

Centre Report on Confucian Roundtable in Brisbane¹

By Rosita Dellios²

‘At a time of major shifts in global wealth and power, Australians more than ever need to understand the cultural ethos driving the rise of Asia.’ This was the rationale for a roundtable on Confucian values held in Brisbane on 3 September 2013. Hosted by the Qld branch of the Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA), the event comprised presentations by a visiting delegation of experts from China, Singapore and Vietnam that was organised by the Beijing-based International Confucian Association. There were also Australian commentators and interested members of the community who engaged in discussion. The roundtable was part of the 2013 China-Australia Cultural Dialogue focusing on the broad theme of Eastern and Western cultural environments and traditions of thought and the relevance of this to Australia. It ties in with the recent *Australia in the Asian Century* white paper calling for deeper engagement with Asia.

The presentations focused on various themes concerning Confucian thought and values. The principal of the Four Seas Academy, Feng Zhe, spoke about the revival of Chinese classical education. He said that the recent emergence in China of private academies was a positive trend, not only in restoring traditional Chinese culture within a contemporary context but also acting as a platform for multicultural education. By teaching the Chinese classics from early childhood it was hoped that the values of tolerance and mutual understanding would be nurtured. These are qualities that would be much in demand in intra-regional relations – be they in business, politics or people-to-people diplomacy.

But what are the Chinese classics?’ Professor Lee Cheuk Yin, of the National University of Singapore, discussed these and the moral education they imparted. He said that the *Analects* of Confucius, the Daoist *Book of the Way and its Power*, the *Book of Changes* and many other texts, with an ethos of education and least four millennia of Chinese history, had informed contemporary Asia’s peaceful economic rise. He quoted a well-known saying that to understand the past is to know the present. The Five Classics of *Poetry*, *History*, *Rites*, *Changes*, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and the Four Books of the *Great Learning*, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, the *Analects*, and the *Mencius* represented the educational pillars of China’s educated class and government service until 1911 when China’s imperial system collapsed and modern China emerged.

¹ The views in *The Culture Mandala* are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views, position or policies of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies. Bearing in mind the controversial debates now occurring in International Relations and East-West studies, the editors publish diverse, critical and dissenting views so long as these meet academic criteria.

² Co-Author (with R. James Ferguson) of *China’s Quest for Global Order: From Peaceful Rise to Harmonious World* (Lanham Md: Lexington Books, 2013).

The Confucian moral values that came with a classical education included filial piety, loyalty to one's country, and self-cultivation for the sake of others not for oneself; it was a matter of how to bring happiness to the family, the state and the world in expanding circles of harmonious relations. In this sense, Confucian education is designed to bring out a person's 'innate goodness'. Professor Lee gave the example of his own country, Singapore, as practising Confucian values: 'In our shared values, the nation comes before community and society before self. The family is the basic unit of society.' He said children are taught civic and moral education in their mother tongue (Singapore being a multicultural society of Chinese, Malay and Indian ethnic groups) at primary school level, and were taught in English at secondary school. Such core values as respect and responsibility are instilled through this education.

But what is unique about the Chinese classics? This was the question addressed by Professor Wen Haiming, of the Department of Philosophy, Renmin University, Beijing. The first requirement was to realise that early Western translations of Chinese cultural concepts were 'Christianised' and this needed to be redressed. (There is no personal God in Chinese thought; rather, it centres on an ethical system.) He elaborated on the classical belief in a unity between humans and the universe rather than the humans having dominion over the world. This contrast concerning the West's dichotomy (between humans and God) or *reductionism* in science and the East's unity (between humans and the moral and natural universe) or *holism* in the approach to problem-solving, was taken up by Professor Tian Chenshan, from Beijing Foreign Languages University.

In speaking about the 'cultural veil between East and West and how we misunderstand each other', Prof. Tian said it was important to consider the 'one and many' concept. For the Chinese, he said, the 'one and many' were indivisible as they correlated. The *Book of Changes* emphasises this through the idea of 'one in many and many in one', whereas in Christian culture there is a transcendental 'One', God. In human relations, the West thinks in terms of individuals but the Chinese think of people in the context of relationships and the big picture. On the question of human rights, for example, he said that Chinese focus on 'how to get a balance among different people and different interests'. During the Q & A discussion, Professor Tian was asked about China's current problems of morality, especially corruption. He replied: 'The problem China has is a violation the Chinese way of thinking with regard to its moral values. If China sticks to Chinese traditions it will be successful.' He said moral problems such as corruption and neglect of the environment (which goes against the human-universe/nature relationship) is being addressed by President Xi Jinping who is using 'a skilful way to correct these problems', referring to the need for officials to set a moral example by not being ostentatious or engaging in lavish banquets. Thus behaviour is being modified by psychological means (the 'carrot' of Confucian persuasion) and not only by the law (or 'stick' of punishment).

The Chinese classics were not only influential in China but also in what is known as the Confucian cultural area, most notably Japan, Korea and Vietnam. How the Chinese classics shaped East and Southeast Asia was the theme of a Vietnamese scholar, Dr Ngoc Tho

Nguyen, of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, in Ho Chi Minh City. He said that East Asian societies have long been familiar with the Chinese classics while Southeast Asian societies all have Chinese ethnic minorities which tend to play a key role in setting standards of excellence in education, government administration and commerce. He pointed out that different aspects of Confucian morality were emphasised in the various non-Chinese Confucian societies. For example, the Japanese emphasised 'loyalty' as the indigenous 'Samurai spirit' was underpinned by Confucian education. Meanwhile, 'filial piety' meant that the value of family relations was expressed in terms of clan (rather than the modern nuclear family) among the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia. This helped in their cultural survival and prosperity.

In Dr Ngoc Tho Nguyen's own country, Vietnam, Confucianism was not imposed by China, which in pre-colonial times was the equivalent of a superpower in the East Asian world order, but consciously adopted as the ideology of choice. This helped in the 'unification of the country and bringing about a balance between high and folk culture'. He added that for spiritual sustenance the Vietnamese relied on Buddhism while in societal terms there was a Confucian outlook. 'Once Confucian values became entrenched in Vietnamese village life it was not easy to erase.' Moreover, during French colonial rule the new administrators took advantage of the Confucian teaching of the people's 'loyalty' to the 'ruler' to establish themselves.

The speakers at this lunchtime roundtable also addressed an evening audience in Brisbane and then went on to Sydney and other Australian city venues to engage in with Australian audiences.