Introduction

TWO KINDS OF CONFUCIAN PERFECTIONISM

Over the past two decades, political theorists of East Asia and beyond have been struggling with nonliberal political regimes and practices pertinent in East Asia's Confucian philosophical and societal contexts, resulting in the emergence of Confucian political theory as an important subfield in political theory. Earlier in this development, the major concern was constructing Confucian democracy as an alternative to the dominant Western-style democracy by critiquing its underlying liberal premises, then dialectically reconnecting the ideals and institutions of democracy, decoupled from liberalism (particularly liberal rights-based individualism), to Confucian ethics and practices.[1] Overall, in its developing stage, Confucian political theory was primarily a democratic project, even though the robustness of its democratic character was sometimes questioned, especially against the societal backdrop of pluralism.

What is distinctive about the more recent developments of Confucian political theory, often formulated in terms of *political meritocracy*, is its deep skepticism of, even objection to, democratic ideals (such as popular sovereignty and political equality) and democratic practices (such as competitive election based on "one person one vote" and universal

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[1] Most representative studies in this endeavor are David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *The Democracy of the Dead: Dewey, Confucius, and the Hope for Democracy in China* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999); Sor-hoon Tan, *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004); Brooke A. Ackerly, "Is Liberalism the Only Way toward Democracy? Confucianism and Democracy," *Political Theory* 33:4 (2005), pp. 547–576.

political participation).[2] Daniel Bell, an ardent advocate of political mer-
itocracy, defines the term as "the idea that a political system should aim to
select and promote leaders with superior ability and virtue."[3] Most often,
in efforts to justify their normative position, advocates of Confucian
political meritocracy draw attention to various social and political prob-
lems of Western liberal democracies – problems that they argue are
directly correlated with popular sovereignty and political equality. Some
even point to the recent economic success of China or Singapore to make
a case for political meritocracy. Bell is most vocal in this regard when he
asserts, "the world is watching China's experiment with meritocracy.
China, unlike Singapore, can 'shake the world.' In the early 1990s,
nobody predicted that China's economy would rise so fast to become
the world's second largest economy. In twenty years' time, perhaps we
will be debating how Chinese-style political meritocracy set an alternative
model – and perhaps – challenge to Western-style democracy."[4]

Justification for Confucian meritocracy as a normative theory goes
even further than these practical concerns. Though varied in their indi-
vidual proposals, advocates of Confucian meritocracy largely share some
perfectionist assumptions: (1) Confucian ethics is a kind of perfectionist
ethics that assumes the existence of an objectively good life and thus aims
for moral perfection of the people; (2) given the inseparability between
Confucian ethics and politics, the supreme goal of Confucian politics lies
in promoting the objectively good life (as stipulated in Confucian ethics)
as well as securing socioeconomic conditions that enable such a life; and
therefore (3) the state in a Confucian polity is morally authorized to
promote a particular (Confucian) conception of the good life in a non-
coercive way. There are two underlying arguments here: first, democracy

[2] Tongdong Bai, *China: The Political Philosophy of the Middle Kingdom* (New York: Zed
Book, 2012); Daniel A. Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East
Asian Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); idem., *The China Model:
Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,
2015); Joseph Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times*
(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Ruiping Fan, *Reconstructionist Confucian-
ism: Rethinking Morality after the West* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010); Jiang Qing,
*A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China's Ancient Past Can Shape Its Political
Future*, eds. Daniel A. Bell and Ruiping Fan and trans. Edmund Ryden (Princeton:
Princeton University Press, 2013).
[3] Daniel A. Bell, "Introduction: The Theory, History, and Practice of Political Meritocracy,"
in *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Per-
spective*, eds. Daniel A. Bell and Chenyang Li (New York: Cambridge University Press,
2013), p. 7.
[4] Ibid., p. 5.

is largely instrumentally valuable or altogether unimportant as long as the
perfectionist ends are promoted by the state without the use of violence or
illegitimate coercion, and second, the key agents of state perfectionism are
"leaders with superior ability and virtue."

When philosophically justified in terms of perfectionism, Confucian
meritocracy poses a formidable challenge to Confucian democrats wrest-
ling with democratic citizenship and participation in the Confucian soci-
etal context. Simply put, it is difficult for Confucian democrats to deny the
heavy perfectionist elements in early Confucianism, by which both they
and the champions of Confucian meritocracy are equally inspired,[5] and
therefore it is also difficult for them to reject the attempt to rejuvenate and
enact Confucian perfectionism and by implication Confucian meritoc-
racy – or, put together, *Confucian meritocratic perfectionism* – in modern
East Asian societies with a Confucian heritage. Thus, it is not surprising
that David Hall and Roger Ames, advocates of Deweyan Confucian
democracy, condone, if not actively support, political meritocracy, not-
withstanding their strong commitment to universal political participa-
tion.[6] The dilemma for them and many other "Confucian" democrats,
including myself, is therefore as follows: on the one hand, Confucian
democrats are also perfectionist as long as they wish to make East Asian
polities a *Confucian* (democratic) polity, and hence nonneutral to other
competing ideas of the good life including liberalism;[7] on the other hand,
Confucian democrats embrace democracy (and the ideals and values
integral to it such as popular sovereignty and political equality) as non-
instrumentally valuable under the modern circumstances of social
diversity, value pluralism, and moral disagreement, and reject (or wish
to reject) political elitism implied in traditional Confucian ethics and

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[5] Deweyan Confucian democrats such as David Hall and Roger Ames (and arguably Sor-
hoon Tan) offer an interesting case because while they do not believe that Confucian ethics
is premised on the existence of the objective good and instead understand Confucianism
mainly as an aesthetic ideal of human creativity in which each person is author of her or
his own life, their communitarian political vision is clearly perfectionist, aimed at moral
growth of the people.

[6] For criticisms on the elitist components in Hall and Ames's vision of Deweyan Confucian
democracy, see Shaun O'Dwyer, "Democracy and Confucian Values," *Philosophy East
and West* 53 (2003), pp. 39–63, esp. pp. 53–57, and Sungmoon Kim, "John Dewey and
Confucian Democracy: Towards Common Citizenship," *Constellations* 22:1 (2015), pp.
31–43.

[7] Liberalism is often regarded as a universal moral system, neutral to other comprehensive
moral values. I contest this conventional wisdom, particularly in Chapter 2, by critically
engaging with Rawls's political liberalism, arguably the most neutral form of contempor-
ary liberalism.

political philosophy.[8] We can call this dilemma faced by Confucian democrats the *perfectionism dilemma*.

The aim of this book is twofold. First, it attempts to relieve Confucian democrats from the perfectionist dilemma by defending *Confucian democratic perfectionism*, a mode of comprehensive Confucian perfectionism that not only can accommodate the plurality of values in civil society but also is fully compatible with constitutive values of democracy such as popular sovereignty, political equality, and the right to political participation. After defending Confucian democratic perfectionism against the recent challenge of Confucian meritocratic perfectionism, it then explores what I call *public reason Confucianism*, a particular style of Confucian democratic perfectionism that is, as will be argued, the most attractive option in contemporary East Asian societies that are historically and (public) culturally Confucian.

DIFFICULTIES OF CONFUCIAN MERITOCRATIC PERFECTIONISM

One of the major problems in recent proposals of Confucian meritocratic perfectionism is their shifting attitudes toward democracy. For instance, while arguing for the perfectionist promotion of Confucian values (such as filial piety) and family-oriented public policies (such as family ownership of property) in East Asian countries,[9] Daniel Bell finds it "tempting to conceive of the possibility of reconciling the Confucian emphasis on rule by wise and virtuous elites [required due to the sheer complexity of public affairs] with the democratic values of popular participation,

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[8] Note that even the strongest Confucian critics of Confucian political meritocracy have yet to advance a coherent normative stance toward perfectionism on which Confucian meritocracy is justified, leaving their critique incomplete from a philosophical standpoint. For instance, see Sor-hoon Tan, "Beyond Elitism: A Community Ideal for a Modern East Asia," *Philosophy East and West* 59 (2009), pp. 537–553. I admit that the same criticism is equally applicable to my earlier work *Confucian Democracy in East Asia: Theory and Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014) in which I did not show in a philosophically lucid and systematic way how the nonneutral promotion of Confucian public reason can be compatible with intrinsic values of democracy in the societal context of value pluralism. In this current work, I attempt to provide a more robust philosophical foundation for my normative idea of Confucian democracy from a perfectionist standpoint.

[9] Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy*, pp. 243–251; Daniel A. Bell, "Confucian Constraints on Property Rights," in *Confucianism for the Modern World*, eds. Daniel A. Bell and Chaibong Hahm (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 218–235.

accountability, and transparency."[10] Famously, Bell's solution is to create
a bicameral legislature, with a democratically elected lower house and a
"Confucian" upper house composed of representatives selected on the
basis of competitive examinations in the Confucian classics, among other
things. What imparts to this arrangement a distinctively "Confucian"
mark is the constitutional formula providing supermajorities in the upper
house with the right to override majorities in the lower house.[11] Bell's
institutional proposal, which resonates strongly with the Chinese Confu-
cian scholar Jiang Qing's tricameralism (consisting of the house of Con-
fucian scholars, the house of the nation, and the house of the people),[12]
has influenced many contemporary Confucians, though these scholars –
whom I call throughout this book advocates of Confucian meritocracy or
simply Confucian meritocrats – disagree on what should be the proper
method of nondemocratic selection of members of the upper house: while
Tongdong Bai and Ruiping Fan embrace Bell's exam model,[13] Joseph
Chan and Chenyang Li prefer recommendation over examination.[14]

It is important whether or not Confucian meritocrats' institutional
proposals are politically plausible in contemporary East Asian societies,
but this practical question goes beyond the scope of this book. My
prominent concern here is rather with a theoretical difficulty underlying
such proposals, that is, whether or not these scholars can have both (bits
of) meritocracy and (bits of) democracy in their proposed way(s), which
they understand as grounded in completely different, even opposing,
sources of legitimacy, without compromising the theory's internal coher-
ence. If we prefer "Confucian democracy" over liberal democracy solely

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[10] Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy*, p. 152.   [11] Ibid., pp. 165–172.
[12] Jiang Qing, *Zhengzhi Ruxue: Dangdai Rujia de zhuanxiang, tezhi yu fazhan* [Political
Confucianism: Contemporary Confucianism's Challenge, Special Quality, and Develop-
ment] (Beijing: San lian shu dian, 2003). For a helpful English summary of Jiang's
tricameralism, see Albert H. Y. Chen, "Three Political Confucianism and Half a Cen-
tury," in *The Renaissance of Confucianism in Contemporary China*, ed. Ruiping Fan
(Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), pp. 205–223. Also see Jiang, *Confucian Constitutional
Order*.
[13] Tongdong Bai, "A Confucian Version of Hybrid Regime: How Does It Work, and Why Is
It Superior?" in *East Asian Challenge for Democracy*, pp. 55–87; Fan, *Reconstructionist
Confucianism*, pp. 62–63. In his recent essay, though, Fan finds Jiang's original tricamer-
alism more convincing, at the pinnacle of which lies the transcendental authority of
Heaven, and deliberately distances himself from other Confucianists, who are, in his
view, "secular liberal." See his "Confucian Meritocracy for Contemporary China," in
East Asian Challenge for Democracy, pp. 88–115.
[14] Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism*, pp. 100–109; Chenyang Li, "Equality and Inequality in
Confucianism," *Dao* 11 (2012), pp. 295–313.

because of the substantive, putatively Confucian goods it can bring
about,[15] in other words, if our perfectionist justification of Confucian
democracy is entirely consequentialist, why do we care about democratic
procedures such as popular election operating on the principle of "one
person one vote (OPOV)," even in the lower house or in local public
affairs? What good (Confucian) consequences can we reasonably expect
from such democratic institutional mechanisms?[16] Why not simply advo-
cate a traditional Confucian one-man monarchy, operating on the idea of
a benevolent government (*renzheng* 仁政) or Platonic philosopher-
kingship, if what matters is good consequences *and* if good consequences
are correlated in a non-question begging way with the ruling elites'
epistemic competence and moral virtue?[17] Or, if we reject (for the most
part) democratic ideals of popular sovereignty, political equality, and the
right to political participation in our meritocratic understanding of Con-
fucian democracy, on what normative grounds can we justify democratic
practices of popular election and political participation, and how can they
be justified in ways that can simultaneously and coherently endorse the
value of meritocracy, again understood as rule by the elite, and its
attendant political institutions? Moreover, if we need to introduce demo-
cratic mechanisms into our preferred meritocratic institutional settings in
order to check the meritorious upper house, why do we not simply opt for
equally nondemocratic or less democratic measures, such as a nondemo-
cratically selected judiciary or bureaucracy, as the counterbalancing force
of our otherwise "knowledgeable and virtuous" leaders? But if members
of the meritorious upper house also need be checked by and held account-
able to ordinary citizens, what is the point of pitting meritocracy against
democracy in the first place? Why do we not instead reconceptualize
democratic representation (e.g., with emphasis on the co-subject dimen-
sion of our citizenship as much as its co-author dimension) and/or devise
new institutional mechanisms of democracy that can make political

[15] Bell's strong emphasis on good economic performance in some East Asian countries as a
justification for *Confucian* meritocratic perfectionism is puzzling in this regard.
[16] Joseph Chan seems to be the only Confucian meritocrat who offers an answer to this
question and he does so in terms of democracy's institutional expression of the mutual
commitment of the ruler and the ruled (*Confucian Perfectionism*, p. 86).
[17] Among recent Confucian perfectionists, Kang Xiaoguang appeals directly to the Confu-
cian ideal of benevolent government for his antidemocratic political paternalism. See his
Renzheng: Zhongguo zhengzhi fazhan de disantiao daolu [Benevolent Government:
A Third Road for the Development of Chinese Politics] (Singapore: Global Publishing,
2005).

decisions epistemically superior as well as politically accountable?[18] In short, why should we care about democracy (even the Schumpeterian minimal democracy) if we are strongly convinced of the disvalue of democracy?

We can approach the same issue from a related yet somewhat different angle. Political scientists working in the field of democratic transition and consolidation have long struggled with the problem of what Giovanni Sartori aptly called "conceptual stretching."[19] According to Sartori, a qualitative (i.e., value-ridden or normative) concept such as democracy travels and ought to travel to different cultural contexts, and because of this conceptual traveling we can have an interesting category of comparative political analysis. The problem is that when traveling across cultures, the concept in question is often stretched and this poses a critical obstacle to reliable measurement and rigorous comparison. This is not to say that conceptual traveling always presents a liability in social science research – quite to the contrary, it can occasionally contribute to conceptual innovation. For instance, if we understand democracy minimally in terms of periodic competitive election, the proliferation of various conceptual forms of democracy, or "democracy with adjectives," is the most likely consequence. In fact, contemporary political science is saturated with alternative conceptual forms such as "authoritarian democracy," "neo-patrimonial democracy," "military-dominated democracy," and "proto-democracy."[20] The challenge for political scientists, then, is how to achieve conceptual innovation without abandoning the precision of the concept.

"Confucian democracy" is a powerful instance of conceptual traveling and an interesting case of democracy with adjectives. We can celebrate Confucian democracy as a concept only if it illuminates a form of democracy, distinct not only from various sorts of liberal democracies but also from other forms of non-Western democracies. Though Confucian

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[18] On recent democratic theory in this direction, see Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); David Estlund, *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[19] Giovanni Sartori, "Conceptual Misformation in Comparative Politics," *American Political Science Review* 64:4 (1970), pp. 1033–1053. Also see David Collier and James E. Mahon, JR., "Conceptual 'Stretching' Revisited: Adapting Categories in Comparative Analysis," *American Political Science Review* 87:4 (1993), pp. 845–855.

[20] David Collier and Steven Levitsky, "Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research," *World Politics* 49:3 (1997), pp. 430–451, at p. 431.

democracy, by definition, does not have to be modeled after a Western-style liberal democracy, it must meet certain minimum requirements to be called a "democracy" at all. For political scientists such minimums include, among other things, regular competitive election both for selection of political representatives and for peaceful handover of political power, as well as an autonomous civil society that can offer citizens a space for public contestation.[21] What should not be forgotten here are the things implicated with these institutional minimums (and other additional institutional arrangements) – namely the foundational democratic ideals of popular sovereignty, political equality, and the right to participation.[22]

As a subject of comparative political analysis, Confucian democracy may be characterized by its own unique modes of electoral system, election mechanism, civil society, political authority, and the relationship between state and civil society, qualitatively (or culturally) different from those we are familiar with in Western liberal democracies. In addition, the way democratic ideals of popular sovereignty, political equality, and the right to political participation are manifested in Confucian democracy might also be distinguished from the way they are understood and practiced in Western liberal democracies. And of course, Confucian democracy can have additional cultural institutions, practices, and values that may reinforce, supplement, or, if necessary, constrain democratic institutions and practices of Western provenance, as long as they do not undermine democratic ideals or principles that citizens have constitutionally affirmed. In no event, however, can our refusal to model blindly Western-style liberal democracy and explore instead a Confucian democracy lead us to support a polity that demands serious compromises of democratic ideals themselves, which make democracy morally valuable. What we deal with then is not so much an innovated concept of democracy but a democracy whose concept has been stretched, a regime that goes beyond not only liberal democracy but democracy in toto.[23]

It is true that there is meaningful difference between normative political theory, aimed at a philosophical articulation of the normatively attractive mode of democracy, and empirical political science, the main interest of which lies in producing a reliable category of scientific measurement and

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[21] Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).
[22] See Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).
[23] This is the criticism raised by Fred Dallmayr to Daniel Bell's *Beyond Liberal Democracy*. See his "Exiting Liberal Democracy: Bell and Confucian Thought," *Philosophy East and West* 59 (2009), pp. 524–530.

comparison.[24] That said, the lesson from the problem of conceptual stretching for a normative theory of Confucian democracy is rather obvious: it is implausible to adopt the institutions of democracy (mainly election), without its underlying principles and values, by arbitrarily decoupling the concept of democracy from its related philosophical postulates.[25] From a philosophical standpoint, however, democracy is a constellation of interrelated postulates such as popular sovereignty, political equality, and the right to political participation. As I said earlier, what kind of a constellation Confucian democracy is and how distinct it is from other democracies are valid questions, philosophically as well as empirically. It seems arbitrary, for instance, to espouse democratic election based on the principle of OPOV without acknowledging the underlying moral principle of political equality.[26] And as I show in Chapter 6, when we embrace popular sovereignty and political equality as related postulates of democracy, it is difficult not to acknowledge the right to political participation as another postulate of democracy, given the moral demand to respect every citizen's dignity and his or her material and moral interests.

That being said, there are seemingly three ways to address these difficulties of Confucian meritocratic perfectionism. One way to forestall the charge of conceptual overstretching is to rename what has been called Confucian democracy with, for example, "Confucian aristocracy" (Ruiping Fan), "Confucian constitutionalism" (Jiang Qing), "Confucian perfectionism" (Joseph Chan), "Confu-China" (Tongdong Bai), or simply "(Confucian) political meritocracy" (Daniel Bell). That is, we can simply shift our conceptual focus away from Confucian democracy to something else that contains some democratic components. However, this move does not fully relieve the theoretical difficulties we have discussed thus far. Our earlier questions – *why should we bother with democracy if its disvalue is*

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[24] I regret though that sometimes this difference becomes too significant for empirical political scientists in democracy studies and normative democratic political theorists to have an intelligent and productive conversation.

[25] For a crucial importance of the coherent relation among postulates for theory-building, see Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975).

[26] My judgment is supported by works such as Jeremy Waldron, *Law and Disagreement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Henry S. Richardson, *Democratic Autonomy: Public Reasoning about the Ends of Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Corey Brettschneider, *Democratic Rights: The Substance of Self-Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Thomas Christiano, *The Constitution of Equality: Democratic Authority and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

so obvious and practically unbearable? and *what is the normative basis
for election given the rejection of political equality?* – still remain
unanswered.

   Another, more plausible, way to avoid these sorts of theoretical diffi-
culties is to call the polity in which meritocratic and democratic insti-
tutions are mixed a "mixed regime" in the sense that Western republican
theorists, most notably Aristotle and Montesquieu, understood the
term.[27] This, however, raises a different theoretical difficulty. In the
republican tradition a mixed regime is pursued not merely to attain
political order and stability, but, far more importantly, to secure political
liberty and public freedom – hence Montesquieu's fascination with the
constitution of England. Ironically, the best modern example of a mixed
regime is found in the United States of America, the most frequent target
of criticism by Confucian meritocrats as the epitome of all negative things
that liberal democracy stands for. Daniel Deudney famously dubbed the
American constitutional system (i.e., the Philadelphian system) as "negar-
chy," a mixed regime that structurally resists both one-man tyranny and
the tyranny of majority, thereby creating a space for political liberty and
public freedom.[28] Deudney shows not only that a mixed regime, whose
polar opposite is despotism, aims at a particular set of political goods, all
revolving around political liberty, which most Confucian meritocrats
either reject outright (by associating them with liberalism) or simply
bypass, but also that there is no inherent tension between a mixed regime
and (constitutional) democracy with all its conceptual postulates.[29] This
is essentially a matter of institutional design.

   Though there is no prima facie reason that a Confucian mixed regime
must be modeled after either the Roman-republican or American-
democratic mixed regime, we cannot brush away the overarching political
purpose of instituting a mixed regime and the regime's coherent operative

[27] For instance, see Bai, "Confucian Version of Hybrid Regime."
[28] Daniel H. Deudney, "The Philadelphian System: Sovereignty, Arms Control, and Balance
   of Power in the American States-Union, circa 1787–1861," *American Political Science
   Review* 49:2 (1995), pp. 191–228.
[29] This does not mean that an American-style democratic negarchy, focused on resistance, is
   most effective in "getting things done" but this practical difficulty, characteristic of
   American democracy, does not directly vindicate the disvalue of democracy. For state-
   ments addressing this issue from the perspective of democratic theory, see Jane Mans-
   bridge, "On the Importance of Getting Things Done," *PS: Political Science and Politics*
   45:1 (2012), pp. 1–8; Mark E. Warren and Jane Mansbridge et al., "Deliberative
   Negotiation," in *Negotiating Agreement in Politics*, eds. Jane Mansbridge and Cathie J.
   Martin (Washington, DC: American Political Science Association, 2013), pp. 86–120.