



Confucius Lives Next Door: What Living in the East Teaches Us About Living in the West

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"Fascinating...clearly stated, interesting and provoking.... A plainspoken account of living in Asia." --*San Francisco Chronicle*

Anyone who has heard his weekly commentary on NPR knows that T. R. Reid is trenchant, funny, and deeply knowledgeable reporter and now he brings this erudition and humor to the five years he spent in Japan--where he served as **The Washington Post**'s Tokyo bureau chief. He provides unique insights into the country and its 2,500-year-old Confucian tradition, a powerful ethical system that has played an integral role in the continent's "postwar miracle."

Whether describing his neighbor calmly asserting that his son's loud bass playing brings disrepute on the neighborhood, or the Japanese custom of having students clean the schools, Reid inspires us to consider the many benefits of the Asian Way--as well as its drawbacks--and to use this to come to a greater understanding of both Japanese culture and America.

Confucius Lives Next Door: What Living in the East Teaches Us About Living in the West Details

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Andrea says

I learned about some Japanese history and current affairs, but the book bothered me. The author was the Tokyo bureau chief for The Washington Post (now the London bureau chief) and he's no doubt a great writer. But his arguments seem a little too black-white/east-west for my tastes. He claims that there is a distinct Asian Way, which I find hard to believe, especially since "Asia" itself is a shaky, colonial concept that encompasses many different cultures. Many of his descriptions also fall into old stereotypes about the "mysterious Orient." He tries to address some of these criticisms all at once in a chapter at the end, but he doesn't fight very hard for his thesis. He merely states the possible criticisms and says "But I still think I'm right." This wouldn't have flown even as a university writing assignment.

It was a clear and sometimes entertaining read, but tainted. I knew something was wrong as soon as the author insulted Nobel-prize winning writer Kenzaburo Oe and bad-mouthed green tea ice cream.

Lindsay says

Although the argument of the book is a bit simplistic (essentially, copy the "Asian way" for a safer and better society), I did learn a lot about Japan and living there. I wasn't aware of how much Confucius impacts school and society in modern Japan, and Reid's everyday examples of life in Japan were generally funny and entertaining. I would recommend this to anyone with an interest in Japan; I think it would be especially interesting to anyone considering studying or moving there.

Toshi says

Insightful observations and mind-boggling analysis and research of Asian culture, ethics, politics, economic system, values, written by an American lived in Tokyo with his family as Washington Post reporter. The main point of this book is that Asian value, particularly in Japan, Korea, Singapore are Confucious (??, ?????) values in practice daily everywhere. This book actually helps me digest and understand Analects (??) much better than a few modern Japanese translation of Analects. And finally went on comparing his American poorer civility but individualistic democratic society vs. Asian harmony and value to prioritize society as a whole than individual, with the striking comparison of the two incidents; one in Baton Rouge a Japanese teen age boy was shot dead in Halloween night while shooting to death was acceptable right to protect his family from threat; Second incident in Singapore where American boy graffiti paint spray on vehicles was sentenced to 4 month jail and 6 cane strikes. Very interesting book and highly recommended to my friends who are interested in global business and global citizenship.

Christine Ezell says

His attitude is a bit too American for my taste, but overall it was informative and enjoyable.

Mario says

I was intrigued to read this book after finding it referenced several times in Laurie Helgoe's "Introvert Power". Although the publication date is 1999 and much of the specifics about Japan's latest cultural/political/technological endeavors are now outdated, the gist of Reid's message still holds true. The notion that strong moral values, passed along through generations, as well as reinforced by schools, businesses, and the government, are what are responsible for what the author describes as the "Asian Way".

Much of the book is dedicated to the origin of these values and their roots in the teachings of Confucius and his students. As a textbook introvert, I found it reassuring to know that many of my own perspectives and ethics are echoed in the Master's teachings. Likewise, it is clearer to me now why Helgoe made such frequent reference to this book in her own "Introvert Power". Respect for personal space, deference to the group over the individual, and a pervasive sense of humility are the cornerstones of the Asian Way that Reid stresses have been lost in modern American society.

It would be great to see Reid return to the subject matter and update the reader as to how the Asian Renaissance that he postulates would occur with the new millennium, has fared entering 2015. Not in so much the economic forecasts he predicts, but more so, how well the Confucian values of the Asian Way have held up in the last 15-16 years.

Overall, Reid does a great job of breaking down the sociology of Asian values without oversimplifying things and diminishing the impact that the teachings of Confucius have had on the culture as a whole. A great reference for any introvert seeking to understand how their temperament carries over into other cultures, especially one so apt.

Sovatha says

The first chapter of this book makes me feel like Japan and East Asia is almost like a Utopia where everybody should look up to: low crime, divorce, better education, high level of social morale, stability, and all the things you can imagine. It almost makes me think if I were a prime minister of a country now, I should try to lead my country up to that standard. Will see the rest of the book.

The rest of the book gives me more than just the answer to the question of whether I should look up to Japan for a society with high morale and efficiency. It brings out this discourse between the East and the West and how the global forces kinda affects this discourse. Of course, the West has problems and so does the East. There's no perfect society, but it helps to look to other society to see what works and what doesn't in your own.

I find the book very informative not only about cultural practices and values in Japanese society, but also about broader forces that shape the relations of the East and the West as we see now. For instance, the reasons behind why Japan has indoor ski resorts or indoor beaches could be understood from phenomena beyond the boundaries of Japan, but in terms of relations between Japan and the US. I found that very engaging and entertaining to read.

Overall, the book was well researched and well written all around. The only problem I have with it is I'm not sure whether to classify it as a prose based on personal experience or as an academic work. Maybe it should be a category of its own. Regardless of that, it's a great book.

Daniel Blair says

I enjoyed this book well enough, but it works much better as a travelogue (an American in Japan) than as a treatise on the actual role of Confucian thought in modern Asia.

The majority of the chapters deal with aspects of Japanese life and culture as experienced by the author, a journalist assigned to Tokyo. His accounts of things like his kid's schooling should be taken for what they are: one person's experience. They are easy to read and quite vivid in painting a picture of his time in Japan.

His arguments about Confucianism's role in shaping what he calls "Asian" thinking is on trickier ground, and as a non-academic, he may be incorrect about the role of these ancient ideas in shaping modern Asia. It's not that Confucianism doesn't remain highly influential on the culture (it certainly does), but that his examination is a bit too simplistic, ignoring other factors that may have influenced the culture, and perhaps relying on confirmation bias to relate everything he experiences to Confucius.

Still, there are undoubtedly cultural differences between the West and Japan (and other countries in Asia he discusses at times), and Reid does a good job describing some of them (including the educational system, which is certainly a major difference). I do think he may be falling a bit into the trap of Benedict's "The Sword and the Chrysanthemum," generalizing and essentializing the culture. To his credit, he does talk about this book and suggests that, as Reischauer argued, it's perhaps overly simplistic. Still, Reid is seemingly not aware of the massive amount of literature, such as Edward Said's work, critiquing his way of looking at another culture. He also relies on ancient texts (specifically Confucian texts) to interpret contemporary society, which anthropologists will tell you was a common error of past scholarship on Asian societies. Using the Bible to interpret every aspect of American society would be problematic for the same reason.

Also, I don't think Reid gives enough of a critical eye to the problems in the cultures he is examining. In this, he is probably highly influenced by his friend Kishore Mahbubani. He does note some of the issues (rigid adherence to authority, enforced conformity), but his core argument is about the positives and doesn't adequately address the problems (something that is equally frustrating when listening to Mahbubani). He dismisses countries like China, whose government uses Confucianism for authoritarian ends, in a "no true Scotsman" style. It's true that much of modern China's government is opposed to Confucius' teachings, but he is ignoring the way that Confucianism has been used in history to encourage conformity and authority. China is using its own interpretation just as every dynasty before has done. This type of authority may not be in the spirit of The Analects, but it is certainly in the spirit of Confucianism as it has been practiced by Chinese dynasties for thousands of years.

Finally, as others have said, his coverage of Confucius himself (as well as the later scholarship around him) is not terrible but is certainly not scholarly. It's also a bit dull in that portion.

I probably spent too much space here talking about the problems with the book. I actually enjoyed it, and would lightly recommend it. Again, it works as a travelogue. If you want a better argument for taking up Confucian ideas in modern society, look into the New Confucians such as Tu Weiming. If the book leads the reader to a more thorough exploration of Confucianism, as Reid clearly hopes, that's a good thing.

Elizabeth Reuter says

Confucius Lives Next Door is a memoir, and as a memoir, it carries bias; Mr. Reid's observations are his own, and they are slanted indeed.

He praises things about Japan that are praiseworthy in certain situations, like Japan's cultural adherence to rules, and suggests Westerners do the same. However, Mr. Reid then fails to mention the downside to such obedience, and why it can be dangerous. After the March 11th earthquake, for example, one shelter with roughly 2000 refugees in it received servings of food for 1000. With no "correct" way to divide up the food, and having never been taught to do anything but the "correct" thing, the shelter organizers threw the 1000 servings of food away and let everybody starve! Gee, I bet everyone was grateful at starving fairly.

Such a slanted book has value, because there are wonderful things about Japan, and about the "Japanese way" of doing things. But throw away your rose-colored glasses before reading, and read other works alongside it to get a fuller picture. If *Dogs and Demons* is slanted to the negative, unable to see much good in Japan, *Confucius Lives Next Door* is its opposite, blind to anything but propaganda-style perfection.

-Elizabeth Reuter
Author, *The Demon of Renaissance Drive*

Glen Engel-Cox says

I picked this paperback up for me during her business trip in the U.S., due in part for her own interest in it, but also because we both had enjoyed Reid's informal talks with Bob Edwards on NPR's Morning Edition where he often provided a great first-hand view of an ex-patriate. Since we've been in that position for just a little over 18 months now, she thought I would find Reid's view of what the East gets right, and gets wrong, interesting. And I did. Reid is clear in his thesis, which may have aged somewhat since the book was written in the late 90s and thus doesn't cover some of the world changes that have occurred since. The background idea, that Asia is rapidly coming into its own and displacing the 20th century to make the 21st century the Asian century, is hard to refute. Reid's thesis, however, that this is due to a philosophy born out of Confucian thought, is a little tougher to follow, although he provides plenty of examples, both anecdotal and statistical.

The best thing about the book, however, is that Reid adopts a Japanese idea and points out the flaws in his own theory in an afterward (an atogaki). This is where I understood what was bugging me the most about the book, and that is trying to define Asia as a homogenous group. My personal perspective, having lived in Malaysia and visited (albeit too briefly for many of these places) other Asian locations, is that while some shared perspective is present, there's a lot more cracks in the impenetrable front that is often portrayed within and without the region. Malaysia, in particular, has a schizophrenia from its mixed racial identity and the growth of Islamic economic power. Reid, at one point, quotes a Chinese Malaysian as saying the affirmative action put in place to bring the Malay population out of poverty (in comparison to the Chinese population) was not perfect, but necessary for the culture, might still be said today, but that commentator would also say that it is time to change that affirmative action to one based on income, rather than race, as the ongoing New Economic Plan is increasingly seen as a racial divider rather than one that is actually improving race relations.

Finally, the other nice point that Reid emphasizes is that Confucian thought is actually not that far different from Christian teaching, with the golden rule of "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you" expressed as "Do not impose on others what you do not want for yourself." He then proceeds to make connections between other Judeo-Christian and Classical ethical guidance and Confucius, coming to the conclusion that, in a nutshell, ethics = ethics, in all languages and cultures. The difference may lie in how much individuals are willing to concede to groups, and vice versa (i.e., where are the commons, or where does your face end and my fist begin?).

Pamela Huxtable says

Reid presents a very insightful analysis of the influence of Confucian philosophy on contemporary Asian culture, particularly Japanese culture. I liked Reid's willingness to argue against his own arguments. I also appreciated his point that Confucian philosophy doesn't really differ all that much from Western "moral values," but that Asian society takes responsibility for these values, and doesn't leave them to religious institutions or civic organizations as we do in the West.

I do think this book is beginning to show its age - it is 10 years old - a point Reid makes over and over again is that Japanese companies do not layoff employees. Here in 2009 we are seeing Japanese companies making layoffs, and the effects of those layoffs in the community.

But I have to agree with him on this point, wholeheartedly and without reservation. As a resident of Tokyo, it is so refreshing to feel so safe. I love not being afraid after dark, or afraid of men on the streets, or afraid of intimidating teens acting up. I love that I don't have to worry about my kids being accosted. And the homeless guys that sleep under the bridge near our subway station never bug you for handouts - they only want to say hello to the cute gaijin children.

Brittan says

Fundamentally flawed, but the Confucius parts are insightful.

Cindy Dyson Eitelman says

The parts where he made it personal--supreme. The strictly informative parts--good. The theories--dry. Dry-ish.

When his daughters were enrolled in a Japanese school and the headmistress said, "no *taibatsu*.(corporal punishment) No *ijamme*. (teasing/bullying) None at all. I won't allow it." You had to cheer! Here was a father who had done--and was doing--his homework. He'd learned about Japanese schools and was prepared to try the experiment, but not at the expense of his daughters' well-being. He asked the right questions.

His next-door neighbor Matsuda-san gave him a delightful, first hand insight into manners, mores, beliefs and behavior. I could have listened to his Confucius-next-door all day.

Among many other ideas the book proposes, most intriguing is this--do Americans take personal liberty too

far, at the expense of public security? You can tell he thinks so. And...after reading this book...maybe I do, too. Along with the rights of citizenship come the responsibilities of citizenship. Voting. Participating in your school boards. Reporting crimes and maybe even carrying out a citizen's arrest or two. Supporting our police--and keeping them honest.

Example from today's news: why is Texas considering vouchers for parents to enroll their kids in private schools or religious schools? How is that going to make our public schools better? Bah!

He adds an afterword that points out the flaws in his own arguments--in keeping with the Japanese tradition of *atodaki*. Why can't every writer do that? One of the glaring questions regards corruption. With all the respect for authority built into the eastern philosophy, how do explain the widespread corruption in government officials? Is it all the result of respect for family, expressed as nepotism? When you appoint your nephew's cousin to a position in government, is that corruption or family honor...and how does it play out with the public interest?

Tiffany says

I'm going to be honest-I definitely expected more of a memoir-type book. In that sense, I was a little disappointed, since I was really looking for a story. I knew going in that it was non-fiction, so in that sense, I was pleasantly surprised. Although it was somewhat academic in the way that it made some judgments and comments on how to run a country, yet it was still fairly engaging. The mini-stories and even reflections on the success of Asian countries kept me reading without constantly wondering when the paragraph would end. I was truly interested in how some of these phenomena came to be, and Reid did a good job explaining with real-life examples. The education, business, and safety topics really intrigued me and seemed to make a whole ton of sense.

On the other hand, (and I can't figure out if this was the goal) Reid thoroughly convinced me that everyone should convert to "the Asian way" to have successful countries. As an American myself, I embarrassingly felt defensive about my country, wondering when Reid would begin talking about some pitfalls about living in the East. Those never came (though I do believe the blurb did indeed say that Reid would reveal some downsides). Honestly, I think the only bad thing about the Asian system is that they have a distorted view as to how dangerous and scary America is. While I know that "the Asian way" can't be perfect, Reid does a great job refuting that.

I will also say that the nonfiction part, though it could be exciting and interesting, could also be extremely dull. Yes, it is important to understand Confucius and how he became such an influential person in China and Asia as a whole, I'm not sure if it required one entire chapter. That chapter was purely a history lesson, one that even a person fairly interested in history wasn't too keen on reading. I found myself constantly flipping to where the chapter ended, doing math in all kinds of funky ways to try to figure out how many pages I had left to read. That said, it has to be stated that as a more informational book and story, this is expected. Rather, I like to focus on the fact that an intellectual book on Asia was a fairly smooth read for a girl who has an indifference to nonfiction and prefers historical fiction to historical information. So, good job!

Matthew says

I could not wrap my head around what T.R. Reid had in mind when he set about to write this novel. On the one hand, the better hand, he presents a deep respect and veneration for the East Asian nations that he talks about ... he uses them as great models to enhance the American life. On the other hand, though, he uses crass and racist terms throughout the book to do this. Most notably, he often describes his subjects as "Orientals" (they are people, not furniture!).

It seems that he undermines the thesis of his book by throwing away his findings as "oriental," instead of something worth looking at. It was very unfortunate, because while this wasn't a thrilling novel by any measure ... it was at least readable, and I think that there is something to be said for much of the arguments.

Oh well, maybe this Occidental mind just can't figure out the ramblings of these oriental lovers. See, doesn't that just leave a distaste in your mouth after saying/thinking that sentence? That's kind of what I'm getting at. If you want to get a better understanding of Confucius and/or East Asia, there are many better books than this one.

Carol says

I had a zig zag experience while reading this book. The book was published in 1999 so a few years have passed since it was written. I researched some of his predictions; while some were supported, others missed the mark. In simple terms, he summarizes Confucius with a 'do unto others as you would have them done to you'. One can summarize Judeo-Christianity in the same way. Asia's crime rate, murders, divorce rate etc is well documented to be lower than the United States; and their education math and science scores are higher than ours. Does socialism wear better than capitalism? Is there a definitive difference in the various races?

Part of my zig zag was caused by the author's ability to articulate his story: very easy to follow at times followed by pages of lagging. It was, however, a thought provoking read.
