

Confucianism and Creating a Sea of Peace in Northeast Asia

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Abstract: At the end of the twentieth century, the dissolution of the Soviet Union gave credence to Francis Fukuyama's theory of 'the end of history' and this view prevailed for quite a while. However, this perspective changed after the start of the twenty-first century, with the 9/11 attacks in the United States and subsequent global terrorist attacks, making Samuel P. Huntington's theory of 'the clash of civilizations' more relevant. This article argues that the rise of China, accompanied by the revitalization of Confucianism, may offer an alternative to the 'clash of civilizations' and create a sea of peace in Northeast Asia.

Keywords: Confucianism, Northeast Asia, the end of history, the clash of civilizations, the rise of China

Introduction

In 2016, two major events occurred that took most people completely by surprise: Britain voting to exit the European Union (Brexit), and the victory of Donald Trump in the presidential election in the United States. Both events seemed to indicate that there was a trend towards the setback of globalization and the rise of economic nationalism, as well as right-wing populism. A

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critical question arose: will these events reverse the trend of globalization and significantly change the current world order, temporarily or even permanently?

In this article, the author analyzes the situation according to two theories. One is the relatively optimistic theory of ‘the end of history’ advocated by Francis Fukuyama; the other is the relatively pessimistic theory of ‘the clash of civilizations’ asserted by Samuel P. Huntington. The ‘the end of history’ theory had been prevalent during the final two decades of the twentieth century, but the 9/11 attack at the beginning of the twenty-first century and ongoing terrorist attacks have changed public opinion to a certain degree. The global financial tsunami in 2008 and the subsequent anti-globalization events, including Brexit and Trump’s victory, seem to have made ‘the clash of civilizations’ theory more credible and popular.

Is there any way to escape from the dilemma of the ‘clash of civilizations’? This article argues that the rise of China and with it, the revitalization of Confucianism may offer an alternative to the ‘clash of civilizations’.

The Emergence of the Theory of the End of History

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the communist regimes of the Eastern Bloc, including Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and Romania, collapsed one by one. The Berlin Wall came down on November 9, 1989, unifying East and West Germany; Yugoslavia was divided into Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia, etc., and the various areas became embroiled in a civil war. The Soviet Union was dissolved in December of 1991.¹ Thus, the Cold War between the Capitalist Bloc, led by the United States, and the Eastern Bloc, led by the Soviet Union, ended.

Japanese-American scholar Francis Fukuyama believes that the end of the Cold War marked the demise of communism and the final victory of Western liberal democracy. In an article entitled “The End of History?” published in 1989, Fukuyama stated, “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”² He extended his argument in a book entitled *The End of History and the Last Man* published in 1992.³

In his theory of the end of history, Fukuyama identifies on some level with Karl Marx, but basically adopts Hegel’s viewpoint of the historical development of human society, and Russian-born French philosopher, Alexandre Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel. According to Fukuyama, Hegel believes that human history has to do with the ongoing evolution of social institutions. In

1 “Revolutions of 1989”, *Wikipedia*, retrieved August 20, 2017, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolutions_of_1989>.

2 Francis Fukuyama, 1989. “The End of History?” *The National Interest*. Vol.16 (Summer), p.3.

3 Francis Fukuyama, 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: The Free Press.

the process, humans are constantly seeking the right to be recognized as equals. This desire encourages people in different generations to resist and reshape the unequal social institutions they experience. As a result, human society will go through a dialectical process of evolution until it achieves the ideal state. In the ideal state, freedom can be fully demonstrated and complete equality implemented. History will thus come to the end.

The view that human history is about the evolving of social institutions which will eventually reach the ideal state or enter a certain stage also appears in the thoughts of Marx. However, in contrast to Hegel's assertion that the dynamics of history come from the spiritual desire for equality, Marx claims that the dynamics come from the material desire for a better life. The material desire has continuously promoted innovations in the means of production, increased productivity, and changed the relationships of those involved in production. In terms of production, Marx argues that society can generally be divided into two classes: the dominant class which owns the means of production and the subordinate class which owns none. The disparity between the dominant class and the subordinate class will be intensified and bring about class struggles and social revolution. When the mode of production becomes capitalistic, the main disparity will be between the capitalists and the proletariat. After the success of the proletarian revolution, all social institutions will be communist. In a communist society, the means of production will be owned jointly by all the people rather than by a certain group, and the disparity between classes will be eliminated. In this society, people will cooperate in the production process, productivity will vastly improve and the ideal quality of life will be realized. History will thus come to an end.

Based on Hegel's doctrine, Kojève put forward his own view of 'the end of history'. Considering the ideological and ideational levels, Kojève maintains that history had already come to the end at the time of the outbreak of the French Revolution and when Napoleon Bonaparte was in power. In the French Revolution, the ultimate values of human society: freedom and equality, had already been upheld. Napoleon took the values espoused by the French Revolution to Hegel's homeland, Germany when he defeated Prussia in 1806, and freedom and equality became universal values. Since the French Revolution, therefore, all discussions of ideas and the constructions of ideology have merely been about elaborating on the ultimate values of freedom and equality. History thus has come to the end.

Using the doctrines of Hegel, Marx and Kojève, Fukuyama believes that human's historical development is a general history moving towards the institutional arrangement of liberal democracy, or a process of modernization with modernity spreading out to the whole world. The liberal democratic system is the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the final form of human government. With the collapse of the Eastern European communist regimes and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the institutional arrangement of liberal democracy, the market economy and the civilization of modernity led by the United States has prevailed. There will be no further changes in the institutional arrangement of human society. History thus comes to the end.

The Rise of the Theory of the Clash of Civilizations

Fukuyama's argument has attracted much criticism and the theory of 'the clash of civilizations' advocated by Samuel P. Huntington (Fukuyama's mentor at Harvard University) has often been cited to refute the theory of the end of history. In an article entitled "The Clash of Civilizations?" published in 1993, Huntington disagreed with Fukuyama's theory.⁴ He later expanded his theory in a book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, published in 1996.⁵

Huntington maintains that the fundamental source of conflict in the post-Cold War era will not be ideological or economic; it will have to do with cultures and will be brought about by the great divisions among humankind. In global politics, the principal conflicts will be between nations and different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics and will appear in two forms: fault-line conflicts and core-state conflicts. *Fault-line conflicts* are local: between neighboring states with different population groups or among different population groups within a country. *Core-state conflicts* are global and involve different countries. Fault-line conflicts can escalate to core-state conflicts. These conflicts may have a number of causes: relative influence or power (military or economic), discrimination against people from a different population group, intervention to protect kinsmen, or different values and culture, particularly when one group attempts to impose its values on people of a different group.

Huntington further maintains that conflict is most likely to occur between the world's major civilizations rather than between the capitalist West and the communist East (to put it simplistically), as was the case in the Cold War. The major civilizations are: the West, which comprises those countries associated with western culture and the Christian religion, which includes Western Europe, North America, Central American and South American; those countries that adhere to the Islamic faith and culture; the Sinic countries which comprise China, North and South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Vietnam; those countries that adhere to the Hindu faith, such as India, Bhutan and Nepal; the former Soviet Union and most of Eastern Europe; the Japanese civilization which is considered to be a hybrid of Confucianism and the older Altaic pattern; and the African civilization.

He gives six reasons why civilizations will clash: every civilization has at its foundation its history, language, culture, traditions, and most importantly, religion which are all deeply rooted and have developed over centuries. It is implausible to expect rapid changes. Due to improved communication, travel and information technology, the world is becoming smaller. It is possible now to instantly become aware of what is happening in other countries. Through television, news broadcasts and social media, 'civilization consciousness' has intensified the awareness of

4 Samuel P. Huntington, 1993. "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*. Vol. 72, No.3, pp.22-49.

5 Samuel P. Huntington, 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

differences and commonalities. Economic development and social change have meant that people increasingly are disengaging from their longstanding local identities and communities. Often, when people feel disconnected, religion fills the gap; religion can offer its adherents a sense of identity and encourage a level of commitment that transcends national boundaries, uniting people of different populations or nationalities. Huntington believes that the growth of civilization consciousness is enhanced by two factors: on the one hand, the West is perceived to be very powerful but on the other hand, there is a rise in a 'return-to-your-roots' phenomenon among non-Western people. Thus, the powerful West may well confront those from non-Western countries who have the desire, the will and increasingly, the resources to shape the world in non-Western ways. Certainly, cultural characteristics and differences are less mutable and hence less easily compromised and resolved than political and economic ones, but economic regionalism is increasing. Successful economic regionalism will reinforce civilization consciousness, but may only succeed when it is rooted in a common civilization.⁶

According to Huntington, in the future, the central axis of world politics will tend to entail the conflict between Western and non-Western civilizations. Non-Western countries have three options available: they can attempt to isolate themselves to preserve their own values and protect themselves from Western invasion; they can accept Western values, or they can try to balance Western power with modernization, that is, they can develop economic and military power and cooperate with other non-Western countries to stand against the West while still preserving their own values and institutions.

With the developing international power of non-Western civilizations, the West may realize that it needs to develop a better understanding of other civilizations' cultures. In this case, Western civilization will cease to be regarded as universal, and different civilizations will learn to coexist and unite to shape the future world. However, a more negative scenario may prevail: the clash of civilizations may become more intense, especially between the Islamic and Western civilizations. There are historic resentments between these two world views, but also additional factors that would certainly contribute to a conflict between other religions, especially Christianity and Islam: both are missionary religions and seek the conversion of others; both are universal or all-or-nothing religions in the sense that both believe that only theirs is the true faith; both are teleological religions, believing that their values and beliefs represent the goals and the purpose of human existence; and both perceive those who are not of their faith as violating their basic principles, and to be furthering their own pointless aims. These traits can easily lead to violent interactions.

Huntington maintains that cultural divides are difficult to bridge, and the theory of 'the end of history' is too naive. He further postulates that two factors could result in a bloody clash between the Islamic and Western civilizations: one is the Islamic Resurgence that began in the

⁶ Clash of Civilizations", *Wikipedia*, retrieved August 22, 2017, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clash_of_Civilizations>.

1970s with a demographic explosion among Muslims, and the second involves the concept of Western universalism which has to do with the belief that all civilizations should adopt Western values. This infuriates Muslim fundamentalists. After the 9/11 attacks, the United States sent troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, leading to a long war and turmoil in the Middle East. The ongoing terrorist attacks and racial conflicts around the world have encouraged an acceptance of the theory of the clash of civilizations.

Overcoming the ‘Clash of Civilizations’ with Confucianism

Will society move towards the ‘end of history’ or be trapped in the ‘clash of civilizations’? The trends shown in social changes since the late 1980s, and the state of the world since the beginning of the twenty-first century, make the theory of the ‘clash of civilizations’ more plausible than that of the ‘end of history’. It is possible to consider the situation in terms of three aspects: socioeconomic development, political systems, and racial and international relations.

Trends and Challenges of Contemporary Society

In terms of socioeconomic development, the Asian financial crisis of 1997 and the global financial crisis of 2008 indicated that globalization has resulted in increasing interconnections between countries. The concepts of ‘Japan is number one’ and the United States being an example of the ultimate in social institutional arrangements and historical evolution no longer apply. However, China’s development since the two financial crises has made the concepts of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ and ‘the Chinese model’ worth serious discussion.

It is perceived that capitalism as a system may result in a financial tsunami; because of its inherent nature, there is a worsening state of wealth distribution. Joseph E. Stiglitz strongly criticizes inequality in the United States and globalization led by American capitalism. He contends that inequality in the United States is self-perpetuating due to the vast amount of political power the wealthy hold, enabling them to control legislative and regulatory activity. Politics have shaped the market in ways that advantage the wealthiest one percent of Americans at the expense of the other 99 percent.⁷ Furthermore, because globalization has lacked the necessary governance mechanisms, inequality in terms of economic growth between developed and developing countries, as well as within developing countries, has increased and is now a serious problem. This situation means that developing countries find it very difficult to experience economic growth.⁸

As well as slow economic growth, the problem of inequality has worsened in the twenty-first century. This can be noticed indifferent countries, different classes, and from generation to generation: people from the poorer sectors and younger people in many countries are

⁷ Joseph E. Stiglitz, 2012. *The Price of Inequality*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.

⁸ Joseph E. Stiglitz, 2006. *Making Globalization Work*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.

experiencing great anxiety and anger. Resentment of the wealthy is pervasive. Policymakers are facing the challenges of extreme populism, radical nationalism, and economic issues becoming political ideology. If they cannot offer convincing arguments and policies, the situation often tends to escalate.

With regard to political systems, although the collapse of the Eastern European communist regimes and the dissolution of the Soviet Union made the theory of the ‘end of history’ (advocated by Fukuyama) popular for a while, the process of democratization has not been easy either in the former socialist bloc or in the ranks of developing countries. Fukuyama expresses a high degree of confidence in American style liberal democracy and believes that the institutional arrangements of other countries will come close to that of the United States sooner or later. But by sending troops to Iraq, President George W. Bush found out that even if liberal democracy is desirable, it needs the support of social conditions. Without such support, the institutional systems of liberal democracy will merely repeat the same mistakes that lead to political decay.⁹

Fukuyama has subsequently reexamined the theory of the ‘end of history’ and modified his argument. In his recent work, Fukuyama identifies three pillars of the modern state: an effective state, rule of law, and democratic accountability.¹⁰ Of these, Fukuyama emphasizes the importance of an effective state. He takes modern China as an example of an effective state with competent governance. In contrast, the United States is experiencing political decay as indicated by a declining quality of bureaucracy, dysfunctional political divides and government structures being captured by special interests rather than considering the wider public good. In other words, American liberal democracy is no longer the ultimate example for the other countries to follow. There is still a long way to go before we reach the ‘end of history’.

With reference to racial and international relations, the result of globalization has been that different countries and groups have closer and more frequent interactions. Despite this, according to Huntington, conflicts and wars between races and nations have not decreased. On September 11, 2001, the Islamic terrorist group al-Qaeda launched four coordinated terrorist attacks on the United States. These included hijacking two airplanes and flying them into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York. This attack led to a sharp increase in conflict between the United States and Islamic forces. The United States then formed an alliance with Britain and other countries and sent troops to Afghanistan and Iraq. The conflict continued for nearly ten years and is still on-going to a degree. The situation in the Middle East is still unstable.¹¹ In

9 Francis Fukuyama, 2006. *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

10 Francis Fukuyama, 2012. *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Francis Fukuyama, 2014. *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

11 War in Afghanistan (2001-present)”, *Wikipedia*, retrieved August 24, 2017, <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_in_Afghanistan\(2001-present\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_in_Afghanistan(2001-present))>; “Iraq War”, *Wikipedia*, retrieved August 24, 2017, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraq_War>.

addition, after the outbreak of the “Arab Spring” at the end of 2010, refugees have been flocking into Europe from the Middle East and North Africa, resulting in some conflict between those from Islamic countries and those in Western countries. The terrorist attacks by the Islamic State have caused panic and stirred up right-wing populism against immigrants in many European countries.¹² Britain’s exit from the European Union and Trump’s victory in the American presidential election have resulted in trade protectionism in Europe and the United States, and nationalist sentiment around the world.

In addition to the clash between Islamic and Western civilizations, the rise of China and the corresponding attempts to contain China by the United States constitute another fault line in the ‘clash of civilizations’. Feeling a threat to the hegemony of the United States by China’s rapid rise, former president Barack Obama initiated the strategies of ‘Pivot to Asia’ and the ‘Asia Pacific Rebalance’ the intention of which was to form an alliance with the countries in East Asia to contain the rise of China. Donald Trump claimed that he would not follow Obama’s foreign policy. However, the strategy of containing the rise of China has not changed significantly and has perhaps even intensified in terms of trade since Trump assumed office. Moreover, Trump’s white supremacist utterances have caused tension in racial relations and increased the divisions in American society. All these factors seem to support Huntington’s theory over Fukuyama’s.

The Essence and Teaching of Confucianism

According to Huntington, China’s Confucian heritage, with its emphasis on authority, order, hierarchy, and the supremacy of the collective over the individual is the antithesis of democratic values and is in sharp contrast with the American cultural heritage that emphasizes freedom, equality, democracy, and individualism.¹³ Therefore, the rise of China will result in a clash with the United States because of the social and cultural differences. Nonetheless, for those who really understand the essence of Confucianism, Huntington’s view would seem to be rather superficial. The core value of Confucianism is renai (仁愛), or loving kindness, specifically to others. The teaching of Confucianism has the three characteristics which would be helpful in mitigating any clash of civilizations.

The first characteristic is its open and inclusive view of religions. Confucianism is a set of secular life teachings rather than a monotheistic belief in one true God. Because its attitude to the supernatural is “Confucius did not speak of strange events, violence, riots and the supernatural” (子不語怪、力、亂、神), Confucianism easily coexists with different religions such as Taoism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity and it is why there are virtually no religious wars in Chinese history. In contrast to the clash of civilizations after the Cold War, mainly due to the beliefs of different religions, the open and inclusive view of Confucianism is conducive to resolving religious conflicts.

12 “Arab Spring”, *Wikipedia*, retrieved August 24, 2017, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab_Spring>.

13 Huntington, 1996, p.238.

The second characteristic has to do with the attitude of “do unto others; do not impose on others”(己所不欲 , 勿施於人). This famous quote expresses the basic view of Confucianism about the way of individuals, groups, and countries should get along with others. Western civilization proposes that there are universal values that need to be accepted by all. In this, cultural differences, backgrounds, spaces and degrees of development are not respected. The Confucian attitude to people and life is one of gentleness and humility. Applying this attitude to international relations, foreign policy from a Confucian perspective would resist interfering in another country’s internal affairs. This is different from the United States’ strategy that tends to put pressure on other countries in the name of human rights or sends troops to other countries in the name of anti-terrorism. The Confucian way of dealing with the differences between civilizations would reduce the likelihood of clashes.

The third characteristic is the cosmopolitan spirit of the “kingly way” (王道), or ruling over the world with benevolence. Confucianism’s core value of renai of was extended by Mencius (孟子) to “behaving as a king and implementing a policy of benevolence” (行王道 , 施仁政). Mencius believed that a ruler who could behave as a king and implement a policy of benevolence would be able to overcome all challenges and win global support. Dr. Sun Yat-sen, having inherited the teaching of Confucius, applied it to his principle of nationalism: when China becomes strong, it has to be the guardian of the kingly way rather than the aggressor with overbearing hegemony. According to Sun, in the pursuit of its own wealth accumulation and power, China should associate with the countries that treat each other as equals, help the weak, and aid the needy to move towards the realm of global harmony together.

Foreign policy derived from Confucianism with its characteristics, as mentioned above, will not impose its own values or institutional structures on other countries. Instead, the Confucian way of managing foreign relations is to seek mutual trust and understanding. According to the Confucian philosophy of harmony in diversity (和而不同), the ‘clash of civilizations’ is neither destined to happen nor impossible to overcome.

Conclusion

On September 24, 2014, an international conference to commemorate the 2,565th anniversary of Confucius’ birth was held in Beijing. At the opening ceremony, the president of the PRC, Xi Jinping, gave a speech during which he stated that the Chinese nation had always been peace-loving, an attitude deeply rooted in Confucianism. Since ancient times, Chinese people had always valued ideas proclaiming peace, such as “co-operate and seek harmony with all nations”, “associating with the benevolent and befriending neighbors is a precious virtue of the state”, “within the four seas, all men are brothers”, “a distant relative is not as helpful as a close neighbor”, “neighbors wish each other well, just as loved ones do”, and “a warlike state dies eventually, no matter how big it is”. The love of peace is firmly embedded in the spiritual beliefs of the Chinese nation, and undergirds China’s attitude to international relations.

Furthermore, Xi said: “The ideals and struggles as well as the values and spiritual world of the Chinese people have always been deeply rooted in the fertile soil of the fine Chinese traditional culture, and have constantly advanced and been renewed in step with the times”, and “We have consciously absorbed sustenance from the teachings of Confucius and added it to those of Sun Yat-sen.”¹⁴

The author believes that the rise of China accompanied by the revitalization of Confucianism may offer an alternative to the ‘clash of civilizations’. If China can apply the teaching of Confucianism to its foreign relations and how it handles international affairs, it will be able to make significant contributions to a peaceful world order. Since China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan all share the heritage of Confucianism, we should try to work together to make a sea of peace in Northeast Asia.

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¹⁴ “Xi Jinping’s Speech in commemoration of the 2,565th Anniversary of Confucius’ Birth”, *China-US Focus*, retrieved August 26, 2017, <<http://library.chinausfocus.com/article-1534.html>>.