *ren* ceases to be a mere normative criterion, becoming instead the governing principle in the behaviour of states. Just as Mervyn Frost argues:

> Every agent acts upon some understanding of the situation in which he finds himself and since such an understanding requires some study of the situation (however rudimentary it might be) every actor must perforce be both a practitioner in, and a student of, international relations.[88]

What Confucius recommends to us, then, is the necessary intertwining of the rules governing actions with the need to realise and improve such norms of behaviour.

Thus, in both theory and practice, the teachings of Confucius are inadequately put to use. This omission is stark once the behaviour of Southeast Asian governments – both inside and outside their borders – is taken into account. Many of the narratives within the 'Asian values' discourse conflate the virtues of discipline with a latent distrust of people. *Inside*, Mahbubani sees harmony as a derivative of social order, such that strong-handedness becomes an antidote for mainly Western decadence.[89] Lee Kuan Yew also argues that a government's capability to 'reinvent itself in new shapes and forms' is not proven. However, 'the family and the way human relationships are structured, do increase the survival chances of its members',[90] and by implication a strict discipline becomes an indispensable tool for that purpose.[91] For the *outside*, the failure of ASEAN members to censure Myanmar over the military junta's abuse of human rights is indicative of how the organisation relinquished the norms of acceptable behaviour.[92] Moreover, historic animosity across the causeway pits two

major ASEAN partners – Malaysia and Singapore – against each other in a way that makes a mockery of harmony within the organisation.[93] These are just a few examples of the way Confucius is abused by governments to justify their complacency.

The Realist misapprehension effectively expunged intersubjectivity from *ren*, and instead substituted raw coercion in the name of discipline. Yet a discipline devoid of social context only seeks to condone egregious acts of violence within the state, and the complacency outside. The resultant schism between East and West became a self-fulfilling prophecy, such that the proponents of 'Asian values' had lost viable tools for identifying 'Asian' distinctness, and as a result the only recourse available was to overplay the 'clash of civilisations' thesis.

A Confucian rereading of 'Asian values'

I have shown that: (1) theoretically, it is tempting to relate Confucius to Realism, once the parallels are identified with a Realist reading of Machiavelli; and (2) practically, the 'clash of civilisations' scenario inherent within the 'Asian values' discourse shares a family resemblance with the theoretical structure of Neorealism in treating both 'Asia' and the 'West' as monolithic entities engaged in a balance of cultural influence. While a discursive conflict between the two cultures is *not* inevitable, there is nothing to prevent it from happening.[94] Yet it is not surprising that 'Asian values' became muted after the onset of the Asian financial crisis of 1997–8, since it posed a question mark over the validity of the discourse itself, potentially casting a damning verdict on 'Asia's' capability in a world of purported cultural rivalry.[95] However, from a Constructivist perspective, the 'clash of civilisations' worldview of 'Asian values' is an emergent property born of its own speech act. Put differently, once the proponents of the discourse enter into intercultural communication, uttering the language of rivalry rather than harmony, the emergent intersubjective structure boomerangs back on to the interlocutors as a reified social reality, posing itself as an irrevocable 'clash'.[96] When the Southeast Asian leaders spoke of the 'genuine pride felt by many in the region at the stunning success of their economies over the previous two generations', using strong discipline as a justification for their intolerance towards any dissent, the Western Other saw 'Asia' as an authoritarian entity.[97] Hence, the result was a sense of incompatibility between 'Asia' and the 'West' – however elusive those terms might be. The balance of cultural power and the monolithic 'Asia/West' were reified as a result of this particular intercultural speech act.

i. Confucian double reading of 'Asian values'

As I discussed in previous sections, Confucian ideas occupy an integral part of the 'Asian values' discourse. By revisiting Richard Robison's identification of its main principles – such as family values, filial piety, social cohesion and strong government[98] – we can spot parallels between 'Asian values' and *The Analects*: emphasis on social harmony, benevolence and the welfare of the people.[99] Indeed, Mahbubani identifies

this set of prescriptions as a hallmark which distinguishes 'Asia' from the perceptively decadent 'West'.[100] However, when we embark upon a 'Confucian' Constructivist double reading of the discourse, we notice an absence in the intersubjective understandings of power relationship, effectively denuding political authority of its Confucian social analysis. A Confucian double reading reveals that an allusion to the Sage's teachings within 'Asian values' in fact confounds two elements of good governance pursued within *The Analects*.

First, Confucius defines good governance as a function of moral authority deriving its power from the ability to persuade others, rather than as a sheer exertion of physical force, in contrast to the propensity of 'Asian values' to justify coercion in the name of order. Inherent within his prescription of good governance is the realisation that unless the participants acknowledge the crucial role played by the intersubjective notion of legitimacy in a hierarchical structure, *ren* can never be achieved. Conversely, this suggests that an absence of *ren* is very much a product of bad governance and ignorance of the social context within which authority needs to be exercised. Confucius suggests that, 'if you privilege the righteous over evil-doers, people will follow. But if you privilege evil-doers over the righteous ones, people will not follow you.'[101] Ultimately, bad governance and the use of coercion constitute a vicious circle of intolerance. Transposed on to the mid- to late 1990s, this constitutes a direct warning against the sort of crony capitalism associated with the Asian financial crisis, as well as the discourse's characteristic intolerance towards difference.[102] Indeed, Confucius adds that 'it is no use governing a country without the sense of giving',[103] and that 'you must treat your people as you treat your guests at home'.[104] For him, the power of moral suasion is privileged over the use of coercion for moral, as well as practical, reasons. At the same time, authority as an intersubjectivity constitutes a two-way street: rulers are able to exercise authority only in the presence of people who are willing to accede to its legitimacy. Confucius' prescriptions are based on practicality as well, since he understands the role played by intersubjectivity in social relations: humans are social beings and governance is very much a social activity. Confucius argues that 'the reason why the people of yore did not speak lightly was because they knew that things are always easier said than done'.[105] As such, 'if you are righteous, governance will follow without commandments. But if you are not righteous, nobody will heed your orders.'[106] This, he believed, is because 'if the rulers are honest, the people will naturally oblige'.[107]

These sets of normative prescriptions belie the penchant for hard-line disciplinarian attitudes of Southeast Asian autocrats, who are more than willing to impose intrusive restrictions on the way their subjects behave. Kim Dae-jung's rebuttal of 'Asian values' as a disguise for a police state[108] is a poignant reminder of the discrepancies in the way the proponents of the discourse have misappropriated the Sage. As Ian Buruma suggests, the indefatigable quest for social engineering in 'Asian values' countries such as Singapore makes it seem more like a 'tropical boarding school' than a bastion of Confucian polity.[109] Therefore, the practice of the 'Asian values' discourse stands in stark contrast to the intersubjective elements of normative prescription inherent within *The Analects*.

Hence, the subsumption of authority as a social relationship into a mere top-down flow of coercive power lies fundamentally at odds with the Confucian teachings. The obsession of 'Asian values' with discipline and the justification for the constant scrutiny of the lives of subjects is an illustration of how an absence of *ren* engenders a lack of confidence in the people, as well as the polity itself within the social structure in general. It is ironic that Confucius is invoked to buttress an idea which seems to betray his own teachings.

The second aspect of a Confucian double reading of 'Asian values' is more social theory-oriented, and as such exposes Confucius' affinities to Constructivism more closely. His prescription for intersubjectivity is a restatement of his understanding that human experience is constituted through institutional facts. Put differently, what is apparent from his normative prescriptions is the understanding that social relations need to be explained through intersubjectivity. For him, *ren* is an institutional fact. People are responsible for its reconstruction through societal interaction. At the same time, *ren* as a *governing principle* means that the Sage also understands that, as an emergent property, *ren* can interact with the interlocutors themselves. If good governance is something rulers and the people can hope to establish and enjoy, this is made possible only by maintaining a hierarchical structure conducive to the two-way flow of legitimacy and authority. The failure to uphold such an institution is also contingent upon the particularities of the intersubjectivity in which mutual respect is replaced by coercion. In effect, any social structure is potentially a self-fulfilling prophecy: how participants approach the structure determines its context.

Similarly at a macro-level, if 'Asian values' enter into a cultural dialogue with the 'West' in a particular manner – e.g. the 'clash of civilisations' – the alleged cultural dichotomy as a function of the discourse becomes a recipe for the reconstruction of the very 'clash' itself. Thus the social relationship between the problematic 'Asian' Self with the equally contested 'Western' Other is likely to produce an outcome which Confucius would consider anathema to good governance on a larger scale.

In an allusion to the intersubjective nature of *ren*, Confucius asks: 'Is *ren* such an alien thing? If we wish for it, we will immediately realise it',[110] adding that, 'it is the people who pioneer the "way", and not the other way round'.[111] Here we see the centrality of human agency in the reconstruction of intersubjectivity, similar to the Critical Realist argument that humans as social beings engage in social interactions, from which institutions emerge, subsequently acquiring a life of their own to confront the agents who constructed them in the first place.[112] Likewise for Confucius, *ren* is an institution born of social interactions; but once it emerges, it interacts with the people to provide a sense of legitimacy in governance. Confucius asks: 'Is honesty similar to such things as a crystal or silk? Is music simply bells or drums?'[113] The implication here, of course, is the intangibility of *ren* as a guiding principle; but at the same time, it is an admission that a social structure has an emergent property allowing it to interact with the agents. Confucius adds that:

> rulers can govern people only when he has acquired their trust. Otherwise, people will begin to think they are oppressed. People can censure rulers only when they have the trust of the rulers, otherwise, the ruler thinks he is being disobeyed.[114]

Therefore Confucius tells us that good governance and an amicable relationship between cultures is very much an ongoing project in which participants need to be cognisant of their roles as integral components of the intersubjective structure.

ii. 'Asian values' as a self-fulfilling prophecy

Having seen Confucius' conviction that intersubjectivity plays a crucial role in societal relations, a Confucian rereading of the misappropriation of his teachings within 'Asian values' and the ensuing clash between 'Asia' and the 'West' reveals that they are themselves institutional facts born of particular interactions between the cultural discourses. Furthermore, a Confucian critique of 'Asian values' suggests that the worldview espoused by the discourse is very much a self-fulfilling prophecy: depicting the intercourse between the two 'cultures' as necessarily antagonistic only seeks to reconstruct that very animosity. And within this discursive construction the elusiveness of 'Asia' becomes neutralised, then reified into a monolith, just as the Western Otherness becomes ever more apparent. When the reification is complete, the *problematique* of 'Asia' in 'Asian values' becomes nullified, constructing the dichotomy whereby 'Asia' becomes synonymous with 'discipline', on the one hand, and the 'West' becomes synonymous with 'decadence', on the other.[115]

The pervasiveness of this reification – and the attendant neutralisation of 'Asia' – is reflected in the emergence of a similar narrative appearing even in Japan, whose usual trajectory in identity construction is to consider both the 'West' and 'Asia' as Otherness, which, in turn, highlights the Japanese sense of uniqueness.[116] A former Foreign Ministry official, Ogura Kazuo, suggested in 1993 that the historically negative images of 'Asia' as a result of its colonial history have been transformed into positive ones, as the region has became synonymous with an emerging economic powerhouse.[117] Ogura then goes on to suggest that 'Asian characteristics' – whatever these might entail – provide a basis for the Japanese economic boom, as well as a driving force for the Asian developmental model.[118] For him, the universalising force of the 'West' is a myth born of its historical clashes with other civilisations. The role for 'Asia', therefore, is to act as a cultural counterweight in the 'eventual clash with European and American values as a prelude to constructing a uniquely Asian voice'.[119] While not suggesting that 'Asian values' have acquired a universal symbolism in Asia, Ogura's narratives nevertheless suggest that the discourse is capable of appealing to interlocutors seeking to buttress their ontological security.

If the post-Cold War status quo needs an element of good governance, Confucius offers some meaningful lessons. The Confucian double reading of 'Asian values' highlights the intersubjectivity of the 'clash of cultures' worldview in which the purported cultural incompatibility between 'Asia' and the 'West' is seen *not* as an inevitability, but partly as a product of how Asian interlocutors have alter-casted the Western Other to suit their self-confidence. In this sense, the early 1990s called for a new debate in international good governance. Confucius warns that those striving to realise *ren* should not be wasting their time criticising others.[120] To the extent that much of what constitutes 'Asian values' is, in effect, a criticism of the 'West',

Confucius seems to fundamentally confound the attitude taken by the supporters of the discourse. For him, the emergence of 'East–West' rivalry represents an absence of *ren*. He suggests that 'only those who follow *ren* can truly love or hate people' because their hearts are pure.[121] At the same time, he adds that if one 'truly seeks to achieve *ren*, we can do away with evil'.[122] For Confucius, the intercultural spat is a banality: 'the righteous prefers justice; the small people prefer profit'.[123] It is as if the Sage is warning against privileging the short-term gains to be had from the clash of cultures, as opposed to the potential for intercultural understanding. Therefore, his observation is telling: 'morality is never isolated. It will find friends.'[124] As such, the 'Asian values' thesis fails in its programme of socialisation when its modus operandi is primarily a dismissal of, rather than a regard for, Otherness.

The overt self-confidence of Southeast Asian interlocutors underpinned by the region's economic success comes under criticism once Confucian teachings are used to deconstruct 'Asian values'. The Sage suggests that 'if one is living lavishly, one becomes arrogant'.[125] He also notes that 'the righteous live freely, whereas small people constantly live timidly',[126] as if to insinuate that the Southeast Asian overconfidence and the attendant hostility towards the 'West' evoke a sense of 'Asian' cultural insecurity. In a criticism that can be used against the worst excesses of xenophobia in 'Asian values', Confucius states that 'a good horse is praised not for its power, but for its qualities'.[127] Hence, the Confucian double reading of the discourse unearths 'arrogance' beneath the veneer of purported destiny towards 'Asian' cultural supremacy.[128]

Hence the construction of a quid pro quo worldview by the proponents of the 'Asian values' discourse, using Confucius as a theoretical anchorage, contradicts the kind of international good governance envisaged by the Sage himself. This is the ultimate irony of the discourse – in an effort to distinguish between 'Asia' and the 'West', it misappropriates Confucius by neglecting the pillar of his sociological analysis in which intersubjectivity plays a crucial role. Just as Confucius argues, 'a righteous person privileges other people's good aspects over bad; but "small people" do the opposite'.[129] By refusing to see the beneficial aspects of the Western experience, and in their failure to engage with the Other, 'Asian values' become a mere bromide. A Constructivist critique of the discourse finds reverberations with the Sage's lament: 'I have yet to come across those who are affectionate toward morals as much as they are toward a beautiful person',[130] along with his admonition that one should 'worry more about one's lack of ability than one's anonymity'.[131] It seems that the 'Asian values' discourse falls into the vicious circle of banality against which Confucius warns us: 'those who are benevolent seek to engage widely and refuse to privilege a small group; while small people only privilege a small group and never engage widely'.[132]

Thus a Confucian rereading of 'Asian values' tells us that the 'clash of civilisations' characteristics of the discourse are very much a restatement of myopia rather than a careful analysis of the status quo.[133] Borrowing from Wendt, a sense of cultural clash is what antagonists make of it,[134] and it is constructed out of the particular way in which the proponents of the discourse have depicted the Western Other, alter-casting it as a

decadent entity incompatible with the Asian Self – however tenuous the reification of 'Asia' as an unproblematic entity may be. Confucius himself warns that, 'if we are self-critical and abstain from criticising others, we divest ourselves of mutual hatred'.[135] The intercultural clash that the 'Asian values' predicted was a chimera whose paucity can readily be revealed through the Confucian rereading of the discourse. Perhaps the financial crisis of 1997–8 was a wake-up call which effectively deconstructed the fragile intersubjective structure of such a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Conclusion

The aftermath of the 1997–8 Asian financial crisis seems to suggest that the much-touted 'Asian values' discourse was a vacuous enterprise – or a legitimising strategy for Southeast Asian leaders basking in their economic success – which crumbled once investors fled Asian markets. People can be forgiven for wondering what it was all about. After all, purportedly 'hard-working' Asians were supposed to overtake the 'decadent' West and prosper, both culturally and economically. Yet the crisis exposed not only the fragility of many of the Asian markets and their dependency on international capital, but also the paucity of 'Asian values' in general: after all, what was 'Asian' about the concept, if ASEAN remained impotent and failed to instil institutional dynamics uniquely Asian in origin? For a while, even Japanese policy elites warmed to the idea of an inevitable clash between 'Asia' and the 'West', only to rediscover Japan's uniqueness, effectively distancing itself not only from the 'West' but from 'Asia' as well.[136] In effect, the overt xenophobia of 'Asian values' tells us that Southeast Asian leaders have much to learn from their mistakes; and, despite the claims to the contrary, Confucian values have not yet been adopted to the fullest extent. Put differently, references to the teachings of the Sage were mere excuses used to add panache to the self-congratulatory mood that covered the southern corner of Southeast Asia in the early to mid-1990s.

Therefore it is a pity that the Confucian rereading of 'Asian values' suggests that the whole exercise was a self-fulfilling prophecy. The irony of the discourse is that it was never able to suggest a truly 'Asian' alternative to Western values, and instead degenerated into a vacuous dichotomy between 'Asia' as a disciplined entity and the 'West' as a source of decadence.[137] There are some laudable prescriptions within 'Asian values', and these must not be forfeited for the sake of bad ones. In other words, bad money should not drive out the good. As I have shown, we have much to gain from a Constructivist rereading of *The Analects*. Not only does Confucius impel us to practise honesty and benevolence, he also teaches us that it is imperative for us to construct intersubjective structures conducive for good governance. Furthermore, if the 'Asian' in 'Asian values' is to be emphasised, it is the shared sense of community as well as the norm of non-use of force,[138] along with ASEAN's penchant for inclusion.[139] While not an extensive reassessment of Confucianism, let alone the teachings of the Sage, this article casts a different light on the problems of, and potentials for, how Southeast Asian institutions can potentially learn from the myopia of 'Asian values', and utilise socialisation in such a way as to seek the potential to improve the existing

institutional framework – such as the ASEAN+3 – and the concomitant expansion of the 'ASEAN Way' beyond the boundaries of the organisation, as evidenced towards the end of 2003. Accordingly, this article also acts as a corrective to the worst excesses of the 'Asian values' discourse by focusing on the role of intersubjectivity in social experience. Now that Constructivism is making inroads into the study of ASEAN,[140] and since the 'Asian values' discourse originated in the earlier successes of the Southeast Asian economies at the heart of the organisation, it is a worthwhile critique of what is meant by 'Asianness'.

The future success or failure of ASEAN is in the hands of its political masters. It is a pity, however, to overlook what the Sage might be able to teach us. The ideas buried within the pages of *The Analects* have much to contribute towards an investigation into the possibilities of the organisation evolving into a potential security community. However ancient his ideas might be, Confucius has much to offer international relations scholarship today. As William de Bary suggests:

> that having come to terms with one's self, one's society, and one's culture, one could achieve a sense of personal ease, contentment, and fulfilment. Is this not still a good reason for answering the question 'Why Confucius Now' in the affirmative?[141]

To this I would add that not only is Confucius relevant to personal life today, but if his ideas can potentially influence how international agents can contribute towards a less dangerous world, there is no vice in rereading *The Analects* and pondering its practicality.

Notes

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3 Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. Kanaya Osamu (Tokyo: Iwanami bunko, 1998), Book 12.19.
4 I am mindful of the need to distinguish between Confucius and Confucianism in Chinese intellectual history. Yet in the practice of 'Asian values' the distinction is downplayed. Hence my focus in this article is on the concept of Confucian teachings, rather than the details of intellectual evolution.
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20 Puchala, *Theory and History*, pp. 174–80.
21 Walker, *Inside/Outside*, pp. 30–48.
22 *The Economist*, 25 June 1998, p. 25.
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27 Robison, 'The Politics', p. 310.
28 Anwar quoted in Joakim Öjendal and Hans Antlöv, 'Asian Values and its Political Consequences: Is Cambodia the First Domino?', *The Pacific Review*, 11(4), 1998, p. 528.
29 See *The Economist*, 10 October 1998, pp. 25–7.
30 Robison, 'The Politics', p. 311.
31 See Amitav Acharya, 'Ideas, Identity, and Institution-Building: From the "ASEAN Way" to the "Asia-Pacific Way"?' *The Pacific Review*, 10(3), 1997, p. 330; Öjendal and Antlöv, 'Asian Values', p. 528; and Mauzy, 'The Human Rights', pp. 218–19.
32 Robison, 'The Politics', p. 311.
33 Quoted in *The Economist*, 25 June 1998, p. 26.
34 See, for example, Kishore Mahbubani, 'The Dangers of Decadence: What the Rest Can Teach the West', *Foreign Affairs*, 72(4), 1993, pp. 10–14.
35 See Robison, 'The Politics'; and Mauzy, 'The Human Rights', pp. 215–19.
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48 Lee in Zakaria, 'Culture Is Destiny', p. 112.
49 Lee in Zakaria, 'Culture Is Destiny', p. 120.
50 Lee in Zakaria, 'Culture Is Destiny', p. 125; emphasis added.
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53 Mahathir quoted in Öjendal and Antlöv, 'Asian Values', p. 528.
54 Robison, 'The Politics', p. 320.

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63 See Puchala, *Theory and History*, pp. 175–6.
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121 *Analects*, Book 4.3.
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123 *Analects*, Book 4.16.
124 *Analects*, Book 4.15.
125 *Analects*, Book 7.35.
126 *Analects*, Book 7.36.
127 *Analects*, Book 14.35.
128 See Mahbubani, 'Culture is Destiny'.
129 *Analects*, Book 12.16.
130 *Analects*, Book 9.18.
131 *Analects*, Book 14.32.
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134 See Wendt, 'Anarchy'.
135 *Analects*, Book 15.15.
136 Ogura, 'Ajia'.
137 Mahbubani, 'The Dangers'.
138 Katsumata, 'Reconstruction', p. 104.
139 Acharya, *Constructing*, p. 63.
140 See Nikolas Busse, 'Constructivism and Southeast Asian Security', *The Pacific Review*, 12(1), 1999, pp. 39–60; and Amitav Acharya, *Constructing*.
141 William Theodore de Bary, 'Epilogue: Why Confucius Now?', in Bell and Hahm, *Confucianism for the Modern World*, p. 372.