

Research Note 【研究討論】

DOI: 10.6163/tjeas.2016.13(2)127

Modern Confucianism and
the Intercultural Exchange
between China and Central-Eastern Europe
現代儒學及中國與中東歐之間的跨文化交流

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Keywords: China and the Central-East European Area, Confucian Revival,
Contemporary Social Values, Transition, Tradition and Modernity

關鍵詞：中國與中歐及東歐地區、儒學復興、當代社會價值觀、過渡、傳統與現代性

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Abstract

The topical processes of modern identity-making within Central and Eastern Europe on the one hand, and China, on the other, are fundamentally results of different forms of cultural and economic transformation, conflict and harmonious social adjustments. The aim of the present paper is to expose the need to appreciate the role of culture not only as a background to, but also as a constitutive part of, economic dynamics. Thus, it assumes that any comparative analysis of the rise of transitional societies must deal with questions connected to respective value systems, i.e. of moral education, political authority, social solidarity, and religious beliefs.

It is not coincidental that the recent rapid development of the P.R. China owes much to such crucial traditional virtues as social hierarchy, self-discipline, social harmony, strong families and a respect for education. In this context, the present article examines the revival of Confucian tradition in China. According to previous research results, traditional East European values were in many aspects closer to such virtues than traditional Western values, which focused heavily on the idea of individual autonomy. This paper follows the presumption that the Central and Eastern Europe could function as a cultural and axiological bridge between China and Western Europe.

摘要

中歐、東歐及中國現代認同建構的過程，基本上是兩種不同形式的文化與經濟變遷、衝突、與和諧社會適應的結果。本文的目的是揭露我們為何必須把文化視為經濟動力學的基本要素，而不只是一種背景而已。因此，筆者以為，對於過渡型社會興起的比較式分析，必須處理與相對的價值體系有關的問題，例如道德教育、政治權威、社會團結與宗教信仰。

中華人民共和國近年之所以能快速發展，與其社會階層制度、自律、社會和諧、堅固的家庭、以及對教育的尊重等重要傳統美德，有密不可分的關係。本文將在這種社會脈絡下，檢視儒學傳統在中國的復興。依照過去的研究成果，傳統東歐的價值觀在許多方面比較接近儒家的美德，而非以個人自主性為主的傳統西方價值觀。因此，依照這個假設，中歐與東歐地區可作為中國與歐洲之間的文化與價值論橋樑。

Introduction

Since the fall of the Iron curtain, Central and Eastern Europe (hereinafter CEE) has been re-defined by combined effects of complex political and social processes. During the same period, the economic reform has raised China into the center of the global economic stage. Based on current trends, in the near future, China may become the largest economy in the world. Contemporary China represents a model of exceptional diversity in social structures, organizational forms, strategies, and practices. In addition, it is experiencing a profound revival of certain institutional rules,¹ social norms, business strategies and cultural values, emerging from specific Chinese tradition.

It is not coincidental that the recent rapid development of the P.R. China owes much to such crucial traditional virtues as social hierarchy, self-discipline, social harmony, strong families and a respect for education.² According to previous research results,³ traditional East European values were in many aspects closer to such virtues than traditional Western values, which focused heavily on the idea of individual autonomy.⁴

The confrontation and understanding of the so-called “foreign cultures” is linked to issues of various languages, traditions, histories and socializations. The

¹ William Theodore de Bary, *Asian Values and Human Rights: A Confucian Communitarian Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp 18.

² Roger T. Ames, “New Confucianism: A Native Response to Western Philosophy,” in Shiping Hua (ed.), *Chinese Political Culture 1989-2000* (London/New York: M.E. Sharp, 2001), pp. 80.

³ For instance, Loreta Poškaitė, “Filial Piety (xiao 孝) for the Contemporary and Global World,” *Asian studies* Vol. 2, No. 1 (2014), pp. 99-114. Jana S. Rošker, 2006.

⁴ Jana S. Rošker, “Cultural Conditionality of Comprehension: The Perception of Autonomy in China,” in Qing Cao and Hailong Tian (eds.), *Reinventing Identities: The Poetics of Language Use in Contemporary China* (Tianjin: Nankai daxue chuban she, 2012), pp. 50.

interpretations of the various aspects and elements of “non-European” cultures are linked to the geographic, political and economic positions of both “the interpreting” and “interpreted” subjects. Intercultural research always includes translation issues; of course this does not mean merely a translation between languages, but also translation between various discourses, which include interpretations of individual text and speech structures, categories, concepts and values that differ in different socio-cultural contexts.⁵ We often encounter a discrepancy between the etymological and functional understanding of a certain expression; in certain cases the same expression may even be understood completely differently on the level of the general social context in the two societies.

The main motif for the comparative research between Chinese and CEE cultures does not lie merely in the recognition of “different axiological models”, but in the relativization of the value systems and perception structures. In order for this relativization to take place, we need an insight into the conceptual structures and connections among concrete historic, economic, political and cultural systems that form the material and thought base of both cultural areas in question.

Proceeding from the notion of the so-called “vacuum of values” that determines the alienation which defines modern post-capitalist societies in the global world, it is also important to analyze the question whether the Confucian revival taking place in contemporary China is really on its way to generate a non-individualistic version of post-modernity; because if so, then the geopolitical area of Central and Eastern Europe could represent a linkage between new post-capitalist European values and the revival of certain Chinese traditional ethical concepts that could serve as a suitable system for the elimination of the

5 Zhang Dainian 張岱年, *Zhongguo zhexue shi fangfalun fa fan* [An Introduction of the methodology of the History of Chinese Philosophy] 《中國哲學史方法論發凡》 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003), pp.145.

abovementioned axiological vacuum. The present paper introduces this revival through the lens of some crucial works published by the main representatives of the contemporary Modern Confucian philosophy.

China and the CEE Area: Between Tradition and Modernity

In the 21st century, the evolving central values of the new, globalized societies have to be fitted into new political contexts. This revaluation is the most important condition for consolidation of new ideologies to form a political basis for the changing societies and their new economies. On the one hand, these “new” value-systems should assure economic efficiency, and on the other, preserve political stability. China and the CEE countries today are routinely confronted with specific issues of modernization within the framework of a new, globally structured economic and political trend. These issues naturally afford a rethinking of traditional values: the requirements of the new era, which have been determined by changes in elementary social conditions, demand their revaluation.⁶

A number of Sinologists and comparative philosophers recently argue over the relevance of Confucian ethics for contemporary European world, in accordance with the recent rebirth of studies of Confucianism, its reinterpretation as a teaching with universal appeal, and the currently topical interest in comparative axiological studies.

In her study on the significance of traditional Confucian virtue of filial piety (孝) for Eastern European youth, Loreta Poškaitė exposes that such Confucian

⁶ Tang Junyi 唐君毅, *Zhongxi zhexue sixiangzhi bijiao lunji* [*A Collection of Essays on Comparing Chinese and Western Thought*] 《中西哲學思想之比較論集》 (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1991), pp 32.

virtues (and the values they imply) are in many ways not only understandable, but also most relevant for CEE students in Chinese studies, because in certain ways it helps them to reconnect with values rooted in their own cultural tradition, and to overcome the contemporary axiological crisis prevailing in all transitional societies.⁷ Poškaitė points out that A.T. Nuyen from the National University of Singapore stresses upon the fact that the central Confucian value of filial piety (孝) is important to the contemporary global ethics and culture, if it is understood as a respect for tradition.⁸ Nuyen argues that in this sense it could even be used “to correct the ‘traditional’ Chinese family structure that has been the subject of social critics.”⁹ However, the most extensive argument over the relevance of filial ethics for contemporary global world were presented by H. Rosemont and R.T. Ames in the Introduction of their translation of 《孝經》 (*The Classical Book of Filial Piety*). They believe that this classical text can help Europeans to realize the cost of prioritizing values of Western ethics such as individual freedom, independence, equality, privacy and individual rights and entitlements. Poškaite’s findings clearly shows that for the CEE Sinology students, the ethics of filial piety seem neither exotic nor strange or too specific, if comprehended from the comparative perspective of Chinese culture.¹⁰ Even when discussing out of the context of respect and honoring one’s obligations towards ruler and state, it is something that could be easily understood by most people around the world, as a concept in its basic sense—reverence for the parents, which is present in all cultures, although different in extent and forms of expression. On the other hand, some of the students consider it as one of the best means to explain a specific behavior of Chinese people, for example, not daring to oppose or resist elderly. They see such behavior as a sharp contrast with the Western cult of “individualism.”

7 Loreta Poškaitė, “Filial Piety (xiao 孝) for the Contemporary and Global World,” pp. 105.

8 A. T. Nuyen, “Filial Piety as Respect for Tradition,” in Alan K. K. Chan and Sor-hoon Tan (eds.), *Filial Piety in Chinese Thought and Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004), pp. 210.

9 Ibid, pp. 210-213.

10 Loreta Poškaitė, “Filial Piety (xiao 孝) for the Contemporary and Global World,” pp. 106.

The result of a cross-cultural comparative inquiry in China, Slovenia and Austria about the comprehension and use of the concept “autonomy” (自律) showed that the understanding of the notion of “law” as a criterion to regulate human interaction in a society cannot be separated from the political system in which it arises and functions.¹¹

Thus, if we want to find out about the meaning of autonomy discourse in a particular society, we have to first investigate its historic institutional context. Among others, this investigation has clearly shown that the individual self-understanding in China and CEE respectively, is, in both cases, not strictly established as an individualistic consciousness, but as a consciousness of individualization. In sharp contrast to individualism, which is based on positive valuations of supposedly typical characteristics of an individual in opposition to collective considerations and duties, individualization can be seen as a process of identification of an individual with the cosmic, and also with the social unity. Here, it is important to understand that this kind of self-reflection or self-understanding of an individual, despite the importance it projects on the consideration of the social backgrounds, must not be mixed up with the principle of collectivism. In opposition to individualism, the latter has to be seen as a mere bipolar idealized node. Both are parts of a mechanistic ideology based on an abstract dichotomy between the concepts of individual and society. Thus, in the context of individualization, the special characteristics of an individual cannot be understood as something alien to general social unity. To the contrary, they possess a singular special relation of emergence and/or differentiation of functions and abilities that respectively is/are universal in nature. This kind of understanding implies a complementary relationship of an individual and society.¹² However, when we explicitly try to raise the question about which of the two elements is of primary importance, the answer is predictable: most of the

11 Jana S. Rošker, “Cultural Conditionality of Comprehension: The Perception of Autonomy in China,” pp. 56.

12 Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities,” *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000), pp. 29.

influential East Asian state doctrines (especially Confucianism, of course)¹³ will rank the universal before the particular, and the society before the individual. The cross-cultural inquiry has shown that similar priorities are much stronger in Eastern than in Western Europe.

In order to find a method of intercultural axiological reconciliation and to enhance the exchange and the possible cooperation between both cultures in question, an overall analysis and interpretation of such issues seem rather reasonable and significant. This implies various tasks linked to investigations in the roles and the functions of contemporary Confucian revival, which manifests itself in the intellectual current of modern Confucianism.

The Confucian Revival

The so-called Confucian revival that manifests itself in the philosophical stream of Modern Confucianism is one of the most significant elements of the new Asian ideologies of modernization.¹⁴ This stream of thought in no way constitutes a monolithic theoretical corpus, and includes a wide range of theoretical elaborations of a tradition, which, in itself, is already extremely complex and heterogeneous.

A prime consequence of the current transnationalization of capital may be that, for the first time in the history of capitalism, the capitalist mode of production appears as an authentic global abstraction, separated from its specific

¹³ For a brilliant account of the historical coherence of East Asian Confucianism, see Chun-chieh Huang, *Humanism in East Asian Confucian Context* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2009). Chun-chieh Huang, *Mencian Hermeneutics: A History of Interpretation in China* (New Jersey: Transaction publishers, 2010), pp. 9-13, and Chun-chieh Huang 黃俊傑, *Dongya ruxue shiye zhongde Xu Fuguan ji qi sixiang* 《東亞儒學視域中的許復觀及其思想》(Taipei: Taida chuban zhongxin, 2011), foreword.

¹⁴ Peter Berger, "An East Asian Development Model?," in Peter Berger and Hsin-huang Michael Hsiao (eds), *In Search of an Asian Development Model* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1988), pp. 78.

historical origins in Europe.¹⁵ This means that 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 on the history of capitalism and modernization.

As a major source of social values, Modern Confucian theory has acquired a fundamental importance amidst the proliferation of instrumental rationality in contemporary China.¹⁶ This current is distinguished by a multifaceted effort to revitalize traditional (mainly Confucian) thought by means of new influences borrowed or derived from Western systems. It defines itself as the search for a synthesis between “Western” and traditional Chinese thought, aimed at elaborating a new system of ideas and values suitable for modern, globalized societies. Modern Confucian discourses are based on the supposition that Confucian thought can be amalgamated with capitalist development.¹⁷ Its proponents also believe that a renewed form of this traditional Chinese system of philosophical and moral thought can serve as a basis for endowing modern life with ethical meaning, while providing a “spiritual salve” for the alienation which appears as an undesirable side-effect of capitalist competition and profit-seeking.

The philosophical current of Modern Confucianism (*Xin Ruxue*), while mainly developed during the last century in Taiwan and Hong Kong, also gained a widespread popularity in most other East Asian societies traditionally influenced by Confucian thought, such as Japan and South Korea. Although the Modern Confucians of the 20th century were mostly active and lived primarily in Taiwan and Hong Kong, this current also began to appear in the P.R. China, in the last two decades of the last century. It is generally acknowledged that Modern

¹⁵ Arif Dirlik, “Modernity as History: Post-Revolutionary China, Globalization and the Question of Modernity,” *Social History* Vol. 27, No. 1 (2002), pp. 30.

¹⁶ Lai Chen 陳來, *Gudai zongjiao yu lunli – ru jia sixiangde genyuan* [*Ancient Religion and Ethics – the Original Foundations of Confucian Thought*] 《古代宗教與倫理——儒家思想的根源》 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1996), pp.98.

¹⁷ Mou, Zongsan, *Zhide zhijue yu Zhongguo zhexue* [*Intuitive Reason and Chinese Philosophy*] 《智的直覺與中國哲學》 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshu guan, 1971), pp.12.

Confucianism provided the theoreticians in Mainland China with certain basic elements for the elaboration of their new ideologies, which combined neo-liberal elements in the economic sphere with traditional elements in the political one.

In general, the current forms the most influential and important stream of thought in contemporary East Asian theory and since the 1980's also represents a crucial component of the new prevailing ideologies in the P.R. China, it is defined as the search for a synthesis between Western and traditional East Asian thought, aimed at elaborating a system of ideas and values capable of resolving the social and political problems of the modern, globalized world. Thus, its political, social and ideological backgrounds and its intrinsic links with the ideological foundations of East Asian modernity might prove itself important not only for Asian, but also global societies. Modern Confucianism is namely determined by various attempts to reconcile “Western” and “traditional Chinese” values in order to elaborate a theoretical model of modernization that would not be equated with “Westernization”.

Modern Confucianism and Chinese Modernization

Since Modern Confucians see modernization primarily as a rationalization of the world, they search within their own tradition for a series of authentic concepts which could be considered as comparable to the two main Western paradigms that underpinned modernization: i.e. subjectivity, and reason or rationality.¹⁸ Based on this general premise, it is worth to analyze the central values of Confucianism, and to interpret them within the different sociopolitical contexts in order to evaluate their impact upon prevailing contemporary ideologies.¹⁹ The same holds true for the main elements that have been utilized

¹⁸ Yanming An, “Liang Shuming and Henri Bergson on Intuition: Cultural Context and the Evolution of Terms,” *Philosophy East and West* Vol. 47, No. 3 (1997), pp. 340.

¹⁹ Ming-Huei Lee 李明輝, *Der Konfuzianismus im modernen China* [Confucianism in Modern

in order to effect the amalgamation of traditional Chinese values within the framework of capitalist ideologies and axiological contexts.

The new value systems developed within this stream of thought aim at guaranteeing economic efficiency while also preserving political stability. Traditionally, stability was guaranteed by various state doctrines, which focused on hierarchic and formalistic social structures.²⁰ The current demand for a social stability, which, according to its proponents, can only be realized within a capitalist mode of production and the “democratization” of society, is inherently paradoxical. Thus, from a cultural comparative perspective, we have to situate this contradiction within the context of issues linked to present economic and cultural transition, which are determined by diverse social outgrowths emerging from the (mostly artificial) gap between “tradition” and “modernity.”

In the 20th century, the most influential theorists of Modern Confucianism were Mou Zongsan, Xu Fuguan, Tang Junyi and Fang Dongmei. The interpolation of their thoughts into the methodological and theoretical framework of contemporary theories of modernization represents an important contribution to the general understanding of questions linked to societies in transition.

Until recently, the official ideologies of the P.R. China dismissed Confucianism as an “outdated feudal tradition”, while Western modernization theories likewise stressed the need for Chinese (and Asian) societies to abandon Confucianism if they ever hoped to develop a modern society. In fact, classical Western theorists of modernity generally viewed traditional Chinese culture as incompatible with modernization. The Modern Confucian critique of such presumptions is manifesting itself in the so-called “post-Confucian hypothesis²¹”, which argues that societies based upon the Confucian ethic may, in certain

China] (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2001), pp. 12.

²⁰ Guy S. Alitto, *The Last Confucian – Liang Shuming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press 1979), pp. 29.

²¹ Mark R. Thompson, “Whatever Happened to “Asian Values”?” *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 12, No. 4 (2001), pp. 154-165.

respects, be superior to the West in terms of the pursuit of industrialization, affluence and modernization.²² Max Weber, who assigned a fundamental role to the protestant ethic in the development of modern societies, likewise concluded that traditional Asian ideologies (especially Confucianism) were profoundly unsuited or even antithetical to modernization.²³ The modern Confucians instead question this Eurocentric assumption and, through its analyses of Modern Confucian discourses, shows that modernization represents a complex process of social transitions that includes both universal and culturally conditioned elements.

In this context, it is important to investigate whether the Modern Confucian model could provide the theoretical basis for the creation of a non-individualistic form of modernity.²⁴ The contemporary research results in this field clearly show that the purported inherent relation between modernity and individualism is merely an outcome of prevailing Western discourses on modernity.

Among other issues, it is also important to examine the axiological differences within Chinese society, focusing on the Modern Confucian treatments of epistemological and ethical concepts that can serve as the foundation for a specifically “Chinese” modernization theory.²⁵ The notions of moral self (道德本心), unlimited heart-mind (無限的智心) and intellectual intuition (智的直覺) are especially important in this context.²⁶

²² Fred Dallmayr, “Tradition, Modernity, and Confucianism,” *Human Studies* Vol. 16, Issue 1-2 (1993), pp. 67.

²³ Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt and Wolfgang Schluchter, “Introduction – Paths to Early Modernities – A Comparative View,” *Daedalus* Vol. 127, No.3 (1998), pp. 20-47

²⁴ Ming-Huei Lee 李明輝, *Ruxue yu xiandai yishi* [Confucianism and Modern Consciousness] 《儒學與現代意識》 (Taipei: Wenjin chuban she, 1991), pp. 43.

²⁵ Ming-Huei Lee 李明輝, *Ru jia yu daode* 《儒家與道德》 [Confucianism and Morality] (Taipei: Lianjing, 1990), pp. 21.

²⁶ Shu-hsien Liu 劉述先, “Chaoyue yu neizai wentide zai shengsi [A renewed Thought on the Question of Transcendence and Immanence] 〈超越與內在問題的再省思〉,” in Shuxian Liu and Yuehui Lin (eds.), *Dangdai ruxue yu xifang wenhua Modern Confucianism and Western Culture* 《當代儒學與西方文化》 (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan - Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiusuo, 2005), pp. 40.

Comparative Perspectives: Future Prospects and Challenges

For Europeans, the understanding of non-European cultures is always linked to the issue of differences in language, tradition, history and socialization processes. If we want to discover certain common grounds in the scope of traditional values in China and the CEE cultures respectively, we have to follow the fundamental presupposition that Western epistemology represents only one of many different models of human comprehension.²⁷ Thus, any research in this field has to adhere to the main methodological tenets of intercultural research, and to take into account the incommensurability of paradigms conditioned by culturally heterogeneous situations (or, to put it another way, of theoretical frameworks which emerged within the diversely formed discourses of different cultural and linguistic contexts.) This methodology seeks to synthesize general perspectives, knowledge, skills, interconnections and epistemologies within the basic research setting, in order to facilitate the study of a topic which while coherent, cannot be adequately understood from a single perspective. Hence, within the broader scope of intercultural humanities, the future research in possible axiological connections between China and the CEE countries has to be structured in an interdisciplinary fashion, and to include inquiries and methods pertaining to the following research areas:

- Socio-cultural perspective: different patterns of modernization;
- Epistemology: the cultural and linguistic conditionality of comprehension;
- Intellectual history: the political and ideal background of both societies in question

²⁷ Jana S. Rošker, *Searching for the Way: Theory of Knowledge in pre-Modern and Modern China* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2008), pp.12.

- Comparative philosophy (the impact of European ideas 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 those existing in Asian philosophies which are comparable to the Western concepts of subject and reason);
- Axiology: the critical examination of new “Asian Values” and the contribution of Modern Confucian ethics to the new values of the contemporary world;
- Ideological: the impact of Modern Confucianism upon new theoretical streams in Chinese society.

The studies that have been hitherto carried out in this field can thus tell us a great deal about our present time and the evolution of traditional values within diverse contemporary societies; further research conducted through the lens of comparative perspective might furthermore reveal possibilities of new intercultural dialogue, based on various common grounds of specific Chinese and CEE axiological heritages.

Conclusion

Despite the many books and articles that have appeared in Chinese, qualified academic publications on this topic in European languages are still decidedly lacking. Since Modern Confucian efforts to revitalize and restructure traditional Confucian thought can be seen as an attempt to counter dominant ideological trends and to preserve Chinese cultural identity, the present study can

contribute to the development of theoretical dialogues between Chinese and CEE discourses.

All these findings reopen a question: if contemporary changes in economy, politics and social structure have serious impact on the revival of traditional Confucian values in contemporary China, then, in what sense and ways its principles could be acceptable and relevant to the contemporary CEE societies and cultures, in which the alienation processes are even more intense and cardinal?

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, its introduction will contribute to the development of theoretical dialogues between Asia and the Eastern Europe.²⁸ Previous research has clearly shown that Chinese modernization processes imply certain specific features that cannot be regarded as universal.²⁹ Due to the fact, that studies concerning the complex question of tradition and modernity, of continuity and change in a global context are still in a developmental stage; due to the fact that Modern Confucian discourses which represent a relevant part of these studies are still insufficiently explored by European theoreticians, the research in these issues might fill an important gap in contemporary intercultural social and philosophic studies by evaluating and improving knowledge on current intellectual transformations in transitional societies, and provide a more consistent basis for international relations between CEE and China. Such a basis will enable CEE researchers in Chinese studies to provide a systematic and coherent analysis of Modern Confucianism with new interpretations of the contents, axiological innovations and social relevance, and introduce its most

²⁸ Carsun Chang [Zhang Junmai] 張君勱, "Guojia minzhu zhengzhi yu guojia shehuizhuyi [State Democratic Politics and State Socialism] 〈國家民主政治與國家社會主義〉," *Zaisheng* 《再生》 Vol. 1, No. 3 (1932), pp. 38-39.

²⁹ Weiming Tu (ed.), *China in Transformation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1993), pp. 112.

relevant contributions to contemporary global theory to a wider academic public.

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♦ Responsible editor: Chieh-Ju Wu

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