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Review of Confucian political ethics

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BOOK REVIEWS

Confucian Political Ethics. By Daniel A. Bell. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. xiv, 273 Pp. Hardcover, ISBN 978-0-691-13004-0; Paperback, ISBN 978-0-691-13005-7.)

All chapters in this collection have been previously published. Revised, they are now assembled in this anthology to show “the abiding relevance of Classical Confucian Theory in the contemporary world” (p. x). Those interested in Confucianism will welcome having these resources in one convenient volume. The four-page preface highlights the importance of such discussions in view of the political revival of Confucianism in mainland China and the need for anyone who wishes to engage with East Asian societies to “understand the Confucian ethical thinking that informs social and political practices in the region” (p. xi). The collection would have benefited from a more substantial introduction examining the idea of “political ethics” within the Confucian context, beyond merely noting and assuming a mere conjunction or overlap of politics and ethics, as well as some clearer demonstration of how the four parts of “Civil Society,” “Boundaries and Justice,” “Ethical Pluralism,” “Contemporary Feminism,” and “War and Peace” are related to one another within the framework of such distinctive political ethics.

Joseph Chan’s contribution, “Territorial Boundaries and Confucianism” (chapter 4), most effectively brings out the distinctive relation between ethics and politics in Confucianism. He suggests that the irrelevance of territorial boundaries to the Chinese conception of ideal political order, *tian xia* (“the world under Heaven”), is rooted in the Confucian conception of moral order in which the scope of *ren* and human relationships are “*potentially unbounded*,” and “the *elastic* nature of human relationship” means that “friends can be regarded as the very members of one’s family” (p. 66). Chan criticized Liang Qichao’s characterization of *tian xia* in terms of “transnationalism” and “cosmopolitanism,” as the suggestion of equality between nations and cultures is misleading, to the extent that the traditional Chinese view holds the central regions of China (*zhu xia*) to be superior to barbarians inhabiting the surrounding regions. Nor is the Chinese world order neutral to different cultures. Instead, it has the responsibility of transmitting the superior culture to the rest of the world, which should be ruled by the most wise and ethical men. This seems more like “imperialism” than “cosmopolitanism” to Chan,

who nevertheless admits that the traditional Chinese world view is not imperialistic in the sense of condoning the use of force to conquer others.

Chan traces the notion of *tian xia* to the Zhou Dynasty, before Confucius' time; but it was the Confucians who idealized the notion with critical and ethical import. In the historical and philosophical texts of the pre-Qin period, *tian xia* could mean "the empire," "the kingdom," or the whole world, and sometimes it refers to an ideal political and ethical order transcending national or state boundaries to cover all under heaven. Chan highlights the uniqueness of the Confucian perspective on territorial boundaries by comparing it with the Ancient Greek one, in which territory and territorial boundaries are also relatively unimportant but for different reasons. He contrasts the Greek *polis*, which is "the community of citizens as a whole taking part in the making of collective affairs," with the Chinese political community, which is about "promotion of the highest moral good in individual lives (*ren*), and its accompanying moral order, a harmonious order of social relations" (p. 70).

Chan then discusses the implications of the Confucian theory of *tian xia* for some issues pertaining to territorial boundaries—ownership, distribution, and diversity. He points out that Western incursions in the twentieth century led to the replacement of the traditional Chinese perception of world order by the modern notion of world order composed of equal sovereign states. To understand how modern Confucians face the impact of such fundamental political changes, Chan explores the works of Mou Zongsan, which attempt to create space for cultural pluralism and the modern nation-state without abandoning the Confucian notion of *tian xia* and *yi xia zhi bian* (distinction between Chinese and barbarian). In Chan's view, Confucianism in its present state has something to say about the issues of territorial boundaries in the global order, but not much. Chan's contribution shows the relevance of Confucianism only in a very qualified and limited sense. "Confucianism still has a long way to go" (p. 81) before it could contribute to solving contemporary political and ethical problems. More skepticism than support for the "relevance of Confucianism" is also evident in Chan's discussion of disagreements about human sexuality in his chapter on "Confucian Attitudes toward Ethical Pluralism" (pp. 133–35).

A major obstacle to Confucianism's acceptance in modern societies is its perceived sexism. The two chapters in the section on "Contemporary Feminism" argue that sexism is not inherent to Confucianism, and furthermore there are affinities between Confucianism and contemporary feminisms. Sin Yee Chan (chapter 8) reconstructs an early Confucian conception of gender and examines its relation to the

subordination of women. She argues that, in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, gender is basically a functional role, which unfortunately seems to exclude women from achieving the ideal of *junzi* by denying them political positions and education. By requiring wives to be docile to husbands, Confucianism thereby subordinates women as wives, although the subordination is restrained by its assumptions of reciprocity and respect in the primary human relations.

Sin Yee Chan argues that “serving in government” is too narrow a view of political influence and achievement within Confucian political philosophy itself, and the continuum between family and state gives women (even in early China) access to political influence, and the kind of trials and challenges necessary for attaining morally ideal character, despite their domestic role. It follows that women also should not be excluded from education. While she finds various forms of subordination of women in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*—asymmetry in sexual access, objectification of women, and neglect—she notes that the texts do not offer any theoretical justification for them. In contrast to other forms of sexism in traditional societies, the contingent and functional nature of women’s supposed inferiority and their subordinate status renders Confucian sexism relatively easier to overcome.

The concluding section of chapter 8 deals with the implications of Chan’s arguments for contemporary society, showing that modern Confucian societies admit women into various domains, that in practice a Confucian gender equality supporting partnership and equality in family would be more beneficial for all, and that the complexity of today’s world means that the path to the moral ideal does not lie in government service alone. Chan believes that these implications suggest that the Confucian position on gender resembles liberal feminism, even though Confucianism does not subscribe to the liberal feminist’s “ultimate intrinsic values” of equality, choice, and individuality. While the claim of similarities between Confucianism and liberal feminism in the last section is somewhat hasty and not as persuasive as earlier sections, this laudable attempt to liberalize Confucian position on gender succeeds in establishing “compatibility with gender equality,” even though it falls short of offering a *Confucian* conception of gender equality. To give Confucianism a stronger relevance, we need to show how a reconstructed Confucian conception of gender offers a different approach to gender issues that might even be beneficial in ways not available to liberal feminism.

Some chapters in the book, with different degrees of persuasiveness, make stronger claims for the relevance Confucianism in providing significant and valuable alternatives to predominant Western political and ethical thinking. Confucianism suggests, for Henry

Rosemont, “that we must begin to alter significantly the economic and political structures of contemporary nation-states, beginning with, and especially the United States” (p. 54). Daniel Bell finds Mencius’ theory of just war—where necessary promotion of peace and benevolence at home and abroad by a moral party but not the defense of particular culture, language, religion, or distinctive form of political association provides the only justification—more attractive than alternative Western theories such as Michael Walzer’s (p. 241). Michael Nylan draws on analogies between the physical body and the body politic in the Five “Confucian” Classics of the Warring States and Han periods in her observations on “Confucian” boundaries, which suggest better ways to “reconfigure our own [Western] moral priorities” (p. 98). Nylan recommends the Chinese spirit of *di li* for future endeavors. Rather than iconic knowledge of geography which aids territorial expansion in the Western tradition, the Chinese discipline of *di li* is interested in ethnographic and historical knowledge which reconfigures space toward frequent ethical interaction and produces “learning that informs conscious, ethical action” (pp. 98–99).

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The Chan Interpretations of Wang Wei’s Poetry: A Critical Review. By Yang Jingqing. (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2007. xvi, 280 Pp. Hardback, ISBN 10: 962-996-232-2.)

The book under review, a critical review of the interpretations of Wang Wei’s poetry by Yang Jingqing, is a daring and provocative work that boldly takes on centuries of literary commentaries. His challenge, often expressed more as a deferential suspicion than a frontal assault, is clear and simple: In spite of prevailing sentiment, there is no hard evidence to suggest that Wang Wei intended any ulterior Chan Buddhist meanings in his poetry. Yang draws attention to the singularity of this position by affirming that he is, in fact, the first scholar to interrogate the assumption that Wang Wei sought to convey Chan ideas in his poetry (p. 210). He attempts this, quite simply, by undertaking a survey of historical texts, both primary and secondary. Yang embarks on this crusade with the zeal of a documentary historian who calls an entrenched understanding into question. The numerous historical, poetic, and theoretical texts he draws upon to challenge the notion of an intentional Chan stance in Wang Wei’s work do allow for an obvious Buddhist interpretation of his poetry, but not one that is *distinctly* Chan. Thus, he concludes: “Considering the fact that the