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Confucian Tradition, Public Opinion, and Government in the New Economic

Powerhouses of Asia

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1. Introduction

1.1 Subjects and objectives of this paper

This paper discusses the relations between the Confucian tradition of Chinese philosophy –
especially its roots in the ancient Book of Changes (*Yi Ching*) – and public opinion, and the
implications of both for government and economic growth in Asian Countries. Eventually,
proposals are discussed dealing with the use of survey research to explore the manifold
relations between the subjects mentioned above.

Following some introductory remarks on Chinese philosophy and public opinion the second
section of the paper explains some points of contact between fundamental Confucian thinking
and public opinion as a social phenomenon. The following chapter discusses contiguities
between Confucianism, public opinion, and government. The next major section explains why
Confucianism and Confucian notions of public opinion can be useful for modern Asian
governments to achieve and preserve economic success. The last chapter discusses the role of
survey research in the exploration of all these structures in Asian social reality.

1.2 Confucian philosophy and public opinion: Some background information

Confucian philosophy

Confucius is said to have lived from 551 BC to 479 BC (Day 1962: 29 f). His major work –
and the only one which is believed to directly go back to Confucius himself – is the *Lun Yü*,
the *Analects of Confucius*. The book comprises 20 books, each of which contains about 20 to
30 sentences and short depictions of or about Confucius. The bases of the Confucian
philosophy are five classic texts which were bequeathed and written down long before
Confucius was born. The *Five Classics* are (Day 1962: 31):

1. The *Book of Poetry* (Shih Ching)

2. The *Book of History* (Shu Ching)

3. The *Book of Changes* (Yi Ching)

4. The *Book of Rites* (Li Chi)

5. The *Spring-and Autumn-Annals* (Ch'un Ch'iu).

Confucius himself especially appreciated the Book of Changes, which he studied over and
over again (*Lun Yü* VII 16; Wilhelm 1996: 14, 48, 85). As a consequence, there is a dominant
Confucian understanding of the actually very enigmatic text on the one hand. On the other
hand, the ideas of the *Yi Ching* had a great influence on Confucian philosophy throughout
history. Most discussions in this paper are based upon comparisons between theories of public
opinion and the Confucian interpretation of the *Yi Ching* as given by the authoritative
sinologist Richard Wilhelm (Wilhelm 1998).[1]

The *Yi Ching* consists of 64 'Signs', each made up of eight sentences or short descriptions on
the changing situation of the sign. The Book of Changes is also used for soothsaying and tries

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[1] All Quotes from the Yi Ching and the explanations by the original translator Wilhelm have been translated into
English by Thomas Roessing, since there is no English edition of Wilhelm's work available.

to depict the whole universe of life in its signs and sentences (Wilhelm 1995: 7). The actual signs of the Book of Changes are hexagrams made up of six straight or broken lines (Legge 1966; Wilhelm 1998; Day 1962: 31). For example, hexagram 10, *Lü* (for further explanation see below), looks like this:

Five straight lines and one broken line on the third place from the bottom (in *Yi Ching* terminology: 'A six on third place'). The sign describes a situation where something strong meets something clear and fair.

Unfortunately, limited space prevents further explanations of the complete *Yi Ching*, its history, structure, use, and interpretation in this paper. Some details are explained in the subsequent sections where needed.

Public Opinion

There are three major conceptions of public opinion:

➢ Public opinion as survey research, respectively its results

➢ Public opinion as social control, providing integrative power to societies (Noelle-Neumann 1984, 1991)

➢ Public opinion as a normative concept of the opinions of a rational, informed elite, opposing the official government in a system of checks and balances (Berelson 1952; Lazarsfeld 1957).

This paper will concentrate on the first two conceptions of public opinion, emphasizing especially Noelle-Neumann's social psychological notion of public opinion. Chinese

philosophy also provides discussions on the normative philosophy of rational elites and their relationship with governments (Cho 2000: 301, 316), but these cannot be discussed here.

2. Confucianism and public opinion

Confucian tradition and the values of its founding father still influence social life in many Asian countries, including China and Singapore, Vietnam and Japan (Fukuyama 1997, Weggel 1997, Ngo 2000). Core values of the Confucian philosophy like subordination of the individual to family, state, or sageness (Day 1962) engulf the individual, confining its individuality (Scheff 1994). Three examples from the *Yi Ching* and its Confucian interpretation shall make clear how modern survey research, the theory of public opinion and the core ideas of Confucius can be connected. This aims at two objectives: The first objective is to achieve a better understanding of ancient philosophy and its modern effects. The second is to try to learn from ancient philosophy to improve public opinion theory.

2.1 The personality strength of the sage

Sageness is a central Confucian value and the sage has something like the leading part in many books of ancient Chinese philosophy. The Confucian conception of the sage is pretty much based on the descriptions and norms of the *Yi Ching*.

Hexagram 1: *Kien*; 9 in second place reads:

"Appearing dragon on the field. It is good to see the great man." (Wilhelm 1998: 28). That means (Commentary by Richard Wilhelm): The great man is distinguished by "his seriousness, his absolute reliability, the influence he exerts on his social environment without deliberate endeavour."

Other passages of the Yi Ching (i.e. hexagram 3, Dschun, the difficulties at the beginning; hexagram 51, Dschen, the arousing, cf. Wilhelm 1998: 35 ff; 189 ff) describe the sage as:

➢ Strong, unresting, serious, reliable

➢ Intrepid

➢ Unremitting creative

➢ Caring, concerned

➢ Working to improve his personality

➢ Self-critical

➢ Influencing others.

In the 1980s, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann and the Allensbach Institute were commissioned to develop a methodology to identify strong personalities. After many pretests and validity considerations the personality strength scale was ready to use (Noelle-Neumann 1983; Weimann 1994). The scale consists of ten cards with self-statements written on them. Respondents in surveys are asked to single out those cards on which they could say: "That statement is true for my personality, that matches me". The items are (Weimann 1994: 256):

➢ I usually count on being successful in everything I do
➢ I am rarely unsure about how I should behave
➢ I like to assume responsibility
➢ I like to take the lead when a group does things together
➢ I enjoy convincing others of my opinions
➢ I often notice that I serve as a model for others
➢ I am good at getting what I want
➢ I am often a step ahead of others
➢ I own many things others envy me for
➢ I often give others advice and suggestions.

Those items singled out by the respondents are used to calculate an index on personality strength. Depending on their score on the index, respondents can be divided into the categories "very high", "high", "low", and "very low" personality strength. Further research revealed other attributes of persons, who are high on personality strength (Noelle-Neumann 1983):

➢ Responsible

➢ Determined

➢ Active above average

➢ Self-critical

➢ Caring

➢ Opinion leaders.

The accordance between the ancient descriptions of the sage and the modern instruments for the identification of and findings on strong personalities are striking. To make them even more evident, table 1 gives an overview over the attributes of the sage and those of strong persons.

Table 1: The sage of Chinese philosophy and strong personalities

PS-Scale	Yi Ching	Strong personalities
I usually count on being successful in everything I do	Strong, unresting, serious, reliable	Responsible
I am rarely unsure about how I should behave	Intrepid	Determined
I am good at getting what I want I am often a step ahead of others	Unremitting creative	Active above average
I like to assume responsibility	Caring, concerned	Caring
	Working to improve his personality	
	Self-critical	Self-critical
I like to take the lead when a group does things together I enjoy convincing others of my opinions I often notice that I serve as a model for others I often give others advice and suggestions I own many things others envy me for	Influencing others	Opinion leaders

2.2 Manners make the man

In many Asian countries, especially the metaconfucian[2] ones, the individual is engulfed by social norms, in some cases even more than by manifest laws (Cho 2000: 303ff). The "social bonds" (Scheff 1994) are strong and tight, the whole counts more than its parts, social harmony is a precious good (Weggel 1997: 38 ff; Cho 2000). Although public opinion – i.e. what one can say and show or must say and show in order not to isolate oneself socially (Noelle-Neumann 1984; 1991) — is also very effective in western societies, the limitation of people's individual nature is very strong in Asian metaconfucian countries (Mahbubani 1993: 14; Zakaria 1994: 113). Conventions, manners, proper behaviour and the dominance of the whole over individual interests are core values of Confucianism. It is probable that even in the modern metaconfucianism, which is a radically modified version of the pure Confucian thoughts 2500 years ago (Roetz 1995: 114f), these core values have preserved much of their original power.

Confucius praised the role of conventions and rites for the society in many sections of his analects (e.g. *Lun Yü* XII,1; Wilhelm 1996: 121). His successor Hsuen Tzu (approx. 300-230 BC) pointed to the importance of the cultural tradition for a society and called individual breaches of this tradition a shame (*Hsuen-Tzu* XVIII,10; Köster 1967: 238). Personal cultivation is the first step to achieve a stable and wealthy society (Cho 2000: 302). It is the personal cultivation according to the traditional rites and manners (*Li*[3]), that is literally fundamental for the pyramidal architecture of a Confucian society (Weggel 1997: 57ff). The

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[2] Some political scientists call the political philosophy that is based on Confucian ideas, but not pure Confucian thought, 'metaconfucianism' (Weggel 1997).

[3] The role of Li in Confucian societies and its connections with public opinion are discussed in Cho (2000) so that there is no need to discuss them extensively in this paper.

Yi Ching dedicates a whole hexagram to the importance of adequate behaviour: 10, Lü, the appearance [stepping on something].[4]

For example, the first sentence of hexagram 10 reads (Wilhelm 1998: 59f): "Stepping on the tail of the tiger. It does not bite. Success." That means (commentary by Richard Wilhelm):

> "The situation is that one is confronted with wild, unfriendly people. In such cases one will succeed if one appears with manners, keeping good conventions in mind. Polite manners lead to success even in a confrontation with tetchy people."

3. The king and the people

Hexagram 20, *Guan*, the consideration (the sight) symbolizes a landmark, which in turn is a symbol for a ruler governing by good example (Wilhelm 1998: 91). One sentence of Guan reads: "The wind is moving over the surface of earth. The image of sight. This way the ancient Kings visited the countries of the world, viewed the people and gave instructions" (Wilhelm 1998: 92). This refers to the practice of Chinese rulers throughout history to travel around their empires (Wilhelm 1998: 92) or to send county magistrates to gauge public opinion (Cho 2000: 314). For Confucius and Mencius (approx. 371 BC – 289 BC), another of his successors (Day 1962), power was assigned to rulers through heaven and through the will of the people (Cho 2000: 315). Therefore, it is necessary for the ruler (1) to cultivate his personality (work to be a sage, see above, cf. *Lun Yü* II, 3; Wilhelm 1996: 42), (2) to gauge the effective social norms, needs, and the will of the governed people, and (3) to rule by good example in accordance with *Li* instead of ruling by law and force (Day 1962; Roetz 1995; Cho 2000: 316f).

This notion of government is either still in effect in many Asian countries, or can at least be utilized by governments to gain public acceptance (Roetz 1995: 114 f; Cho 2000: 317). Communist China revived Confucianism in the 1970s, Singapore started a campaign

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[4] The German word for Lü is ‚Auftreten'. It means 'stepping on something' as well as 'appearance', and 'behaviour'. Unfortunately this play on words is difficult to translate into English.

promoting Confucian values in the 1990s (Zakaria 1994). The Confucian notion of the will of the people as the will of heaven to which a ruler needs to respond is also consistent with Noelle-Neumann's theory of public opinion. She (1984) implemented Hume's statement, that it is "on opinion only, that government is founded" into her theory of public opinion. The social nature of men is powerful in such a manner that government measures cannot permanently oppose it. If a king loses the power of public opinion he loses all of his power (cf. also Teng-hui 1995).

4. Confucianism, public opinion, and the economy

The promotion of Confucian values does not only serve the stabilisation of authority but can also strengthen economic growth. The commonplace arguments are that Confucian values like the striving for harmony and the resulting obedience (Weggel 1997; Cho 2000) or the tightness of the social bonds and the resulting conformity support economic growth. These arguments are as plausible as controversial. It is difficult to determine, how far Confucianism contributed to the rise (and the later problems) of the so-called "tiger states". One important cause for this is that non-(meta-) Confucian Countries, like Thailand or Malaysia, experience strong economic growth as well as the traditional Confucian Countries of China, Korea, or Japan.

It is at least probable (ways to test this hypothesis are discussed below) that a public opinion that is saturated with certain classical Confucian thinking can support economic growth. This is because economic well-being is touched in the *Yi Ching*; accordant ideas had more than 3000 years to become manifest in the heads of the people.

The first sentence of hexagram 48, *Dsing*, the well, reads:

"Over the wood is water: the image of the well. That is the way the sage encourages the working people and gives advice for mutual solidarity" (Wilhelm 1998: 180). The hexagram depicts the task of the ruler to properly organize society so as to make it work like a plant: Plants seem to grow self-reliantly only by the ideal cooperation of its parts for the sake of the whole (Wilhelm 1998: 181). Another hexagram, 42, I, the increase, praises the value of good government (see above) for tough missions and bold challenges that a society could face (Wilhelm 1998: 159). It seems to be a good advice for rulers of Confucian countries not to subjugate the ruled in order not to destroy the "productive powers" (a term coined by Friedrich List) of a society. Especially for economically successful countries like Singapore (Zakaria 1994: 109), that do not provide the freedom of western democracies to their people (cf. the accordant statements of Lee Kuan Yew in Zakaria 1994), the consideration of Confucian rules for governing and the promotion of Confucian values like conformity can provide political stability and economic prosperity. Despite all pursuit for harmony, a ruler will lose power if he proves to be unable to care for his people like a father caring for his family. For example, "Confucian revolutions" like that happened in China throughout history (Cho 2000: 314ff).

Maybe an obverse effect to the support of the economy by Confucian values could be the change of traditional culture and values in Asian countries by economic growth and its side effects. Economic success and entrepreneurship not only require a certain amount of freedom and individualism, it also puts forth both. There is already some evidence that advertisement and consumerist values promote individualism and self-actualisation in modern China (Wei/Pan 1999).

4. Subjects of survey research

All the "findings" discussed above – concerning connections between Confucianism and personality strength, manners and public behaviour, government and economy are in fact no findings but *conjectures*. The interpretation of ancient writings, scientific analyses, and political commentary (e.g. that of Kishore Mahbubani or Lee Kuan Yew) is no *empirical* method to explore structures of social reality. Survey research could step in and fill the empirical gap in research on Confucianism and public opinion – at least as far as survey research is possible in non- or semi-democratic countries like the People's Republic of China, Vietnam, or Singapore. No attempt shall be made here to discuss existing studies on values and economy in Asia, so as to look for empirical corroborations for the issues discussed above. Instead, dedicated studies on the similarities between social psychological notions of public opinion and Confucianism are proposed. These studies should primarily test the hypotheses that
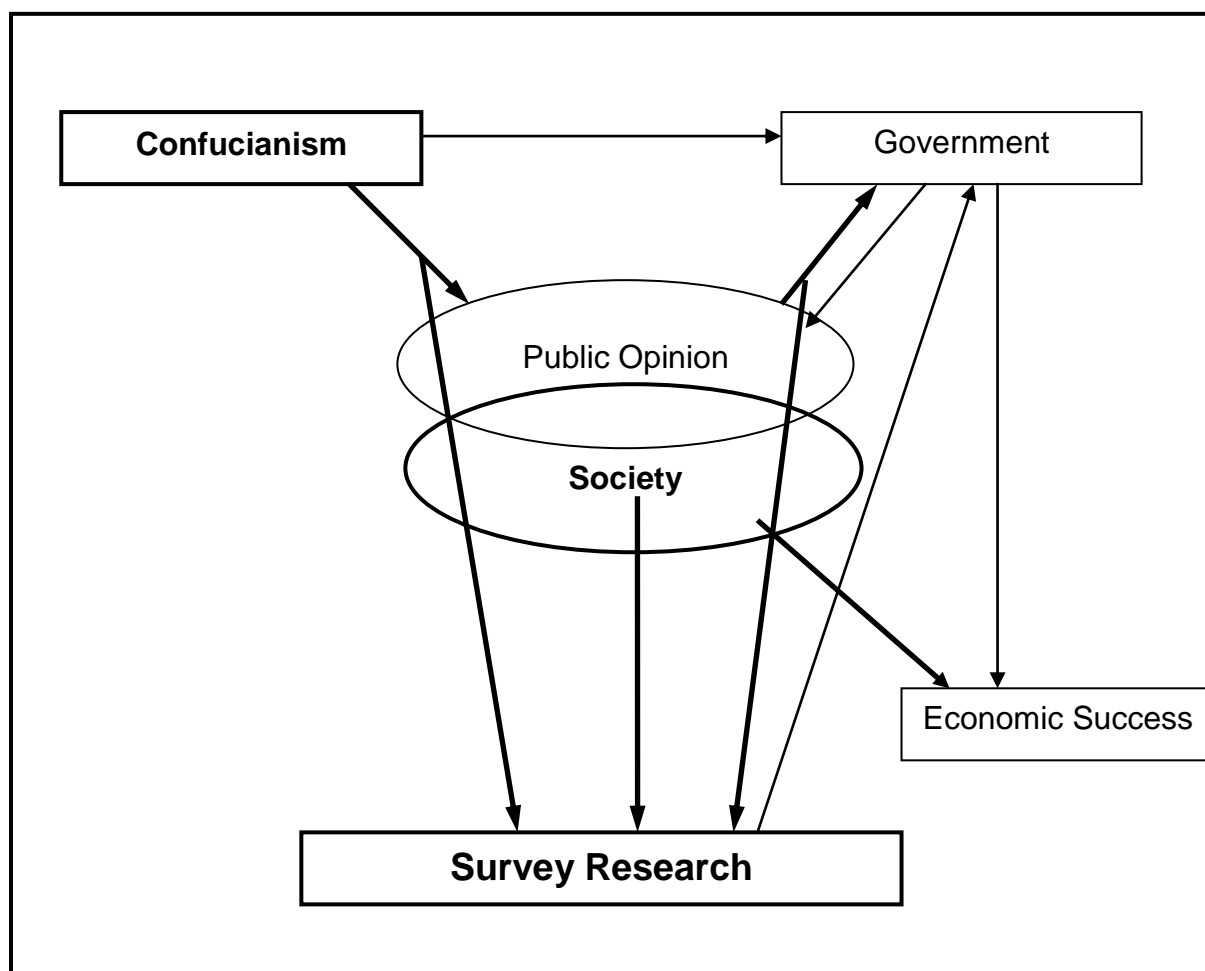
1. Confucian values are part of public opinion in (meta-)Confucian societies

2. Confucian values support the social control function (Weggel 1997; Cho 2000: 307ff) of public opinion in those countries (Scheff 1994).

In a second step the findings could be used to clarify the question if the connection between Confucianism and public opinion is indeed supporting government stability and economic growth as it could be expected from the arguments above.

Unfortunately, the adoption of survey research to explore complex connections between complex subjects in countries and societies on a diverse continent is very difficult. Examples for that are difficulties in the adjustment of western questionnaires for use in Asia (Noelle-Neumann 1991; Willnat 1996) or the comparison of regions in culturally diverse Mainland China (e.g. Wei/Pan 1999).

Summing up, survey research has to deal with Confucianism, public opinion, society (including government and economy), and the relations between the three in order to validly investigate the development of countries like Singapore or China. Figure 1 illustrates some of the relations that are effective in many Asian societies.

Fig. 1.

Source: Illustration by the author.

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