

R. TAGGART MURPHY

## EAST AND WEST

### *Geocultures and the Coronavirus*

**F**OR ALASDAIR MACINTYRE in *After Virtue*, the problems of modern moral theory emerge as ‘the product of the failure of the Enlightenment project’. On the one hand, the individual moral agent, freed from hierarchy and teleology, is now conceived as sovereign; on the other, ‘the inherited, if partially transformed, rules of morality’ have lost their older, teleological character, not to mention their ancient categorical character as expressions of divine law. Unless these rules can be found some new status—‘one which would make appeal to them rational’—then, the Scottish philosopher argues, ‘appeal to them will indeed appear as a mere instrument of individual desire and will.’<sup>1</sup>

*Failure of the Enlightenment project?* That is the clearest message of the COVID-19 catastrophe. The buckling of the direct institutional heirs of Hobbes, Locke and Montesquieu, along with the manifest collapse in the US and UK of the core functions of the state—providing for the security of persons and property—form a telling contrast today with the East Asian polities that trace their intellectual heritage to a different set of thinkers. It is not good enough to argue that the crisis is ‘unprecedented’; there are plenty of precedents—SARS, HIV, Ebola, MERS, not to mention smallpox, yellow fever and bubonic plague. Washington and London had weeks of explicit warnings about the outbreak, and an array of examples to follow, yet pleas from epidemiologists went unheard. Nothing was done to stockpile equipment and, as a result, tens of thousands of avoidable deaths will follow. Nor can one simply cry, ‘Trump! Trump!’, as if Trump had arisen from nowhere to hijack previously functional political machinery. The very fact that an ignorant boor of a carnival barker

could seize the reins of power is a damning indictment of the overall political order.

China, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore: these are the six polities juxtaposed to the US and UK as places that got it right. Though we don't know for sure, it seems likely that COVID-19 originated in Wuhan, where wild animals jammed together in wet markets, catering to an enthusiasm for eating exotic creatures, permitted a bat virus to jump via an intermediate vector to human hosts. It had happened before (*vide* SARS). But this time the virus broke out in the run-up to a Lunar New Year celebration that saw millions of Chinese travelling—domestically and internationally—and local officials determined to suppress bad news. What we know for certain is that the virus spiralled out of control before the leadership in Beijing had grasped what was happening. By then it was too late to prevent widespread infection in Wuhan's Hubei province or to confine the epidemic, which soon spread beyond the country's borders. But once the severity of the situation became apparent, the Chinese government took action, locked down the province and imposed drastic measures nationwide—measures that appear to have worked for the time being, with new cases slowed to a trickle.

The responses varied slightly in other 'successful' polities. South Korea implemented immediate and widespread testing, while Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong employed a mixture of social and border controls, testing and exhortation—so perhaps draconian shutdowns are not the only solution. To be sure, Japan is something of an outlier. At the time of writing, it has resorted neither to Beijing-style authoritarian restrictions nor to the Korean ubiquitous-testing model, and its pleas for people to observe social distancing have fallen partly on deaf ears. It's possible that Japan's social practices—bowing rather than hand-shaking, donning of masks at the first sign of a sniffle—along with 'just-enough' control measures, which include shutting down schools and prohibiting large gatherings, on top of earlier preparations to head off an anticipated flu epidemic, helped to prevent things from reaching critical mass. Perhaps numbers were suppressed in a vain attempt to keep the 2020 Olympics on-track and stop people from flooding hospitals; or Japan may be sitting on an Italy-like time bomb that has yet to explode. But for now, the country seems to count as one of the polities that suffered early exposure but managed to bring the situation under control.

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<sup>1</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame, 1981, p. 61.

Which leads to a perplexing question: what do the successful polities have in common? It is clearly not unanimity of response. Nor is it a defining political feature: China and Singapore are one-party dictatorships, China unabashedly so; Singapore has the trappings of parliamentary democracy, but woe betide anyone deemed a threat to its rulers. Hong Kong is slowly being digested by Beijing—it does have a genuine opposition, but its days are probably numbered, alas. South Korea and Taiwan, by contrast, are liberal democracies where power changes hands in relatively free elections, while Japan lies somewhere in the middle: in practice it is a one-party state, but—unlike in Singapore and China—opponents of the ruling party are not hounded into bankruptcy, while at present academics, writers and gadfly publications risk nothing more than marginalization by taking potshots at the political elite.<sup>2</sup>

Here MacIntyre's line of thinking provides a clue that might steer our analysis. To be sure, his relevance to this question is inadvertent—*After Virtue* contains only one passing reference to East Asia, in a trenchant aside on the Noh drama—but it is worth teasing out anyway. MacIntyre famously suggests that Western moral—and, by implication, political—language is grounded in a deep structure that has collapsed. Furthermore, our memory of the collapse—and with it the underlying meanings of the words and concepts we use to discuss political and moral reality—has largely vanished. We bandy about terms like 'freedom' and 'autonomy', but we have forgotten what they mean.

What does this have to do with the rapid coronavirus response in Seoul and Singapore, as opposed to the dithering in Washington and London? What makes Asia's elites, if not less prone to corruption, then at least more attuned to reality—better able to hear bad news and act on it? Among other things—and this is where digging through the unacknowledged assumptions that prop up distinct political orders can be helpful—the 'successful' East and Southeast Asian polities all share a Confucian political heritage. This doesn't mean that aspirants for membership in today's ruling elites must submit sterling examples of the Eight-Legged Essay, the requirement for entry into the mandarinat of the Song, Ming and Qing dynasties, which demonstrated mastery of the Confucian classics. Those seeking advancement in China's Ministry of Commerce spend about as much time studying Mencius and Zhu Xi as their counterparts at the Federal Reserve spend reading Aristotle and

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<sup>2</sup> See R. Taggart Murphy, 'Privilege Preserved', NLR 121, Jan–Feb 2020.

Aquinas. The Confucian institutions that could once be found in the Forbidden City or the shogun's Edo have long since been displaced by the outward trappings of a Leninist state, or in Japan's case by British parliamentary-monarchy forms, American constitutional notions and bureaucratic models derived from 19th-century continental Europe. Just as Western political structures are no longer justified through revelation and natural law, explicit links between East Asian politics and the Confucian tradition have vanished. Indeed, Confucianism was seen as a major ideological obstacle by modernizers and revolutionaries in East Asia, just as Voltaire had once commanded, 'Écrasez l'infâme!'

But the last two generations of East and Southeast Asian history clearly describe the reemergence of something like Confucian ways of thinking, albeit dressed in Western clothes. This reemergence is particularly evident in the reflexive notion that rule by an enlightened mandarin state constitutes the essence of a proper political order. The staying power of Confucian thought may have something to do with its relatively materialist character; Confucius himself is said to have dismissed metaphysical speculation—'know not life; how know death?'—in favour of a quasi-utilitarian emphasis on practical efficacy, enabling the nimble adaption of his thought to changing historical circumstances. But regardless of this, that legacy has left East and Southeast Asian polities with two features that help us to understand why they have so far coped with the unfolding crisis.

This first is a willingness to trust experts: education and training are revered; there is little counterpart to the disdain for expertise that characterizes so much of British and American political culture. A presidential candidate gaining power by deliberately fomenting popular resentment against learning and science—as happened in the US—is simply unimaginable in today's East and Southeast Asia. Polities in this region are not immune to the politics of resentment, but that resentment has not—at least since the Cultural Revolution in China—been directed against the educated. So when Chinese or Korean epidemiologists set out the realities of infection and transmission, they are more likely to be listened to. Second—and perhaps more important—elites in the Confucian tradition tend to be acutely aware that their legitimacy relies on the preservation of order, and that includes the natural order. The concept of the 'Mandate of Heaven' extends beyond the truism that mishandled catastrophes like Chernobyl and Katrina imperil elites by shedding light on

their incompetence. In this philosophy, natural disasters *in and of themselves* cast doubt on the legitimacy of existing political arrangements.

The combination of widespread respect for expertise and hypersensitivity to the threat of disorder—whether social or natural—helps us grasp the alacrity with which Beijing shut down its cities and Seoul implemented aggressive testing while cases were still minimal. It can even explain what appears to be the rather un-Confucian dithering of the Abe government in Japan. As noted, Abe may have delayed reporting the true scale of the pandemic in a bid to avoid delaying the Tokyo Olympics, which was set to be a glorious confirmation of his grip on power and unparalleled longevity in office. My assessment in NLR 121 that ‘Abe’s position remains secure’ is therefore dated. Even if the pandemic does not get out of hand—and while the numbers are still small, the trends are menacing—the postponement of the Games and the concomitant economic havoc threaten Abe more than any other event since he entered office in 2013.

Aside from the cases connected to the Diamond Princess, the cruise ship marooned for several weeks off Yokohama, most of the initial infection in Japan was concentrated on the northern island of Hokkaido. In recent decades, Hokkaido has become a popular skiing destination not only for Japanese citizens but for tens of thousands of Chinese and Koreans, some of whom brought the virus with them. The subsequent outbreak was studied by a committee of experts whose report, summarized by Japan’s Health and Welfare Ministry on 9th March, concluded that most asymptomatic carriers did not pose a high risk to others; but for reasons not fully understood, certain carriers were extremely contagious. Particularly dangerous sites for contagion, according to the experts, were ‘live houses’ (a Japanese-English term for a live-music venue, usually small and poorly ventilated), ski resorts, gymnasiums, restaurants serving buffet-style meals, mahjong parlours, enclosed tents and passenger boats with crowded cabins.<sup>3</sup> These findings appear to have informed Japan’s response. While schools and large gatherings were shut down by decree, many of these latter sites have voluntarily closed their doors. Japanese officialdom is notorious for the extra-legal, informal pressure that is often applied to achieve desired outcomes, and such pressure

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<sup>3</sup> See ‘Expert Meeting on New Coronavirus Infection Control’, [mhlw.go.jp](http://mhlw.go.jp) (in Japanese).

has undoubtedly stood in for more drastic lockdown measures over the past month.

But containment of the pandemic has relied on more than that. In an article for the *Asia Times*, Jake Adelstein observed that Japan's response 'rests on a strong foundation: world-class treatment of the disease's main symptomatic killer, pneumonia'. Adelstein, the only foreigner ever to serve as a regular reporter on the police beat at a major Japanese daily (the *Yomiuri Shimbun*), scored a journalistic coup by persuading a 'well-placed Japanese official' to give an off-the-record briefing on the government's approach. This source revealed that, instead of following the precedent set by Seoul, Japan is deliberately 'holding back data, keeping test numbers low, and doing its best to make sure that everything looks "under control"'. As the official explained:

We are in a period where containment is probably not realistic . . . We need to focus on treating the serious cases and most experts would quietly agree. If everyone is urged to get testing, then medical institutions will overflow with people who do not need to be there. This not only detracts from taking care of more critical cases, it could indirectly result in a greater health crisis . . . Ask yourself, 'What is the value of wisdom when it brings no benefit to those who are the wiser?' Most of the infected will recover on their own, thanks to their own immune systems. We need to first take care of those whose immune systems are failing them, or the health care system itself will fail.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, Japan is not eschewing successful Asian paradigms because it believes itself immune to the laws of nature, but because its dependence on shutdowns and testing is (at least in theory) diminished, thanks to world-class infrastructure for treating pneumonia, in addition to a well-functioning public health system—no one in Japan faces economic ruin from medical costs—and ingrained respect for expertise.

Nonetheless, this approach is a huge gamble, and there are already signs of panic in the briefings by Abe and Tokyo's governor, Koike Yuriko. The Japanese bureaucracy is no stranger to criminal negligence: in the mid-1980s, scores of hemophiliacs were infected with HIV thanks to blood derivatives that officials knew were tainted, a scandal that helped give birth to the rise of the Democratic Party of Japan, whose victory

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<sup>4</sup> Jake Adelstein, 'Japan's winning its quiet fight against COVID-19', *Asia Times*, 25 March 2020.

in the 2009 elections was the only serious challenge to one-party rule that Japan's elite has faced since 1960. Given this recent memory, the country's political establishment is aware that the medical and economic effects of COVID-19 could trigger political upheaval. So, like their counterparts in the other East Asian polities, they operate within the parameters that reality sets, even if the course they have chosen differs. And unlike their counterparts in Washington and London, they realize that the stakes are not just electoral victory and stock-market values, but the legitimacy of the political order on which their power depends.

*Tokyo, 31 March 2020*