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# Democracy in Confucianism

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## Abstract

Confucianism's long historical association with despotism has cast doubts on its compatibility with democracy, and raise questions about its relevance in contemporary societies increasingly dominated by democratic aspirations. ''Confucian democracy'' has been described as a ''contradiction in terms'' and Asian politicians have appropriated Confucianism to justify resistance to liberalization and democratization. There has been a lively debate over the question of whether democracy can be found in Confucianism, from ancient texts such as the Analects and Mencius, to Confucian institutions such as those recommended by Song dynasty Huang Zongxi. Philosophers have examined similarities and differences between Western ideas, such as autonomy, liberty, and rights, that are central to democratic theories on the one hand and Confucian ideas of virtue, ren (humaneness), yi (appropriateness), li (rite), zhi (wisdom), exemplary person and authority. Scholars have studied the biographical accounts of prominent Confucians to understand the Confucian ideal person and society. Works arguing that there are elements of democracy in Confucianism, or that some Confucian ideas could provide the basis for a contemporary Confucian democracy, differ in the kind of democracy they choose as models. Liberal democracy was the model of earlier works; with increasing criticisms of liberal democracy in the past decades, a growing number of works arguing for Confucian democracy seek alternatives to liberal democracies, many proposing some kind of communitarian democracy as having affinity with the Confucian philosophical orientation. Besides conceptions of democracy that view it in terms of political systems, Dewey's conception of democracy as the idea of community and primarily a moral ideal has also inspired attempts to reconstruct Confucian democracy.

## *Confucian Political Philosophy and Historical Practice*

Confucianism advocates the rule of virtue; Confucius and his followers through the centuries looked back to legendary sage-kings as exemplars of virtuous rulers who by the very moral power of their conduct brought about order and harmony. The early Confucian texts, the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and the *Xunzi* all take the monarchy for granted, even though they imply that not just anyone who happens to occupy the throne deserves the title of king, and the way of the true king (*wangdao* 王道) – what we call political legitimacy today – is based on moral merit instead of birth or superior force. The Confucian political ideal of a sage-king aided by virtuous and capable ministers, who together govern for the benefit of the people, peace, and harmony in the world, came to dominate imperial China from the Han dynasty onwards, and the Confucian vocabulary pervaded the political rhetoric of the ruling class from emperors to petty bureaucrats for much of two millennia of Chinese history, although other philosophies, Daoism or Buddhism for example, gained influence in Chinese societies during different periods and significantly influenced later Confucianism.

While the fortunes of Confucian scholars rose and fell through different dynasties, and specific individuals or groups sided with different parties vying for political power, some criticized emperor and ministers at great personal risks, and others tried to educate or influence those in power according to Confucian ideals, no prominent Confucian before the nineteenth century is known to have questioned the rightness of the monarchical government structure, and certainly not on the basis of Confucius' teachings about ideal government. Even the most politically progressive among them, as radical a critic of the politics of his times as Huang Zongxi (1610–1695), yearned not for the people to take over the reins of power but for "an Enlightened Prince" (90). Although, as William de Bary points out, Huang "came to be acclaimed by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reformers and revolutionaries as an early champion of native Chinese 'democratic' ideas" (Huang xii), Confucianism in practice was more prominently allied with pro-monarchy types and implicated in Yuan Shikai's attempt to overthrow the early Chinese Republic (Fairbank et al. 756). It is therefore not surprising that May Fourth intellectuals, such as Chen Duxiu, blamed Confucianism for China's backwardness in the pursuit of democracy, which they identify with modernity and progress (154). More recently, Samuel Huntington calls "Confucian democracy" a "contradiction in terms" ("Democracy's Third Wave" 27), and predicts that the post-Cold War world order will bring Western liberal democracies into confrontation against Confucianism and Islam (*Clash of Civilizations*).

Long association with autocratic practice does not imply that Confucianism is inherently anti-democratic. Some might point to the liberal democracies in East Asia with societies often identified as Confucian – South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan – as counter examples for maintaining that there can be, because there is, democracy in Confucianism (Fukuyama 30). One could, however, question the extent to which these societies are Confucian or democratic; and even if both Confucian and democratic, Confucianism and democracy may merely coexist peacefully or even uneasily, rather than integrate meaningfully. What empirical cases prove depends on the meaning of the key concepts and the understanding of the philosophies under discussion. For Huntington, "Classic Chinese Confucianism and its derivatives in Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, Taiwan, and (in diluted fashion) Japan, emphasized the group over the individual, authority over liberty, and responsibilities over rights" ("Democracy's Third Wave" 24; cf. Fukuyama 25). Chenyang Li, who argues that Confucianism and democracy could only coexist in East Asian societies because they have incompatible values, understands democracy as valuing individual liberty, equality and pluralism while Confucianism values duty, loyalty, paternalism, unequal social roles, and unity (*Tao Encounters the West* 174–8). From the philosophical perspective, this short article proposes to survey the kinds of arguments that have been made about the presence of democracy in Confucianism as a philosophy, usually relying on textual evidence.[1]

Since the Ancient Greeks bequeathed us with the term "*demokratia*" and the earliest institutions identified with it, democracy has been through many transformations, so that philosophies of democracy are almost as varied and complex as interpretations of Confucianism, which is a diverse historical as well as philosophical tradition with sometimes contradictory elements. In approaching the question of "democracy in Confucianism," one could try to find the equivalent of an argument for some conception of democracy itself in Confucian philosophy interpreted in some particular way. Creative interpretations notwithstanding, this is likely to be judged as anachronistic and procrustean given the very different origins and contexts of democracy and Confucianism. Usually those who set out with this ambition move to or only arrive at a less exacting goal of finding ideas and institutions in Confucianism that resemble those in democratic theories or could form part of the basis for a contemporary Confucian theory of democracy.

A simplistic and vague understanding of democracy as opposition to despotic rulers who abuse the people and benefit only themselves and their cronies, has led some to equate the Confucian tradition of "*min-ben* 民本" with democracy.[2] Though the term is coined later, this idea of "the people as the basis" of government can be found in the emphasis on the government's responsibility for the welfare of the people (*Analects* 5.16; 6.30; 13.9), and in the assertion of the priority of the people over the ruler (*Mencius* 7B14), who should govern as if he were the "parents of the people" (*Mencius* 1A4; 1B7; 3A3).[3] This resembles the "government for the people," part of democracy (Tan, *Confucian Democracy* 133–6). However, the crucial component of democracy is government by the people, which may not go together with government for the people, if the people are not equipped either intellectually or morally to govern themselves. The idea of *minben* does not mean that there is democracy in Confucianism, but it provides a Confucian basis for democracy. One needs to fill the gap between government for the people and government by the people with an argument showing how the latter is best achieved or possible only through the former, either conceptually or by bringing in empirical evidence. This will take one beyond the early Confucian texts, but inevitable if one's interest is the relevance of Confucianism to contemporary problems.

David Elstein argues that attempts to "generate" democracy from early Confucianism fail because Confucius and Mencius do not trust people to make good decisions, and therefore the move from government for the people to government by the people is blocked by key values and beliefs of Confucianism (431); the best that could be achieved is merely "Confucian-inspired democracy (democratic polity that implements Confucian values but not structured upon them" rather than "Confucian democracy (democratic governance based on Confucian values)."[4] There is no denying the textual evidence for early Confucians' distrust of the rule by law and lack of confidence in the ability of people to make good decisions. However, it is still open to debate whether they were making philosophical claims about unchangeable nature of the people and necessary principled rejection of the rule of law, or whether those views should be contextualized by their recognition of contingent reality: actually ignorant and unskilled people and laws that worked only as tools of despotic rule – imperfect reality that could be changed. Given their emphasis on everyone having the capacity for learning and self-cultivation, it would be unduly pessimistic for Confucians to accept Elstein's dismissal of education in making the people better at decision making and therefore more effective in democratic government (440). If lack of committed effort renders education an ineffective solution for the obvious weakness of democratic rule (amply discussed by Western critics), the problem is much worse than just the lack of democracy in Confucianism, it is a strike against both democracy as government by the people and against Confucianism as a philosophy of self-cultivation to achieve exemplary personhood.

Elstein acknowledges that "there are certain elements in Confucianism compatible with democracy," but insists that "to say that Confucianism is compatible with democracy means discounting its own political theory" (434). Without discounting the relevance of Confucianism for contemporary political theory, I would contend that political theory is not the primary concern of Confucius or Mencius. The early Confucians themselves subordinated politics to ethics. Their contribution does not lie in political innovations, theoretical or institutional; instead their solution to the political problems of their time was to turn to ethics and advocate rule by virtue. They therefore took for granted the political institutions of their times and focused their efforts on reforming *people* (starting with the most powerful for maximum effect) rather than reforming the political system. This means that although historically Confucians might not have questioned the undemocratic political system, defending such systems is not essential to their philosophy, which is primarily an ethics of self-cultivation that goes hand in hand with the creation and sustaining of harmonious community.

Early Confucian "political theory" is derived from its ethics. This derivation is inadequate to the extent that they were hampered by uncritical acceptance of Warring states politics and society. Given that the Confucian tradition has transformed itself many times by borrowing from other philosophies and adapting to new situations, it is not betraying Confucianism to try to improve on the derivation of ideal polity from its ethical commitments. If one could show that Confucian ethics is better served by democracy than undemocratic political systems, then I believe there is sufficient ground to say, as modern Neo-Confucians did (Chang et al. 472; Tu 29), that Confucian ideals could be realized better, or only, in democracy, whether or not Confucians had recognized this earlier. Two millennia of failure by undemocratic regimes to realize its ideal "government for the people" should motivate contemporary Confucians to turn to more democratic alternatives.

### *In Search of Autonomy and Rights*

The first phase of the discourse about democracy in China beginning in the twentieth century was dominated by attempts to find Confucian ideas that resemble or could be reconstructed to approximate those in modern democratic theories, especially theories of liberal democracy. Respect for individual liberty and recognition of rights have been seen as the most critical challenge to Confucianism, given its historical association with despotism and oppressive social relations. William de Bary is an early champion of "liberal Confucianism." His works show that there is a tradition of "Neo-Confucian individualism" (*Self and Society in Ming Thought*; *Learning for One's Self*). He argues that the modern Chinese translation of the Western term "liberty," *ziyou* 自由, draws on the Neo-Confucian vocabulary of *ziran* 自然 (spontaneity), *zide* 自得 (getting it by or for oneself), among others, indicating an appreciation of voluntarism in the Confucian pursuit of learning and their moral life (*Liberal Tradition* 44–5). He maintains that "'rite,' as formal definition and concrete embodiment of principle, covers some of our rational, moral and legal conception of 'rights'" (*Trouble with Confucianism* 67), and argues that the institutions Huang Zongxi recommended on how to curb imperial abuse of power "would fulfill at least some of the same functions as do the organs of representative government in Western democracies" (*Asian Values* 102).

de Bary supplements textual studies with historical accounts emphasizing the individualistic conduct of exemplary Confucian scholars who criticized court politics in a "tradition of public dissent" (*Confucian Tradition* 6) to counter the historical involvement of Confucianism in Chinese despotism as its state orthodoxy. De Bary finds in Confucian philosophy of education – highlighting self-fulfillment, self-cultivation as the starting point of reaching out to others, the pedagogy of dialog and conversation, and the inclusive breadth of higher education (*Liberal Tradition* 21–42) – elements of a liberal education that is essential to reasoned, public discourse in a democracy. His works have inspired many in resisting the dismissal of Confucianism as an apology for authoritarianism, although the interest in comparative philosophy in the last two decades has shifted to pre-Qin Confucianism rather than Song and Ming dynasty Neo-Confucianism. Comparisons of Confucian values with Western liberal democratic values continue to be published regularly, but recent works with more fine grained philosophical analysis have been more cautious in claiming similarities (e.g. Kim; Angle, *Human Rights*), characterized by a more critical stance towards Western political philosophies and models, more philosophically rigorous analysis and comparison, and a willingness to modify both Confucianism and Western political philosophies in their search for the best political ideal or most viable solutions to contemporary political problems.

Joseph Chan identifies four elements commonly found in conceptions of moral autonomy, and argues from textual evidence in the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and the *Xunzi*, that only two – voluntary endorsement of morality and reflective engagement in moral life – can be found in Confucian ethics (''Moral Autonomy'' 286–9). The other two, morality as self-legislation and morality as radical free expression of the individual's will, are incompatible with it. Chan accepts that classical Confucianism is concerned with moral autonomy only for moral and political leaders, but argues that contemporary Confucianism has good grounds for de-emphasizing, even abandoning this moral elitism, since even classical Confucians, following Mencius, believe that all human beings are born with equal capacity to become moral. Moreover, today's societies have more resources to overcome the limited access to the education needed to develop the capacity. According to Chan, this thin Confucian moral autonomy is enough to support civil liberties, but only up to a point. It would restrain the use of coercion and protect individuals from interference in their lives, but Chan sees Confucianism parting company with liberal democracy in its perfectionist political theory (292–3).

May Sim categorizes Chan's position as one of re-describing rights in a way that is more compatible with Confucianism but in the process losing the connection with extant Western notions (338). She proposes a Confucian approach that is comparable to a specific Western conception of human rights, that of A. I. Melden (*Rights and Persons*), which eschews Enlightenment individualism and views human rights as based on the ''mutual support intrinsic to human agency and human relationship'' (338). Both Confucianism and Melden ground human action and identity in the family (341), in which one learns the highest Confucian virtue of *ren* (benevolence or humaneness). Confucian virtue involves loving others and supporting them, implying a conception of what is due to others, which can be expressed in the language of ''a concrete, community-based rights theory'' (343). Sim argues that such a Confucian approach to human rights would make virtue central, and would admit universal rights only as ''rights to the pre-conditions of moral virtue'' (349). Since every human being needs to cultivate *ren*, each member of the community has a duty to help others cultivate it, and everyone has a right, a universal human right, to demand that others fulfill that duty.

### *Confucian Critiques of Liberal Democracy*

The protection of human rights is often thought to be essential to liberal democracy. There has been a lively debate about the relationship of Confucianism to human rights (de Bary and Tu; Bauer and Bell). At one end of the spectrum are those, such as Julia Ching, Irene Bloom, and Cheng Chung-ying, who argue that human rights are similar to or could be constructed from Confucian ideas (de Bary and Tu 67–82, 94–116, 148–9; also Bauer and Bell 212–37; Angle, *Human Rights*). Others argue that Confucianism has parallels that protect the important human interests in its rites-based social order and philosophy of *ren* that present a viable alternative to, or complement liberal human rights regime (Hall and Ames 221–5; Lee; also Chen, A.). Sangjin Han reconceptualizes human rights as ''people-centered, participatory, communitarian,'' based on Confucian traditions. At the other extreme are some who reject the concept as unhelpful in understanding the relevance of Confucianism for modern societies and maintain that Confucianism offers a better alternative for human beings to pursue material and spiritual well-being. (Some occupy more than one position or shift positions along this spectrum over time.)

To Henry Rosemont Jr., human rights represent a ‘‘bill of worries’’ (de Bary and Tu 54–66), because it implies the pernicious idea of rational, autonomous individuals existing prior to and opposed to society – an idea rendering differences irreconcilable, and on the basis of which social problems become impossible to solve (‘‘Rights-bearing individuals and Role-Bearing Persons’’ 87–8). He argues that the very different conception of what it means to be a human being in Confucianism is much more promising for addressing ‘‘the issue of how a society best distributes the basic necessities of life when these are in short supply, and how human lives can be dignified, and significant in such circumstances.’’ (‘‘Rights-bearing individuals and Role-Bearing Persons’’ 93; see also Bockover). In response to criticisms that rejection of the very concept of human rights may play into the hands of dictators and others from whose abuse and oppression human rights are intended to provide protection, Rosemont has shifted his tactics from rejection of human rights concept cluster to arguing against the priority of civil and political rights over economic and social rights (Chandler and Littlejohn 364–5). The difference between the two kinds of rights has implications for the question of democracy in Confucianism; for Rosemont, if democracy implies civil and political rights, then there is no democracy in Confucianism, but Confucianism supports democracy that prioritizes economic and social rights, which do not need to assume that human beings are autonomous selves. He advocates going beyond Western liberal tradition by studying Confucianism as ‘‘a genuine alternative to modern Western theory of rights (and democracy), rather than as an implicit early version of them’’ (‘‘Which Rights? Whose Democracy?’’ 64).

The Liberalism-Communitarianism debate (Delaney; Sandel) in Western political philosophy has spilled over into the inquiry about democracy in Confucianism and the various camps in the latter inquiry have been classified along that axis, not without some problems. Rosemont believes that Confucians would agree with Michael Sandel’s communitarian critique of liberalism (Rosemont, ‘‘Which Rights? Whose Democracy?’’ 67). Even scholars who find elements of liberal democracy in Confucianism do not go so far as to attribute to Confucianism an acceptance of the metaphysical or ethical priority of an autonomous self over social relations. Tu Wei-ming, while drawing on Enlightenment values to elaborate Confucian values, criticizes the former for not giving enough weight to the idea of community, and recommends that Europeans and Americans learn from Confucian humanism in this regard (17–9). Few disagree with the claim that community, or at least networks of human relations, is central to Confucian philosophy. In his later works, de Bary adopts a ‘‘Confucian communitarian perspective,’’ but argues that this is not a state communitarianism opposed to individual liberty and rights (*Asian Values*). Those who argue that Confucianism values individuality usually interpret that individuality as embedded in social relations. David Hall and Roger Ames (*Democracy of the Dead*) have interpreted Dewey’s theory of democracy as a communitarian conception – since Dewey regards democracy as the idea of community life itself (*Public and its Problems* 328) – that shares strong affinities with the Confucian social vision. Among the works inspired by Hall and Ames is Sor-hoon Tan’s *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction*, which aspires to transcend the liberal-communitarian divide (14).

Daniel A. Bell, who defends communitarianism (*Communitarianism and Its Critics*), offers a different approach to go beyond liberal democracy with an alternative political thinking for a East Asian context, in the form of a ‘‘Democracy with Confucian characteristics’’ (*Beyond Liberal Democracy*, chapter 6). He suggests that we take seriously the value of political elitism or meritocracy he finds in Confucianism by modifying democracy –

understood in the ''minimal'' sense as free and fair competitive elections under universal franchise to fill policy making positions (*Beyond Liberal Democracy* 185) – with a bicameral legislature, one democratically elected, the other ''a 'Confucian' upper house composed of representatives selected on the basis of competitive examinations'' (*Beyond Liberal Democracy* 165–6). Though not directly addressing the question, Bell's views imply that there is no democracy in Confucianism. However, he is arguing for ''a modern Confucian democracy'' (*Beyond Liberal Democracy* 165) insofar as his institutional innovation could be said to bring democracy into Confucianism if it successfully integrates key democratic and Confucian values.

Chenyang Li points out that Bell's interpretation of Confucian meritocracy as ''rule of the wise'' dispenses with the virtuous leadership central to Confucianism, and competitive examinations are certainly ineffective for selecting the virtuous (''Confucian Virtuous Leadership'' 533–5). For Fred Dallmayr, Bell's ''move is not just beyond 'liberal democracy' but beyond democracy *tout court*'' (526), leaving behind only ''occasional participation by the people in the public affairs of the day'' (Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy* 14), that requires little more than ''visiting the voting booth every few years'' (Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy* 151). Confucian elitism is no doubt very attractive to some sections of the intellectual elite in China, beginning with university students, and Bell is only the most prominent (at least in English speaking academic community) among a group of advocates for Confucianism, critical of Western liberal democracies, who are eager to promote elitist political alternatives. One could question whether or not Confucianism is ''elitist,'' and even if it is, whether Confucianism would not be better off abandoning such elitism, sometimes equated with meritocracy (Tan, ''Beyond Elitism''). Insisting that Confucianism is *essentially* elitist in the sense of rejecting the value of equality completely and in any form would amount to a denial of the possibility of democracy in Confucianism insofar as equality is a core democratic value. In my view, the topic of equality, how the concept is to be understood – for example, it does not mean eradicating all social inequalities even in liberal democracy (Berlin, ''Equality'' 90) – what it implies in practice, and whether a democratic conception of the value is reconcilable with Confucian political philosophy, is going to be central to the next phase of philosophical debates over democracy in Confucianism.[5]

The works selected for discussion so far have been concerned with issues of ''individualism,'' ''freedom'' and ''equality'' that dominates criticisms of liberal democracy. Other critics have focused on other issues; the limited space of this essay does not allow us to venture deeply into those. But one emerging strand that should at least be mentioned is the ''moderate perfectionism'' defended by both Joseph Chan and Stephen Angle. The latter's study of sagehood ideal in Confucianism leads him to defend a moderately perfectionist Confucian politics that allows ''significant roles for individual, particularist judgment … a plurality of voices with sovereignty'' (*Sagehood* 197). While agreeing that contemporary Confucians should endorse participatory politics, he cautions against rushing to the simple answer of ''democracy'' (*Sagehood* 212–3).

### *Deweyan Inspiration: Confucianism as a Democratic Way of Life*

While most attempts to argue for democracy in Confucianism adopt conceptions of democracy that emphasize the mechanisms that enable government by the people, the approach inspired by Dewey's Pragmatism sees democracy as primarily an ethical ideal, and the typical political institutions and other means of realizing that ideal as subject to reform according to the demands of actual situations. This, together with its emphasis on community, places Dewey closer to the early Confucians who treated politics as a branch of ethics. In a Deweyan democracy, fraternity, equality, and liberty are valued in connection with communal experience (Dewey, *Public and its Problems* 329). Political participation takes the form of social inquiry by publics, each constituted by those affected by transactions in which they are not directly involved (Dewey, *Public and its Problems* 314). Social inquiry requires effective communication to create things in common that sustain a community. Dewey maintains that the participative process of inquiring into shared problems is educative just as education itself has to be democratic to succeed. Citizens in a democracy acquire knowledge and skills through participating in the inquiry and decision making in matters that concern them. In the process of education, one learns through participating in social inquiry – "enlightenment comes from the give and take, from the exchange of experiences and idea" ("Democracy and Education" 296) – so that communication adds meaning to one's experience and increases one's ability to direct one's future. Dewey sees "democracy as the educational process without which individuals cannot come into the full possession of themselves nor make a contribution, if they have it in them to make, to the social well-being of others" ("Democracy and Education" 296) This intertwining of democracy and education in Dewey's philosophy resonates with the mutual implication of personal cultivation and community making in the central Confucian virtue of *ren*.

Peter Boodberg suggests that *ren* is best translated as "co-humanity" (229–330). Consideration and concern for others is the key to cultivating this virtue. The answers Confucius gave to the question, "What is *ren*?" include "Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not want" (*Analects* 12.2) and "loving others" (*Analects* 12.22). Personal cultivation, as a process of realizing one's humanity, achieves *ren* through extending and improving one's social relationships. It begins in the family, where one learns to be a filial son and to be brotherly (*Analects* 1.2), and extends to being "broadly generous with the people" and "helping the multitude" (*Analects* 6.30). The process of personal cultivation is at the same time a process of creating community. The "method of *ren*" is to "establish others in seeking to establish themselves and to promote others in seeking to get there themselves" (*Analects* 6.30). This brings to mind Dewey's idea of democracy as the method for "living together in ways in which the life of each of us is … profitable to himself and helpful in the building up of the individuality of others" ("Democracy and Education" 303). While there are no exact equivalents of the values of equality and liberty in the *Analects*, we may nevertheless understand Confucius' views about learning and living as an exemplary person in ways that support those democratic values as Dewey understands them, in the context of ethical communal experience (Tan, "Confucianism and Democracy").

Dewey understands very well that valuing equality does not translate into a "one-size fits all" extreme egalitarianism; instead equality means "unhampered share in the consequences of associations" (*Public and its Problems* 329) that allows for functional differentiation and quantitatively different distribution of resources, and different levels and kinds of participation, based on different needs and capacities relevant to specific situations. We can understand inequality in the *Analects*, not in terms of defending absolute hierarchy, but as advocating a differentiated social order compatible with Dewey's conception of equality as differentiated distribution and participation based on needs and capacities contributing to personal-communal growth. Inequality in a Confucian community is relative rather than absolute, requiring distribution of respect, power, goods and services *proportional* to the degree each individual meets the criteria ethically relevant to what is to be distributed. A Confucian ruler should worry about inequality in the form of inequitable (*bujun* 不均)

distribution (*Analects* 16.1). Confucius recommends that distribution be based on some ethically acceptable criteria, such as need: "Exemplary persons help out the needy; they do not make the rich richer" (*Analects* 6.4, also 12.7). Confucius is seen as advocating a meritocracy of ethical achievement (*Analects* 4.14, 13.2, 15.14). Meritocracy is compatible with equality only if everyone has an equal chance of rising to the highest office; there can be no permanent hierarchy. Moreover, the distribution of political power and social prestige, though based on ethical merit, is not a reward for virtue or abilities. In terms of material goods, what is sufficient for the people should be sufficient for the ruler (*Analects* 12.9). The more virtuous and capable do not therefore deserve more. There is no permanent elite who enjoys more of everything at the expense of the rest of the people.

There is a kind of authoritative freedom in Confucius' achievement at seventy: "I could give my heart-and-mind free rein without overstepping the boundaries" (*Analects* 2.4). This freedom is achieved only after a long and arduous process of cultivating the person. Contrary to what liberals might think (Berlin, *Two Concepts*), Confucius' freedom is not the "internalizing" of external constraints. He liberates himself from some desires not because he *cannot* realize them, but because he *should not* realize them. Unethical constraints should be overcome not accepted; but when the constraints are ethical, not overstepping the boundaries is synonymous with walking the Confucian way (*dao* 道). This is not a fixed standard of conduct, but something that emerges from one's personal experience (*Analects* 15.29). Albeit an experience which always involves others with whom we interact; it cannot bring ethical success if imposed from without. "Becoming authoritative in one's conduct is self-originating, how could it originate with others?" (*Analects* 12.1).

Such "emergence" of the *dao* requires an organic integration of one's actions with the rest of one's experience, which precludes coercion as a means. Coercion results only in external compliance. One may force another to follow a way, but such compliance does not guarantee understanding, she cannot be coerced into "realizing it" (*Analects* 8.9).[6] An argument can be made that *zhi* is not merely knowing intellectually, but requires knowing in practice. It implies knowing how; it is "to realize" in both senses of "coming to know" and "making real." Realizing a Confucian way requires integrating it with one's experience through learning and reflecting. Confucian freedom lies in realizing a way, not in merely following one – it cannot be forced. The distinction between "realizing the way" and merely following it is crucial in steering Confucianism away from an elitist meritocracy toward democracy. It opens up the possibility of asserting the educative nature of participation. To realize the way, to know what to do in various situations, one must learn. Learning is a social and participative activity, so that the capacity to contribute to political order is best developed in political participation. One could reconstruct Confucian learning as participation in social inquiry. In learning, we seek the answers to "What to do?" in problematic situations (*Analects* 7.28, 15.16). Finding those answers means knowing our way, it means realizing the way (*zhidao*). Just as becoming *ren* begins with oneself, learning and realizing the way requires personal participation in solving the common problems of the community. To realize the way rather than merely follow it, there must be democratic participation in social inquiry to solve the shared problems of the community.

## *Short Biography*

Sor-hoon Tan is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the National University of Singapore. She is author of *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction*; editor of *Challenging Citizenship: Group Membership and Cultural Identity in a Global Age*; co-editor of *Filial Piety in Chinese Thought and History*, *The Moral Circle and the Self: Chinese and Western*

*Perspectives*, and *Democracy as Culture: Deweyan Pragmatism in a Globalizing World*. Recent articles include "Authoritative Master Kong in an Authoritarian Age," "Our Country Right or Wrong: Pragmatic Response to Anti-democratic Cultural Nationalism in China," "Why Study Chinese Classics and How to Go About it."

## Notes

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[1] This is obviously only a small slice of a much more wide ranging, diverse and complex discourse. Due to space limit, what follows will focus only on works published in English more likely to be accessible to general reader of this journal, even though Chinese as well as Korean and Japanese participants in this debate writing in their native languages are also important, if not more so within current historical contexts. For a brief discussion of the Chinese discourse on democracy in Confucianism, see "Confucian Democracy as Pragmatic Experiment: Uniting Love of Learning and Love of Antiquity," (Tan 144–7).

[2] In the early decades of the twentieth century, some Chinese translators use *minben* when translating Dewey's "Democracy and Education".

[3] The term, "*minben*" is an abbreviation of a line in the *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu*), "the people are the basis of the state (*min wei bang ben* 民惟邦本)" Liang Qichao has been credited with the coining of this term in his *History of Pre-Qin Political Thought*; see also Jin Yaoji's history of Chinese *minben* thinking.

[4] The arguments against democracy in Confucianism deserve more careful attention; I have chosen to focus more on the evidence and arguments for claiming that there is democracy in Confucianism in this short article and will admit to not doing full justice to the opposition. Many works arguing for the compatibility of democracy and Confucianism do address various objections.

[5] For an attempt to reconcile the value of equality with Confucianism, see Tan, *Confucian Democracy* (98–112).

[6] Elstein singles out this passage to prove the antidemocratic nature of early Confucian philosophy (435); I offer a different reading that shows the limit of coercion in government if one's interest, like the early Confucian's, is in ethical community.

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