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. 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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political participation). Daniel Bell, an ardent advocate of political meritocracy, defines the term as “the idea that a political system should aim to select and promote leaders with superior ability and virtue.” Most often, in efforts to justify their normative position, advocates of Confucian political meritocracy draw attention to various social and political problems 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.”

Justification for Confucian meritocracy as a normative theory goes even further than these practical concerns. Though varied in their individual 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

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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 wrestling with democratic citizenship and participation in the Confucian societal 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, and therefore it is also difficult for them to reject the attempt to rejuvenate and enact Confucian perfectionism and by implication Confucian meritocracy – 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, notwithstanding their strong commitment to universal political participation. 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; 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 implicated 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.


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 contemporary liberalism.
political philosophy. 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, 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,”

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.

accountability, and transparency.” 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. Bell’s institutional proposal, which resonates strongly with the Chinese Confucian scholar Jiang Qing’s tricameralism (consisting of the house of Confucian scholars, the house of the nation, and the house of the people), 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, Joseph Chan and Chenyang Li prefer recommendation over examination. 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 coherence. 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.
because of the substantive, putatively Confucian goods it can bring about, 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? Why not simply advocate a traditional Confucian one-man monarchy, operating on the idea of a benevolent government (renzheng) 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? 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 Confucian 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 democratic 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 nondemocratically 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 accountable 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 dimension of our citizenship as much as its co-author dimension) and/or devise new institutional mechanisms of democracy that can make political

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55 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.

56 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).

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,” “neopatrimonial 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


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

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.
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. 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.

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
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 difficulties is to call the polity in which meritocratic and democratic institutions are mixed a “mixed regime” in the sense that Western republican theorists, most notably Aristotle and Montesquieu, understood the term. 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 “negarchy,” 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. 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. 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.”


\[29\] 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 statements addressing this issue from the perspective of democratic theory, see Jane Mansbridge, “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.