Introduction

**Toward Confucian Democratic Theory**

The Plasticity of “Democracy” in the East Asian Political Discourse

One puzzling phenomenon in modern political science and political theory is that as democracy has become ubiquitous in many parts of the world and democratic values have become increasingly accepted as universal human values, the term “democracy” has become almost a cliche, losing its definitional political meaning. This is especially so among East Asians who have yet to establish (full) democracy, despite their strong desire for it, and those who have attained it only recently through bloody fights against authoritarian forces. On one extreme, democracy means everything good: political stability, economic development, quality of life, full protection of individual human rights, maximal respect of diversity, and so on. On the other extreme, democracy is associated with the detriments that Western liberal democracies are currently struggling with, such as unbridled egoism, consumerism, erosion of the common good, and social anomie – all of which might ultimately contribute to high divorce rates, dysfunctional families, juvenile violence, and so on.

For those who are in the first extreme, democratic struggle aims primarily to “remedy evils experienced in consequence of [existing or] prior political institutions.”¹ Thus understood, democracy not only is compatible with but also can provide optimal political and societal conditions for a market economy, rights-based individualism, value pluralism (or cultural pluralism), a vibrant civil society, and social justice. In a democracy, the argument goes, we can have all these goods simultaneously and without any internal contradictions, if we, the citizens, so will it; if any of these goods are missing or if there is any tension between these goods in our putatively democratic system, quite simply our democracy has not reached its pinnacle, or in political scientific language, our

democracy has not yet been consolidated. Originally conceived negatively as the absence of evils, therefore, democracy in this understanding turns out to be “democratic faith,” an optimistic belief in the omnipotence of democracy.\(^2\)

For those on the other extreme, however, democracy is the source of “Western evils” and the global resurgence of democracy as the only legitimate political regime is more than alarming. Here, democracy is nothing more than mob rule, namely, rule by the ignorant and self-interested many, where tyranny of majority is the defining characteristic.\(^3\) Of interest, however, the focus here is not on the Tocquevillian or Millian apprehension that the tyrannical majority suffocates individual souls and makes liberal self-experiment and democratic self-government impossible. Quite the contrary, the key argument is that in a democracy, tyranny of majority is inevitable precisely because of democracy’s preoccupation with individualism, whatever that may mean practically (individual self-interest, individual self-identity, or individual self-government); democratic accommodation of individual self-interest erodes the common good, democratic respect for individual self-identity destroys social harmony, and democratic commitment to individual self-government threatens political order. Committed to political equality (thus ignoring the importance of excellence and merit) and upholding self-interested and rights-based individualism (thus jeopardizing public interest and common good), democracy turns out to be an anathema.

However, democracy is neither omnipotent nor impotent, and neither understanding of democracy captures the core tenets of democracy as a political system and as a social practice.

Contra the first view, democracy is not the comprehensive package of all good things we cherish qua human being. Democracy includes both the political system in which power resides not in kings or aristocrats but in ordinary citizens who are free and equal, and its underlying public culture that makes popular sovereignty not merely a political slogan but a palpable social reality. Therefore, collective self-determination and protection of citizens’ basic rights are central to democracy, and together they can undergird political equality and thus realize popular sovereignty.\(^4\) Deeply concerned with what the citizens

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\(^{4}\) See Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, 20th anniversary ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Ian Shapiro, *Democratic Justice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). By “the citizenry’s basic rights” I mean the rights that people are entitled to qua citizens in a democratic polity, not natural rights that they putatively possess in the natural state qua human beings. Following Corey Bretschneider, we can call rights of the
commonly share – legally, politically, and public culturally – and trusting the citizenry’s capacity to resolve common problems through public deliberation and contestation (i.e., through civic virtue), democracy is often in tension with value pluralism that stresses diversity more than public commonality, rights-based individualism that puts the individual right before the common good, and social justice, the attainment of which is sometimes sought by circumscribing democratic deliberation and contestation both in the legislature and, more important, in civil society. In short, democratic politics is premised on the realistic observation that good democratic citizenship is not always congruent with good membership or with one's unique individuality. The virtue of democratic politics, instead, lies precisely in the way it resolves such tensions, however temporarily – not by appealing to abstract moral principles but by all affected citizens participating in public deliberation.

From the perspective of democracy understood in terms of collective self-determination and protection of citizen rights, the second view is equally, if not more, problematic. Although the view is mistaken, in a sense it is natural that democracy is idealized by its proponents, most of whom are not educated in democratic theory and principles, particularly those under authoritarian regimes. What is needed for them is John Dewey’s reminder that “political forms do not originate in a once for all way [and] the greatest change, once it is accomplished, is simply the outcome of a vast series of adaptation and responsive accommodations, each to its own particular situation.” In contrast, the problem of the second view lies in the stark “East versus West” dichotomy, but its complete rejection of democracy is based on the massive confusion that identifies democracy with everything one finds abhorrent in existing Western liberal democracies, be it market consumerism, rights-based individualism, or the morally irresponsible political system of one person, one vote, which only justifies and ineluctably results in mob rule.


On this so-called incongruence thesis between democratic citizenship and associational membership (and/or individual plurality), see Nancy L. Rosenblum, Membership and Morals: The Personal Uses of Pluralism in America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).


Dewey, Public and Its Problems, 84.
condition that can best accommodate individual self-identity and self-interest should not mislead us to conclude that it is grounded in and also engenders atomistic individualism and/or neoliberal consumerism, only to erode the communal bond and impair the common good. Likewise, democracy’s ability to accommodate value pluralism should not be misunderstood as democracy’s acquiescence to the “perils of pluralism.” While respecting value plurality and associational freedom, democracy offers political institutions and a civil society that can mitigate (if not eliminate) social ills resulting from the vicissitudes of pluralism. We cannot oppose democracy by identifying it in terms of the things that democracy actively opposes or aims to mitigate. This is more than a categorical mistake. Its political cost is simply huge.

East Asian Particularism Revisited

This book is motivated by the conviction that democracy, properly understood, is desperately needed in East Asia, where political regimes remain authoritarian or only partially democratic. In this regard, this book shares the first view’s faith in democracy enabling a viable and flourishing social and political life for its citizens, with the additional aim of articulating the societal conditions of democracy, originally of Western provenance, under which democracy would work best in East Asia – historically Confucian – societies, accommodating other social goods and values that are not necessarily democratic. The central thesis of this book is that in East Asian societies democracy would be most politically effective and culturally relevant if it were rooted in and operates on the “Confucian habits and mores” with which East Asians are still deeply saturated, sometimes without their awareness – in other words, if democracy were a Confucian democracy.9

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9 Whether citizens in East Asian, historically Confucian, countries are still deeply soaked in Confucian habits and mores is an important empirical question, and this book, which aims at a normative political theory of Confucian democracy, does not attempt an empirical test for my foundational sociological observation. Instead, for such empirical evidence, I draw attention to recent social scientific studies relying on public opinion surveys and their statistical analysis. See Doh Chull Shin, Confucianism and Democratization in East Asia (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Chong-Min Park and Doh Chull Shin, “Do Asian Values Deter Popular Support for Democracy in South Korea?,” Asian Survey 46 (2006), 341–61; Yu-Tzung Chang and Yun-han Chu, “Traditionalism, Political Learning and Conceptions of Democracy in East Asia” (Asian Barometer Working Paper Series No. 39, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2007); Yu-Tzung Chang, Yun-han Chu, and Frank Tsai, “Confucianism and Democratic Values in Three Chinese Societies,” Issues & Studies 41 (2005), 1–13. Readers may object that survey data alone are short of providing compelling evidence for the claim that East Asians still possess the Confucian habit of the heart by pointing to some methodological limits inherent in the survey-based research on values, and, to be sure, the scientific validity of such
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Even though Confucian democracy sounds foreign or even anachronistic to many East Asians, many of whom attribute their sufferings following the “Western impact” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to Confucianism, particularly its failure to modernize the state and society, Confucian democracy is hardly a novel idea among East Asian political scientists and political theorists and Western academics active in East Asia. In fact, in the course of refuting Samuel Huntington’s provocative claim that “Confucian democracy” is a contradiction in terms and Francis Fukuyama’s end of history thesis that liberal democracy is the only morally and politically legitimate universal value in the post–Cold War era, scholars of East Asia have actively searched for Confucian democracy as the viable political alternative to Western liberal democracy. Although the debate remains ongoing as to whether Confucian democracy is possible both in theory and in practice, and if possible what it should look like, in the past two decades, three dominant theses have emerged in the discourse of Confucian democracy, namely, the particularism thesis, the communitarianism thesis, and the meritocracy thesis.

(1) The particularism thesis declares that Confucian democracy is a valid East Asian response to cultural imperialism, political hegemony, and ethical monism implicated in the globalization of liberal democracy. Confucian democracy offers political institutions and a civil society that are most suitable to East Asia’s particular cultural context.

research hangs critically on the reliable definitions of the key concepts (say, “Confucianism”) and the proper measurements of the variables (e.g., family-oriented worldview, filial piety, ritual propriety, deference, respect of elders, social harmony, etc.). That said, it is worth noting that a good number of interpretive – sociological, philosophical-anthropological, social psychological, and legal – studies on Confucian values and practices among East Asians (particularly South Koreans), which occasionally draw on survey data, content analysis, and/or in-depth interviews, generally suggest the same conclusion. For such studies, see Byung-ik Koh, “Confucianism in Contemporary Korea,” in Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity: Moral Education and Economic Culture in Japan and Four Mini-Dragons, ed. Tu Weiming (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Geir Helgesen, Democracy and Authority in Korea: The Cultural Dimension in Korean Politics (Surrey: Curzon, 1998); C. Fred Alford, Think No Evil: Korean Values in the Age of Globalization (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Sun-young Ryu, “Han’gukinui yugyojeok gachicheukjeongmunhang gaebal yeon’gu” [Item Development for Korean Confucian Values], Korean Journal of Management 15 (2007), 171–205; Chaihark Hahm, “Disputing Civil Society in a Confucian Context,” Korea Observer 35 (2004), 433–62.


11 While the first two theses are almost unanimously affirmed by the advocates of Confucian democracy, the third thesis is controversial. For instance, Sor-hoon Tan, a strong advocate of Confucian communitarian democracy, is critical of political meritocracy (actually, meritocratic elitism) of the kind advanced by other Confucian communitarians such as Daniel Bell, for Bell’s argument for political meritocracy in China, see Daniel A. Bell, “Taking Elitism Seriously,” in Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). Tan’s criticism of Bell is found in her “Beyond Elitism: A Community Ideal for a Modern East Asia,” Philosophy East and West 59 (2009), 537–53.
The communitarianism thesis asserts that as Western liberal democracy is predicated on the assumption of rights-based individualism, and since rights-based individualism is incompatible with Confucian role-ethics and a communitarian culture and philosophy, the most appropriate mode of democracy in East Asian societies is a Confucian communitarian democracy.

The meritocracy thesis proclaims that Confucian democracy offers a political alternative to liberal representative democracy, which is structurally inhibited from producing responsible and sound long-term public policies due to staggering electoral pressures on representatives from ordinary citizens who are largely self-interested, shortsighted, and of mediocre intelligence. By contrast, Confucianism upholds a political meritocracy understood as rule by the “best and brightest.”

Although the mode of political practice that I am proposing in this book embraces some elements from all three theses either explicitly or implicitly, my proposal is significantly different from the existing suggestions. Let me begin with the particularism thesis. Indeed, there is a danger of value monism in the presumption that the transition from an authoritarian regime to democracy in East Asian societies is completed with the establishment and consolidation of a Western-style liberal democracy, an assumption that is most salient in the political scientific studies of democracy. And given its nature as a sociopolitical practice involving constant social, political, and cultural adaptations and reformulations, democracy cannot be reduced to a set of moral and political principles, and must be context-sensitive and culturally grounded. There is no disagreement here with the conviction that Confucian democracy can offer an important pluralist corrective to global value monism and cultural universalism from the perspective of East Asian particularism (if not parochialism).

However, I disagree with the core claim of the particularism thesis – that Confucian democracy and liberal democracy are diametrically opposed to each other and that in East Asia the former must replace the latter in both political institutions and civil society. Confucian critics of liberal democracy tend to identify liberal democracy solely in terms of rights-based individualism as if liberal democracy is founded on, and thus is not possible without, it. Since


This claim is most salient among Chinese scholars such as Jiang Qing, Kang Xiaoguang, and Chen Ming. See Zhengzhii Rujia: Dangdai Rujia de zhuaniang, tezhi yu fazhan [Political Confucianism: Contemporary Confucianism’s Challenge, Special Quality, and Development] (Beijing: San lian shu dian, 2003); Renzheng: Zhongguo zhengzhi fazhan de disantiao daolu
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rights-based individualism is culturally and philosophically incompatible with Confucianism, which is at its core a communitarian ethics, and since rights-based individualism and communitarian ethics are diametrically opposed, the critics’ reasoning goes, Confucian democracy is both philosophically and practically inconceivable without going beyond liberal democracy. The problem with this incompatibility claim is that it reduces politics (and political theory and practice) to a self-contained philosophical or ethical thesis. At the heart of this claim lies the assumption that philosophical incompatibility directly leads to political incompatibility and that mutually incompatible ethical systems cannot coexist (or cohabit) or dialectically interact with each other. It is, however, beyond this book’s scope to examine whether or not Confucianism as a philosophical system is incommensurable with rights-based individualism.

So let us put this purely philosophical question aside and instead focus on two methodological problems in the theorization(s) of Confucian democracy thus far.

First, I find it problematic to think of Confucian democracy as a purely philosophical construct. The strategy has been, first, to reconstruct Confucian ethics or Confucian political philosophy with reference to ancient Confucian classics in the communitarian perspective and, second, to present it as an alternative political vision and practice to liberal democracy. But this produces mainly a philosophical reconstruction of Confucianism in light of contemporary


For a recent criticism of this view, see Stephen C. Angle, Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy: Toward Progressive Confucianism (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

communitarianism without construction of a Confucian democracy that is politically relevant in existing East Asian societies both as a political system and as a social practice. The intention is to contrast Confucian democracy to liberal democracy, but in the end communitarian Confucianism and liberal rights-based individualism are contrasted. The democracy part remains untouched.

Therefore, scholars remain unclear regarding whether or not Confucian democracy thus understood can be a robust democratic political practice in any realistic sense without having liberal constitutionalism (consisting of checks and balances, an independent judiciary, judicial review, etc.) as an institutional backdrop. In this sense, it is quite ironic that when some of the Confucian critics of liberal democracy articulate their Confucian democratic institutional vision more directly, quite often they do not merely go beyond liberal democracy but leave out democracy in toto.

Second and related, it is just as problematic to understand liberal democracy as a purely (deontological) philosophical system. It is true that while many liberal philosophers (especially in the Kantian-Rawlsian strand) construct their normative political theory of liberal democracy on the assumption of rights-based individualism, there is a valid normative and methodological ground for disagreement with such attempts. In fact, the communitarian critiques of liberalism in the West during the 1980s and the 1990s revolved around just this problem. More specifically, when communitarians criticized John Rawls's A Theory of Justice, their major focus was on his philosophical apparatus of the original position and the Kantian deontological reconstruction of the liberal self as a socially unencumbered self. Put differently, the debate was between social, civic, or communitarian liberals and deontological liberals, not between antiliberals and liberals. None of the communitarian critics of (deontological) liberalism took issue with liberalism as a political system (i.e.,

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18 This is clearly true of Daniel Bell and Tongdong Bai (See Chapter 3 for my critical examination of their institutional proposals) and less so of Hall and Ames, who take issue with the Western rule of law but do not advance alternative Confucian political institutions except Confucian ritualism. Tan’s view is similar to those of Hall and Ames, but her critique of liberal democracy is more moderate and sensitive. It is still unclear though whether Tan endorses liberal constitutionalism as an integral element of her Deweyan Confucian democracy. For a pointed criticism of Bell’s institutional proposal, see Fred Dallmayr, “Exiting Liberal Democracy: Bell and Confucian Thought,” Philosophy East and West 59 (2009), 524–10.


20 Although I appreciate Stephen Holmes’s presentation of liberalism as political theory and practice, I think his charge of communitarians as antiliberals is too strong, even misleading. See his The Anatomy of Antiliberalism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
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liberal constitutionalism) or as a political practice (i.e., public freedom and citizen rights). It is one thing for Confucian communitarian democrats, who are deeply inspired by Western communitarians, to engage critically with a certain brand of liberal political philosophy; it is another to reduce liberal politics to deontological liberalism.

This is not to argue that Confucian democrats must embrace liberal politics, specifically liberal constitutional politics. My point is that if there is no inherent and foundational connection between deontological liberalism, the main focus of the Confucian criticism of liberalism, and liberal-democratic and constitutional politics, there is no strong reason to present Confucian democracy and liberal democracy as polar opposites. Again, democracy can mean or include many different things, but at its core, it is a political system and a sociopolitical practice, not a philosophical idea or an ethical precept.

East Asians no longer live in a traditional Confucian society, where Confucian political doctrines and moral precepts enjoyed cultural and ideological monopoly in both central government and local communities, and virtually all East Asian societies have been more or less liberalized, pluralized, and democratized, compared to their old Confucian counterparts. Although some Confucian philosophers continue to raise skepticism about the relevance of human rights in the East Asian context, reiterating the philosophical incompatibility claim, rights discourse and rule of law have become integral parts of East Asian life. Only very few East Asians self-consciously identify themselves as “Confucians,” and a very small number of them wish to return to an old-style Confucian regime, however “noble” it would appear from a contemporary philosophical and atheistic viewpoint.

Confucian democracy as a political vision and practice must be socially relevant in contemporary East Asian societies and must be able to appeal to ordinary East Asian citizens who now belong to various moral, philosophical, cultural, and religious communities. However, the idea of Confucian democracy that is philosophically constructed in reference to ancient Confucian classics without much consideration of its social relevance in modern and pluralistic East Asian societies can hardly achieve this crucial political goal. Therefore,

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41 Certainly, Jiang Qing is one example of such (religious) “Confucians” who differentiate themselves from (secular) “Confucianists.” For Jiang’s distinction between Confucians and Confucianists, see his Confucian Constitutional Order, 47. To be fair, while envisioning Confucian constitutionalism by returning the sovereign authority back to heaven (or its representatives, viz., Confucian scholars), Jiang clearly says that he is not a reactionary but a reformer who embraces China’s republican historical context.

42 It should be clarified that my problem with the philosophical construction of Confucian democracy lies not so much in its attempt to reconstruct Confucian political philosophy with reference to Confucian classics as such (there is nothing wrong with this endeavor) but in its failure to address the central feature of democracy as collective self-determination, particularly in the modern societal context. In this regard, it is surprising that recent “Deweyan” Confucian democrats do not pay enough attention to Dewey’s analysis of social and practical conditions under which politically significant problems arise and “publics” (in Dewey’s distinct sense) emerge.
I suggest a more political version of Confucian democracy: instead of trying to surpass liberal democracy, East Asians should attempt to Confucianize partially liberal and democratic regimes that currently exist.

This suggestion is based on my observation that the real problem East Asians are struggling with is not so much the putative philosophical incompatibility between Confucianism and liberalism but the frustrating reality that the (more or less) democratic institutions that they (or their leaders) have imported from the West do not work as the theories of liberal democracy claim. Of course, no political regime can operate precisely as political theory stipulates. But East Asians are currently experiencing more than the usual discrepancy between theory and practice. The gist of the East Asian problem lies in the systematic discord between the more or less liberal-democratic institutional-political hardware and the social-cultural software that should operate it. Put differently, liberal discourse and liberal-democratic institutions are not socially relevant in East Asian societies, where citizens are soaked in Confucian habits and mores, often without self-awareness.

The result is the widespread complaint that there is no genuine democracy in East Asia, followed by the common suggestion for the transformation of East Asian societies and its civic culture through “attitudinal, cognitive, and behavioral” changes among the East Asian citizenry.

From the perspective of cultural pluralism, however, this attempt to attain a perfect congruence between democratic institutions and their underlying civic culture is overbearing. The Confucian democracy that I am proposing in this book is predicated on the Confucian habits and mores that citizens, while subscribing to different comprehensive moral doctrines, broadly share as the core components of their public culture and as the affective sources for their public reasoning. In this suggested Confucian democracy, the formal political structure is largely undergirded on liberal-democratic political institutions as they offer sophisticated institutional mechanisms to check the arbitrary power of the power-holders, thereby protecting the citizenry’s public freedom and each individual citizen’s constitutional rights.


See Koh, “Confucianism in Contemporary Korea”; Alford, Think No Evil.


For instance, Doh Chull Shin asserts, “To operate the institutional hardware, a democratic political system requires ‘software’ that is congruent with the various hardware components” (Shin, Confucianism and Democratization, 7).

Of course, this formal liberal-democratic political structure is open to Confucian revisions. But it is not prudent to refuse to adopt liberal-democratic political institutions simply because they are not East Asian or Confucian in origin when they better protect public freedom and political rights than old or reformed Confucian institutions. In this regard, I strongly agree with Stephen