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DISCUSSION NOTES

Ethical and Social Concerns of Artificial Intelligence in Asia

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Abstract The exponential growth in Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the past few years has seen important new considerations in economics, global politics, communication, data analysis and more. Many great promises are in store for those who master this technology, but so too are many potential disasters. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Asia, the most populous continent where national strategies since 2017 have focused on the importance of AI for establishing the stability and prosperity of the region. On 16 and 17 October 2024, the Centre for Applied Ethics at Hong Kong Baptist University, in collaboration with the Dicastery for Culture and Education, held a conference to discuss particular social and ethical challenges facing Asia with AI. Scholars gathered from across the continent and even beyond to bring to light and collaborate on what issues we uniquely face. We offer this piece to highlight problems and potential responses.

Keywords Asia · Artificial Intelligence · Confucianism · Asian Societies · Occidental Bias · Asian ethics

Occidental Bias in Ethical Frameworks

Most ethical AI discussions are drawn from Western philosophical and religious frameworks. The consequence of this is that what have been deemed proper ethical issues for AI and what priority the issues should take have a specific cultural lineage. We suggest Asian values can and should also be part of these conversations to correct for Western bias.

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Moral status of Machines

The first issue which shows the tendency of AI ethics to be deeply occidental is the moral status accorded to machines. The current debate in the West, as suggested by David Gunkel, is whether AI deserves rights or not, which is usually determined by its "intelligence" [1]. This question presumes understanding AI as somehow being comparable to human beings in a human rights framework, and the criteria used for this typically are rooted in Western metaethical thinking [2].

Asian reflection offers different perspectives. Buddhism accepts the possibility of an AI being treated with respect for our own karma. Confucianism prioritizes relationship, which may include relational AI. Islam cautions against idolatrous treatment of AI. In each case, the reductive question of "intelligence" is not sufficient for moral status, nor even the primary condition.

Machine Ethics Frameworks

Much important work has been done on what ethical frameworks on which to train AI. The question of whether AI should be consequentialist or deontological is a Western dichotomy (and a false one at that). A Confucian-based virtue model will look to embed values into AI that help us become Confucian model persons, i.e., *junzi* [3, 4] while Buddhism emphasizes a teleological framework, the goal of which is based on a true understanding of nature.

Value alignment as well needs to be considered in terms beyond Western discourse. Harmony, propriety or a strong concept of trustworthiness, for example, are cultural values that East Asian countries may wish to build into their AI systems which are not prioritized in Western cultures.

Finally, even the aim or function of the AI system differs according to region and cultural interests. Korean Christians, for example, think of the potential of AI to spread their beliefs. Japanese people face a crisis of loneliness and so may seek AI "companionship" which can serve as a casual conversation partner.

Policy

At present, Western nations seem to have gone two directions with regard to policy. One, exemplified by the United States, is typically Laissez-Faire, with tech companies playing the dominant role and the government having little interference. The second, exemplified by the European Union, includes a strong regulatory framework limiting the function, development and use of AI. Asian countries face the dilemma of how to approach policy. China is taking a stronger position for regulation than South Korea and Japan are. Other legal systems like those in Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore may choose other ways. Asian countries also must contextualize what values should be subject to regulation. For example, privacy and transparency do not have the same significance and may have different considerations in Asian cultures from Western liberal democracies. In Asian philosophical systems, such as Confucianism, where virtues and close relationships hold paramount importance, the concept of privacy is often viewed through the lens of intimacy, emphasizing a distinctly different perspective compared to a Western moral theory like Kantian ethics. Access is also a key issue in a region where infrastructure and development leave wide gaps between the wealthy and the poor. Trustworthy AI, similarly, has a different sense in a Confucian framework from a social contract framework. If Asian countries imitate fully Western countries' policies, their AI systems will reproduce the colonial imposition of Western values that many Asian nations have historically experienced [5].

Philosophical Anthropologies

The status of the person and how AI can be imagined in relation to the person is a unique problem that divides Western ethical discussions from Asian (or broadly non-Western) perspectives. "Asia" is not philosophically or religiously monolithic, so different perspectives on the person should be given due attention.

Buddhist Anthropology

From a Buddhist perspective, an AI is not likely to be considered a person, though there is a possibility that an AI system could be considered a person if certain conditions obtain. One of the terms used

to indicate a "person" in Buddhism is *pudgala*, an entity that travels around samsara. Since an AI cannot die and transmigrate, it is not *pudgala*. However, use of AI for Buddhist ritual meditation or even conducting ritual is less controversial in Japan than is the case for parallel uses in Western Christian settings.

Islamic Anthropology

Islam has a strong prescription against idolatry. Unlike Christianity, which views humans as *imago Dei* and therefore capable of creating like God, Islam emphasizes that human beings are part of God's creation, and that the wonder of our minds and relation to the world is only properly understood with due reverence to God. The idea that we could create an artificial being like us is the continual temptation of idolatry, like the worship of the golden calf in place of God.

Confucian Anthropology

A proper person in Confucianism is someone who can become a junzi or even a sage. Becoming a *junzi* entails cultivating virtues such as *ren* and *yi*, honoring one's relationships, studying the classics, performing the rites, and living with propriety. There is perhaps nothing barring AI from achieving these ends, but only an AI capable of doing all of this and relating to us according to the proper modes of relationship is worthy of being considered as a person.

Colonial Pressures and Progress

Asian countries' relation to Western countries should also be understood in light of histories of colonialism (e.g. in India, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines) and so-called neo-colonialism and globalization. Taiwan and South Korea, while not traditional Western colonies, provides notable examples of Western influence through globalization and post-war political dynamics, and although Thailand escaped direct colonization by the Western powers, it largely follows the same trajectory as other colonized countries.

While China and the U.S. may be current global super powers, the economic and cultural status of Asia has been playing "catch up" with Western countries for decades. This context frames current struggles for AI domination, as Asian countries vie for prominence in AI research (China, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan) or rapidly seek to integrate AI into their existing economic strategies.

Asia's eagerness to compete with the West has meant that Asia both follows the winds of "progress" and makes sacrifices to be the testing grounds of new technologies. Asian societies are less cautious compared to Western countries, lacking the "Frankenstein complex" that allows pre-cautionary ethics to temper libertarian technological development. Rather, Asian countries, like South Korea, prioritize being a globally-ranked technology power over ethically-informed planning.

Additionally, Asian countries are dependent on Western countries for their current economic well-being. Taiwan, for example, depends heavily on American investment in their semi-conductor manufacturing. China has been unable to compete with the US in AI development because the US will not let Taiwan sell their chips to China. Countries in this region find their allegiances often torn between US economic colonialism and the nearby Chinese market.

Finally, since major tech companies have mostly utilized Western data (including literature, and languages), responses from Generative AI show cultural inclinations which disfavor non-Western cultures. As a result, there is a push among Japanese scholars and tech firms to establish "sovereign AI" which draws from Japanese cultural and historical material for its training data [6].

Unique Social Problems

Beyond the above issues, Asian societies themselves face unique challenges. The history, geography, economics, and culture of this area are not comparable to Europe or North America, and AI poses novel problems here which may not be relevant in other areas.

Inegalitarian Societies

AI has the unfortunate result of worsening inequality gaps in many places. In this region, wealthier societies like China, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan have quickly and decisively adopted AI to strengthen

their economies to compete with Western countries, though the benefits may not be evenly distributed within these societies. Poorer countries, like India, the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, scramble to develop AI regimes to avoid being left behind while large portions of their countries remain under-developed. In countries where inequalities are rampant, AI merely exacerbates these inequalities. In the Philippines, for example, spending money on AI development could mean under-funding other critical areas like education and IT infrastructure. Even absent AI-related problems, the integration of these two industries has been quite a challenge for the country, owing to "inadequate infrastructure and computer equipment available for educational usage in the schools in the Philippines" ([7], p.278). In India, Dalits, tribals and religious minorities have been the subject of abuse under Hindu nationalist policies. AI allows violent regimes to further exert control over these oppressed groups.

Ecological Destruction

AI's ecological impact continues to be under-reported. Some scholars have begun to highlight the water cost and carbon footprint involved in training large AIs in data centers [8, 9], but few have similarly noted the problem of e-waste and rare earth element processing needed for high-end computing [10]. These problems disproportionately affect Asia: climate change's consequences are borne out worse here, more people die of air pollution here, more e-waste is dumped here, and more mineral extraction and component assembly occurs here than in other parts of the world. In short, the real costs of developing AI are experienced more in Asia than in the wealthier Western countries.

Education

Asia places a high priority on education. In places like South Korea, Japan and Taiwan more than half of the adult population have bachelor degrees. Cities like Hong Kong and Singapore have multiple top-global universities. AI has created unique challenges and opportunities in this region. On one hand, if the actual uses and effects of a polypotent AI are typically directed by the dominant values of the social context in which the AI is adopted [11], then the highly-competitive nature of Asian education, when coupled with the mindset that education is more (or merely) a means than (but not) an end, makes dishonest use of generative AI highly attractive to students who feel the need to attain high grades no matter the costs. Instructors who often have over-sized classes have to figure out new ways of teaching and assessing students when they may lack basic manpower to do so, even as AI promises increased efficiency at tasks and a reduction in manpower needs. On the other hand, AI may be of use in helping Asian educational systems to better focus their curriculum on examples, history, studies and contexts situated in Asia rather than in Western countries. Asian moral traditions, such as Confucianism, can also offer perspectives on education that prioritize holistic development and personalized learning, potentially benefiting Asian educational systems [12].

The opportunities and challenges offered by AI for education also need to be examined in relation to other pressing issues in this region. As noted above, equality gaps mean that access to advanced version of AI can vary greatly across educational institutions and countries. Furthermore, in relation to colonizing pressures, reliance on AI tools for English editing, translating, and transcription may contribute to reinforcing norms from the white Anglophone world [13]. Another example is that instructors and policy-makers at educational institutions have a unique opportunity to teach and model environmental justice to students in their choices regarding the use of AI, as students and their families in Asia are among the most impacted by the ecological costs of AI.

Political Stability

AI has created unique problems for political stability. In Western Asia, for example, the reliance on LAVENDER by the Israeli government creates significant problems of uncritical trust in warfare. And given how different countries deem someone to be an enemy of the state, the state of facial recognition technologies, and conflicting political parties' interests, uncritical use of AI for national security is certainly a disaster at present, doing more to exacerbate worries and heighten tensions than to ease them. In the Demilitarized Zone, for example, or in Central Asia, definitions of terrorists or foreign enemies are not easily operizable for automated weapons

systems. In general, the capability of these technologies to make morally sound decisions is in question [14].

On the other hand, the spread of deep fakes serves to undermine political trust by creating fake stories about high-ranking leaders in democratic countries like Taiwan. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) global research project has observed a significant rise in the dissemination of false information by foreign governments in Taiwan since 2011, with recent years seeing an unprecedented surge in such activity [15]. Generative AI is already widely employed to create text and short videos, offering an efficient and scalable means of spreading disinformation, surpassing the traditional use of deepfake videos or images [16]. Thus, AI poses real threats to political stability and harmony, especially in a region where tensions persist across, and even within, national borders.

Elder Care

In places like China, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan, low birth rates and longer lifespans have created a difficult situation in which the elderly do not have enough support to care for them. AI offers one solution to help meet the needs of older populations, but at least two problems emerge. Confucian cultures insist on the obligation of caring for one's parents in their later years, as do other cultures such as the Philippines [17]. The act of caring for the elderly is considered an obligation that AI must not supplant. Apart from the concern from social arrangements, however, the employment of AI for elderly care can also lead to job displacements. Such use could potentially affect countries like the Philippines ([18], p.97), which deploys a significant number of healthcare workers (e.g., caregivers, nurses, etc.) abroad. Additionally, removing the human element of care seems to signify that we have relegated our vulnerable and venerable elders to an undignified status. However, AI can certainly be useful as a tool to empower caregivers and children.

Gender-Based Challenges

Non-consensual deepfake pornography has become a growing issue in the Asia–Pacific region, where reports of deepfake-related incidents surged by 1,530% between 2022 and 2023, making it the second most affected area globally, following North America [19]. AI technology is frequently misused to produce explicit content targeting women and minors. High-profile cases, such as Taiwan's "Hsiao Yu Deepfake Face-Swapping Scandal" [20], reveal how these crimes disproportionately affect women. While this problem extends beyond Asia, the AI-generated explicit images targeting American singer Taylor Swift illustrate how the intersection of AI misuse and gender-based violence amplifies the scale and severity of such crimes globally. This sharp rise highlights the urgent need for stronger international cooperation, public awareness, and regulatory measures to combat the growing exploitation of vulnerable groups through AI technologies [21]. Furthermore, algorithmic biases that disadvantage women and other marginalized groups continue to be a problem.

One Alternative Solution: Confucian AI?

Finally, in lieu of only pointing out the dangers and divergences between Western and Asian ethical approaches to AI, it should be noted that an alternative, authentically Asian approach to AI should be outlined. Confucianism offers many suggestions for what an AI could be.

In designing the values of the AI, a thin Western concept of trustworthiness will be supplanted by the thicker, interrelational concept of *xin*. Whether an AI can have *xin* is debatable, but the engineers who design the AI can and should cultivate Confucian virtue before they approach their work. Such engineers will also focus on harmony as a value system, balancing the aims and needs of their firms with those of the users.

To be "good" from a Confucian perspective, the values built into the AI should aim at shaping human virtue cultivation as well. It should help us better uphold our relationships and care for the natural environment. It should promote our attention and deep study of the classics. One potential for doing this may be giving AI a "Confucian" personality.

It will finally be important to note that a key aspect of Confucian AI would be the "role" it plays. Confucianism emphasizes that one has different responsibilities based on the relationship they have with

others, what propriety calls for in a given situation, and how to carry out the virtues. AI systems at present are developed for narrow purposes (ANI) while some aim for "Artificial General Intelligence" (AGI) that can do everything a human can do. An ANI may be a better model from a Confucian perspective, oriented toward one relationship which it can carry out appropriately.

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