

Research on the Confucian Revival in Slovenia

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Abstract

There has been a significant amount of research carried out in Slovenia on the revival of Confucianism, particularly since 2012 and 2014, when the first two research projects on this topic were approved. Members of the Department of Asian Studies at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, have been consistently conducting research in Slovenia and various Chinese, Taiwanese, and East Asian archives and libraries. These efforts have led to several important publications in Slovene, English, and even Chinese, and represent an ongoing commitment that continues in the present day. Therefore, it is not surprising that the present special issue of the Slovenian academic journal *Asian Studies*, focusing on the Confucian revival, already marks the fourth special issue in this area of research.

This review article's objective is thus to summarize the key achievements of Slovenian research in this field and provide a comprehensive overview of the diverse Slovene research activities and publications related to Modern New Confucianism. It covers not only research on the revival of Confucianism in China and the broader Sinic region, but also includes Confucian studies in other East Asian regions and the wider Sinic area.

Keywords: Modern New Confucianism, Confucian revival, Modern Chinese philosophy, East Asian Confucianism, Chinese studies in Slovenia, Sinology in Slovenia, Chinese philosophy in Slovenia

Raziskave konfucijanskega preporoda v Sloveniji

Izvleček

V Sloveniji je bilo opravljenih veliko raziskav konfucijanskega preporoda, zlasti od leta 2012 oz. 2014, ko sta bila odobrena prva dva raziskovalna projekta na to temo. Člani in članice Oddelka za azijske študije na Filozofski fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani so odtlej kontinuirano izvajali raziskovalno delo tako v Sloveniji kot tudi v različnih kitajskih, tajvanskih in vzhodnoazijskih arhivih in knjižnicah. Te študije so privedle do vrste pomembnih publikacij v slovenščini, angleščini in celo v kitajščini, ki predstavljajo rezultate kontinuiranih prizadevanj, ki se nadaljujejo še danes. Zato ni presenetljivo, da je pričujoča številka že četrta posebna številka slovenske znanstvene revije *Asian Studies* (*Azijske študije*), ki je posvečena preporodu konfucijanstva.

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Cilj tega preglednega članka je torej povzeti ključne dosežke slovenskih raziskav na tem področju ter zagotoviti celovit pregled različnih raziskovalnih dejavnosti in publikacij v Sloveniji, povezanih s sodobnim novim konfucijanstvom. Obravnava ne le raziskave o preporodu konfucijanstva na Kitajskem in v širši vzhodnoazijski regiji, temveč tudi študije konfucianizma v drugih vzhodnoazijskih regijah in na širšem siniškem območju.

Ključne besede: moderno novo konfucijanstvo, konfucijanski preporod, moderna kitajska filozofija, vzhodnoazijsko konfucijanstvo, kitajske študije v Sloveniji, slovenska sinologija, kitajska filozofija v Sloveniji

Introduction

The resurgence of Confucianism has been a subject of extensive scholarly inquiry in Slovenia since 2014, with primary contributions coming from the Department of Asian Studies at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. In addition to the published works highlighted in the concise annotated bibliography below, Slovenian researchers in the field of Modern New Confucianism have disseminated their findings at over a hundred international conferences and in numerous guest lectures at prestigious institutions across Europe and East Asia.

This research is crucial in fostering cross-cultural understanding and promoting the exchange of ideas between East and West, contributing to a deeper comprehension of the contemporary relevance of Confucianism in the modern world. As such, this research holds significance due to its role in bridging cultural divides and advancing global dialogues on ethics, governance, and societal values. In this sense, it serves as a vital catalyst for global discourse, offering insights into the enduring relevance of Confucian principles in today's interconnected world.

This research not only enriches Slovene academia with a unique perspective on global philosophy but also enhances Slovenia's cultural and intellectual standing on the international stage, fostering academic collaborations and cultural exchanges that contribute to the country's academic and diplomatic prowess.

Special Issues of *Asian Studies* and Edited Volumes

Understanding the phenomenon of the Confucian revival is a fundamental prerequisite for comprehending the distinctive facets of Chinese modernization. Hence, it is no mere coincidence that this journal, established in 2012, is now presenting its fourth special issue dedicated to themes associated with the modernization of Confucianism.

The initial special issue, titled “Modern Confucianism and Chinese Modernity”, graced the inaugural issue of the second volume in 2014 and featured a significant contribution by the eminent contemporary Confucian scholar from Taiwan, Lee Ming-Huei (Lee 2014). Several other distinguished experts in classical and contemporary Confucianism also enriched this inaugural issue with their contributions (see, for example, Sigurðsson 2014; Dessein 2014; Sernelj 2014; Poškaitė 2014; Gänßbauer 2014).

The second special issue, “Confucianism and Education”, appeared in the second issue of the fifth volume in 2017. While half of the published papers centred on classical Confucianism, three explicitly explored its contemporary relevance and application (see Thompson 2017; Rošker 2017b; Ambrogio 2017).

The third special issue looked at Confucian studies in Vietnam, an under-explored domain in international Confucianism research. Released in 2020, under the straightforward title “Confucianism in Vietnam” (Volume 8, Issue 2), it featured noteworthy contributions from Vietnamese scholars, many of whom had not previously published in English (e.g., Nguyen Tuan-Cuong 2020; Tran 2020). This issue, presenting novel insights and theoretical nuances previously unknown in Western academia, was made possible by the guest editor Professor Tho Ngoc Nguyen, who also contributed an article (Nguyen Tho Ngoc 2020).

A significant publication addressing the Confucian revival in Taiwan was the special issue “Taiwanese Philosophy and the Preservation of Chinese Philosophical Traditions”, released in the third issue of the same volume in September 2020 (Vol. 8 No. 3). Notably, this issue included three articles specifically devoted to the pivotal figures of the second generation of Taiwanese Modern New Confucianism: Mou Zongsan, Xu Fuguan, and Tang Junyi (see Sernelj 2020b; Huang 2020; Van den Stock 2020).

Moreover, the Department of Asian Studies at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, the publisher of this journal, has also produced several edited volumes focused on the study of modern and contemporary Confucianism in China and East Asia. The first, titled *Contemporary East Asia and the Confucian Revival*, was published in 2015 by Cambridge Scholars Press and edited by Jana Rošker and Nataša Visočnik. The second, edited by Jana Rošker and Barbara Pihler Ciglič in 2016, bears the title *Confucius and Globalization: Ancient and Contemporary Confucian Discourses*, and was released by Ljubljana University Press as a special issue of the journal *Ars & Humanitas*.

Two Research Projects Focused Exclusively on the Confucian Revival

The inaugural Slovenian research project addressing the theme of the Confucian revival received approval from the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange in 2012, as documented on their official website (see <https://as.ff.uni-lj.si/raziskovanje/raziskovalni-projekti/taiwanese-modern-confucians-and-their-philosophical-contribution>). Helmed by project director Jana S. Rošker, this endeavour bore the title “Taiwanese Modern Confucians and their Philosophical Contribution to Asian Modernization” and lasted for three years, from June 2012 to August 2015.

From the fruits of this research project emerged two edited volumes (see Rošker and Vampelj Suhadolnik 2013; Rošker 2015), in addition to numerous original scientific articles and chapters within monographs. The second year of the project’s progression (June 2013–July 2014) witnessed the publication of these significant contributions (see Rošker 2013a; 2013b; 2014a; 2014b; Sernelj 2013; 2014). Furthermore, the research yielded two scholarly monographs in the Slovene language. The first one presented an analysis of the works produced by philosophers of the second generation of Modern Confucians (Rošker 2013c), while the second focused on Confucian political philosophy, and particularly theories concerning the Confucian state (Rošker 2014c).

In the project’s third and final year (July 2014–August 2015), the project leader published seven papers exploring various facets of the Confucian revival in China and Taiwan in prominent international journals (Rošker 2014d-I; Greif and Rošker 2014). Notably, two of these papers (Greif and Rošker 2014; Rošker 2014d) explored topics related to Korean Confucianism.

The subsequent research project received funding from the Slovene National Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS), as noted on their official website (see <https://as.ff.uni-lj.si/raziskovanje/raziskovalni-projekti/confucian-revival-and-theoretical-foundations-chinese>). Titled “The Confucian Revival and the Theoretical Foundations of Chinese Modernization”, this initiative spanned three years, from July 2014 to July 2017. The project’s most significant scholarly achievement manifested in a highly influential scientific monograph on Modern New Confucian philosophers, authored by the project leader and published by the Chinese University Press in Hong Kong (see Rošker 2016a). Within the framework of this project, the project leader also contributed eight original academic articles addressing various issues within Modern New Confucian philosophy (Rošker 2015; 2016a–f; 2017a; 2017 b).

The project researcher Téa Sernelj made especially valuable contributions to the results, particularly focusing on various aspects of Xu Fuguan, a pivotal figure in the second generation of Modern New Confucianism in Taiwan (e.g., 2017a; 2017 b).

The Research Program Asian Languages and Cultures, Other Research Projects, Dissertations and Translations

Several members of the Asian Languages and Cultures Research Program Group (P6-0243) have also addressed various issues related to Confucian revival in China and other East Asian regions. Most of these texts were written in Slovenian (Motoh 2016; 2017; Vampelj Suhadolnik 2016; Visočnik 2016; Culiberg 2016; Pihler Ciglič 2016), but two of them were also written in English (Culiberg 2015; Visočnik 2015). In this context, it is important to highlight the work of Barbara Pihler Ciglič (2016), as it presents an unknown area of research on the Confucian revival in Portuguese, particularly in Brazil.

Two dissertations completed in the PhD program of the same department also addressed the topic of Confucian revival (Vidmar 2017; Sernelj 2018a).

The department has also published two translations from this field. One is Huang Chun-chie's book on the spread and transformation of Confucianism outside China in other East Asian and Sinic regions (Huang 2016), and the other is an essay by André Bueno that presents the Confucian revival from a Latin American perspective (Bueno 2016).

A third research project from this research area, successfully solicited by members of the same department, did not deal exclusively with the phenomenon of Confucian rebirth. It was funded by the Chiang Chink-kuo Foundation and titled "Modern and Contemporary Taiwanese Philosophy" (see <https://as.ff.uni-lj.si/raziskovanje/raziskovalni-projekti/modern-and-contemporary-taiwanese-philosophy>), and thus included research on other Sinophone philosophical traditions. However, since the second generation of Modern New Confucian thinkers lived and worked predominantly in Taiwan, much of the research output of this project was also related to this current, which is one of the most important intellectual movements of the modern and contemporary Confucian Revival. The project lasted three years, from 2018 to 2021.

In the context of this project, researchers have explored the broader geopolitical dimensions of contemporary Confucian studies. Noteworthy contributions include Marko Ogrizek's meticulous analysis of contemporary Japanese and East

Asian interpretations of Japanese Confucianism and its impact on Japanese society and culture (Ogrizek 2019; 2020; 2021). Tea Sernelj primarily focused on modern Confucian aesthetics (Sernelj 2020b; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2022) but also played a vital role in introducing the general characteristics and historical evolution of Modern New Confucianism, particularly regarding the second generation (Sernelj 2018b; 2019a, b). She further enriched the project with two academic monographs published in Slovene and English (Sernelj 2020a; 2021c).

In contrast, project leader Jana S. Rošker published five academic monographs during the project's duration, although none were directly or exclusively focused on the Confucian revival. Nevertheless, her numerous articles and chapters in edited volumes addressed this topic (Rošker 2019a; 2019b; 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2021a-e).

Following this project, the research team embarked on a new project centred on Chinese humanism, moving beyond the confines of the Confucian revival. Despite this shift in focus, team members continued to contribute to the field of modern and contemporary Confucianism during the three-year project duration (2021–2023) (Sernelj 2023; Rošker 2022a; 2022b).

Research Background

The research team members operated on the premise that the Confucian revival constitutes a highly compelling and profoundly significant theoretical discourse across China and various regions within the Sinic sphere. Comprehending modern and contemporary Confucianism is, therefore, instrumental in gaining insight into Chinese society and several other East Asian and Sinic cultures.

In the 21st century, East Asian societies are redrawing the map of progress: the centre of economic, if not political, power is shifting from the Euro-American to the Asian region. This shift confronts us with many problems, related to transformations of material and ideal paradigms that not only define the development of Asian societies as such, but also strongly influence international relations on a global level. Strategic solutions for these problems need to consider broader perspectives in the context of particular cultural backgrounds. Such perspectives are not limited to economic and ecological issues, but include the political and social functions of ideologies and culturally conditioned values, representing the axial epistemological grounds which the most characteristic and enduring institutions of these societies rest upon.

One of the recent and central theoretical concerns in China (and, in fact, in the entire East Asian region) is related to various developmental trends of the Confucian revival, which form the main subject of the Slovenian research on this

broader issue. This intellectual revival is one of the most important reversals in modern Chinese history, and manifests itself in the philosophical stream of Modern Confucianism, one of the most significant currents that form the new Chinese ideologies of modernization. This stream of thought mainly developed during the 20th century in Taiwan and Hong Kong, but also gained widespread popularity in most of the other East Asian societies that were traditionally influenced by Confucian thought, as in, for example Japan and South Korea.

In the early 1980s, Modern Confucianism also began to reappear in China as one of the most important ideological concerns. This phenomenon is very much worth examining for what it can tell us about our times—and as one of the most important philosophical legacies in the contemporary globalized societies.

The current is defined by a search for synthesis between Western and traditional Chinese thought, aiming to elaborate a system of ideas and values suitable to resolve some of the many social and political problems of the modern, globalized world. The central research questions of the proposed project are thus not only focused upon the main Modern Confucian philosophical approaches, ideas and methods, as the research also aimed to illuminate the political, social and ideological backgrounds of the so-called Confucian revival on the one hand, and its inherent connection to the theoretical foundations of Chinese modernity on the other.

Based upon Weber's argument that the Protestant ethic was extremely useful in promoting the rise and spread of modernization, it is worth trying to critically examine the so called post-Confucian hypothesis, which has emerged in China on recent decades, and according to which societies based upon the Confucian ethic may in many ways be superior to the West in the pursuit of industrialization, affluence and modernization. Weber also wrote extensively on China, concluding that its traditions were deeply uncongenial to modernization. In order to clarify the question as to whether such a Eurocentric view of modernity is still valid or not, the investigations carried out by the team of the Department of Asian studies, aimed to investigate the above mentioned presuppositions, following the hypothesis, according to which modernization represents a complex process of social transitions which includes both universal and culturally conditioned elements.

It was thus also important to analyse the question of whether such an East Asian model is really capable of generating a nonindividualistic (i.e., communitarian) version of modernity. The verification of this hypothesis has indeed proven that the universally presupposed relation between modernity and individualism which has previously been seen by international modernization theories as "inevitable" or "internal" was, in fact, nothing more than an outcome of specific Western historical paradigms.

Theoretical Framework

Hypothesis: The Cultural Conditions of Modernity

The research team has operated under the hypothesis that modernity is not universal but encompasses culturally conditioned elements that may differ from one society to another.

An important consequence of the present transnationalization of capital may be that, for the first time in history, the modern mode of production appears as an authentically global form, separated from its historically specific origins in Europe. Hence, the narrative of capitalism is no longer a narrative of the history of Europe. For the first time, non-European capitalist societies are making their own claims for the history of modernization. Due to the fact that little is known in Western theory about Chinese streams of thought which treat these problems, the project has investigated the Modern Confucian modernization theory, focusing on its interpolation in the methodological and theoretical framework of global contemporary discourses on modernization. The works written by the adherents of the Modern Confucian current, which represented the main primary material of the research, reflect the special relationship that has been mainly elaborated in the specific circumstances of modern Chinese societies (China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore), namely the relation between the new Confucian cultures and the rapid emergence of a superindustrial economy. The research team has investigated the abovementioned relationship through the lens of the presupposed cultural determination of modernization processes.

Central Concepts

The members of the project team have analysed the principle works of the leading theoreticians of Modern New Confucianism who attempted to reconcile “Western” and “traditional Chinese” values, in order to create a theoretical model of modernization that would not be confused or equated with “Westernization”. Given that Modern Confucians viewed modernization primarily as a rationalization of the world, they explored their own tradition for authentic concepts comparable to the two Western paradigms essential for modernization, i.e. the concepts of subjectivity, and of reason and rationality. Taking this as its point of departure, the project members have investigated the central values of Confucianism, and interpreted them in Chinese and Taiwanese contexts, two different sociopolitical arenas, in order to evaluate their impact upon prevailing contemporary ideologies. Among other issues, the team has also examined the axiological differences

within modern East Asian societies, and focused on Modern Confucian treatments of epistemological and ethical concepts that can serve as a foundation for a “Chinese” modernization theory. Of particular importance in this regard are the notions of the moral self, unlimited heartmind and intellectual intuition. On this basis, the research has provided a systematic and coherent examination of the contents, axiological innovations and social significance of Modern Confucianism.

The Analysis of the Relationship between Ideological, Economic and Political Factors

The researchers have also examined the main elements that enable the amalgamation of traditional Chinese values into the framework of (post-)capitalistic ideologies and axiological contexts. The new value systems developed by the Modern Confucian movement are designed to ensure economic efficiency while also preserving political stability. The social order was historically dominated by state doctrines which focused on hierarchical and formalistic social structures. The current demand for the coexistence of social stability (assumed to be possible only within a capitalist mode of production), with the “democratization” of society, is inherently paradoxical. In the studies carried out by the members of the research team, this ambivalence is contextualized within a set of issues related to the economic and cultural transition, which are determined by diverse social phenomena emerging from the gap between “tradition” and “modernity”. The team has shown that when evaluating Modern Confucian attempts at establishing a Chinese philosophical base for modernization, we need to assess them within the context of questions linked to “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1995). We need to consider to what extent the philosophical “traditions” are based upon historic assumptions, and to what extent they are merely produced due to the (ideological and political) demands of the current period.

Problem Identification

The research has followed the above-mentioned hypothesis about the cultural conditionality of modernization. This hypothesis has been investigated through the lens of the Confucian revival that manifests itself in the work of Modern Confucians, who have tried to reveal some of their reservoir of values and knowledge, which can undoubtedly enrich our assumptions as regards the differences in traditions and modernities. However, the researchers did not forget the fact that we live in a period which is not defined merely by attempts to revive various

traditions, but also by attempts to harmonize them with the needs of the dominant economic, political and axiological structures found in the globalizing world. The affirmation of modernity as a palette of living styles and clashing values forms an unquestionable assumption of almost all modern Confucian discourses.

While Maoist historiography relegated Confucianism to the past, most Western modernization theories also implied the necessity of abandoning Confucianism if China were ever to develop a dynamic modern society. Marx and other classical theorists of modernity assumed the imperviousness of traditional Chinese culture to modernization. Based upon Max Weber's argument that the Protestant ethic was extremely useful in promoting the rise and spread of modernization, it was thus sensible to critically examine a notion that has gradually emerged in the last two decades in East Asia—that societies based on the Confucian ethic may in many ways be superior to the West in the pursuit of industrialization, affluence and modernization. In doing so, the team considered the fact that Weber also wrote extensively on China and India, concluding that Asian cultural and philosophical or religious traditions were deeply uncongenial to modernization. This supposition was also further investigated and the research findings have clearly shown that such a Westerncentred perspective on modernity is not valid.

Methodology and Main Objectives

A basic premise of the research was that Western epistemology represents only one of many different models of human comprehension. The research has thus followed the main methodological principles of transcultural research, taking into account the incommensurability of diversely (culturally) conditioned paradigms, or theoretical frameworks deriving from diversely formed discourses of different cultural and linguistic environments. The methods applied sought to synthesize perspectives, knowledge, skills, and epistemologies, in order to facilitate the study of a topic which, while intrinsically coherent, cannot be adequately understood from a single perspective. Within the broader scope of intercultural humanities, the studies of the research team have thus been structured in an interdisciplinary fashion, and have comprised methods and forms of investigation pertaining to the following research areas:

- Sociocultural perspective: different patterns of modernization;
- Epistemology: the cultural and linguistic conditionality of comprehension;
- Chinese intellectual and institutional history: the political and ideological background of Modern Confucianism;

- Comparative philosophy: the impact of German Idealism upon modern Confucian philosophers, their elaboration of traditional paradigms and the creation of syntheses between Chinese and Western philosophies;
- Conceptual analysis: the elaboration and cultural renewal of crucial modernization concepts especially subject and reason in Asian philosophies;
- Axiology: the creation of new “Asian Values” and the Modern Confucian contribution to the “new values of the contemporary world”;
- Ideological: the impact of Modern Confucianism on new theoretical streams in East Asia and the theoretical background of the new prevailing ideology in the P. R. China, which is based upon the concept of harmony.

These areas have been investigated by experts in Sinology (and partly in Japanese studies), specialized in the fields of postcolonial studies, history, sociology and philosophy.

Since the research has raised the question of differences in values within modern Chinese societies, its results have highlighted the occupational, class and state appropriations of Confucian values, as well as the differential impact of these values on different generations and genders. The research has enabled the team members to introduce the most relevant Modern Confucian contributions to contemporary global theory to a wider academic public in the West. Although there have been a large number of books and articles on this topic published in Asia, there was previously a lack of such academic results in Western languages. Since Modern Confucian efforts to revitalize and reconstruct traditional Confucian thought can be seen as an attempt to counter the dominant ideological trends and preserve Asian cultural identity, the research has also contributed to the development of theoretical dialogues between Asia and Slovenia.

Conclusion

The findings of the research set out above show that the classical modernization model on the global level led to a situation in which the problems such a model brings are no longer merely those of the so-called “nonEuropean” societies, but also problems of EuroAmerican ones. The related research studies clearly indicate that the need to learn about “alternative modernities” represents a challenge for all EuroAmerican modernization cultures, as it has established their new borders and hence relocalizes the very concept of modernity as such.

In essence, this body of research stands as a vital catalyst for global discourse. It reaffirms the enduring significance of Confucian principles in our interconnected world, demonstrating how age-old wisdom continues to shape and enrich our understanding of the complex challenges and opportunities that confront us today. As we move forward, this research will undoubtedly remain a beacon, guiding us toward a more harmonious and enlightened global community.

The research on modern and contemporary Confucianism presented above is also important for Slovenia itself, because it not only enhances the country's academic standing, but also contributes to cultural exchange, global perspectives, cultural enrichment, and the pursuit of economic and diplomatic opportunities with East Asian nations.

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