In 1912, the Meiji Emperor of Japan died. “On the night of the Imperial Funeral,” writes the pre-eminent Japanese novelist of the era, Natsume Soseki (1867-1916), “I sat in my study and listened to the booming of the cannon. To me, it sounded like the last lament for the passing of an age.” Indeed, an age had passed, but not, as the nostalgic tone of these lines might suggest, the final days of traditional Japan. Instead, the Meiji era (1868-1912) had marked probably the most radical leap from old to new in all of history, a consciously implemented program of changing the ancient land of Japan overnight into a modern, Western-style nation-state. Economic infrastructure, political institutions, the military, educational, and medical systems all were refashioned on Western models.

Literature followed suit, with Soseki himself owing more to the nineteenth-century realist fiction of Europe than to, say, Lady Murasaki’s courtly Tale of Genji. Yet the chief character in Soseki’s masterpiece Kokoro (“The Heart of Things”), who is writing the words quoted above in the course of a suicide note to a young student who calls him “Sensei” (“Master,” “Teacher”), does see himself as caught in an unsupportable transition between a tradition in which he can no longer fully believe and a modernity to which he remains largely alien.

Others in Japan clearly chose to side with the new ways, while still others, relatively few, consciously chose to maintain a traditionalist life-style. One of these was Fukuda Kodojin (1865-1944), a painter and poet who wrote both Japanese haiku and classical Chinese poems that could have been produced centuries ago, like this one:

When the Gentleman occupies centricity,
It causes others to maintain centricity.
When the Gentleman upholds reverence,
It causes others to practice reverence.
Heaven and Earth then share the same essence,
And Sun and Moon are brilliant mirrors....

From the eighth century, Japanese writers had written in Chinese as well as in Japanese, rather like medieval Europeans writing in Latin. They revered Chinese civilization, from which they had inherited writing itself, as well as the books from which they learned of Confucianism, the “School of the Scholars” (chin. ju-chia). The “Gentleman”? (chin. chün-tzu) “Centricity”? (chin. chung) “Reverence”? (chin. ching) These are all key Confucian philosophical terms and concepts, as is the goal of man forming a harmonious trinity with Heaven and Earth. The nom-de-plume Kodojin itself means,

“Man of the Ancient Way” (chin. Tao, pron. do in Japanese), the Way in this case being the Confucian Way, a way which originated in China, but which was adopted in Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. At the very moment that Soseki’s character “Sensei” is committing suicide—partly because he cannot abide the coming transformation of Japan into something entirely different from what it once was—Kodojin is inscribing in his poetry his conviction that there are principles that do not change: centricity, reverence, participation in the transcendent.

There can be no denying that Confucianism, despite its image in much modern scholarship as a thoroughly secular system of thought, paid homage to a transcendent order—unchanging, normative, and moral in nature—expressed by the Chinese word t’ien or “Heaven.” In perhaps the world’s earliest, and certainly the world’s shortest, autobiography, Confucius himself used the word with unmistakable meaning:

The Master said: At fifteen I set my heart upon learning. At thirty, I had planted my feet firm upon the ground. At forty, I no longer suffered from perplexities. At fifty, I knew what were the biddings of Heaven. At sixty, I heard them with docile ear. At seventy, I could follow the dictates of my own heart, without overstepping the boundaries of right. (Analects of Confucius, 2:4, Trans. of Arthur Waley, slightly emended)

Although some scholars today would date this passage later than the sixth century B.C., when Confucius actually lived, it certainly captures Confucius’s grounding of his teachings not in his own creative capacity (elsewhere, he states, “I am one who transmits, and does not invent”) but rather in the transcendent order. These teachings have their source in Heaven, and they are transmitted by the sages. Confucius himself is known in Chinese tradition as the “Model Sage for Ten Thousand Ages.”

Thus, Confucius and his disciples and later followers held that there are indeed “permanent things,” to borrow the telling phrase employed to such great effect by Russell Kirk. One might almost translate the Confucian term, wu-ch’ang (“Five Norms”) as “The Five Permanent Things,” as ch’ang in Chinese means “that which subsists, that which is normative.” The Five Norms are: jen, “humane-ness;” i, “righteousness;” li, “ritual,” “ceremony,” “proper deportment,” etc.; chih, “sagacity,” “wisdom;” hsin, “trustworthiness.”

The Confucian Norms represent moral imperatives for individual human beings. But they are in turn part of what is called the “Normal/Normative Way” (ch’ang-tao) by the eleventh-century Confucian thinker Shih Chieh (1005-45). Shih was the author of an extraordinary three-part essay, A Discourse on Aberrations, in which he defines the Normal Way of Heaven as consisting in the regular movements of sun, moon, and other heavenly bodies and the orderly sequence of the four seasons, whereas eclipses and comets represent “aberrations” (kuai). By the same token, Shih goes on to argue, the congruent “Normal Way of Man” obtains when the Four Groups of society (in descending order of prestige: scholars, farmers, artisans, merchants) wear the proper garments and caps and follow the ways of...
righteousness and proper deportment. Aberrations occur when such teachings as those of Buddhism, which emphasizes the emptiness of all things, undermine the proper Way.

Shih further argues that these cosmic and human aspects find an echo in literature—that there is an orthodox Confucian literary tradition, which is undermined by decadent poetic styles such as that championed by a certain school of poets whose work had recently become fashionable. In the mind of such a classical Confucian thinker as Shih, order in the cosmos, in human moral deportment, and in the expression of these in literature, is normative; disorder and decadence in all of them are aberrational. Heaven, Earth, and Man are inextricably interconnected; thus the moral law is in fact the natural law of the cosmos.

How close are these ideas to the American conservatism of our day? Of course, we must distinguish at this historical moment among at least three conservatisms: the traditionalist conservatism represented by Kirk, and derived by him from Burke; the so-called “neoconservatism;” and libertarianism. Of these three, the last, although increasingly influential in the electoral politics of both major American parties, is in fact culturally and socially anti-conservative. Kirk warned true conservatives against libertarians, whom he called “chirping sectaries.” Neoconservatism, especially influential in the media, seems to be dedicated to the proposition that conservatives are upholders of such abstract conceptions as “democracy” and “human rights.” Neoconservatism would thus appear to be a species of liberalism, at least on the philosophical level. Again, it was Kirk who warned in various of his writings, almost prophetically, against transforming “democracy” into an ideology, a kind of secular pseudo-religion. In neither of these modes of contemporary conservatism does one discern any real similarity to Confucianism. Both are in fact hostile, or at least suspicious, of the Confucian strains that remain in Asian societies.

But in the Burkean idea of the “cake of custom” as developed by Kirk—that is to say, in the anti-ideological conservatism which strives to conserve what has been received, understanding that the ultimate source of tradition transcends the merely human—we do find a remarkable parallel. So also in the idea of “making it new” (a phrase garnered from Confucius by Ezra Pound) only after very careful consideration. Further similarities are striking:

- The existence of transcendent truth, linked to, and normative for, the human sphere.
- The essentially moral nature of human society: virtue and order as the ideal goals of human striving.
- The essentially moral nature of literature, art, and scholarship. The arts and humanities echo or reflect the moral tone of society as a whole, and conversely exert a critical influence upon it.
- The necessity for elevating “centricity” above eccentricity. Not that the latter cannot be valued, but it ought never to displace the former.
- The social order is grounded in personal moral cultivation. According to the text known as Ta-hsüeh, “The Great Learning,” attributed to one of the immediate disciples of Confucius, “Those [rulers] in antiquity who wished to make manifest brilliant virtue in the world first brought order to their states. Wishing to do this, they first regulated their own families. Wishing to do this, they first cultivated their own persons. Wish-
ing to do this, they started by correcting their own hearts...” This imperative was not only for the elite; the Ming-dynasty thinker Wang Ken (1483-1541), drawing on the writings of a disciple of Confucius, asserted that “even the illiterate man or illiterate woman can participate” in the moral Way.

One might be tempted to respond: well and good, Confucianism has conservative elements. But isn’t it, in a sense, too conservative? In comparison with American conservatism, would it not be found excessively wedded to an overbearing governmental order, as well as insufficiently appreciative of personal freedom? But then, one would need to define “freedom.” So much of post-Enlightenment discourse is based on abstractions such as this that we tend to overlook the fact that they are abstractions, lacking in content until carefully defined.

A Chinese of, say, the eleventh century was certainly not free to vote for the emperor, any more than an Englishman or Frenchman of the eleventh century were free to vote for their kings. But the Chinese understood perfectly well what it meant to have an overly intrusive government, usually manifest in the levying of excessive taxes. Oppressive taxation was a measure derived from the pragmatist “Legalist” School of Chinese thought—Fa-chia, “The School of Laws”—which was always in tension, not to say conflict, with the Confucian tradition. In fact, the Confucian scholars were in principle suspicious of excessive reliance on statutes and policies in regulating the social realm. That is why a writer like Mei Yao-ch’en (1002-1060)—whose closest friend, the Confucian statesman and thinker Ou-yang Hsiu (1007-1072), initiated the great Neo-Confucian revival of the Sung Dynasty that would eventually spread to Korea and Japan—could capture for us the following remarkably realistic sketch of an impoverished riverside village, ending with a cry that will echo in the hearts of all conservatives:

A Little Village

On the broad River Huai, dotted with islets, a village suddenly appears:
Gateways here are bramble hedges, broken and full of gaps.
Scrawny chickens cluck at their mates as they peck for food;
Old men with no robes to wear hold grandchildren in their arms.
Birds perch on the frayed hawsers of simple skiffs;
The river eats at withered mulberries, exposing the gnarled roots.
—That’s how they live in this village.
How wrong to register the population in the emperor’s tax-books!

And how counter-intuitive for a modern Western reader to realize that this eleventh-century Confucianist is protesting at all, let alone against excessive taxation! But such a theme is a fairly common one, and Confucius himself urged his disciples to “Read the Odes [classic poems of antiquity], as you can use them...to express grievances.” Precisely because of the recognition that there is something above the emperor—namely, Heaven—Confucianism was able to countenance and even encourage protest against unjust or immoral practices, betrayals of the cosmic order.

How was it, then, that modern Western scholars came to the misconception that Confucianism is merely “social” (as opposed to personal) and “secular” (as opposed to having a transcendent or even spiritual dimension)? The answer is that we have unthinkingly adopted a depiction of Confucianism that was deliberately—and very cleverly—crafted by Voltaire and the philosophes to validate their argument that it is possible to have a harmonious civil society without recourse to religion. The philosophes real antagonist, of course, was
The Conservatism of the East by Jonathan Chaves

The Church. They wanted to be able to point to a purely secular society somewhere on earth as an example of what could be achieved without religious faith. Confucian China seemed to suit their purpose. At least, the Confucian China of their secularizing imaginations did.

But the first Western sinologists, the Jesuit missionaries to China, beginning with such great figures as Michele Ruggieri, S.J. (1543-1607), Matteo Ricci, S.J. (1552-1610), and Giulio Aleni, S.J. (1582-1649)—men who actually lived for years or decades in China, mastered both the vernacular and literary languages, and penetrated far more deeply into all aspects of Chinese civilization than Voltaire possibly could—came to realize that Confucianism would be their best ally in China. Why? Precisely because, aside from the fact that the Confucian moral code was entirely compatible with that of Christianity, these men recognized in the concept of “Heaven” an acknowledgment of a transcendent order. From this, they believed they could bridge the gap to the idea of a personal God, or *t’ien-chu* (“Lord of Heaven”), as they would come to translate the word Deus. Not that they didn’t face opposition from within the ranks of Christianity. The Dominican Father Francisco Luján (1648-1710), for example, argued that the Chinese *t’ien* was limited to the material sky, and could not therefore be taken as referring to an ontologically transcendent realm. Eventually, the “accommodationist” approach of the Jesuits was officially rejected, in Benedict XIV’s 1742 bull *Ex quo singulari*. This ironically left the field to the purely secularist interpretation of Confucianism advanced by the *philosophes* and their modern disciples.

In recent years, there has been a further attempt to claim Confucianism for *liberalism* rather than conservatism. This effort has been part of a remarkable yet largely unnoticed development in recent intellectual history: intellectuals from the great non-Western traditions (China, India, etc.), joined by their empathetic Western counterparts of the cultural Left, have been striving to embrace what they conceive to be the secular, pluralistic, “humanistic” democracy of the West, *while claiming that these principles were already foreshadowed in certain traditional philosophical concepts of the non-Western civilization in question*. Alas, this entire project is driven, at least among its Western practitioners, not by the only legitimate scholarly motive—to discover the truth—but by a kind of therapeutic empathy, or even a pseudo-religious attempt to expiate the sin of “colonialism.”

At any rate, liberals and neoconservatives today seem to agree that Western liberal democracy is the highest and best form of human society and governance, as in the well-known argument of Francis Fukuyama. This contention is based in turn on the Hegelian belief that the “goal” of history is the evolutionary achievement of an ideal form of social organization. Such a perspective utterly ignores or dismisses the “cake of custom,” the content of tradition, including everything meant by *culture* or *civilization*. One of the greatest of Confucian thinkers, Han Yü (768-824), in his classic essay *Yüan tao* (“Tracing the Origins of the Way”), definitively makes the case that *wen* (“culture,” “civilization,” etc.) in China must be the *cheng-t’ung* (“orthodox
transmission)—that is, the teachings of Heaven as received by the ancient Sages and transmitted by Confucius to his disciples and beyond. The notion of abstract principles, deracinated from actual cultural transmission or a concrete tradition, would have been anathema to such a Confucian thinker.

Needless to say, such an attitude also militated against widespread acceptance of Christianity among the scholarly elite of China later on, hence the necessity for the Jesuits to argue carefully in favor of a hierarchical arrangement by which many cultural practices (paying respects to statues of Confucius after passing the civil service examinations and the like) might continue among Christian converts in China, while at the highest level—the purely theological—the truths taught by Christianity might still be seen as universally valid.

Confucianism itself has never been monolithic. As early as the fourth to third centuries B.C., a debate emerged within Confucian ranks on the basic question of human nature, or hsing, “that which is innate in the heart-mind at birth.” The two key thinkers were the great Mencius (Meng Tzu, or Master Meng, 371-289 B.C.) and Hsün Tzu (Master Hsün, b. ca. 312 B.C.). Mencius argued that human nature is innately good, but goes bad because of a failure to cultivate the seed of goodness. This view would later become the established Confucian orthodoxy. His famous example to prove his point was that of a man who sees a child about to fall into a well: anyone in such circumstances, he claims, will have an initial feeling of compassion, a desire to help. Hsün Tzu, however, disagreed, stating in no uncertain terms that “Man’s nature is evil; goodness is the result of conscious activity.... He is born with feelings of envy and hate, and if he indulges these, they will lead him into violence and crime....” (trans. Burton Watson) The solution is lì, “ritual, good deportment,” one of the Five Norms, as we have seen: “Man must be transformed by the instructions of a teacher and guided by ritual principles, and only then will he be able to observe the dictates of courtesy and humility, obey the forms and rules of society, and achieve order.” (trans. Burton Watson) In either event, the primary purpose of all “education” in Confucianism is moral, rather than merely the transmission of functional subjects. And this, too, is a quintessentially conservative view.

Although Mencius’s view would be accepted as orthodox, Hsün Tzu would continue to be read and highly respected. And Mencius’s idea must in any event be distinguished from the notion that man once existed in a state of perfect harmony, which was only disrupted by the emergence of civilization and society—the argument, in China, of Taoist philosophers (in the Tao te ching, for example), and in the West, of Rousseau, in this regard as in so many others, one of the real fathers of the modern Left. Thus, within Confucianism there was no sanction for any project of social engineering, so dear to the hearts of liberals, by which one locates the cause of evil in the arrangement of society and sets out to eradicate evil by social transformation. The basic structure of society is accepted as ordained by Heaven. Once again, that this view is much closer to modern conservatism than it is to liberalism should be obvious.

Finally, one might raise the question: Can Confucianism be credited with the economic success of the “Asian Tigers”? Just as attempts have been made, by Wei-ming Tu, William Theodore de Bary, and others, to portray Confucianism as compatible with liberalism, there have appeared arguments to the effect that there is a “Confucian work ethic,” with similar effects to the “Protestant Work Ethic” described by Max Weber. But merchants held the lowest position of
the four traditional groups of Chinese society; Mencius famously berated King Hui of Liang for asking “What will profit my kingdom?” on the grounds that a concern for profit is unseemly. Indeed, the essence of capitalism—Adam Smith’s idea of the limitless generation of new wealth—is historically unique, and does appear to be linked in its genesis with Protestantism, as argued by Weber. Of course, capitalism, like anything else, can be imitated—once it has come into historical existence.

But then the linkage of conservatism and capitalism is itself more problematic than usually realized. In America, conservatives have of course supported capitalism against the utopian dreams of the socialist Left. Nonetheless, cultural conservatives such as G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc have been as opposed to “plutocracy”—large-scale, corporate capitalism—as they have been to socialism. Their proposed alternative, distributism, would have protected the freedom to own private property but would have kept that property small-scale. I suspect that Confucianism would have been uncomfortable with capitalism for the same reasons Chesterton and Belloc were, while certainly agreeing with them on the necessity for keeping alive the “cake of custom.”

In the end, the whole attempt to argue that the Tigers owe their economic success to Confucianism ignores the evident fact that Confucianism in no true sense exists anymore. Wei-ming Tu and others may attempt to articulate a Neo-Neo-Confucianism, modeled on Western Enlightenment thought and acceptable to modern intellectuals. But this is a far cry from the organic, unmediated Confucianism which, for all practical purposes, came to an end with the last dynasty in 1911, with Eastern intellectuals turning to Western ways of thinking, the old tradition continuing to appear only in the dreams of such a man as Fukuda Kodojin.

And so, let us give him the last word—written on New Year’s Eve, 1911:

Years and months—I grieve at flowing water,
Even hills and streams are changing form.
Floating clouds have darkened the sun in heaven,
And this Way [Tao] of mine in vain turns all obscure.
Sharply, sharply, wind shakes the trees;
Sighing, sighing snow showers the pavilion.
The grieving man lies all awake,
This cold night, beside a single guttering lamp.

2. For this, and for an excellent discussion of the whole question of terminology, see Claudia von Collani, “Francisco Luján’s ‘Annotationes’ in Giulio Aleni’s Wanwu zhenyuan,” in Tiziana Lippiello and Roman Malek, eds., “Scholar from the West:” Giulio Aleni and the Dialogue Between Christianity and China (Brescia: Fondazione Civiltà and Sankt Augustin: Monumenta Serica Institute, 1999), 302-303, and passim.