



## Confucius Lives Next Door

*What Living in the East Teaches  
Us about Living in the West*

T. R. REID

NEW YORK: RANDOM HOUSE, 1999

249 PAGES + APPENDIX AND INDEX

HARDBACK. ISBN 0-67945-624-4

**T**. R. Reid served as Tokyo Bureau Chief for the *Washington Post* for almost six years during the first half of the 1990s and was a regular contributor to NPR's "Morning Edition." Having lived in Japan for several years two decades earlier, and having studied East Asian philosophy and history at Princeton, he brought to his assignment more of an academic background than many foreign correspondents have. This book is not a compilation of his radio spots or articles he wrote for his newspaper; it is an attempt to explain to Americans how Japan has accomplished what he calls their "social miracle" and what we can learn from it to improve social conditions in the United States.

Most people are familiar with Japan's economic miracle: overcoming wartime devastation to become the world's second-largest economy despite a lack of natural resources. For Reid, the social miracle is even more remarkable. On page 14 he lists its components: ". . . the world's lowest rates of violent crime, theft, and drug use; strong stable families with low rates of divorce, and virtually no single parents; public education that tests out as the best in the world; a broad sense of equality that gives almost everybody a stake in the society and thus help assure, for the most part, safe and peaceful living conditions."

These characteristics would not be noteworthy if found in a traditional, agricultural society. But Japan is highly industrialized, urbanized, and during the mid-nineties was in the midst of a prolonged economic recession. In the West, urban crowding and a bad economy are usually blamed for increases in crime, drug use, divorce, and social unrest. Yet Japan did not, for the most part, experience any of these social maladies. What Reid found out by talking with officials, scholars, and taxi drivers was that Japan's social order did not reflect economic conditions, but traditional moral values. And those values are rooted in Confucianism.

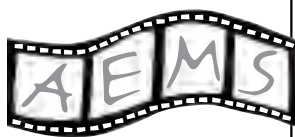
One does not usually associate Confucianism with Japan. Reid learned, however, that the Chinese philosophy is indeed alive and well in the Land of the Rising Sun. It was his neighbor, a courtly, elderly gentleman who lived next door, who made him aware of it. Mr. Matsuda Tadao came over one evening to inform him that Reid's teenage son was playing his bass guitar too loudly. Matsuda-san was dressed up as though he were going to an important function: blue suit, white shirt and dark necktie, with "a crisp, white handkerchief folded into three perfect peaks in his breast pocket." Instead of threatening to call the police, he observed polite rituals of making a call on his neighbor. After taking off his shoes at the front door, accepting and sipping a cup of tea, and engaging in small talk about the weather and such, he finally got around to the point of his visit. With many apologies for intruding and being impertinent for having to bring it up, he informed Reid "that noise coming from upstairs in your house—that noise is a *meiwaku*" (p. 68).

Reid had not encountered the word before, but he learned it means "something that causes trouble or shame for other members of

### Asian Educational Media Service

<http://www.aems.uiuc.edu>

Bookmark our  
Web site for free  
advice on finding  
and selecting the  
audio-visual materials  
you need on the  
cultures of Asia!



- Search our online database
- Read a review
- Write a review
- Download teacher's guides
- Sign up for our free newsletter
- Post a message
- Request information
- Make a suggestion
- Check out our many helpful links!

Asian Educational Media Service • Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies • University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign • 230 International Studies Building • 910 South Fifth Street • Champaign, IL 61820

Toll Free Telephone: 1-888-828-AEMS (2367) or 217-265-0642  
E-mail: [aems@uiuc.edu](mailto:aems@uiuc.edu) • Fax: 217-265-0641

... “*The Secret Weapon*,” explains economic policies that avoid mass layoffs even in the recession years of the ‘90s: “. . . Japanese have made a national calculation of comparative costs. They have decided that the social costs associated with large-scale unemployment would be greater than the costs required to keep people at work.”

the group you belong to” (p. 75). It is such a potent concept because every Japanese is made to feel a sense of belonging to a whole set of groups: family, first of all, neighborhood, one’s school and class, job, various clubs and organizations one has joined. In a conversation they had several years later, Matsuda-san quoted a saying that Reid recognized as the opening lines of the Confucian *Analects*. When Reid showed that he knew the line, Matsuda-san replied, “Well, of course. . . . What do you think we’ve been talking about all these years? Everything I’ve tried to teach you, Reido-san, everything anybody knows about building a successful society—it all comes from Confucius” (p. 90).

The ancient wisdom of Confucius, embodied in the courtly Mr. Matsuda who lived next door—but more importantly its ingrained position in the social mores of the Japanese—provides the explanation for the social miracle Reid found. And like Confucius, who said he wasn’t an innovator but a transmitter (of the distilled wisdom of China’s sage kings), Reid transmits in this highly readable book the ways in which Confucian virtues and values maintain a high degree of social order. In a chapter titled “The Master Kung,” Reid lays out the essence of Confucianism and the very unstable historical context around 500 B.C.E. that gave rise to the “hundred schools of thought.” High school and college students—and teachers—wanting to understand Confucianism more thoroughly than they can learn from two or three pages in world history survey texts should read this 36-page chapter. He explains all the basics very clearly in an engaging style.

At one point in that chapter Reid telegraphs the ultimate aim of this book: “It’s a shame—it’s almost a tragedy—that the *Analects* are not required reading in the West as well as the East. I say that partly because of the book’s universal appeal: it is one of the greatest collections of ethical wisdom in the history of mankind. *Its truths fit the contemporary West as well as they fit the ancient East*. But it is also essential as a key to the thinking of East Asia—a key that has become even more important for those of us in the West with the coming of the Asian century” (p. 98; emphasis added).

Before he gets to the final “message” chapter, Reid explores in telling vignettes how Confucian values are inculcated and maintained in Japan. His young daughters were enrolled in a Japanese elementary school and learned first-hand about “working hard, following rules, respecting authority, taking responsibility, and getting along with the group.” So important are these lessons that “they don’t stop when school ends” (p. 152).

The following chapter, “Continuing Education,” relates how new employees of a corporation are ceremoniously inducted into the firm. Inductions and other rituals are a very Confucian way of “conveying tradition and morality through ritual and ceremony” (p. 159).

Reid’s favorite is the *Seijin-shiki*, the Coming-of-Age Ceremony held on January 15th each year. Everyone who will turn twenty during that year is invited to one of the 3,200 or so ceremonies all over the country—it is a national holiday. The ceremony consists of speeches, some popular entertainment, and gifts that double as advertising from local and national firms. At one of the ceremonies Reid attended, the main speaker, the chairman of the local school board, stated to the assembled young people: “I ask you to engrave in your hearts . . . an awareness of your duties to society and a desire to fulfill your responsibility” (p. 165).

Ubiquitous signs in the form of posters, slogans, billboards, and television commercials are another means of reminding Japanese to obey the rules and respect others. The Japanese government created a new form of art, “manner posters,” commissioning thousands of serious, commercial, and fledgling artists to create posters primarily for subway stations and bus stops, changing them with new posters about every month. All this attention on reminding people to do what they have been taught to do prompts this reflection by Reid: “Here was a

### MUSEUM QUALITY EXHIBITS

**“MY LIFE IS MY MESSAGE”**—40 panels (2' x 4') of photographs with captions on the life of Mahatma Gandhi

**“INDIA—THE PEOPLE AND THEIR LAND”**—more than 100 color photographs taken over 40 years by Beatrice Pitney Lamb

**“BEAUTY IN STONE”**—Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic architecture of India, color photographs by Beatrice Pitney Lamb

Also—smaller portable exhibits (sent by mail), video cassettes (including biographical documentaries of Gandhi), and other resources available for loan.

Undergraduate-level CORRESPONDENCE COURSE on Gandhi (study materials from the Gujarat Vidyapeeth University in India founded in 1920)

#### THE GANDHI MEMORIAL CENTER

P.O. Box 9575  
Washington, D.C. 20016  
Phone: (301) 279-3871  
Website: [www.gandhimc.org](http://www.gandhimc.org)  
Email: [gandhimc@earthlink.com](mailto:gandhimc@earthlink.com)



## ESSAY BOOK REVIEWS

**Asia's Maritime Bead Trade: 300 B.C. to the Present**

PETER FRANCIS, JR. USD\$52.00, CLOTH

Well illustrated, this fascinating study is the first detailed description of the ancient and enduring trade in beads that spans more than two millennia.

**Barons, Brokers, and Buyers**The Institutions and Cultures of Philippine Sugar  
MICHAEL S. BILLIG USD\$45.00, CLOTH

"Billig has written a very contemporary and important analysis of the different actors in the Philippine sugar industry. . . . An exceptionally well written, engaging book." —Susan Russell, Northern Illinois University

**Abdurrahman Wahid**

Muslim Democrat, Indonesian President

GREG BARTON  
USD\$42.00, CLOTH; USD\$19.95, PAPER

In this authorized biography, the author introduces us to Wahid and his world and attempts to make sense of his controversial public career and twenty-one-month presidency which ended in 2001.

**Village on the Edge**

Changing Times in Papua New Guinea

MICHAEL FRENCH SMITH  
USD\$50.00, CLOTH; USD\$17.95, PAPER

Weaves together the story of Kragur villagers' struggle to find their own path toward the future.

**China Off Center**

Mapping the Margins of the Middle Kingdom

EDITED BY SUSAN D. BLUM AND LIONEL M. JENSEN  
USD\$65.00, CLOTH; USD\$24.95, PAPER

Focuses on the everyday, the particular, the local and the puzzling, and little-known but significant aspects of China from the past decade.

**Acts of Reading**

Exploring Connections in Pedagogy of Japanese

HIROSHI NARA AND MARI NODA USD\$50.00, CLOTH

Examines what reading is for Japanese as a language, and how instructors should teach it to students of Japanese.

**Education Fever**

Society, Politics, and the Pursuit of Schooling in South Korea

MICHAEL J. SETH USD\$49.00, CLOTH

Explores Koreans' demand for achieving as much formal education as possible, and how it has shaped nearly every aspect of South Korean society.

**Korean Reader for Chinese Characters**CHOON-HAK CHO, YEON-JA SOHN, AND HEISOON YANG  
USD\$25.00, PAPER

Helps students of Korean master basic Chinese characters that are frequently encountered in everyday situations.

Published in association with the Curriculum Research and Development Group (CRDG), University of Hawai'i

**The Rise of Modern Japan**LINDA K. MENTON, NOREN W. LUSH, EILEEN H. TAMURA,  
AND CHANCE I. GUSUKUMA USD\$30.00, CLOTH**China: Understanding Its Past**EILEEN H. TAMURA, LINDA K. MENTON, NOREN W. LUSH,  
FRANCIS K. C. TSUI, WITH WARREN COHEN

TEXT: USD\$24.00, CLOTH; TEACHER'S MANUAL: USD\$29.00, PAPER



Hawaii

WWW.UHPRESS.HAWAII.EDU • 1-888-UHPRESS

society that clearly believed people will be virtuous if you encourage them to; that's why so much time and money were put into the continuous effort to encourage good behavior. And that seemed to be a fairly confident view of mankind" (p. 170). It is also very much a Confucian attitude.

Another chapter, "The Secret Weapon," explains economic policies that avoid mass layoffs even in the recession years of the '90s: ". . . Japanese have made a national calculation of comparative costs. They have decided that the social costs associated with large-scale unemployment would be greater than the costs required to keep people at work" (p. 187). And by hiring more people to work on a given job than in other countries, Japan usually has relatively low labor productivity in many service industries. "But for Japan, low productivity is the secret weapon. It's the key reason why the society remains civil, stable, and safe" (pp. 187–8). There is also a cultural reason for keeping workers employed, even though it means that companies have to absorb losses at times. Employees are considered—and treated—as members of the corporate group. "Group membership creates loyalties that flow up and down" (p. 189). There are also structural supports for maintaining high levels of employment. The government will pay unemployment benefits to the company to subsidize temporarily redundant workers so that employees continue on the job and thus avoid the stigma of being laid off. Another important aspect of the business culture in Japan is the relatively narrow gap in pay between executives and workers; whereas in the United States the average CEO makes about 157 times what the average worker earns, in Japan the factor is only 30. Consequently, about 90 percent of Japanese—but only 60 percent of Americans—consider themselves middle class. People in Japan, and in other East Asian countries where Confucianism is still an essential element in the value system, "get the feeling that they have a personal stake in the well-being of the overall society. . . . [T]his is the modern version of Confucius's teaching that life's central loyalties run both ways" (p. 204).

Reid's final chapter, "Our Own Miracle," states the author's case that "the basic cultural values of East and West are not different. . . . The basic precepts are the same in both hemispheres; they differ in nuance but not in substance" (p. 241). Although he was based in Tokyo, Reid traveled widely in East Asia and came to see that Confucian values are alive and well in a broad arc from South Korea to Singapore. Some of his vignettes, statistics, and observations come from those other countries, but he is clearly more familiar with Japan. Knowing the language well—he has written two books in Japanese—gives him the ability to read signs and posters and converse with just about anyone. He criticizes Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History* and Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*—both of which, Reid asserts, "were wrong about Asia" (p. 242). Most people know Kipling's line, "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." Reid quotes the lines from the ballad that immediately follow: "But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth / When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth" (p. 243). Reid remembers not how different he and his Confucian neighbor Matsuda-san were, but how much they had in common.

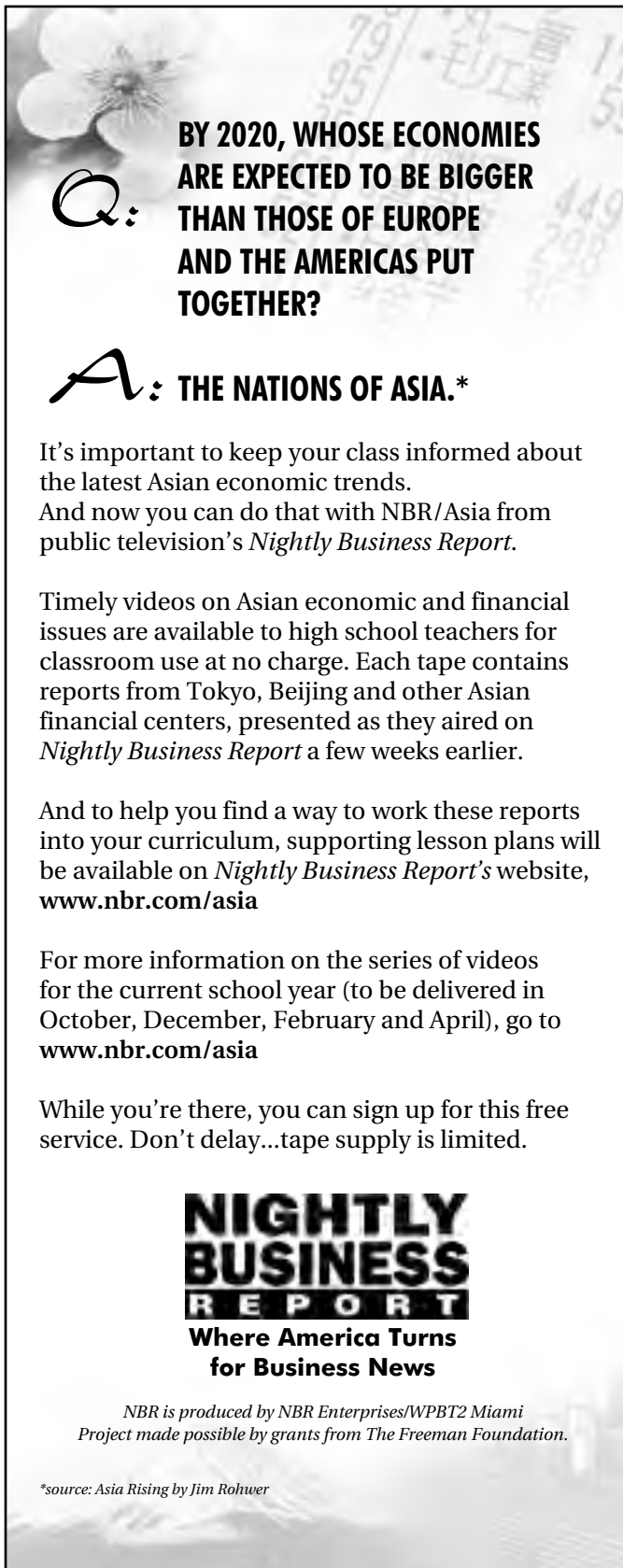
Confucian values—stable families, education, moral examples, rituals, duties and responsibilities toward others in the groups to which one belongs—all have counterparts in our own ethics as derived from “the Bible, the Greeks and Romans, and other key sources of the Western tradition” (p. 244).

The crucial question is this: “How come these traditional values seem to [be] working better in Asia than in the West?” Reid’s answer: “I would say it’s because the East Asians, at least over the past half century or so, have done a better job of inculcating their cultural tradition, of bringing their basic moral values to bear on the events of daily life . . . We ought to do the same thing” (p. 246). He suggests using ceremonies to reinforce our values; making it more difficult for single persons to start families and for couples with children to divorce; and encouraging corporate executives to develop more of a sense of membership both in society and among their employees. “In recognizing the importance of individual responsibility, family stability, and sense of loyalty to fellow members of our companies, clubs, and neighborhoods, we would be reaffirming traditional tenets of our own Western culture” (p. 249).

This book is appropriate both for advanced high school and college students as well as teachers at those levels who seek greater insight into “what makes Japan tick.” Confucian values do not, in this reviewer’s opinion, tell the whole story. There are historical, religious, and psychological elements that have not been addressed that also help explain Japan’s social miracle. Insular in geographical terms and in ways of seeing themselves as unique in the world, the Japanese have long cultivated a sense of distinctiveness, of ethnic and cultural homogeneity. It would have helped the reader understand and how a Chinese philosophy came to be such an important element in the Japanese value system if Reid had added a few paragraphs about the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603–1868) and the deliberate imposition of Confucianism to maintain social and political order after the preceding century of internecine warfare.

These are far from fatal flaws, however. In shining a spotlight on the centrality and effectiveness of Confucianism to explain how Japan does so many things so well, the discerning reader will appreciate and draw lessons about aspects of Japanese life that are rarely included in textbooks, about the continuing importance of values in a postmodern society, about cultural diffusion, and about the timelessness of Confucianism. That spotlight also illuminates the mirror Reid holds up to Americans, the better to examine ourselves and decide how to deal with some of the difficult issues we face today. We may not want to think that we have anything to learn from the Japanese, but in Reid’s view we do. ■

**GEORGE B. PRUDEN** has just retired as Professor of History at Armstrong Atlantic State University, where he taught Japanese, Chinese, and Middle Eastern History for the past twenty years. He lived in Japan for two years while on active duty in the U. S. Navy prior to his academic career.



**Q: BY 2020, WHOSE ECONOMIES ARE EXPECTED TO BE BIGGER THAN THOSE OF EUROPE AND THE AMERICAS PUT TOGETHER?**

**A: THE NATIONS OF ASIA.\***

It’s important to keep your class informed about the latest Asian economic trends. And now you can do that with NBR/Asia from public television’s *Nightly Business Report*.

Timely videos on Asian economic and financial issues are available to high school teachers for classroom use at no charge. Each tape contains reports from Tokyo, Beijing and other Asian financial centers, presented as they aired on *Nightly Business Report* a few weeks earlier.

And to help you find a way to work these reports into your curriculum, supporting lesson plans will be available on *Nightly Business Report*’s website, [www.nbr.com/asia](http://www.nbr.com/asia)

For more information on the series of videos for the current school year (to be delivered in October, December, February and April), go to [www.nbr.com/asia](http://www.nbr.com/asia)

While you’re there, you can sign up for this free service. Don’t delay...tape supply is limited.

**NIGHTLY BUSINESS REPORT**  
Where America Turns for Business News

*NBR is produced by NBR Enterprises/WPBT2 Miami  
Project made possible by grants from The Freeman Foundation.*

\*source: Asia Rising by Jim Rohwer