Public Reason Confucianism

“Public reason Confucianism” is a particular style of Confucian democratic perfectionism that calls on an active role for the democratic state in promoting a Confucian conception of the good life; at the heart of which are such values as filial piety and ritual propriety. It is also fully compatible with core values of democracy such as popular sovereignty, political equality, and the right to political participation.

Sungmoon Kim presents “public reason Confucianism” as the most attractive option for contemporary East Asian societies that are historically and culturally Confucian.

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Public Reason Confucianism

*Democratic Perfectionism and Constitutionalism in East Asia*

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This book’s motivation was to provide a philosophical foundation for my political vision that I presented in my earlier work *Confucian Democracy in East Asia: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 2014). One of the most frequent questions I have received since the publication of *Confucian Democracy* has been how I can reconcile the apparently nonneutral promotion of Confucianism in my democratic theory and my embracement of public reason, a philosophical apparatus commonly associated with state neutrality. Relatedly, some Confucian critics have noted that my suggestion to differentiate between civic virtue and moral virtue has strong resonance with the Rawlsian strategy, aimed at state neutrality, and is difficult to harmonize with the old paradigm of Confucian virtue politics in which no distinction between moral virtue and civic virtue is posited. In this book I attempt to offer a principled rejoinder to this misgiving by articulating the perfectionist dimension of my democratic political theory and examining its constitutional implications.

At the heart of my project is to justify a particular mode of Confucian democratic perfectionism – what I call public reason Confucianism – in which perfectionism is intertwined with partial comprehensive Confucianism in mediation of public reason, understood as the reason of democratic citizens. I argue that if the idea of Confucian democracy is reformulated in terms of public reason Confucianism and Confucian democratic perfectionism is reconceived from the broader perspective of democratic constitutionalism, the practical distinction between moral virtue and civic virtue becomes an unavoidable feature of the modern democratic and constitutional Confucian polity. I hope that readers can not only see clearly how some of the most challenging philosophical
questions arising from Confucian Democracy have been attended (and resolved) in the course of my exploration of public reason Confucianism but further understand its contributions to democratic constitutionalism that is most attractive in East Asia’s Confucian societal context.

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