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What and whose Confucianism? Sinophone communities and dialogical geopolitics

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Commentary

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Abstract
This commentary responds to An et al.'s (2021) article, 'Towards a Confucian Geopolitics', by re-examining 'the political' of Confucianism and its contribution to fostering a cosmopolitan form of Confucian geopolitics. By taking note of the differences within and between Sinophone communities, we discuss the variegated forms of Confucianism, and their various geopolitical implications. In doing so, we call for re-theorising Confucian geopolitics as *dialogical geopolitics* that challenges the cultural and ideological basis of statist and Sino-centric geopolitics.

Introduction

In their article 'Towards a Confucian Geopolitics', An et al. (2021) elaborate on China's strategic appropriation of Confucianism into its governance and geopolitical narrative. This is particularly salient at a time when the discourse of 'the decline of democracy' is prevalent, and when the 'China Model' – which is based on authoritarian and meritocratic governance – is being promoted and exported by the Chinese state as an alternative to global norms. However, how Chinese intellectuals and politicians perceive the 'China Model' actually aligns with what Agnew (2010: 572) calls 'the dominant Western

linear narrative of geopolitics' that places the 'state' at the transition of hegemons in a shifting world order. These contextual conditions reaffirm the necessity to re-examine *whether* or *what* Confucianism can contribute to what we term a 'dialogical geopolitics'. This is a geopolitics that challenges 'the naturalized and ideological basis to traditional geopolitics' by fostering a more cosmopolitan scholarly

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dialogue that goes *beyond* state-centrism (Agnew, 2010: 569; Rose-Redwood et al., 2018).

We somewhat agree with the authors' proposal of a 'hybrid Confucian geopolitics' in understanding China's global engagement. Indeed, Confucianism is actively integrated into the socialist governance that is used to legitimate China's geopolitical narratives. In this commentary, however, we will develop two points beyond the statist and determined accounts of Confucian geopolitics implied by An et al. (2021). First, we re-explore 'the political' of Confucianism per se by distinguishing it from different projects of geo-politicisation endorsed by China and the West. By drawing on the school of *political Confucianism* (Tu, 2001), we deconstruct the ideological basis that either pits Confucianism against liberal democracy, or ties Confucianism to particular statecraft and cultural nationalism. In doing so, we identify two distinct sets of Confucian ethics – namely, secular humanism and Confucian communitarianism – that can contribute to inter-ideological dialogue. Second, we examine the variegated models of Confucian geopolitics beyond China, especially those among Sinophone communities. Instead of offering a *prescription* for what ideal Confucian statecraft should become, we develop a Sinophone critique that focuses on the 'actually existing' or locally redefined Confucianism practised by both state and non-state communities, and its geopolitical implications. In particular, we encourage scholars to take note of the Singapore case, where Confucianism operates at various scales and forms, and which enables the geopolitical production of Chineseness that lies beyond Sino-centrism. Overall, we advocate for a cosmopolitan and dialogical form of Confucian geopolitics that is 'not really amenable to dominance by a single state' (Agnew, 2010: 571), and that is open to the manoeuvrability and place-based practices of non-state communities.

What Confucianism?

Much of the current geopolitical imagination of Confucianism, popular among both Chinese and Western scholars, is structured by 'the linear narrative' (Agnew, 2010) that inserts Confucianism into the intellectual history of nation-state formation and the transition of political world order. On the one hand, many Western scholars, especially Huntington (1993), associate Confucian civilisation with authoritarian statecraft that exists in contradistinction to Western democratic ideologies. Alternatively, Fukuyama (1995) argues that Confucianism's meritocratic system may help build up the state capacity of democratic political systems.

These two conventional models (conflict or compatibility) imply that Western democracy is the judge and final truth, which are still accepted by most Western political theorists today. On the other hand, some Chinese scholars mould Confucianism into a particular form of statecraft, especially the 'China model', that cuts against the Western ideologies. Collectively, these arguments actually geopoliticise Confucianism by interpreting it through the lenses of different statist perspectives, all of which obfuscate 'the political' of Confucianism per se, and obfuscate the potential for cosmopolitan dialogue. Instead, we suggest that an engagement with *political Confucianism* can offer a more critical approach to An et al.'s (2021) proposal of Confucian geopolitics (Qin, 2009; Tu, 2001).

Political Confucianism is a spectrum of research that critically re-examines the essence of Confucianism by distinguishing it from the politicised Confucianism. This perspective is based on a new genealogy of Confucianism by placing it into the original historical context of *Zhou-Qin* transformation (周秦之变), during which ancient China underwent a drastic transformation from feudalist society to a centralised autocratic state. Confucius's original philosophy actually defended against the expansion of totalising state power by restoring the *Zhou Li* that maintained moral order, mutual responsibility, and harmonious balance between person, family, community, and empire. However, another philosophical school during the same era – namely, Legalism – advocated the view that human beings are driven by self-interest, which requires strict laws to control them. At the time, this philosophy overshadowed Confucianism to become the overwhelming governing philosophy accepted by politicians (Qin, 2009). Confucianism was originally a counter-hegemonic force against Legalist governance that dismantled the autonomy of moral communities that put

individuals directly under imperial authority. Since the Han dynasty until now, however, Confucianism has been politicised and sanctified as a state ideology that has since been integrated into Legalist modes of governance. Confucianism and Legalism therefore merged by embedding Confucian scholars within bureaucratic systems. As Qin Hui (2009) argues, China's history since the Han dynasty is actually characterised by 'Confucianism and Marxism without and Legalism within' (儒表法里，马表法里). Therefore, what original Confucianism emphasised was not a statist philosophy, but actually the agency of moral communities in mediating the relationship between individuals, state, and the world-at-large.

We thus propose two sets of ideas drawn from *political Confucianism* that may contribute to inter-ideological dialogues; namely, Confucian secular humanism and Confucian communitarianism. First, according to Tu (2001), secular humanism is the core 'ethico-spiritual' value of Confucianism that prioritises human-relatedness at the centre of politics. The central teaching is the philosophy of *zhongyong* (中庸 moderation or balance) that emphasises not only a tempered mind, but also seeks an optimal action for harmony by placing conflicting forces within an interaction context. *Zhongyong* objects to the excessive use of state power for *strategic* ends by carefully reconciling rational calculation with righteousness (*daoli*), emotions (face) and human relations (*guanxi*, or interpersonal relationships). A Confucian ethics of *zhongyong* has the potential to create a relational model of communicative rationality in international politics. Second, Confucianism also provides a communitarian critique of both individualism and statism. Confucianism relates the individual to a larger network of human relationships from the family and the state to the world-at-large and emphasises the mutual responsibility and moral obligations between individuals and community (Qin, 2009; Tu, 2001). In Confucianism, individuals are relationally embedded within the community that offers *li* (rituals or cultural norms) to unite them as 'humanity as a whole'. However, Confucian communitarianism does not argue against liberalism by restoring state authority but rather emphasises the agency of non-state moral communities in constituting an alternative geopolitical landscape (Agnew,

2010). Geopolitical dialogues must be socialised into common values of communities so that they can achieve their ends. Here, a Sinophone critique can be instructive.

Whose Confucianism?

A Sinophone critique draws on the variegated formations of Sinophone communities around the world. In doing so, it calls into question the 'China-centric and uniform definition of Chineseness' (Shih, 2013: 53). By taking Sinophone communities, in particular Singapore's, into consideration, we can see more variegated forms of Confucian geopolitics. In Singapore, a Chinese-majority country, Confucianism is utilised as a state-mandated ideology for social engineering to produce well-disciplined citizens, as well as a moral impetus to promote economic development and geopolitical integration (Kuah, 1990). However, what renders Singapore's model of Confucian geopolitics distinctive to China's is that Confucianism is appropriated to *mediate* rather than *reject* the Western definition of democracy. In doing so, it reveals how a soft or paternalistic form of authoritarianism and representative democracy can co-exist in a pragmatic manner. The Confucian ethics of secular humanism and *zhongyong* are well practised by Singapore as pragmatic statecraft to reconcile the ethno-religious differences and the tension between authority and democracy, so as to carefully balance its geopolitical position within Southeast Asia, and at the East-West nexus.

However, our argument calls for exploring not only the variegation of Confucian statecraft, but also how Confucianism is defined and practised by *non-state* Sinophone communities. The most noticeable Confucian communities are the Chinese clan associations flourishing throughout Southeast Asia and beyond. These Sinophone communities were first established on the basis of kinship, locality, and dialect by Chinese immigrants for purposes of mutual help, ancestor worship, and business, but have also played a crucial role in shaping the economic and geopolitical landscape of both host countries and China. In fact, Chinese settlers had even established a quasi-republic kongsi federation (known as 'Lanfang Republic') in Borneo in 1777 as an experiment

in using Confucian ideals to enable co-governance by virtuous and capable persons (Shih, 2013). Lanfang Republic can be viewed as a Confucian form of democracy, as it had been successively governed by 13 presidents over 107 years, who were recommended or selected by community members, and served as a powerful civic and economic organisation that challenged China's 'ban on foreign trade' during the Qing dynasty. Since China's reform and opening-up in 1978, these clan associations have placed a crucial role in facilitating China's integration into modern international systems by co-producing a global 'Confucian capitalism' built on kinship, *guanxi*, and ethnic intimacy.

The rise of China actually reinforces the Sinocentric definition of Chineseness, and in particular, its ethnic geopolitics that attempts to emotionally involve overseas Chinese communities into its global engagements by creating Confucian kinship affinity. However, the Sinophone studies literature suggests that Sinophone communities also developed their own particular Confucian practices by in-situ economic and cultural production, while rejecting the 'Sinicization' from China that reduces them to diasporic subjects (Shih, 2013). For example, through integrating Confucian communitarian values into public services and neoliberal economics, clan associations in Singapore help produce a de-historicised form of Chineseness that is neither Sino-centric nor state-mandated (Montsion, 2014). These Confucian clan associations can resist the Singaporean state's production of uniform Chineseness (e.g. by suppressing the use of dialects), or adapt to a state's geopolitical initiatives that use Confucianism to defend against Westernisation or to establish economic integration with China. Nevertheless, these communities offer political scales for interrogation and dialogue that may or may not have anything to do with state-prescriptive Confucianism. Therefore, a Sinophone critique require scholars to explore the 'actually existing' Confucian practices that tend to operate at non-statist scales and forms, and their production of geopolitical spaces. Overall, by re-examining 'the political' of Confucianism and its variegated practices, we advocate bringing

Confucianism into conversation with normative geopolitical discourses, developing instead a *dialogical geopolitics* that moves 'beyond the choice of either the linear narrative or Sino-centrism' (Agnew, 2010: 575).

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