

Rewriting the Geography of Reason

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The modern world is marked by a paradox. The values that once defined its normative horizon, such as human dignity, autonomy, critical rationality, and the moral equality of all people, are increasingly invoked as universal achievements, yet they are simultaneously challenged, hollowed out, and strategically instrumentalized in many parts of the globe, including Europe itself. The heritage of the European Enlightenment, with its insistence on the self-legislating subject and the emancipatory force of reason, is under pressure from authoritarian populisms, technocratic reductionisms, and the erosion of public spheres capable of sustaining critical debate.

In such a constellation, the reaffirmation of autonomous subjectivity is not only an academic endeavour. It is an ethical and political necessity. The defence of free subjectivity entails much more than the simple protection of individual choice; it presupposes the cultivation of reflective selfhood, moral accountability, and the courage to question inherited authorities. Yet in a world structured by global interdependence and all-embracing crises, such as ecological disasters, profit-driven economies, digital infrastructures, and transnational conflicts, no cultural region can (or should) claim exclusive custodianship over these ideals. Since today's crises are global, their resolution can only emerge from an inclusive, transcultural dialogue capable of rethinking modernity beyond Eurocentric self-descriptions, and of listening to knowledge and ideas developed in diverse historical traditions.

This special issue proceeds from precisely this conviction. Although the Enlightenment formulated a powerful articulation of autonomy, the foundations of modern subjectivity are by no means reducible to Western intellectual history. Forms of reflexive selfhood, moral self-determination, and critical agency have taken shape in multiple cultural traditions. Most prominently within Confucian traditions, but also in sustained dialogue with Daoist and Buddhist thought, as well as with their Neo-Confucian reconfigurations, East Asia developed rich conceptions of the self as ethically responsive, self-cultivating, and capable of autonomous judgment. These conceptions were far from peripheral curiosities. They informed educational ideals, the self-understandings of traditional literati, and normative visions of political order across the Sinic region for centuries. At the same time, they were repeatedly refracted through, and at times even constrained by, the

state orthodoxies that selectively restructured and misused original Confucian teachings into instruments of governance. In many historical constellations, institutionalized forms of such “state Confucianism” privileged hierarchical stability and loyalty, thereby marginalizing or suppressing the more egalitarian and self-critical strands of classical Confucian ethics. The relationship between moral philosophy and political power was therefore neither uniform nor harmonious: it oscillated between creative appropriation, strategic reinterpretation, and doctrinal reduction. Precisely this tension underscores that the resources for free and reflective subjectivity were present within the tradition, even when official structures curtailed their transformative potential.

In recent decades, the Confucian revival in East Asia has reactivated debates about the relationship between tradition and modernity. Central to these debates is the tension and interplay between individual autonomy and social embeddedness. At stake is the question of whether normativity must be grounded in externally imposed law and in the regulation of allegedly self-centred tendencies perceived as standing in structural opposition to society, as assumed in dominant liberal paradigms (Xiang 2026, 16), or whether it can emerge organically from a conception of the human being as constitutively socio-cultural. In this latter view, human moral capacities are activated and shaped through participation in shared symbolic forms. From this perspective, culture (*wen* 文) is not a secondary ornament of social life but the very medium through which human sociality becomes actual (ibid., 17), and normativity acquires binding force without coercion.

Does Confucianism reduce the individual to the performance of hierarchical roles, or does it advance a distinctive model of moral subjectivity grounded in reflective self-examination and accountable agency? Can relational conceptions of the self generate sufficient normative power to maintain critical distance from illegitimate or unjust authority? In what ways have inherited notions of self-cultivation, conscience, and moral judgment been reconfigured under the pressures of industrialization, nationalism, and globalization? *Asian Studies* has addressed these questions in a range of contributions across previous volumes.¹ The present issue, however, brings them into sharper focus by examining them systematically and from multiple methodological angles, thereby consolidating and deepening an ongoing scholarly conversation. The call for papers for this issue invited

1 See, for instance, Ambrogio (2017), Ames (2020), Angle (2024), Carleo (2020), Dessein (2017), Hmeljak Sangawa (2017), Jia (2020), Moore (2026), Nelson (2020), Ouyang (2025), Paul (2026), Tang (2024), Tao (2026), Turner (2026), and Xiang (2023), among others. Each of these contributions illuminated central aspects of the problem from distinct analytical perspectives. They certainly do not constitute a thematically unified cluster, for they have been being distributed across different volumes and frequently embedded within diverse special issues. Nevertheless, they collectively laid important groundwork for the more concentrated exploration undertaken in the present issue.

contributions that examine how free subjectivity has been conceptualized, challenged, and reconfigured in East Asian thought and practice, both historically and in contemporary contexts. Philosophical, cultural, historical, and interdisciplinary approaches were encouraged, particularly those that illuminate how Confucian traditions have shaped understandings of the individual, community, and society. Comparative inquiries placing East Asian perspectives in dialogue with other traditions were equally welcome. The resulting volume demonstrates not only the vitality of these questions, but also their urgency.

For a long time, however, the very possibility of an East Asian discourse on free subjectivity was denied within dominant strands of Western philosophy. Influential European thinkers, most prominently G.W.F. Hegel, constructed a narrative of world history in which freedom gradually unfolds from an alleged Oriental despotism toward its culmination in the modern European state. Within such teleological schemes, China and the Sinic region were depicted as lacking the structural tension between transcendent norms and immanent reality that, in this view, alone gives rise to philosophy. In Hegel's view, the "Oriental writers" have portrayed the world in a wholly irrational (Hegel 1990, 38) way. Moreover, he is convinced that such an "abstract negativity and complete dissolution, coupled with the abiding of the one [substance], is the basic characteristic of the Oriental mode of representation" (ibid., 38–39).

Such a position argued that without a personal God standing over and against the world, or, in other words, without a metaphysics of transcendence that fractures the given order, there could be no space for critical subjectivity.

This philosophical schema was reformulated in different registers throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Max Weber, for instance, translated the argument into the language of comparative sociology. In his analyses of Confucianism and Daoism, he associated China with a form of "traditionalism" and patrimonial order that, in his view, lacked the inner-worldly asceticism and rational-legal structures necessary for the emergence of modern autonomy (Weber 1951, 152–56). The absence of a transcendent, personal God and of a radical tension between divine command and worldly existence was interpreted as a deficit that inhibited the development of a fully rationalized subject.

Between and after these figures, similar assumptions resurfaced in diverse socio-philosophical constellations. Karl Marx's early writings on the "Asiatic mode of production"² (Fogel 2011, 56), although oriented toward material conditions rather than theology, reinforced the image of a stagnant and despotic East lacking dynamic self-determining agency (Marx and Engels 2022). Later, strands of

2 Although the idea was further developed in *The German Ideology*, co-authored by Marx and Engels, the fundamental theoretical schema underlying this category originated with Marx.

phenomenology and existentialism often presupposed that authentic subjectivity arises only through the drama of transcendence and contradiction characteristic of the European intellectual trajectory (Husserl 1970, 20ff). Even in 20th-century critical theory, where Hegel's legacy was critically reinterpreted, the implicit equation of philosophical reflexivity with specifically Western historical conditions frequently remained intact.³

The cumulative effect of these interpretations was the consolidation of a powerful narrative in which rational autonomy and free selfhood were treated as uniquely Western achievements, while East Asian traditions were relegated to the realm of ethical particularism, pragmatic accommodation, or pre-philosophical wisdom.

These assumptions solidified into enduring prejudices: that East Asian thought is guided by adaptive harmony rather than productive tension, by ritual accommodation rather than rational critique; that it elevates communal cohesion at the expense of individual agency; and that it lacks the logical structure, argumentative precision, and conceptual differentiation deemed necessary for genuine philosophical inquiry.

Such claims were seldom grounded in sustained and methodologically rigorous engagement with primary sources in their original linguistic and historical contexts. Instead, they relied on selective translations, second-hand reports, or abstract civilizational schemata detached from textual and institutional realities. In this way, they operated as self-validating axioms within a Eurocentric historiography of reason, reinforcing a teleological narrative that positioned European thought as both the origin and culmination of philosophical rationality, while relegating other traditions to derivative, secondary, or philosophically immature stages of intellectual development.

The groundlessness of these presumptions has been demonstrated through philosophically rigorous and philosophically systematic scholarship that proceeds from the universality of rational capacities rather than from cultural relativism. Researchers such as Chad Hansen (1983), Christoph Harbsmeier (Needham and Harbsmeier 1988), Heiner Roetz (1993), and—in a different but equally significant register—Mou Zongsan (1986), Xu Fuguan (1969), and Li Zehou (1980),

3 In Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (1966) and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (which he co-authored with Horkheimer, 1947), the genealogy of reason and its self-critique is reconstructed almost exclusively within the Greco-European trajectory. Although sharply critical of Western modernity, the capacity for dialectical self-reflection is treated as emerging from within that specific historical constellation. Similar problems occur in Jürgen Habermas' interpretation of modernity. In his famous and highly influential book *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1990) and his theory of communicative action, the normative resources for rational self-reflection are traced primarily to the European Enlightenment. While framed as universally valid, the historical narrative situates the institutionalization of reflexive reason within Western modernity.

have shown, on the basis of close textual analysis, that early classical Chinese sources articulate complex forms of argumentation, conceptual abstraction, and normative justification. Their work has made clear that debates on moral deliberation, the grounding of ethical norms, and the cultivation of responsible agency were conducted with a high degree of logical differentiation and reflexivity. What emerges from such analyses is not an alternative to reason, but a historically distinct configuration of a common human rational discourse and moral subjectivity.

Rather than an absence of reason, one finds alternative models of rationality. They are most often embedded in dialogical, situational, and praxis-oriented frameworks. The Confucian tradition, far from suppressing individuality, elaborated the idea of an inwardly grounded moral self whose authority derives from reflective engagement with inherited norms.

Moreover, scholars such as Huang Chun-chieh (2014) have shown that these conceptions did not remain confined to a single cultural sphere. They profoundly shaped intellectual developments across the broader Sinic region, influencing Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, and interacting dynamically with Buddhist, Daoist, and later Western ideas. The moral self articulated in classical and Neo-Confucian discourses was never static; it evolved in response to social transformation, political upheaval, and intercultural encounters.

At the core of many of these traditions lies a conception of subjectivity grounded in reflective inward examination. The cultivated person does not begin with the search for external remedies to political or social disorder; she first undertakes the critical rectification of her own dispositions, intentions, and judgments. Self-scrutiny is understood as the precondition for normative clarity, and inner moral orientation as the necessary basis for legitimate action in the public sphere. This introspective movement is not a withdrawal from the world but a precondition for responsible action within it. The self is understood as relationally constituted, yet precisely because it is embedded in networks of obligations, it bears the responsibility to evaluate, reinterpret, and, when necessary, transform them.

Such an understanding complicates the dichotomy between autonomy and embeddedness. Autonomy need not imply atomistic isolation; it can emerge as the capacity for reflective endorsement or critique of one's roles and relationships. Conversely, embeddedness does not automatically entail heteronomy. The Confucian moral agent is conceived as a reflexive and dynamic *continuum* of selfhood. She is neither an abstract sovereign will detached from social and historical contexts nor a merely passive carrier of inherited norms. Rather, she embodies a processual self that continuously interprets, appropriates, and, where necessary, critically revises the normative frameworks within which she is embedded. In other words, the Confucian moral agent is a self-cultivating self whose freedom unfolds through sustained and reflective engagement with normative frameworks.

Modernity—historically crystallizing in Europe and disseminated globally through colonial expansion, industrial capitalism, and scientific rationalization—constitutes a shared social stage of humanity. Its institutional forms, its constitutional orders, market economies, and mass education are no longer geographically confined. Yet the ethical and ontological foundations that can sustain these forms differ across regions. The contributions gathered in this issue trace how East Asian traditions have articulated indigenous resources for negotiating modern transformations. They reveal that modernity is not a unilinear export but a field of reinterpretation, appropriation, and creative reconfiguration.

Although the volume encompasses diverse historical periods, philosophical orientations, and methodological approaches, a common thread runs through all contributions: the insistence on free and critical subjectivity as both an ontological premise and ethical task. Whether engaging classical metaphysics, modern political thought, intercultural exchanges, or contemporary reinterpretations, the essays converge on the conviction that moral agency cannot be reduced to structural determination. Even traditions frequently labelled as conservative or hierarchically oriented disclose, when situated in their specific contexts, progressive potentials. Their emphasis on education, self-cultivation, and moral discernment can function as resources for social critique rather than instruments of conformity.

This perspective is particularly significant in light of current global challenges. Wars, ecological catastrophes, widening inequalities, and the concentration of power in economic and political elites testify to systemic failures that cannot be remedied by technical expertise alone, and still less by the mere exercise of political or economic power. They require subjects capable of critical judgment, ethical courage, and transnational solidarity. The revitalization of free subjectivity, understood as reflective, responsible, and dialogically open, thus acquires a planetary dimension.

To foster such revitalization, transcultural philosophy must move beyond the defensive posture of proving that “there is philosophy” in East Asia. The question is no longer one of mere recognition. Rather, it concerns the constructive integration of multiple intellectual lineages into a shared discourse on freedom, dignity, and justice. This entails acknowledging differences in metaphysical and cosmological presuppositions, epistemic configurations, and ethical vocabularies, while resisting their subsumption under hierarchical schemes of evaluation that are ideologically charged and historically entangled with structures of domination.

The present volume contributes to this endeavour by demonstrating that East Asian traditions contain rich and internally differentiated resources for thinking about subjectivity. They invite reconsideration of entrenched binaries: individual versus community, autonomy versus harmony, tradition versus modernity. They show that the moral self can be both socially embedded and critically autonomous;

that relational ontologies can sustain robust notions of responsibility; and that historical traditions can generate innovative responses to contemporary problems.

In a time when Enlightenment ideals are questioned from multiple directions, their renewal cannot proceed through nostalgic repetition. Instead it requires a serious, rigorous, and respectful dialogue across linguistic and historical boundaries. By situating East Asian conceptions of free subjectivity within global debates, this volume aims to widen the horizon of modernity itself.

Such widening is not a luxury. It is a necessity if humanity is to confront crises that exceed any single tradition's conceptual repertoire. The progressive courage demanded by our present moment is the courage to rethink foundations without neglecting them, to cultivate inward moral strength while engaging in outward structural transformation, and to affirm human dignity in forms that resonate across cultural divides.

Free subjectivity, understood in this expanded and dialogical sense, is by no means the possession of one "civilization". It is an unfinished project, and it needs to be shared, contested, and continuously rearticulated. This special issue offers a contribution to that ongoing task.

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