****

***The 4th Asan Memorial Lecture***

**“Confucian Humanism in the 21st Century:**

**China’s Quest for a New Cultural Identity”**

**-Tu Weiming-**

**Speaker**

**Dr. Tu Weiming** is a Lifelong Professor of Philosophy, Director of the [Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies at Peking University](http://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Institute-for-Advanced-Humanistic-Studies-at-Peking-University/165137716836692?v=wall), and Research Professor and Senior Fellow of the [Asia Center at Harvard University](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~asiactr/index.htm). He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Dr. Tu was the former Harvard-Yenching Professor of Chinese History and Philosophy and of Confucian Studies at Harvard University. It was the first time that a professorship was named for Confucian Studies in the English-speaking world. He has also served as the Director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute, Chair of the Committee on the Study of Religion, and Chair of the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University.

Dr. Tu is a leading expert on Confucianism and Neo-confucianism. A proponent of the idea of “Cultural China,” which attempts to understand what it means to be Chinese within the world context, Dr. Tu is currently interpreting Confucian ethics as a spiritual resource for the emerging global community.

**Lecture Summary**

Confucianism emerged as a “spiritual humanism” in the 6th century B. C., but Confucius as a cultural transmitter deliberately traced his intellectual genealogy to Duke of Zhou, indeed the Sages-Kings of Yao and Shun. Thus, as some Korea scholars claimed that the origins of the Confucian tradition should be dated as early as the time of Jizi, the putative forefather of Korean civilization. In any case, I would suggest that the First Epoch of Confucianism continued to the end of the Eastern Han dynasty in the third century. In this epoch, Confucianism evolved from a local culture of Qufu to become the main stream of Chinese thought. After the introduction of Buddhism from India and Central Asia roughly in the first century B. C., even though Confucian ethics and politics persisted, the Chinese spiritual landscape was dominated by Buddhism and, to a lesser degree, Daoist religion.

In the Middle Period beginning in the 10th century, Confucianism was revitalized by Chinese literati such as Han Yu, Hu Yuan, Cheng Hao, and Zhu Xi. It again became the paramount spiritual as well as intellectual, social and political force in China. Furthermore, it also spread to Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. Thus, it is noted, by scholars such as Shimada Kenji, as a manifestation of “East Asian spirituality” as well. Understandably, to this date, East Asian is often characterized as the Confucian cultural area. However, primarily because of the impact of the Western powers in the mid-19th century, the Confucian international order disintegrated and the Confucian tradition was relegated to the status of the feudal past. It was only *historically* significant and no longer a historically *significant* cultural resource for China’s modernization. Worse, it was widely condemned as habits of the heart that were detrimental to China’s desperate attempt to confront the imperialism and colonialism of Western powers. For more than a century, it seemed that the fate of Confucian China was sealed. In its place, the Enlightenment mentality of the modern West became the prevailing ideology in the 20th century China.

However, in the 1970s, with the rise of Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons (Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore), Confucian ethics was widely recognized by Western and Asian scholars in developmental economics, political culture, comparative philosophy, religious studies, and intellectual history as the functional equivalent of the Protestant ethic. This interpretive stance, under the influence of Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, was briefly challenged by the financial crisis of the 1990s, but the general claim that Confucian ethics has been one of the contributory factors for the economic vibrancy of East Asia (the only region that attained modernity by comprehensive, if not wholesale, learning from the West) seems to have been substantiated. Since the late 1970s when the economic rise of China has been recognized worldwide, the revival of the Confucian tradition is readily visible throughout Cultural China. The Third Epoch of Confucian humanism is no longer merely an imagined possibility.

I would argue that one of the most significant aspects of this revival is the Confucian contribution to China’s quest for a new cultural identity. My presentation is a “personal” observation that the fruitful interaction among Liberalism, Socialism, and Confucianism will shape China’s self-understanding and profoundly influence the constitution of a new cultural identity in China. As for the prospect for Cultural China, the fusion of the ideological orientations of the three symbolic universes, Greater China, the Chinese Diaspora, and the concerned foreign communities, will help forge a cultural identity that is open, pluralistic, and self-reflexive. This is certainly wishful thinking, but it can very well be the aspiration of increasingly vocal and influential Chinese public intellectuals. It may take the People’s Republic of China a long while to transform itself into a full-fledged civil society. But arguably the best practice of an ever-expanding public sphere prompted by responsible “public reasoning” may facilitate what is fashionably stated as “democracy with Chinese characteristics.”

In the global context, the “Confucian renaissance” in Cultural China has far-reaching implications for East Asia. It may be the most wholesome way to attain the “East Asian commonwealth” (*Dongya gongtongti*). Furthermore, it can also serve as a standard of inspiration for the newly emerging world order based upon the spirit of our time: dialogue among civilizations. Confucian humanism as a creative response to ecological, feminist, communitarian, and pluralistic consciousnesses is well positioned to offer an ecumenical way toward a culture of peace. It may also help to lay the foundation of a common ground for interreligious communication. Nevertheless, the positive outcome that I have outlined above is predicated on a fundamental restructuring of the current Chinese polity and society. Otherwise, the great promise is no more than an unrealized figment of the mind.