

Article

Contemporary Business Practices of the Ru (Confucian) Ethic of “Three Guides and Five Constant Virtues (三綱五常)” in Asia and Beyond

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Abstract: What can remain unchanged while the Ru tradition (Confucianism) is continually passed down generationally and passed on geographically to non-Chinese Asian countries and beyond? Does the answer to this question hinted by the tradition itself, viz., the ethic of Three Guides and Five Constant Virtues, still work in contemporary society? As intrigued by these fundamental questions on Ruism, scholars have debated on the nature of the ethic and its adaptability to the contemporary world. One side of scholars condemned it as an outdated, premodern ethic of power which urges unconditional obedience to hierarchy, while another side championed it as a modern ethic which aims to strengthen the autonomy of each individual in reciprocal relationships. While presenting two cases of Ru business practice, viz., Shibusawa Eiichi in Meiji Japan and Peter Drucker in the contemporary U.S., the article treats the controversial ethic as a hypothesis, and assesses it using an empirical method to reinforce views of scholars who have furnished a favorable interpretation of the ethic.



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A key word to characterize the Ru tradition¹ in contemporary Asia and beyond is change. The ongoing change was triggered by the intrusion of Western colonialism in the 19th century, of which Asian countries under the major historical influence of Ruism (such as China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam) bore the brunt. The change is so substantial vis à vis the ultra-stable status of Ruism in the ancient imperial system of the concerned Asian countries that novelties, diversities and hopeful transformations continually emerge from the process. Nevertheless, the change has caused disruptions, estrangements and even traumatic breakdowns as well; it is needless to say that these misfortunes can befall individuals, families, and communities at large.

For instance, I grew up in the 1980s of contemporary China when China enjoyed a freer political atmosphere created by Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997)’s reform. For the generation of my parents, however, their memory of the Ru tradition was almost completely wiped out by the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). As a consequence, while being committed to relearning the tradition mainly on my own, I encountered basic and risky issues such as who to learn with, what books to read, and which interpretations to favor. Similar conundrums have been exacerbated since the 2010s when I started to pursue my PhD in religious studies in the U.S. and to intentionally utilize my expertise in the Ru tradition to interact both the English-speaking academy and the public. In the American context, I need to deal with, sometimes face-to-face, many people with a strong and overt identity among the so-called world religions. I study and compete with sometimes drastically opposite interpretations of Ru classical texts. Most importantly, I also constantly face a fundamental categorical choice of which Western terminology to employ for presenting the Ru tradition. After all, is Ruism a religion, a philosophy, a path of spirituality, a way of life or something else?² From a sociological perspective, each of these categories can be

tied to a comprehensive discourse undergirded by divergent dynamics of power within a shared social–political structure of the north Atlantic world, and hence, the decision-making on these categories can predictably generate considerable impact upon my own academic career.

The tumult and vicissitude which I have been experiencing in my Ru learning as an individual are manifested in the collective domain of scholarship as the array of widely different views among scholars who are concerned with the materialization of Ru ideas in society and politics. Two examples of such scholarship are raised as follows.

On the issue of the relationship between Ruism and the American style of liberal democracy, I once summarized that, if measured by the two criteria of how strongly one endorses liberal democracy and how far-ranging one's advocacy of Ruism is, at least five different kinds of published scholarly views can be arranged on a spectrum: at its far-left end, a scholar whole-heartedly embraces both liberal democracy and Ruism, and thinks that the values championed by both mutually enhance each other. At its middle-left point, scholars endorse liberal democracy while thinking that only part of Ruism supports it. For scholars who take a moderate position in the spectrum, they celebrate part of liberal democracy while seeing that not all of Ruism can furnish a complement to it. At the middle-right point, the major role of Ruism is thought of by scholars in terms of rectifying a variety of flaws of liberal democracy, whereas at the far-right end, scholars aver that liberal democracy and Ruism are utterly incompatible with each other, and an ideal political regime ought to employ Ruism to completely replace its alternative³.

Another issue that produces no less controversy among scholars is surrounding the so-called “post-Confucian hypothesis.” The hypothesis assumes that Ruism contains elements which, in an appropriate modern context, will encourage the development of the capitalist economy, though these elements may not have done so in premodern China because of its different (social, economic, and political) environment. Max Weber's classical study on the causal role of the Protestant ethic in the creation of capitalism, as well as his negative evaluation of the role of Ruism in impeding such a creation in ancient China, is seemingly a counterargument to the hypothesis. However, as intrigued by the notable success of industrialization and the ongoing development of the capitalistic economy in major Asian countries and areas particularly after World War II, scholars proposed new interpretations of traditional Ruist ideas (such as the so-called “vulgar Confucianism”) to support the hypothesis. Because those scholars sympathetic to the hypothesis are still struggling to pin down the exact social mechanism similar to the pastoral care in the Protestant case which helps to transmit the Ru ethic into capitalist practices on the ground, doubtful voices exist among scholars as well. Some even suggest that it was purely human economic compulsion, rather than any Ru ethic, that propelled the capitalist burgeoning in Asia. For these dissenting scholars, the post-Confucian hypothesis is equivalent to nothing less than a myth⁴.

Since there have been so many changes, diversifications and perplexities involved in the evolution of Ruism when it is passed down from one generation to another or transplanted from one area to another in this increasingly globalized contemporary world, one question which concerns me intensively is that: what remains or could remain unchanged about it? In other words, when scholars talk of the Ru tradition in varying times and places, what do they exactly talk about? For a tradition which cherishes the value of the “rectification of names” (正名) so much, is there any possibility to find a common reference to an unchanging set of ideas or facts whenever the term “Ruism” or “the Ru tradition” is mentioned regardless of contexts?

This article is my attempt to answer these interrelated questions, and my answer will unfold in five steps. Firstly, I will analyze how these questions are answered by the tradition itself. Since the answer furnished by the tradition denotes specifically the ethic of Three Guides and Five Constant Virtues (三綱五常, abbreviated as TGFV afterwards), my analysis will focus upon the philosophical implication of TGFV and how Ru thinkers formulated and continued to consolidate such an ethic in the history of ancient China.

Secondly, I will lay out the debate among contemporary scholars on how to interpret the answer, viz., the ethic of TGFV, and on how to correctly understand the overall nature of the Ru tradition while Ruism transitions to its modern forms. Thirdly, my own point of view regarding the debate will be briefly presented. Fourthly, which is also the most important, I will draw upon empirical evidence from non-Chinese countries in the contemporary period to corroborate my favored interpretation of the ethic of TGFV. This evidence refers to the development of capitalism in Japan since its Meiji Restoration as it was exemplified by the business practice of an eminent Ru merchant, Shibusawa Eiichi (1840–1931), and to the advocacy which the American business consultant and thinker, Peter Drucker (1909–2005), made of the fundamental role of the ethic of TGFV in modern business ethics in general. At the end of the article, I will conclude with remarks on the significance of the ethic of TGFV for contemporary society and on whether the ethic can still be thought of as the unchanging kernel of Ruism in anticipation of the tradition's continual globalization in the future. I will also suggest future directions of research on the same topic as this article is concerned with.

1. History and Philosophy of the Ethic of Three Guides and Five Constant Virtues

1.1. Historical Context

If we put the contemporary migration of the Ru tradition in a historical perspective, we'll find that the Ru tradition should not lack an answer to what remains unchanged about individual and communal human life despite inevitable changes in society. While distilling thousands of years' wisdom pivotal to the sustainable development of civilization before him, Kongzi (551–479 BCE, also named "Confucius" in English) broke the governmental monopoly of education in the collapsing Zhou Dynasty (circa 1100–256 BCE) and created a local private school in the state of Lu, which became a decisive historical moment for the transmission of the Ru tradition from pre-Confucian to later generations. After interacting and competing with a variety of schools of thought created around the time of Warring States (475–221 BCE) such as Daoism, Legalism, the school of Yin-Yang cosmology and others, Ruism was established by rulers in the Han Dynasty (202 BCE to 220 CE) as an official ideology around 140 BCE, and thus, was expanded from a local phenomenon to its nationwide scope. In the second millennium of imperial China, starting from late Tang Dynasty (618–907) until 1911, Ruism, while selectively incorporating ideas from other traditions such as Buddhism, Daoism and Catholicism, was revived again as the dominant thought of imperial China partly due to the consolidation of civil examination as a major institution of recruiting governmental officials. During the same period of time, Ruism did not only start to impact political regimes founded by non-Han ethnic minorities of China, but also migrated to other Asian countries to become the intellectual bedrock for the later modernization of these countries in the 19th and 20th centuries. In a word, change has never been absent from the Ru tradition which has been continually passed down generationally and passed on geographically. Interestingly enough, one most important Ru classic is named the *Classic of Change* (易經), and therefore, pondering over what remains unchanged across inexorable changes is fundamental to Ru philosophy.

So, what is the answer furnished by the Ru tradition to the above questions regarding the unchanging kernel of its own? The following conversation between Kongzi and his student Zi Zhang in the *Analects* 2.23 helps us to find a clue:

"Zi Zhang asked, 'Can we know what it will be like ten generations from now?' The Master responded, 'The Yin followed the rituals of the Xia, altering them only in ways that we know. The Zhou followed the rituals of the Yin, altering them only in ways that we know. If some dynasty succeeds the Zhou, we can know what it will be like even a hundred generations from now.'"⁵

Here, Yin, Xia and Zhou were dynasties either prior to or during the time of Kongzi, the state of which Kongzi could research relying upon literature and historical evidence. Ritual (禮), as a quintessential concept of Ru thought, refers broadly to civilizational conventions that a dynasty may utilize to structure its society, including etiquettes, ceremonies, customs,

laws, rules, institutions, etc. So, when Zi Zhang asked what could remain unchanged about human civilization in future generations, Kongzi answered that there is a basis in the ritual systems of ancient civilization, of which the Zhou Dynasty once manifested eminently, and that no matter what happens to future generations, this civilizational basis will never change.

In the Han Dynasty, Ma Rong (79–166 CE) commented upon *Analects* 2:23 to say that what Kongzi referred to as the unchanging basis of civilization is the ethic of Three Guides and Five Constant Virtues (He 1792, vol. 1), and this was also the first time that TGFV was formally phrased in the intellectual history of ancient China. According to Ma Rong, if we intend to know what human society will be like even hundreds of generations after Zhou Dynasty, here is the answer: the ethic of TGFV will still be endorsed and practiced prevalently by the people as long as human civilization still sustains itself in that remote future. “Three Guides” here refers to three major human relationships: “the ruler is the guide for subjects, the father is the guide for the son, and the husband is the guide for the wife,” whereas “Five Constant Virtues” refer to the virtues of humaneness, righteousness, ritual propriety, wisdom and trustworthiness, and I’ll analyze the philosophical implication of these terms later in more details. Ma Rong’s commentary on Kongzi’s thought and his phrase of TGFV prevailed in later Ru thinkers’ understanding of *Analects* 2:23 and, accordingly, the ethic of TGFV became an ethical foundation of East Asian civilizations under major Ruist influence in the pre-modern, imperial period of time.

The major reason why Ma Rong succeeded in distilling such a core of Ru ethics was that, before him, Ru ethics had several chances in Han Dynasty to systematize its own expression, and it was Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE)’s works (Dong 1792) and a later text titled as “A Comprehensive Exposition in White Tiger Hall” (白虎通義, compiled in 79 CE) that provided separate philosophical expositions to each of the terms “Three Guides” and “Five Constant Virtues.” Nevertheless, regarding its philosophical implication, the ethic of TGFV, while evincing the need of Han rulers to unify the vast dynasty and harmonize its increasingly complex society in reliance upon traditional Ru ethical thought, maintained a discernible continuity with the consistent emphasis that Ru thinkers before Han Dynasty had put upon reciprocal human relationship. Therefore, in order to explain what the ethic of TGFV is philosophically up to, I will briefly recount the intellectual history of Ru ethics prior to the one of TGFV in the following. Since Kongzi in *Analects* 2:23 stressed the exemplary accomplishment of the early Zhou Dynasty, my historical recount will start from Zhou Dynasty, although we do find earlier expressions of the ethic in Ru classics.

When the Duke of Zhou (who lived around 11th century BCE) admonished the newly appointed prince of Kang on governance, he says:

“... such great criminals are greatly abhorred, and how much more (detestable) are the unfilial (不孝) and unbrotherly (不友)!-as the son who does not reverently discharge his duty to his father, but greatly wounds his father’s heart, and the father who can no longer love his son, but hates him; as the younger brother who does not think of the manifest will of *Tian* (heaven or cosmos) and refuses to respect his elder brother, and the elder brother who does not think of the suffering of his junior, and is very unfriendly to his younger brother. If we who are charged with government do not treat parties who proceed to such wickedness as offenders, the constant nature given by *Tian* (天惟與我民彝) to our people will be thrown into great disorder and destroyed.” (Kong and Kong 1992, pp. 366–67)

Here, the Duke of Zhou, as the most admired ancient sage-ruler by Kongzi, thought that the foundation of desirable governance is to have the people nurture virtues to fulfill their roles in reciprocal human relationships. In the Duke of Zhou’s mind, these virtues comprise the constant human nature endowed by *Tian*, the ultimate creative origin of the universe and, hence, whether individuals can rediscover and cultivate these virtues remains crucial for manifesting the creativity of *Tian* in good governance and sustainable civilization. Similarly, when the ruler of the state of Qi in late Zhou Dynasty consulted

Kongzi about politics, Kongzi's famous answer was that for good politics, we must have "ruler as ruler, subject as subject, father as father, and son as son" (*Analects* 12.11). In other words, each individual shoulders duties towards each other necessitated by one's role in mutual relationships, and this is how one can become "humane (仁)," the cardinal virtue of humanity in Kongzi's ethical reasoning. After Kongzi, it was Mengzi (372–289 BCE, also named Mencius in English) who formulated the teaching of Five Cardinal Human Relationships (五倫): "between parents and children, there ought to be affective closeness (親); between ruler and subjects, righteousness (義); between husband and wife, distinction (別); between old and young, a proper order (序); between friends, trustworthiness (信)" (*Mengzi* 3A). This teaching of Mengzi's prepared for the further systemization of Ru ethics in later Ruism including the ethic of TGFV. For instance, we find in the chapter of *Li Yun* (禮運, unfolding of ritual propriety) of the *Book of Rites* (禮記) a more elaborate specification of the Ten Reciprocal Duties (十義) each role-player ought to perform within those five human relationships: "What are human duties? Kindness (慈) for parents, and filial devotion (孝) for children, amicability (良) for elder siblings, and discreet obedience (悌) for younger siblings; uprightness (義) for husband, and attentiveness (聽) for wife; considerateness (惠) for elders, and deference (順) for the young; humaneness (仁) for ruler, and loyalty (忠) for subjects. These are what are called human duties" (Zheng and Kong 1999, p. 689). Interestingly enough, while urging cultivation of virtues in five major human relationships, Mengzi also explained why humans can or even want to be virtuous using another teaching called "four incipient moral sprouts" (四端). In a thought experiment (*Mengzi* 2A), Mengzi envisions every ordinary human being will spontaneously have a feeling of alarm and fright when seeing a baby about to fall into a well. If one does not act upon the feeling, he or she will spontaneously have another feeling of shame and disgust. If one succeeds to act upon those feelings and saves the baby, others will look at him or her with the feeling of respect and deference. Overall, these spontaneous reactions speak to the fact that every ordinary human being has an inner moral sense of right and wrong. So, these four interconnected feelings, viz., the one of commiseration of alarm and fright, the one of shame and disgust, the one of respect and deference, and the one of right and wrong, were thought of by Mengzi as the manifestation of four character traits, viz., four virtues, which define the good part of human nature distinguishing human from non-human beings. These four virtues are humaneness, righteousness, ritual propriety and wisdom. To realize the moral excellence required by each of five cardinal human relationships, Mengzi thinks individuals are just in need of rediscovering and growing those incipient moral sprouts intrinsic to human nature and, henceforth, consistently practicing the four named virtues in varying contexts and situations.

In the development of Ru ethics in the Han Dynasty, which my above analysis of the ethic of TGFV was initially concerned with, the ethic of Three Guides was clearly a crystallization of Mengzi's teaching on five cardinal human relationships. Under the influence of the Han cosmology of Yin-Yang and Five Phases, another virtue "trustworthiness" (信) was added to Mengzi's list of four virtues to match the number of five, and this eventually led to the formulation of the ethic of Five Constant Virtues. Finally, Ma Rong invented the term TGFV, and referred it to the kernel of Ru wisdom which had been passed down by previous generations of Ru thinkers and articulated by emblematic texts of Han Ruism.

After putting the ethic of TGFV in this rich historical context, I will articulate the philosophy of TGFV in reliance upon my knowledge of the aforementioned Ru classics and thinkers. A caveat needs to be added that the following Section 1.2 is my interpretation of the ethic of TGFV which succumbs to scholars' further scrutiny, and all the remaining parts of this article can be seen as how I defend my interpretation amid the ongoing scholarly debate on the ethic which I will engage more substantially later.

1.2. Philosophy

The standard expression for the Three Guides is that “The ruler is the guide for subjects, the father is the guide for the son, and the husband is the guide for the wife (君為臣綱, 父為子綱, 夫為妻綱)” (Ban 1778, vol. 7, p. 29).

The original meaning of the Chinese character, written 綱, refers to the lead rope of a fishing net, and thus, by extension, it means guide, guideline, bond, or guiding principle, etc. In the Ru ethic of Three Guides, if X is said to be the guide (綱) for Y, it connotes, first, that the relationship of X to Y is a major human relationship, and secondly, that this X–Y relationship is, in a practical sense, hierarchical, in which X takes the major and leading role while Y takes a minor and subordinate role. Therefore, both X and Y must fulfill those distinct duties which are entailed by their differing roles.

In the ethic of TGFV, if X guides (綱) Y, it means that X must act as a moral model for Y. In other words, X has a responsibility for instructing Y about right human behavior. In the subordinate role of Y, he or she needs to show consistent deference towards and discreetly follow X as long as a normal X–Y relationship is being maintained. Even so, to what extent can an X–Y relationship be seen as “normal”? The answer depends. Classical Ru texts tell us that for the ruler–subjects relationship, if a ruler continues to act badly, a minister ought to leave the state or resign after remonstrance (諫) has failed three times (Zheng and Kong 1999, p. 150). In more extreme cases, such as when a ruler proves to be a ruthless tyrant, revolt is encouraged (Mengzi 1B). In the father–son relationship, if a father commits misdeeds and refuses to correct himself after his son has remonstrated three times, his son should “follow his father while crying and weeping” (Zheng and Kong 1999, p. 151). This implies a persistent duty of the son to remonstrate since the father–son relationship cannot be abandoned as easily as that of ruler–subjects. For the husband–wife relationship, if a husband’s wrongdoing concerns only minor issues, the wife ought to tolerate while continuing to remonstrate, but if the misbehavior is really brutal such as killing the wife’s parents and other similar deeds that violate basic principles of human relationship, the wife has the right to a divorce (Ban 1778, vol. 9, p. 53). Therefore, if there is anything that the teaching of Three Guides suggests to what an individual must be subordinated, it is only to one’s duties and to the universal moral principles that are entailed by each individual’s distinct roles within reciprocal human relationships, rather than to any capricious human person who unjustly happens to hold authority. In relation to this, another Ru thinker Xunzi (circa. 316–235 BCE) once taught us to “follow the Dao, rather than the ruler; to follow what is right, rather than the father” (Xunzi 2014, chp. 29, l.5).

The ethic of Five Constant Virtues is ontologically higher than the one which concerns Three Guides, as well as the earlier teaching on Five Cardinal Human Relationships or Ten Reciprocal Duties from which the ethic of Three Guides derives. This is because these latter terms refer to concrete human relationships and their related duties, but human society is far more complex than what these terms refer to. Even when we know how to behave ourselves within three (or five) major human relationships, we still feel the need for a higher principle that can guide all human relationships. Therefore, the purpose of the teaching of Five Constant Virtues is to provide that single principle which will apply in various situations. These Five Constant Virtues are humaneness (仁), righteousness (義), ritual-propriety (禮), wisdom (智) and trustworthiness (信). Each of these terms is explained one by one.

The basic meaning of humaneness is love. Ruism’s conception of love is all-encompassing. It can be as close by as one’s parents and children, or in its incipient form, manifested in the spontaneous reaction of commiseration when one sees a baby about to fall into a well. It can also be as distant as the feeling of unity with all beings under heaven, just as the *Book of Rites* says a person of humaneness can “treat all under heaven as one family” (Zheng and Kong 1999, p. 688).

Nevertheless, even though human love is universal, Ruism also urges its particularization, so here we are with the virtue of righteousness. The basic meaning of “righteousness” refers to something that “ought” to be done, that is, to what is right. In relation to hu-

maneness, this virtue requires human beings to love appropriately in relation to particular people and in concrete situations. For example, as human beings, our love towards our own parents and children is naturally and understandably more intense than towards other people's parents and children. However, love should not end with one's own family. We must love other people's parents and their children by extending our love outward from our own. In this regard, Ruism teaches us to correctly determine the value of one's various relationships, and thus to bring about a graded form of dynamic harmony (和) in one's dutiful response to each valuable relationship through a reasonable distribution of time and energy.

Ritual propriety refers to the audible and visible ways of human behavior, through which the requirements of the virtues of humaneness and righteousness are practiced. For example, if one has good intentions to appropriately love one's parents but does not actually practice the respectful ways for speaking, looking, hugging, or taking good care, it is hard to say that one has internalized the virtues of humaneness and righteousness in his or her person.

The virtue of wisdom balances the one of ritual propriety since it refers to knowledge. To know how to appropriately love is to possess wisdom. In line with the aforementioned Ruist idea of dynamic harmony, the central task of human wisdom is to be thought of as knowing both the facts and values of things and, thus, of understanding how things in a concrete situation can fit together based upon appropriate human reactions to that situation.

The virtue of trustworthiness is mainly about one's attitude, and thus, has no additional content compared to the other four. It requires that one sincerely practice the four aforementioned virtues, and thus really possess them.

In a word, humaneness is universal human love, righteousness refers to how to love appropriately in concrete terms, ritual propriety is the audible and visible ways of human behavior in which humaneness and righteousness are practiced, wisdom is to know how to be humane, righteous, and ritually proper using one's deep axiological reasoning, while trustworthiness urges one to be sincere in the practice of these virtues, and thus, to truly own them. Overall, the ethic of Five Constant Virtues is the principle that governs one's behaviors within various human relationships. For example, if a ruler can be humane, righteous, ritually proper, wise, and trustworthy in his or her behavior within the ruler-subjects relationship, he or she will be seen as fulfilling his or her duty of "humaneness" (仁, which means the ruler's benevolence in this context), as specified in the teaching of Ten Reciprocal Duties, and the ruler can also be acknowledged as a true ruler who is a guide to subjects as specified in the ethic of Three Guides.

Since the ethic of TGFV is explained above as embedding in the earlier tradition of Ru ethics which focused upon the cultivation of virtues for each individual in reciprocal human relationships so as to create social and cosmic harmony, I'll use the following chart (Figure 1) to explain the relationship of major virtues which have been mentioned so far so that my readers can have a more intuitive grasp of the ethic of TGFV:



Figure 1. A chart of Ruist virtues.

The relationship of virtues mentioned in Figure 1 can be understood as follows:

First, the Way of Heaven (*Tian*) (天道) appears at the top of the chart. *Tian* refers to an all-encompassing, constantly creative cosmic power. *Tian* is the transcendent in Ruism. Literally, Dao means “the way,” but when these two terms are used together, Dao takes on a special meaning: it refers to the principle that runs through the all-encompassing cosmic power. By placing dynamic harmony below The Way of *Tian*, we’re saying that dynamic harmony is the principle that runs through *Tian*. In other words, we can say that dynamic harmony is the Way of *Tian*. Because virtue (德) in Chinese can be extended to characterize the generic features of *Tian*, we can also say that dynamic harmony is a virtue of *Tian*.

The reason we can say that dynamic harmony is a virtue of *Tian* is because, as explained earlier, *Tian's* creativity is all-encompassing. Everything that has ever existed, exists now, or will ever exist is brought into being by *Tian* and every being in the universe is part of *Tian*. In other words, as created by *Tian*, everything is and becomes together, which is the basic meaning of “dynamic harmony.” If we understand this, we can see that dynamic harmony is embedded in every aspect of this constantly unfolding cosmic creation. We can also see that this all-encompassing force is neither anthropomorphic nor anthropocentric. In other words, *Tian* is not a person, nor is it exclusively focused on humans⁶. As such, humans cannot directly access *Tian* per se, but the way humans engage with *Tian* concretely is to realize dynamic harmony in human society. We do this through the virtue of humaneness. For this reason, you will see on the chart that the virtue of humaneness is the Way of Human Beings. The commitment to manifesting the cosmic harmony of *Tian* in a uniquely human, and hence, humane way speaks to both the religious and humanistic tenors of the Ru tradition.

In Kongzi's ethical reasoning, humaneness is the highest human virtue. In the most general sense, the virtue of humaneness is the manifestation of *Tian's* creativity within human nature. When we look in more detail, as explained previously, humaneness includes five different facets, each of which refers to a different dimension of humaneness: humaneness, righteousness, ritual-propiety, wisdom, and trustworthiness.

We refer to these as Five Constant Virtues. The Five Constant Virtues are a set of universal principles that govern concrete human relationships. For this reason, the lower region of the chart describes how the Ru tradition understands and describes particular human relationships.

First, the Three Guides, a Ru ethical understanding of three major human relationships. Since the philosophy of the ethic of Three Guides has been explained above, we can now try to adjust it to the contemporary context while still keeping its key commitment to the reciprocity of good human relationship. Originally, 君為臣綱 meant “the ruler is the guide of subjects.” In a modern context, however, it ought to be understood as something like “in public life, a superior is the guide of subordinates.” This refers to relationships such as those between the state and citizens or between an employer and employees. Likewise, although 父為子綱 originally meant “the father is the guide of the son,” a modern formulation would be as gender-inclusive as “parents are the guides of children.” Finally, 夫為妻綱, which originally meant “the husband is the guide of the wife,” should now be understood as “husbands and wives are the guides of each other, depending upon their different areas of expertise.” Additionally, I will revisit the issue of how to implement the ethic of TGFV in a contemporary context at the end of this article.

The ethic of Three Guides is a distillation of Mengzi's teaching about Five Cardinal Human Relationships and the ethic of Ten Reciprocal Duties in the *Book of Rites*, which appear next in the chart. The relationship of virtues in this part of the chart can be illustrated as follows: for example, you will find that in the relationship between parents and children, parents should be guided by the virtue of parental kindness (慈) and children should be guided by the virtue of filial devotion (孝). The practice of these two reciprocal duties by parents and children, respectively, will nurture the guiding virtue of affective closeness (親) taught by Mengzi in the Five Cardinal Human Relationships. This pattern of reciprocal virtues is repeated for the remaining four relationships.

When perusing this chart, we need to keep one caveat in mind which pertains to the special feature of Chinese language. First, some characters appear in this chart multiple times. This is because they represent different virtues depending on contexts. At the top of the chart, for example, humaneness appears as the singular cardinal virtue, the Way of Human Beings. In the section on the Five Constant Virtues below, however, it appears as one of the five virtues, and is taken in this context to refer to universal human love. Likewise, righteousness appears in the Five Constant Virtues as the way human beings love appropriately in various situations. When righteousness appears in the Five Cardinal Human Relationships, however, it is presented as the guiding virtue of the relationship

between the ruler and subjects and refers to the primary duty of both the ruler and subjects to act appropriately toward each other.

In a summary, this chart of Ruist virtues suggests that each individual ought to cultivate the Five Constant Virtues—which can be seen as different facets of the singular cardinal virtue, humaneness—so that we can perform our roles well in a variety of reciprocal human relationships, among which three or five can be seen as the major ones depending upon which aspect of human relationship to be emphasized in varying contexts. The ultimate goal is to create and sustain dynamic harmony in society, which is a concrete manifestation of the dynamic harmony of *Tian's* all-encompassing cosmic creative power.

2. Contemporary Debate on the Ethic of TGFV

2.1. Three Phases of the Debate

With its history and philosophy being understood as such, will the ethic of TGFV still be able to be held onto, and hence, remain “constant” (常) despite changes destined to occur while Ruism evolves to its modern forms? Or should I ask in a more ontological term, will the way of conducting reciprocal human relationships prescribed by the ethic of TGFV still work in a contemporary context? Because it has been consistently advocated by Ma Rong, Kongzi, Mengzi, and many other major Ru thinkers in the ancient history of China as having indeed such a constant role, the ethic of TGFV can also be seen as a hypothesis to substantiate while the Ru tradition transitions to its modern period.

Nevertheless, the most striking fact about the ethic of TGFV when it is considered in a contemporary situation of global Ruism is that it is precisely the nature and legitimacy of this ethic that has been under one of the fiercest scholarly debates since the old Chinese imperial regime encountered Western colonialism in the 19th century. Three phases of this debate are characterized as follows⁷:

The first phase of the debate was embodied by the so-called New Cultural Movement, May Fourth Movement and their intellectual repercussions in last century, with Chen Duxiu (1879–1942) and Chen Yinke (1890–1969) as two representative rival disputants.

As one of the most impactful thinkers and politicians in modern China, Chen Duxiu started his career as a public intellectual who denounced the ethic of TGFV. For Chen Duxiu, the ethic of TGFV is anything but good regarding ancient Chinese culture. It was thought of as essentially representing the interest of ruling classes in the political and social establishment of feudalism in imperial China. The demand that the ethic puts on inferiors, such as a subject, son or wife, to unconditionally obey their superiors, such as the ruler, father or husband, has obstructed the intellectual freedom and spiritual independence of the human individual. Chen Duxiu thought that this was the major reason why China lagged behind and had to succumb to the colonial or semi-colonial control of the advanced modern West. In a word, the ethic of TGFV, as well as the entire Ru spirituality which is emblemized by the ethic, is utterly pre-modern and must be jettisoned all together in order for China to catch up with the New Culture of modern civilization. The following quote, which was written by Chen Duxiu in 1916, spoke to the intensity of Chen's critique of the ethic:

“The doctrine of Three Guides in the Ru tradition is the ultimate origin of all ethical and political discourses. Since the ruler as the guide of the subjects, the people have become an accessory of the ruler and lost their independent and autonomous personality. Since the father as the guide of the son, sons have become an accessory of the father and lost their independent and autonomous personality. Since the husband as the guide of the wife, wives have become an accessory of the husband and lost their independent and autonomous personality. Among all the men and women under heaven who are subjects, children or wives, there is no single one of them who has been able to be independent and autonomous; and this is what the doctrine of Three Guides has led to. Other ethical terms which derive from the doctrine and are embraced as golden rules, including Loyalty, Filiality and Chastity, all belong to the morality of slaves

who subordinate themselves to others, and hence, none of them belongs to the morality of masters who extend themselves to others.” (Chen 1993, p. 172)

Partly due to the prominent role of Chen Duxiu in the New Cultural Movement and his leadership in the early Chinese communist party, this anti-Ru rhetoric targeting the ethic of TGFV had been inherited and reinforced by the party’s official ideology at least until the end of Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).⁸ Therefore, the rhetoric also becomes a chief characteristic of modern Chinese thought.

However, there was another socially less impactful, yet intellectually more refined trend of thought, viz., cultural conservatism, which endures like a hidden current of modern Chinese thought starting around the same time as the New Cultural Movement⁹. Cultural conservatives counteracted the view of Chen Duxiu’s by affirming that the backwardness of China was mainly caused by the malfunctioned social and political policies of the corrupted Qing Dynasty, rather than by the traditional value system of Ruism. Many cultural conservatives endorsed the values of “democracy” and “science” which were championed by radically Westernized intellectuals (such as Chen Duxiu) as the chief accomplishment of modern Western culture. However, they believed that ancient Chinese culture, particularly Ruism, is not only compatible with those Western values but can also bring insights to perfect Western thought. Among cultural conservatives, Chen Yinke defended the ethic of TGFV impressively to aver that the ethic sustains in a uniquely Ruist way those modern values which Chen Duxiu thought Ruism was desperately lacking.

When writing a stele inscription to commemorate the death of Wang Guowei (1877–1927), another reputable cultural conservative who committed suicide to protest the downfall of ancient Chinese culture in his time, Chen Yinke begins the inscription as follows:

“The reading and learning of scholar-officials (士) aims to emancipate their heart and will from the shackles of vulgar opinions so that truth can be discovered and spread. In this sense, if one’s thought cannot be free, one would rather like to die. (思想不自由，毋寧死耳).” (Chen 1980)

Therefore, the spirit of dying for a cultural ideal as exemplified by Wang Guowei’s suicide is eulogized by Chen Yinke as “It is only his *independent spirit and free thought* (獨立之精神，自由之思想) that survives thousands of generations. This spirit and thought is co-eval with heaven and earth, and will shine out together with the three brightness (sun, moon and stars) forever” (Chen 1980).

What remains crucial for us to understand Chen Yinke’s eulogy to Wang Guowei is that for Chen Yinke, the independent spirit and free thought of Wang Guowei’s is not only manifested by Wang’s suicide for a cultural ideal in face of adverse realities. More importantly, it is also the ideal per se that *makes* Wang Guowei’s spirit independent and thought free as an individual. The following is Chen Yinke’s further explanation of Wang Guowei’s cultural ideal:

“The definition of our Chinese culture is all summarized in the ethic of Three Guides and Six Orders which was explained in the text of ‘A Comprehensive Exposition in White Tiger Hall.’ The ethic intends to address the highest being of abstract ideals, just as what the Greek philosopher Plato referred to by ‘Eidos.’ If we talk of the guide between the ruler and subjects, even if the ruler is (as bad as) Li Yu, (loyal ministers) should hope him to become as good as Liu Xiu. If we talk of the order between friends, even if one’s friend is (as bad as) Li Ji, (a trustful friend) should wish him or her to become as good as Bao Shu. From here we know that both the Way one sacrifices for and the Goodness that one tries to accomplish (like Wang Guowei did) have a universal nature shared by all abstract ideals, and these ideals cannot be limited by any particular person or thing.” (Chen 2000, p. 12)

Two noticeable points of Chen Yinke’s quoted words need clarification. Firstly, as explained in Section 1.1, “A Comprehensive Exposition in White Tiger Hall” is a major text from where the ethic of TGFV derives. The ethic of Three Guides and Six Orders¹⁰ articu-

lated by the text is a nuanced elaboration of chief human relationships, which was clearly under the historical influence of Mengzi's teaching on Five Cardinal Human Relationships. Since he considers the ethic of Three Guides and Six Orders as what defines the cultural ideal, onto which individuals (such as Wang Guowei) are able to hold despite vicissitudes, Chen Yinke's conception of what remains unchanged about Chinese culture stands in line with Ma Rong's interpretation of Kongzi's words in *Analects* 2:23. In other words, Chen Yinke would agree with Ma Rong that the ethic of TGFV remains constant for the sustainable development of civilization, and that the ethic represents a cluster of historical ideas of Ru ethics which characterize the ideal state of reciprocal human relationship, of which I present my own interpretation in Figure 1.

Secondly, one major reason used by Chen Yinke to argue that the ethic of TGFV strengthens the independent spirit and free thought of individual is that as obligated by the moral ideals of the ethic, *loyal* ministers should firmly remonstrate against a wrong-doing ruler, and a *trustworthy* friend ought to persistently admonish their friends for their misconducts. This reason is highly understandable if using the terms I employed in Figure 1: since the highest ideal of conducting human relationships is to realize the dynamic harmony of the cosmos in a uniquely humane way which champions the co-thriving of all beings involved in an evolving civilization, individuals need to, while continually cultivating themselves for the same ideal, have an independent thought on whether their human partners in either hierarchical or egalitarian relationships are fulfilling their duties of promoting that harmony. If they are judged as failing to do so, then, to the extent that a concerned relationship is worth sustaining, an individual needs to freely and courageously remonstrate so as to transform the wrong-doing behaviors of partners in the relationship. In the sense that all humans are urged to shoulder their duties in all reciprocal relationships for the ultimate purpose of creating co-thriving dynamic harmonies, the ethic of TGFV champions the value of equality. In the sense that an individual is demanded to succumb to moral ideals which specify roles and duties in reciprocal relationships, rather than to the power of any particular person, the ethic of TGFV sustains the value of individual freedom.

Be this as it may, it is striking how contrasting Chen Duxiu's and Chen Yinke's conceptions of the ethic of TGV are! The former condemned it as primarily an ethic of power according to which a one-dimensional obligation is demanded from inferiors who ought to unconditionally and blindly obey superiors in social and political hierarchies. Nevertheless, the latter commends it as an ethic of role and duty such that even if a person has less power in a hierarchy, he or she should still try best to rectify superiors' wrongdoing as long as he or she has a moral principle to say.

With the increasingly radicalized intelligentsia after the New Cultural Movement which led to the rising of the dominant ideology of Maoist Marxism in the ruling Chinese communist party, the condemnation of the ethic of TGFV had reached almost a crashing win during the first phase of the debate in modern China. Nevertheless, entering the 21st century, the development of modern economy had been underway in the mainland of China for more than thirty years, and scholars started to reevaluate the radical anti-Ru rhetoric, and launched the second phase of the debate on the ethic of TGFV. This phase was triggered by Fang Chaohui's provocative article "Is the Ethic of Three Guide Really the Dregs?—A Reinvestigation of the History and Contemporary Relevance of the Ethic of Three Guides" (Fang 2011), and involved eminent scholars in the field of ancient Chinese thought such as Li Cunshan, Gan Chunsong, Le Guo-an, etc. Fang later organized his responses to contentions in the debate into a book titled *The Ethic of Three Guides and The Reestablishment of Order* (Fang 2014), which furnishes rich historical and philosophical evidence about the ethic in the Ru intellectual history. Fang's central thesis sustains that the Ru ethic of EGFV never supports unconditional obedience of inferiors to superiors in hierarchies and, hence, he revives Chen Yinke's interpretation of the ethic to a certain extent. In a nutshell, Fang advocates that

"The original meaning of Three Guides is never about unconditional obedience. It refers to a spirit of thinking from a holistic perspective, and thus, making

one's 'small self' act in accordance with a 'big self.' The ethic of Three Guides is an antidote devised by Kongzi to cure the division and chaos caused by wars rampant in his time; the spirit of Three Guides is still ubiquitously applicable in people's ordinary life today, and is also one of the conditions that China can build a healthy and complete democracy in the future." (Fang 2011, p. 47)

Here, the interplay of "small self" and "big self" is utilized by Fang to enunciate the commitment of the ethic of FGFV to the reciprocity of good human relationship. Using the terms I once employed to interpret Chen Yinke's thought, I'll say that the so-called guide in the ethic of Three Guides (such as ruler, father or husband) represents the inclusive interest (the "big self" in Fang's term) of the people involved in a particular relationship and, therefore, the authority of a superior in a hierarchy is urged by the ethic to be obeyed by the corresponding inferiors (the "small self" in Fang's term) if and only if the superior acts in accordance with the inclusive interest. Otherwise, individuals have a right to remonstrate and, in extreme cases, to leave or subvert the concerned relationship.

Without much room here to recount contentions in the second phase of the debate, I summarize it to have focused upon two central issues: whether the ethic of TGFV demands inferiors in social and political hierarchies to unconditionally obey the authority of superiors, and whether the ethic is integral to the Pre-Qin classical Ru ethics which is more prevalently thought of as being committed to the moral ideal of reciprocal duty. This implies that scholars may answer yes to the first question while saying no to the second and, hence, propose a rather nuanced view that the ethic of TGFV was created solely for strengthening the imperial system of ancient China and, hence, significantly deviates from the genuine Ru ethics contributed by Kongzi, Mengzi and other pre-Qin Ru thinkers¹¹. Since my own interpretation of the ethic (as stated in Section 1.2) stands in line with Chen Yinke and Fang Chaohui, I will say no to the first question and yes to the second. Nevertheless, since Fang has furnished a detailed philosophical analysis of key texts from which the ethic of TGFV is derived, as well as an elaborate historical investigation of how the ideal of reciprocal duty implied by the ethic was upheld and practiced by exemplary Ru scholars in ancient China, I would not repeat the same path as Fang to argue for my answers. Instead, I will characterize my methodology of engaging the on-going debate as an empirical one in the later Section 2.2.

The third phase of the debate on the ethic of TGFV is a manifestation of its aforementioned two phases in contemporary English scholarship. Here, we witness the same degree of polarization regarding scholars' views towards the ethic particularly on its adaptability to modern values. A few examples are given as follows.

In Zhang (2016), Zhang Ying brought together historical evidence of how dissenting high ministers in the central government of Ming Dynasty were put in jail by emperors. These high ministers firmly believed they were the most *loyal* to the emperors, or more accurately, to the ideal of emperorship, when they attempted to correct the emperors' wrongdoings and thus had to stay in jail. In Lee (2020) which studies the text of *Amplified Instructions of the Sacred Edict* (聖諭廣訓) issued by the imperial court of Qing Dynasty, Shu-shan Lee argues that it is wrong to hold the accepted view that the obligation of remonstrance in the ethic of Three Guides is merely applicable to governmental officials. Instead, Lee argues that even commoners were acknowledged by their emperor with a right to criticize, or even revolt against him if he cannot fulfill the emperor's obligation of guaranteeing the basic welfare to the people. The ethic of Three Guides as instantiated by the imperial text can therefore be seen as a Ruist version of social contract theory such that the legitimacy of government depends upon whether a sovereign and the people fulfill their duties towards each other.

Nevertheless, there are also scholars who entertain a conception of the ethic of TGFV contrary to the two examples raised, and they affirm that the obligations prescribed by the ethic are not mutual. For instance, in a highly cited article which discusses the relevance of Ruism in contemporary business ethics, Gary Kok Yew Chan says:

“From the Confucian philosophical perspective, however, the relationship between the employer-organization and the employee ought not to be treated on an equal footing. The employee is expected to show ‘filial love’ to the employer, but may not necessarily demand the same love to be shown by the employers towards them.” (Chan 2008, p. 356)

In fact, given the dominance of the anti-Ru rhetoric for most of the 20th century, the perception of Ru ethics as predominantly focusing upon obedience to authority, as well as a talk of that obedience as among “Asian values”, is still prevalent in scholarship and particularly in public discourses of the media. However, since the Ru tradition remains relatively unfamiliar to contemporary Western audiences, such discourses have not yet generated social outcomes in the West as impactful as the case of the Cultural Revolution in the mainland of China.

2.2. Method

As demonstrated by the three phases of the contemporary debate on the ethic of TGFV, the philosophical interpretation of the ethic given by scholars (such as Chen Yinke, Fang Chaohui, me and other quoted ones) who advocate it as indicative of the modern values of Ruism focuses upon the idea of “reciprocal autonomy”, or could I refer to it synonymously as “relational freedom” or “communitarian independence.” The idea intends to realize individual freedom in the form of principled human deeds in reciprocal relationships conducive to the creation of evolving harmonies in civilization. One’s subordination to authority under this intention is conditioned by whether the authority manifests the same moral principle of dynamic harmony and fulfills its reciprocal duty towards related human fellows. In contrast, for scholars (such as Chen Duxiu, Li Cunshan, Gary Kok Yew Chan, and others) who hold a different view, the ethic of TGFV demands the one-dimensional and unconditional obedience from inferiors towards superiors in hierarchical relationships and, therefore, speaks to the uneasiness, if not utter impossibility, of the Ru tradition to adapt to its modern forms. Regardless of philosophical interpretation of the ethic, both groups of scholars share a tendency to think of the ethic as representing the kernel of Ru ethics and having been constantly ratified despite dynastic changes in imperial China.

So, which side of the debate is right?

To further my argument for my preferred interpretation of the ethic of TGFV, I would not take the same philosophical and historical path as Chen Yinke and Fang Chaohui did, since I do not intend to repeat these scholars’ excellent work. Instead, I will treat the favorable interpretation of the ethic of TGFV as a hypothesis and then seek real empirical examples among the contemporary practices of the ethic to support it. The hypothesis is articulated as follows:

The Ru tradition, as historically represented by the ethic of Three Guides and Five Constant Virtues, is ethically committed to realizing the reciprocal autonomy of individual in varying human relationships for the overall purpose of creating evolving forms of dynamic harmony, and whenever and wherever the Ru tradition migrates, this ethical commitment can be held onto by Ru practitioners as a constant moral principle despite contexts and changes.

Several terms in the hypothesis needs to be clarified before I explain how I will try to substantiate the hypothesis in the best possible way. Firstly, “Ru practitioners” refer to human individuals who deliberately and consistently ground their praxis in a concerned realm of human living (which could be political, economic, academic, etc.) upon a Ru rationale. This normally means that the individuals can connect an appreciable interpretation of major Ru classics (such as the traditional Ru canon of Four Books and Five Classics) consistently to their social praxis. However, theorists can also help individuals to reflect upon their praxis in Ruist terms and, hence, as long as such reflection captures the genuine intention underlying the praxis, these individuals can also be seen as Ru practitioners. Secondly, I use the modal expression “can,” rather than “must” or simply “is,” to formulate the hypothesis because of the ideal nature of the ethic of TGFV. As

particularly indicated by Chen Yinke's interpretation with which I agree, the ethic is prescriptive concerning high moral ideals of the Ru tradition. This implies that, as long as there is one Ru practitioner who, under the specified condition of the migration of Ruism, consistently embraces the ideal of Ru ethics stated by the ethic of TGFV (viz., individual reciprocal autonomy aimed for social harmony), the hypothesis is verified to a certain extent. Of course, the more practitioners of this sort we can find, or the more impactful one selected practitioner is, the validity of the hypothesis will be further strengthened¹².

The last sentence of the above paragraph also indicates the best possible strategy to assess the hypothesis: it would be ideal for the purpose of substantiating such a hypothesis to find cases of Ru practice in a social context which is significantly different from the social-political environment where the praxis of Ru ethics was historically embedded, since one essential aspect of the hypothesis pertains to the migration of the Ru tradition. In other words, to enhance the validity of the hypothesis, it would be better to find cases of Ru praxis in a different realm of human living at a different country and in a completely new period of time vis à vis how Ru governmental officials typically made their living in imperial China.

With all these methodological points taken into consideration, I will select the following two cases as the data to substantiate the hypothesis: the development of capitalism in Japan after its Meiji Restoration, as it was exemplified by the business practice of an eminent Ru merchant, Shibusawa Eiichi (1840–1931), and the advocacy which the American business consultant and thinker, Peter Drucker (1909–2005), made of the fundamental role of the ethic of TGFV in modern business ethics in general. Japan and the U.S. are different countries from China, with the U.S. being even conceivable as a different civilization. Business practice is a different realm of human living from what Ru governmental-officials in imperial China typically pursued, and the focused timeline of these two cases is contemporary. Therefore, I deem the selection of these two cases as indicating my endeavor to find the best possible evidence to corroborate the stated hypothesis.

I call this method of mine to engage the on-going debate on the ethic of TGFV "empirical," rather than "philosophical" or "historical," because firstly, the cases I will analyze refer to observable business practices on the ground, rather than merely focusing upon philosophical interpretation of classical texts. Secondly, the time when these two cases occur, while being considered together, is unequivocally contemporary, rather than merely historical. Thirdly, which is also the most important, the overall strategy to employ empirical evidence for corroborating a hypothesis complies with the basic characteristics of the empirical method of hypothesis-deduction invented by modern natural science and currently applied in social science, and I will also point out directions of future research on the topic using the same method at the end of my article.

3. Shibusawa Eiichi's Ru Business Practices

That the ethic of TGFV can be applied into business has been noticed by Ru thinkers. For instance, during the identified first phase of the debate on the ethic, Kang Youwei (1858–1927), one of the most influential Ru thinkers and political reformers during the transitional time from imperial to modern China, said in 1916: "For any company or store, there is a manager and other workers. The manager cannot interact the workers without ritual-propriety, whereas workers cannot treat their manager without loyalty. When he said: 'a ruler employs his ministers with ritual-propriety, and ministers serves their ruler with loyalty' (*Analects* 3.19), Kongzi just meant this" (Kang 2007, p. 324). Notably, Kang's thought is not without historical predecessors. Richard Lufrano reports that the late Ming guidebook for Huizhou merchants, *Solutions for Merchants*, has stressed the importance of the Ru ethical teaching of Three Guides and Five Cardinal Human Relationships (Lufrano 1997, p. 55). Lufrano views that the virtues of a Ru gentleman required by the ethics "were crucial in determining the success or failure of the merchants' business endeavors" (Lufrano 1997, p. 59).

Similarly, the significance of the ethic of TGFV for business management is also stressed by contemporary Asian merchants such as Robert Kuok (1923–) from Malaysia. While cherishing his cultural heritage, Kuok commends that “Good Chinese management is second to none; the very best of Chinese management is without compare” (Kuok 2017). Regarding the virtue of loyalty, Kuok says: “I have not come across any people as loyal as the Chinese. The Japanese have a kind of loyalty, but it’s an uncritical, *bushido* type of loyalty: they are loyal even if the boss is a skunk. Unlike the Japanese, every Chinese is highly judgmental, from the most educated to the uneducated” (Kuok 2017). Evidently, the virtue of loyalty of inferiors towards superiors in a corporation is understood by Kuok in the same way as those scholars in the aforementioned debate who advocated the ethic of TGFV: loyalty ought to be towards moral principles, rather than to any powerful person and, hence, the practice of it does not undermine the autonomous judgment of each individual working in hierarchies.

However, to corroborate the hypothesis stated in Section 2.2, Shibusawa Eiichi’s business practice mainly during the time of Meiji restoration (1868–1912) is still by far the best case to utilize in comparison to the mentioned ones. This is because the practice of Shibusawa’s complies with all conditions of what I argued above as the best possible strategy to substantiate the hypothesis. As one founder of the modern Japanese banking system, Shibusawa helped to develop more than five hundred companies, and is acclaimed by Japanese media as the “father of Japanese capitalism.” He is also a life-long practitioner and promoter of Ruism with the publication of *The Analects and the Abacus* in 1916 as a culmination, and the central thesis of the book advocates the mutual enhancing of the Ru morality taught in Kongzi’s *Analects* and the capitalist pursuit of wealth as symbolized by the abacus. I once gave a more generic analysis of Shibusawa’s life, his work ethic, and his philosophy of management in (Song 2018b) to engage the aforementioned debate on the post-Confucian hypothesis. Without repeating this research of mine, my following analysis will exclusively focus upon demonstrating how the idea of reciprocal autonomy central to the ethic of TGFV was practiced by Shibusawa during his illustrious business career.

3.1. Reciprocal Autonomy for Shibusawa Eiichi

The reciprocal autonomy of each individual to serve the goal of inclusive social harmony is a guiding principle for almost all business activities of Shibusawa’s. The principle is not only entailed by the Ru wisdom taught by the *Analects*, but also required by the unique situation Shibusawa faced as a Ru business leader: for strengthening the fledging modern nation of Meiji Japan, the social status of merchants and business workers needed to be elevated from their despised position in the rigid social hierarchy of Tokugawa shogunate so as to facilitate the import of advanced capitalistic institutions and technologies from the West. On this point, one of the best researchers on Shibusawa in the U.S., John Sagers, summarizes: “Shibusawa’s lifelong battle against bureaucratic arrogance and corruption as a champion of private citizens is a compelling story that continues to resonant with audience” (Sagers 2018, p. 218).

In the environment of Meiji Japan, there were at least three components involved in the activities of a business enterprise: individuals (with their rights and duties to specify), the relationship between the employer and the employees, and the relationship between government and the private sector. Therefore, to demonstrate the consistency of Shibusawa’s practice of reciprocal autonomy, I will raise and analyze brief examples from each of these components.

3.1.1. Individuals

That Shibusawa champions individuals’ right to pursue private profits via his interpretation of the *Analects* is well researched¹³. Nevertheless, Shibusawa’s vision of strong individuals with their sturdy ethical convictions goes much beyond the pursuit of material profits. When talking of individuals’ right of free thought, Shibusawa says:

“There is one saying of Kongzi’s from the *Analects* 15:36, ‘For the sake of (the cardinal virtue of) humaneness, you do not need to yield to your teacher.’ Evidently, Kongzi’s saying implies the idea of ‘right,’ since it urges that as long as an individual has his or her own right reason, he or she should insist upon it. A teacher is respectable, but for the sake of practicing the virtue of humaneness, one does not even need to yield to one’s teacher.” (Shibusawa 1996, p. 146)¹⁴

Regarding Shibusawa’s own practice of the right of free thought, no better example can be raised than the frequent remonstrations he did to the then Japanese government using the traditional Ruist trope of the Mandate of Heaven (天命), which speaks to the legitimacy of a government if it succeeds in realizing the inclusive harmony of the people: “. . . his (Shibusawa’s) repeated criticism of politicians and bureaucrats suggested that they did not necessarily represent Heaven’s Mandate at work in the modern world. By speaking on the subject of heaven, he hinted that people should be able to read the Confucian classics and reach their own conclusions independent of state ministers” (Sagers 2018, p. 192). Furthermore, I will furnish concrete examples of Shibusawa’s remonstrations to the government later.

Nevertheless, even if each individual is supported by the Ru ethic advocated by Shibusawa with his or her right to independently think over ethical matters and freely express critical views, the individual still has a duty to cultivate his or her person so as to justly implement the right. Accordingly, Shibusawa emphasized both the intellectual and ethical facets of business education. In a graduation ceremony of the Tokyo Higher Commercial School, Shibusawa said: “All of you, now that you have carried out meticulous studies to the best of your abilities, must demonstrate the actual need for learning and make it publicly known that one cannot make profits unless one is a person who has studied” (Shimada 2017, p. 131). On the other hand, Shibusawa stressed the irrevocable role of ethical education in students’ business learning as well: “I believe that both devotion and filial piety are important. Unless one is ready to emphatically refine those aspects while honing one’s knowledge, in the end a person will only become more frivolous and cunning as such knowledge advances” (Shimada 2017, p. 131). In conclusion, what Shibusawa expected from business workers was nothing more than becoming a strong, educated individual in reciprocal relationships, viz., a Ru exemplary human (君子) who cultivates the needed knowledge and virtues to fulfill him or herself while serving the public interest. Sagers summarizes this aspect of Shibusawa’s accomplishment as follows: “Shibusawa expanded the moral mandate to care for affairs of state beyond government officials to a wider range of citizens. Whether serving as an official or involved in private enterprise, one has a duty to work for the public interest” (Sagers 2018, p. 93). Such an expansion made by Shibusawa remains quite consistent with the ethic of TGFV interpreted favorably by aforementioned scholars such as Shu-shan Lee, because according to Lee, even commoners have a duty towards their state and, hence, superiors in varying hierarchies need to be held accountable for the interests of all involved people.

3.1.2. Labor Relationship

As noted above, the relationship between an employer and employees in a modern corporation is one area into which the traditional Ru ethic of TGFV can obtain a facile translation. Unsurprisingly, as dedicated to harmonizing the interests of capital and labor for the fledging capitalist economy of modern Japan, Shibusawa was active in promoting the principle of reciprocity in his mediation of labor relationship. While taking on a leadership position in the Cooperation Society founded in 1919 the mission of which was exclusively focused upon improving the increasingly strained labor relationship in Japan, Shibusawa said: “There is no reason for workers to be forcibly and unilaterally subjected to subordinate treatment. It is a natural development for them to demand some sort of appropriate means” (Shimada 2017, p. 150). In other words, if an employer demands the loyalty of employees, conversely, the employer should take care of the well-being of employees and be benevolent towards them.

To enhance this moral sense of reciprocal duty among business leaders and workers, Shibusawa's method also manifested his Ru faith, which is in more reliance upon the moral and affectionate impact of exemplary partners in mutual relationships, rather than on laws and strict rules. While describing the worker-training schools of Kyochoikai within which Shibusawa had a great influence, Gregory K. Ornatowski remarks that

“... the Kyochoikai's approach to worker education was clearly Confucian by assuming that education was primarily a 'moral enterprise' and that the 'most effective method for producing the morally superior man was through moral example of superiors conveyed through close personal ties.' In Kyochoikai schools, this moral example was carried out by teachers and students (workers) mixing on an egalitarian basis. Kyochoikai educational programs thus strove to carry out Shibusawa's (and Home Ministry's) vision of worker 'self-cultivation,' leading to a harmonious modern industrial society.” (Ornatowski 1998, p. 360)

In other words, mediating the interests of stakeholders in reliance upon the cultivation of needed mindset and habits so as to fulfill each stakeholder's reciprocal duty is for Shibusawa the ideal method of improving labor relationship. As evidenced by a number of studies, the commitment of the Ru ethic of TGFV to the reciprocal duty of employers and employees has a lasting impact upon how Japanese companies typically envision the labor relationship even in the post-war Japan. For instance, from the so-called “three sacred treasures” of business management in Japan, viz., lifetime employment, the seniority system and enterprise labor unions, we can discern an influence of the Ru ethics once practiced and promoted by Shibusawa¹⁵.

3.1.3. Business and State

Having tried to elevate the status of merchants and business workers to on par with governmental officials who have a duty of taking care of public affairs in the state, this crucial initiative of Shibusawa's contributed to the reciprocal relationship between business leaders and the government as well. As stressed by Sagers, “as Shibusawa would later recall, whether bureaucrat, soldier, scholar, or businessman, the most important duty was to serve one's sovereign. The business leader had a reciprocal relationship with the state. The government should respect the business leader's individual autonomy in making management decisions and the business leader must be guided by loyalty for the load and love of country” (Sagers 2018, p. 61). For Shibusawa, the loyalty towards the state urged by his Ru ethics is by no means predicated upon blind obedience. Rather, “In his vision of Confucian capitalism, the business leader had a moral obligation to both serve the state and to speak out when political leaders acted against the best interest of the nation and its people” (Sagers 2018, p. 115). Two examples as follows suffice to showcase how Shibusawa remonstrated against policies which he deemed as detrimental to the public interest.

Firstly, Shibusawa forcefully opposed rail nationalization because he believed civilian enterprise should be left to civilian management with competition leading to improvement. He argued that if railroads are managed solely for military purposes, civilian transportation will suffer (Sagers 2018, p. 145). Secondly, more broadly, Shibusawa argued against seeing loyalty to the nation in strictly military terms, and he was a consistent critique of the rising military imperialism of Japan in his time. Shibusawa says: “At times of war, we are willing to give everything for the country, and military expenses expand accordingly. However, now militarism has become the source of difficulty in finance. . . . Military and government leaders are asking the people to bear enormous sacrifices and we must question whether the benefits justify those sacrifices” (Sagers 2018, p. 145).

Unfortunately, embracing the virtue of loyalty implied by the Ru ethic of TGFV which is quite different from the one practiced by military and government leaders, Shibusawa succeeded in neither preventing rail nationalization nor the military imperialism of Japan. In this regard, we have to admit the limit of Shibusawa's influence upon politics despite his consistent practice of the ethic of TGFV in the business sector.

4. Peter Drucker Champions the Ethic of TGFV

Despite consistently practicing the Ru ethic of reciprocal autonomy and ensconcing such a practice in his reading of the *Analects*, Shibusawa Eiichi, as mainly a business practitioner, did not systematize such an ethic in his writing. However, during the transitional time of business management in the U.S., Peter Drucker learned Japanese business thought and practices including Shibusawa's¹⁶, encapsulated the Ru ethical guideline of business as "the ethics of interdependence," and then advocated it as the foundation of modern business ethics in general. Since he is revered as the father of modern management and has generated a remarkable impact upon contemporary business practices of the U.S., Peter Drucker's rapport with Ruism can be seen as another strong evidence in conjunction with the one of Shibusawa Eiichi to corroborate the hypothesis stated in Section 2.2.

As observed by researchers, Peter Drucker "found in Confucian ethics fundamental guidelines for moral behaviors that are appropriate for all stakeholders in an organization" (Linkletter and Maciariello 2010, p. 11). Then, what is Drucker's understanding of the "Confucian ethics"? Furthermore, why is his understanding significant for the aforementioned debate on the ethic of TGFV? My following analysis of Drucker's thought will be dedicated to answering these questions.

Drucker named the Ru ethic of reciprocal autonomy for each individual in varying relationships as "the ethics of interdependence," and he explained the history and philosophy of the ethics as follows:

"The ethics of interdependence, as Confucian philosophers first codified it shortly after their Master's death in 479 BC, considers illegitimate and unethical the injection of power into human relationships. It asserts that interdependence demands equality of obligation. Children owe obedience and respect to their parents. Parents, in turn, owe affection, sustenance and, yes, respect, to their children. . . . For every minister who risks his job, if not his life, by fearlessly correcting an Emperor guilty of violating harmony, there is an emperor laying down his life rather than throw a loyal minister to the political wolves." (Drucker 2000, p. 209)

For Drucker, the central goal of the Ru ethics of interdependence is to require that "each side be obligated to provide what the other side needs to achieve its goal and to fulfill itself" (Drucker 2000, p. 210) so as to "optimize benefits for both parties" (Drucker 2000, p. 208), which, using a term central to my above interpretation of the ethic of TGFV, means to create dynamic harmonies in society.

Concerning the type of business ethics which "tends to assert that in relations of interdependence one side has all the duties and the other one all the rights," Drucker avers that "this is the assertion of the Legalist, the assertion of the totalitarians who shortly end up by denying all ethics. It must also mean that ethics becomes the tool of the powerful. If a set of ethics is one-sided, then the rules are written by those that have the position, the power, the wealth. If interdependence is not equality of obligations, it becomes domination" (Drucker 2000, p. 211). In contrast with this power-centric Legalist ethics, Drucker furthermore propounds that "in a relationship of interdependence, it is the mutuality of obligation that creates true equality, regardless of differences in rank, wealth, or power" (Drucker 2000, p. 211).

Since the primary goal of the Ru ethics of interdependence is to strengthen individuals in reciprocal relationships, Drucker believes that it can be applied into various organization in which individuals happen to work:

"Can an ethics of interdependence be anything more than ethics for individuals? The Confucians say no—a main reason why Mao (Zedong) outlawed them. . . . For ethics deals with the right actions of individuals. And then it surely makes no difference whether the setting is a community hospital, with the actors a nursing supervisor and the consumer a patient, or whether the setting is National

Universal General Corporation, the actors a quality control manager, and the consumer the buyer of a bicycle.” (Drucker 2000, pp. 211–12)

Based upon these arguments, Drucker prudently concludes that the ancient Ru ethics of interdependence implies timeless moral ideals for organizations, and hence, its adaption to the modern era could be essential to business practices in the U.S. and beyond:

“A society of organizations is a society of interdependence. The specific relationship which the Confucian philosopher postulated as universal and basic may not be adequate, or even appropriate, to modern society and to the ethical problems within the modern organization and between the modern organization and its clients, customers, and constituents. But the fundamental concepts surely are. Indeed, if there ever is a viable ethics of organization, it will almost certainly have to adopt the key concepts which have made Confucian ethics both durable and effective.” (Drucker 2000, p. 213)

There are several remarkable points about Peter Drucker’s advocacy of the Ru ethics of interdependence.

First and foremost, Drucker’s conception of the gist of Ru ethics stands in line with the scholars in the aforementioned debate who have a favorable interpretation of the ethic of TGFV and stress the moral principle of reciprocal autonomy for each individual. More importantly, Drucker also correctly points out that the power-centric ethics contrary to the Ru ethics of interdependence is Legalist¹⁷, and we do find it in Legalist texts which demand a one-dimensional and unconditional obedience from inferiors. For instance, the 51st chapter of 忠孝 (Loyalty and Filiality) of the *Han Fei Zi* argues for the unconditional obedience of subjects, the son and the wife towards the ruler, the father and the husband while denouncing the idea of reciprocal duty in Ru ethics (Han 2000, p. 1151).

In light of Drucker’s insight on Legalism vs. Ruism, we come to realize that disputants (such as Chen Duxiu) in the debate who condemned Ru ethics for its demand of unconditional obedience have misplaced their critique. Philosophically, it is Legalism, rather than Ruism, which urges unconditional obedience. However, it is true that historically, an imperial ruler may have demanded a Legalist obedience from their subjects while putting a Ruist façade of mutual obligation between the ruler and subjects in rhetoric, just as the old saying characterizes: the imperial rulership over ancient China is an iron fist with a velvet glove. Be that as it may, given the abundant resource of Ru classics and teachings which uphold the ideal of mutual obligation, loyal ministers and commoners did have the ideological support of Ruism and preceding Ru exemplars to follow when they decided to remonstrate against malevolent rulers, as the research quoted above indicates.

Second, that Drucker thinks highly of Ru ethics is not only based upon his interaction with the business world in the post-war Japan which inherits a legacy of business management from exemplary Ru merchants such as Shibusawa Eiichi. Considering the major contribution made by Drucker on the management of knowledge workers to modern business thought¹⁸, we can also better understand why the Ru ethics of interdependence is advocated by him as furnishing the ethical foundation for modern organizations.

Knowledge workers differ from the traditional labor force in the way that they carry along their knowledge obtained through education as a major form of capital while being employed by organizations. Therefore, knowledge workers enjoy a greater degree of independence in the workplace, whereas they are also obliged to serve co-workers in order to achieve the higher goals of an organization. This characteristic of knowledge workforce significantly resembles the exemplary human (君子) or scholar-official (士) envisioned by Ru ethics in the context of ancient China. As supported by the institution of civil examination, which was a historical origin of the recruiting agency of a number of modern Western organizations¹⁹, those Ru exemplars and scholar-officials were expected to obtain knowledge through learning, strengthen their personality through self-cultivation, and contribute their labor to the management of societies either in the level of central or local government. In light of Drucker’s advocacy of the Ru ethics of interdependence as being

applicable in modern organizations, I share a vision that such Ru ethics is uniquely fit for the contemporary knowledge workforce.

Last but not least, Drucker concludes that the fundamental concepts of the Ru ethics of interdependence shall remain constant while being applied in modern organizations, notwithstanding that not all of the reciprocal relationships traditionally specified by the ethics are adequate in a modern context. This way of arguing for the significance of Ru ethics to contemporary society is in tune with my above interpretation of the ethic of TGFV. As my rendering of the ethic of Three Guides in Figure 1 indicates, the ideal nature of the ethic of TGFV speaks to a timeless commitment to the creation of sustainable and co-thriving civilization, whereas realities in varying stages of the civilization may demand special adaptations of this ideal.

5. Conclusions

During the contemporary debate on the ethic of TGFV, one side of scholars critiqued it as demanding unconditional obedience of inferiors towards superiors for the sake of authoritarian hierarchy, while another side interpreted it as championing the reciprocal autonomy of each individual for the sake of social harmony. On top of philosophical and historical arguments scholars have made for the favorable interpretation of the ethic, I have furnished another empirical one to focus upon two cases in contemporary business practices of Asia, the U.S. and beyond.

The moral ideal of reciprocal autonomy is consistently practiced by Shibusawa Eiichi in his illustrious business career which aimed to import and develop the capitalist economy in the emerging modern nation of Japan. This ideal is furthermore articulated as the ethics of interdependent individuality (which is quite synonymous with my term “reciprocal autonomy”) by Peter Drucker in the U.S., and accordingly thought of as the fundamental ethical guideline for contemporary business practices in the U.S. and beyond.

If being treated as a hypothesis as stated in Section 2.2, the ethic of TGFV implies that the kernel of traditional Ru ethics is committed to the reciprocal autonomy of each individual for the sake of inclusive harmony, and this kernel can remain unchanged when the Ru tradition migrates and transitions. Given the remarkable influence of Shibusawa Eiichi and Peter Drucker in their respective business activities, which strictly comply with the best conditions to substantiate the hypothesis stated in Section 2.2, I conclude that the hypothesis has been verified to a significant degree. Due to the idealistic nature of the ethic of TGFV, it is entirely possible that nobody in some period of human history would understand it accurately, and no society would like to incorporate it, whether acknowledging it as originally Ruist or not, as a major ethical guideline for sustainable civilization. If this indeed happened, we can anticipate that an imminent moral decay of human relationships or an inevitable collapse of civilized human society would ensue. Therefore, future empirical research on the ethic of TGFV may investigate that if a crucial variable, viz., the correct understanding and consistent practice of the ethic, was to be taken away, what would follow as the outcome in a society. This investigation will assess the stated hypothesis from another necessary perspective.

Another direction of further research is to explain why the misinterpretation of the Ru ethic of TGFV was so prevalent among scholars and media workers involved in the contemporary debate on the ethic. I have hinted at certain explanations above, but if contemplated from a larger context, the misinterpretation of the ethic as represented by Chen Duxiu and other similar-minded intellectuals may pertain to a unique dynamic of “self-colonization” during the era of Western colonization, which strives for a complete replacement of the colonized culture with a purportedly advanced colonizing one. Further research on such a dynamic would surely increase our understanding of social mechanisms surrounding colonialism and post-colonialism in an inter-cultural context.

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Notes

- 1 “Confucianism” is a misnomer devised by Protestant Christian missionaries around the 19th century, viz., the time of Western colonialism, to refer to the Ru (儒, civilized human) tradition with a primary purpose of religious comparison and conversion, just as Islam was once called “Muhammadanism” in a similar historical context. Following the reflective scholarly trend upon the nomenclature, “Confucianism” will be written as “Ruism” or the “Ru tradition,” and “Confucian” or “Confucianist” will be written as “Ru” or “Ruist” in this article. However, to respect the use of “Confucianism” and its related terms by discussed scholars, I will still keep their original use of “Confucianism” in quotations. For readers who are interested in exploring the naming history of “Confucianism” in the West, a detailed explanation of the history using the disciplinary approach of religious studies can be found at (Swain 2017, pp. 3–22), and (Sun 2013, pp. 45–76). Meanwhile, from the perspective of philosophical historiography, please refer to (Ambrogio 2020, p. 110). My own elaboration about the meaning of Ru and the misnomer of Ruism can be checked at (Song 2016).
- 2 A fuller account of the significance of these categories for contemporary Ruism can be found at (Bendik-Keymer 2021). About the religious self-identity of a Ru in a global context, please see (Sun 2020).
- 3 See my further analysis on this issue in (Song 2019).
- 4 A further overview of the scholarship on the post-Confucian hypothesis can be found at (Song 2018b, pp. 73–77).
- 5 Translations of original Chinese texts and (Shibusawa 1996) in this article are my own. Some of my own translations are adapted from other translators’, and in these cases, I include these translators’ works in the reference (Kongzi (Confucius) (2003)).
- 6 The meaning of *Tian* undergoes change in Pre-Qin classical Ruism. My conception of it articulated here is based upon the *Xici* (Appended Texts) of the *Classic of Change*, as well as other Ru classics and commentaries which connects to *Xici*’s cosmological thought. For more details, please see (Song 2018a, chp. 5).
- 7 The following summary aims to highlight the intensity of the debate on the nature of the Ru ethic of TGFV, particularly on its contested idea of reciprocal autonomy, in the concerned period of time. It claims no exhaustion of the significant cases of the debate, and does not intend to address contemporary debates on Ru ethics in general. I thank one anonymous reviewer for asking me to make this clarification.
- 8 I analyzed the cause of the radical anti-Ru rhetoric in early modern China and how it evolves in (Song 2021).
- 9 A generic analysis of cultural conservatism interacting with other trends of thought in modern China can be found at (Fung 2010, pp. 145–58 and pp. 200–55).
- 10 The Six Orders refer to six minor reciprocal relationships after the main ones specified by the Three Guides, and they are the relationship among one’s father and uncles (from the father’s family), elder and younger siblings, the one among people in the same extensive family who share the same surname, the one among male relatives in one’s mother’s and wife’s extensive families, teacher and student, and the one between friends. (Ban 1778, vol. 7, p. 29)
- 11 See the example of the view of Li Cunshan’s in (Fang 2014, pp. 128–60).
- 12 The prescriptive nature of the stated hypothesis also makes my method of verification different from the one of quantitative research which aims to select random empirical evidence to test a descriptive hypothesis. What I intend to achieve in the following discussion is to present real empirical examples of the hypothesis so as to illustrate that my favored interpretation of the ethic of TGFV is practicable, and the practices can also generate positive societal effects. I thank an anonymous reviewer for asking me to make this clarification.
- 13 See (Tanaka 2017), and (Song 2018b, pp. 80–81).
- 14 The translation is my own.
- 15 On this point, see (Ornatowski 1996) and (Kikkawa 2017).
- 16 There are multiple occasions in Drucker’s writings where the case of Shibusawa Eiichi was studied. See the summary in (Sagers 2018, p. 16).
- 17 A similar view is expressed by Fang Chaohui in (Fang 2014, pp. 29–30).
- 18 On Drucker’s management thought of knowledge workers, see (Hunter and Scherer 2010) and (Turriago-Hoyos et al. 2016).
- 19 See the proof of the origin furnished by (Teng 1943).

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