Cosmopolitanism: Eastern and Western Perspectives

BACKGROUND REPORT
Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Western Context 1

Eastern Context 2

Modern Discussions of Cosmopolitanism 3

Conclusion 4

Notes 5
Introduction

In recent decades, the term cosmopolitanism has re-emerged as a focus of heightened interest in the humanities and social sciences. The concept has been championed by philosophers East and West, ancient as well as contemporary, and its value seems especially suited to address certain pressing challenges in today’s world of divided national interests and intensified ethnic hostility. The word “cosmopolitanism” is derived from the Greek word *kosmopolitēs* (“citizen of the world”), and its nebulous sense, shared by all cosmopolitan views, is that every human being, regardless of political affiliation, is (or can and should be) a citizen of a single, grand community.¹ While many scholars have been inspired by and traced the origin of cosmopolitanism back to classical resources in the Western tradition, our central argument in this report is that versions of cosmopolitanism can be found in other world traditions, and in particular the Chinese tradition. These diverse traditions offer us valuable alternative resources for developing modern views about what cosmopolitanism can and should be.

Western Context

In the Western tradition, the concept of cosmopolitanism can be traced back to the Cynic philosopher Diogenes of Sinope (400–323 BCE), who is reputed to have resisted the idea of city-state patriotism by claiming that he was not a citizen of any one particular community, but a cosmopolite, “a citizen of the world.”² While the term “cosmopolitanism” may have originated with Diogenes, it was the Stoics who provided a comprehensive and durable philosophy of cosmopolitanism. The ideas of Zeno and Chrysippus, particularly, were important in establishing basic principles of Stoic cosmopolitanism, namely, the idea that all human beings, despite their differences, are a single species and that humans are citizens of the cosmos or universe.³ The philosophical discussion of cosmopolitanism can also be traced back to the works of ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, who opposed cosmopolitanism on the basis of the fact that people usually lived in their own city or state and stuck to particular political doctrines.⁴
Cosmopolitanism was treated and developed substantially in the works of the great Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Although his specific conception of cosmopolitanism grew out of a distinctive eighteenth-century tradition, both the tradition itself and Kant’s own approach to it are saturated with the ideas of ancient Greek and especially Roman Stoicism, where, as noted above, the idea of “world-citizen” received its first philosophical development in the West. Kant’s cosmopolitan utopia concerns humanity in general; it is founded upon and emphasizes universal rational moral agency as the basis of fundamental dignity and what are now called first generation human rights. His account of “cosmopolitan right” is widely regarded as the philosophical origin of modern cosmopolitanism.

**Eastern Context**

Literary and cultural studies scholar Douwe Fokkema once sought to transcend traditional Eurocentric or West-centric versions of cosmopolitanism by crafting an alternative notion based upon the perspective of globalization. In doing so, he was able to integrate some traditional ideas from Chinese culture related to cosmopolitanism, such as the Confucian proposition that “all within the four seas are brothers (四海之内皆兄弟)” (Analects 12.5). In addition, a particular conception of harmony serves an important role in promoting the goals of Confucian social and political philosophy. Confucius expands upon and explains the notion of harmony in the Analects by saying that “the noble person harmonizes but does not seek sameness (君子和而不同)” (Analects 13.23), which indicates that a morally refined individual should be able to respect different opinions and be able to work with different people in a harmonious way. Moreover, the early Confucian thinker Mencius developed Confucius’ idea of harmony and humaneness. According to Mencius, the harmony of people is the most important thing in human affairs: “good timing is not as good as being advantageously situated, and being advantageously situated is not as good as having harmonious people (天时不如地利, 地利不如人和)” (Mencius 3B1).

Daoism, and in particular the philosophy of the Zhuangzi, contributed another relevant approach to and conception of cosmopolitanism. Zhuangzi’s highest ideal was to construct a natural, inactive, non-aggressive, non-oppressive, and non-exploitative society based on naturalism, egalitarianism, and moral universalism. This would result in “purifying heaven and the earth, nurturing all things, harmonizing heaven and earth, and benefitting the people (醇天地, 育万物, 和天下, 泽及百姓)” (Zhuangzi, Tianxia, chapter 33).
In addition to these native Chinese traditions, Buddhism, a religion that arose in India but became deeply rooted in China, also shares core themes and values, such as commonality and mutual inclusivity, with cosmopolitanism. Following Siddhartha Gautama’s teachings, Buddhist philosophy aims at achieving a purity of soul that helps one become virtuous. According to Andrew Linklater, there are “basic considerations of humanity” in both Buddhism and cosmopolitanism—such as human vulnerability to mental and physical suffering—which are central tenants of Buddhist doctrine and can be taken as the basis of the kind of harmonious unity that is characteristic of cosmopolitanism. The insights of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism offer rich and powerful resources for crafting new understandings of cosmopolitanism.

Modern Discussions of Cosmopolitanism

In terms of modern discussions of cosmopolitanism, the widespread and growing commitment to the importance of human rights in regulating our international affairs is thought by many to be an important achievement of cosmopolitanism and a significant contribution to the struggle for global justice. In the twentieth century, the emergence of two international organizations, the League of Nations and the United Nations, marked the beginning consolidation of a legal system of rules and laws that bind many countries together around the world. Although the idea of cosmopolitanism actually originated in the Hellenistic period, it was Martha Nussbaum’s article “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” published in the late twentieth century, that reignited recent debate and interest in the issue. In her essay, Nussbaum presented a contemporary Western liberal cosmopolitan theory, crafted on Kantian assumptions about the moral status and dignity of persons as rational moral agents, which aroused heated discussion on the philosophy of cosmopolitanism from different angles among scholars, including Kwame Anthony Appiah, Amy Gutmann, and Immanuel Wallerstein. Contrary to the critical rationality of Enlightenment philosophy, Appiah’s contribution to the cosmopolitan debate insists that the values it adopts and promotes cannot come from a single philosophical or cultural tradition. He distinguishes between cosmopolitanism and humanism by arguing that the latter aspires to global homogeneity while the former celebrates “different local ways of human existence,” a position similar to the multicultural model Nussbaum condemned. Gutmann challenged Nussbaum’s cosmopolitanism on the grounds that at best it provides an abstraction, and at worst, it promotes ideals for advancing the cultural values of the American elite. At the same time, American sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein highlighted that Nussbaum’s concept of cosmopolitanism confuses the class dimensions of social and educational opportunities. From Wallerstein’s perspective, “being disinterested and global on one hand and defining one’s narrow interest on the other are not opposites but positions combined in complicated ways.”
Moving to the Eastern context, since the late 1990s Chinese scholars—represented most prominently by Tingyang Zhao and Xuetong Yan—have also sought to examine the world from a traditional cosmopolitan perspective. Stoic cosmopolitanism provides modern cosmopolitan researchers with the notion of a “cosmos in which human kind might live together in harmony,” but a quite similar idea is found in the traditional Chinese idea of “all under heaven (tianxia 天下).” Zhao, a leading contemporary Chinese philosopher who authored *The Tianxia System: A Philosophy for the World Institution*, points out that the concept of *tianxia* establishes a “global perspective as opposed to local or national ones.” In his book *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, Yan, a distinguished professor at Tsinghua University, revisits and explores views from the pre-Qin period about “all under heaven” based on humane authority, which contain ideals of social justice, public service, and moral leadership.

**Conclusion**

In the contemporary world, imbued with high uncertainty and various emotionally-charged expressions of nationalism, racism, xenophobia, and secessionism, the significance of paying attention to and studying cosmopolitanism is obvious and imperative. One of the core goals of our cosmopolitan research group is not only to critically assess the reigning Western conceptions of cosmopolitanism, but also to introduce new theories and visions of cosmopolitanism drawn from non-Western, especially Chinese, resources, and use these to promote efforts to understand and navigate the global nature of the modern world and the multicultural dimension of contemporary society in order to improve the lives of “all under heaven.”
Notes

12 Ibid.