INTRODUCTION:
TOWARDS A CONFUCIAN BIOETHICS

I. “MUSEUM” BIOETHICS OR REAL BIOETHICS?

The title of this volume, *Confucian Bioethics*, may sound odd to some. It is odd to them not because they find Confucianism has lost its traditional strength in its homeland. It is odd because they doubt any essential relevance that Confucianism still has to contemporary society in general or to bioethical issues in particular. As the world changes, it seems that all traditional world views have been in retreat before a global cosmopolitan view. Confucianism is the tradition that seems to have declined most speedily in the 20th century. Even the so-called “last Confucian” has passed away (Aittoo, 1985). For some, the only appropriate “ism” for the contemporary world is cosmopolitanism, because it attempts through reason alone to provide moral guidance to all people in all places. Confident in the creative power and justifying capacity of human reason, cosmopolitans hold that all particular traditional moral resources are rationally irrelevant to contemporary moral regulation. Indeed, cosmopolitanism intends to be independent from any particular tradition.

This volume illustrates an intellectual picture that differs from the view of cosmopolitanism. Instead of engaging in cosmopolitan bioethics, it offers particular Confucian perspectives concerning important bioethical issues. Specifically, this volume provides the Confucian views regarding the human body, health, virtue, suffering, suicide, euthanasia, “human drugs,” human experimentation, and health care justice. These views are Confucian because they are derived from particular Confucian metaphysical, cosmological, and moral convictions and assumptions. They contrast with modern Western liberal perspectives in a number of important ways. If one is not sympathetic to basic Confucian metaphysical assumptions and/or moral convictions, one cannot find these views appealing. Indeed, the major authors for this volume are Chinese scholars studying or working in North American areas. They provide bioethical assumptions, arguments, and conclusions that are peculiarly Confucian, not cosmopolitan. Some, following the academic tendency of cosmopolitanism in the present time, would wonder why
these authors cannot simply explore bioethical issues from a reasonable neutral stance, i.e., from a stance that is only based on reason and is not based on any particular tradition like Confucianism? Why is it necessary to pursue Confucian bioethics? And what is the epistemic status of Confucian bioethics?

These questions are not new. In fact, as early as the 1960s, historian Joseph Levenson already vividly described the triumph of cosmopolitan culture over the Confucian tradition. He predicted that the fate of Confucianism was inevitably decline:

[t]he sageliness of Confucius may still be felt in China (or felt again), like Socrates’ in Europe. But Confucian civilization would be as “historical” as Greek, and modern Chinese culture as cosmopolitan as any, like the western culture that reaches now, in paper-back catholicity, to “The Wisdom of Confucius.” In a true world history, when all past achievements are in the museum without walls, everyone’s past would be everyone else’s; which implies that quite un-Confucian thing, the loss of the sense of tradition (1968, Part Three, p. 123).

The sense of tradition is lost in contemporary society because, from Levenson’s historical perspective, no tradition can still stand as a whole. World civilizations are placed in “the museum without walls” only for visiting, not for living. When traditions are unavoidably fragmented in “the museum,” cosmopolitanism arises in life.

The bits and pieces of valuable items left from each tradition may be incorporated into the melting pot of cosmopolitanism in the expectation of forming a unified moral system that can be justified by reason alone and be accepted by everyone alike. Accordingly, cosmopolitanism strictly speaking does not attempt to go without any traditional trappings; instead, it attempts to mix all and only rationally justifiable items from all traditions to shape a new comprehensive doctrine. The content of this doctrine is expected to cover only that which can pass the tribunal of reason. It is hoped that the “truth” from this doctrine is similarly presented, wherever people find themselves in the world, Beijing or New York, London or Singapore. Moreover, from this doctrine, people should have changed to “cosmopolitans” from traditional “communitarians.” Consequently, to cosmopolitans, to do Confucian bioethics in the contemporary age is only to do “museum” bioethics. It may offer some useful bioethical bricks and tiles to the general building of cosmopolitan