Confucian value and democratic value

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Introduction

Samuel P. Huntington asserts that the world is now entering an age of “the clash of civilizations.” Specifically, the clash is between democratic Western civilization and undemocratic civilizations in the rest of the world, Confucian and Islamic civilizations in particular. Huntington also suggests that in order for democracy to take roots in a Confucian society, undemocratic elements in Confucianism must be superseded by democratic elements. The purpose of this essay is to examine the future relationship between democracy and Confucianism in the part of the world where they are most likely to clash, namely, China.

1. What democracy is and what China needs

The word “democracy” has been used in so many ways that people today often disagree about exactly what it means. Many controversies about democracy concern whether it is merely a procedural method for political decisions or something more substantive that has value content. Joseph Schumpeter, for example, has proposed as a minimal definition of democracy:

the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.

His use of “democratic method,” instead of “democracy,” indicates that he takes democracy primarily as a procedural form.

Francis Fukuyama has recently argued that the consolidation of democracy must occur on four levels: ideology, institutions, civil society, and finally, culture. He regards culture as the “deepest level” of democracy. Many people would agree with Fukuyama in as much as democracy penetrates culture and
is therefore value-loaded. Jürgen Domes, for instance, also defines democracy primarily as a value-loaded political system. In addition to its formal dimension, Domes characterizes democracy specifically by three principles: liberty, equality, and pluralism. This is sometimes said to characterize liberal democracy.

Without a context, it makes little sense to ask whose definition is right. The question we should ask here is, what kind of democracy does China need? I believe the answer is the kind of democracy with the values of individual liberty, equality, and pluralism. These values, as I will show, make the clash between democracy and Confucianism possible. Confucianism is no longer an institutional arrangement, and such a clash cannot take place anywhere but on the dimension of value.

Without the values of individual liberty, equality, and pluralism, democracy as a mere procedure is merely a technique or formality. This technique has been and continues to be misused in China. Unless we make explicit the values found in democracy, the misuse is likely to continue. For example, within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), democracy as a voting procedure has been practiced. Missing, however, is the value of individual liberty. Within the CCP, members can vote, but the party leadership demands absolute loyalty. The value of loyalty takes the place of individual liberty in the current mainland Chinese version of democracy. Even when the voting procedure is carried through, the outcome has almost always been a unanimous decision. In Democracy in America Alexis de Tocqueville wrote:

if a democratic republic, similar to that of the United States, were ever founded in a country where the power of a single individual had previously subsisted, and the effects of a centralized administration had sunk deep into the habits and the laws of the people, I do not hesitate to assert, that in that country a more insufferable despotism would prevail than any which now exists in the monarchical states of Europe; or indeed than any which could be found on this side of the confines of Asia.

When democracy is taken to be merely a voting procedure, it can be counterproductive in countries like China where people have formed the habits of following a centralized administration which they may have mistakenly identified as representing their own interest and to which they habitually render unconditional loyalty. Unless individual liberty is valued, voters will not realize that they ought to feel free in choosing their representatives; and unless voters can freely choose to vote for their candidates, there cannot be true democracy. Here "free choice" does not merely mean choice without external coercion. It also means choosing candidates on the basis of individual liberty.
Imagine a people in whom loyalty to their leader is such an overwhelming value that no matter what happens they will always cast their votes for their own leader. Such a so-called democracy would be no better than a tyranny. This form of government is not worth fighting for, except perhaps as a mere preliminary step from totalitarianism to real democracy. What China needs is democracy with the value of individual liberty, equality, and pluralism.8

While acknowledging that democracy has institutional forms, I will focus on democracy on a cultural level and consider democracy mainly as a value system which is centered on the rights of individual liberty and equality. In that value system, pluralism is also an important element. If we recognize that democracy is value-loaded, then no matter how we think about democracy and Confucianism, we have to think about how values from both sides interact.9

2. Is Confucianism democratic?

Among influential Confucian thinkers Mencius had a thought which is probably closest to one that might be considered democratic and is most often cited by those looking for democratic elements in traditional Chinese thought.10 Mencius said: “(In a state) the people are the most important; the spirits of the land and grain (guardians of territory) are the next; the ruler is of slight importance.”11 This thought is often called the thought of min-ben, or people-rootedness. Some people think this is the model for Chinese democracy. For example, Sun Yat-sen said that Confucius and Mencius more than two thousand years ago already advocated democracy because they advocated the common good and emphasized the importance of the people.12

However, Mencius’ thought is not democracy as defined by individual liberty and equality. First of all, Mencius’ thought does not exclude having a king as the sole decision maker for social affairs. As Shu-hsien Liu properly pointed out, Mencius’ idea of people-rootedness and the idea of having a good king mutually depend on each other.13 When a king makes a decision, he should consider the well-being of the people first.14 It would be unreasonable if we were to look for a form of government without a king in Mencius. The point here is that Mencius’ form of government is what Lin Yutang has called “parental government.”15 It requires a king to treat people as he treats his children ai min ru zi. But even though a king considers the well-being of the people first, the form of government is not democratic. For even if a parent has the children’s well-being in mind, the parent is the sole decision-maker. As the decision-making power of a parent does not come from children, a king’s power comes from Heaven, not from popular free choice. In this picture there is no room for individual liberty and equality, both of which are essential for democracy. This kind of government is at most, in the phrasing of Lincoln,
“for the people.” It is highly questionable whether it is “of the people.” It is clearly not “by the people.”

Secondly, the question of whose well-being should be put first has little to do with democracy. A dictator might put the people’s well-being first. The Confucian concept of government is government by gentlemen and governance by moral force. But gentlemen may be mistaken in believing that they make decisions on behalf of the people and in their best interests; or they may really represent the best interests of the people, without the people, due to lack of knowledge or wisdom, wanting them to do so. In each case the Confucian form of government would not be democratic.

Among prominent classic Confucian philosophers, Mencius’ thought is considered the closest to the idea of democracy. If his idea is not that of real democracy, we can conclude that democracy is not an influential value in traditional Confucianism.

While there may be practical reasons for Confucians today to make Confucianism look democratic, the claim that Confucianism is democratic is seriously flawed and, as I will show later, the move to make Confucianism democratic is misguided.

3. Are Confucianism and democracy compatible?

If democracy has not been at the heart of traditional Chinese culture, are democracy and Confucianism compatible? Liang Shuming, for example, thought that there is no room in Chinese culture for democracy. He wrote that, “it is not that China has not entered democracy, it is rather that China cannot enter democracy.” He believed that traditional Chinese value systems alone provide a solid foundation for a good civil society. Mou Tsung-san, a prominent contemporary New-Confucian, sees the inadequacy of traditional Confucianism and believes that through a transformation of the Confucian moral subjectivity into a cognitive subjectivity, Confucianism will provide an adequate foundation for democracy. But it is not clear how such a transformation can actually take place. Mou includes liberty, equality, and human rights in democracy. It is doubtful that these values can be integrated into Confucianism. Shu-heien Liu, in contrast, sees many difficulties in grafting democracy onto Confucianism and maintains that unless politics is separated from morals, democracy will not find a home in China. Liu is certainly right in thinking that democracy must take the political realm as a social institution. But what about the value content of democracy? If democratic values are to enter the culture, then we cannot ignore the relationship between democratic values and Confucian values.
There are fundamentally conflicting values between democracy and Confucianism. Democracy, as we have seen, presupposes the concept of rights. A democratic society is one in which individual rights are recognized and respected. This requires the recognition that some basic rights of individuals are inalienable. Confucianism, at least in the traditional form, has no place for the concept of rights. It is, however, a serious mistake to think that Confucius left out the concept of rights by negligence. In the ideal society that Confucius envisioned, there is just supposed to be no need for rights. On the issue of whether human nature is good or bad, rights-based theories typically lean toward the view that human nature is bad or flawed. Rights are viewed as the basis for individuals to stand up for themselves. When others impose on someone, the person can stand on a right. The Confucian social ideal is one of  
jen, which signifies humanity, compassion, and benevolence. Unlike rights-based social theories, which tend to regulate society by giving weapons to the weak to protect themselves, Confucian theory promotes the view that  
jen regulates society and protects the weak by placing moral restraints on the strong and powerful. If all people are to embody  
jen as Confucius wished, no one would inflict pain on others unjustly and everyone would be taken care of.

In Confucianism the primary concern for individuals has to do with duty, not liberty. The Confucian motto is “to return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self constitutes benevolence (jen).” Overcoming ourselves implies suppressing our desires of self-interest, including the desire for individual liberty. For Confucians the first order of a person’s social life concerns family life, where liberty is typically not a primary concern. In a family model of society, people are defined by their social roles that come with responsibilities. In Confucianism responsibilities override liberty.

Closely connected to duty is the Confucian notion of loyalty (zhong). Loyalty is not only a virtue of the subject to the ruler, but also a virtue among people in general. Replying to Fan Chi’s question on the meaning of  
jen, Confucius said: “Be respectful in private life, be serious (ching) in handling affairs, and be loyal in dealing with others.” In a broad sense, a child’s filial piety to parents and trust between friends are also forms of loyalty. Loyalty implies being bound to other people. As long as people have to be loyal to others, they are not really free in the liberal sense. Thus, there is an essential tension between loyalty and liberty as two values. Of course someone can freely choose to be loyal. But that does not mean that liberty and loyalty, as primary virtues, point in the same direction. Someone can freely choose to be a slave too.

Confucian loyalty becomes even more binding when it is coupled with another cardinal Confucian value, yi. Usually translated in English as “righteousness,” yi has more than one meaning. In a primary sense, yi requires
that we do not abandon friends when they are in trouble or in need of our help and that we do not let friends down even under extreme circumstances. Heavy emphasis on loyalty and *yi* as central Confucian virtues can be seen throughout history. For instance, in 1948 after Chiang Kai-shek was forced to resign from the presidency of the Republic of China, he still had almost full control of the government. The acting president, Li Tsung-jen, formally in the post, was simply unable to perform his duties without having his own people in the government. A main reason for this was that people in the government had an overwhelmingly strong sense of duty of loyalty to Chiang. The kind of loyalty he felt is almost incomprehensible to many Westerners. In contrast, a democratic society such as the United States characteristically lacks for loyalty. Voters are willing to readily withdraw their support from a leader and turn to someone else at almost any time. Elected officials simply cannot count on loyalty from their voters.

As we have seen, a fundamental value for democracy is equality, whereas in Confucianism equality receives only minimal recognition. In Confucianism, while people may have equal opportunities for laboring through the role of an obedient young person to become a respected old person, there is little hope for submissive ministers to rule. Confucians believe that we are what we make ourselves to be. While everyone has the potential to make themselves a sage or superior person (*jun zi*), in practice because people are inevitably at different stages of this process, they are not on the same footing. Therefore they are not equal. To add the value of equality to Confucianism would inevitably undermine the Confucian ideal of superior person which is at its core.

Confucianism is characteristically paternalistic. Paternalism may be seen as a necessary consequence of the lack of equality within the tradition, a natural extension from the concept of *jen*, and a corollary of the Confucian ideal of meritocracy. Confucius said: "the character of a ruler (*jun zi*) is like wind and that of the people is like grass. In whatever direction the wind blows, the grass always bends."\(^{25}\) Mencius advocated that those who use their minds should rule those who use their muscles.\(^{26}\) A cardinal Confucian virtue for the able and wise is to direct and take care of the less able and wise. For example, it is the inescapable duty of Confucian intellectuals to speak on behalf of the masses. In contrast, in democracy, the concepts of liberty and individual rights assure that individuals are entitled to make choices for themselves even if they are wrong or unwise.\(^{27}\) For that, Confucianism leaves little room. In Confucianism, under the name of common good, paternalism prevails over individual liberty and individual autonomy.

Confucians place a strong value on unity (*da yì tong*), not plurality. “Unity” here means not only political and territorial unity, but also unity in thought and ideology.\(^{28}\) Confucius placed paramount importance on following the way
CONFUCIAN VALUE AND DEMOCRATIC VALUE 189

of the Chou dynasty and thereby excluded other options. While Mencius believed that the only way to settle the empire was through unity, Xun Zi advocated the idea of using a unitary principle in deciding world-affairs. The Confucian classic Li Ji states: “Today throughout the empire carts all have wheels with the same gauge; all writing is with the same character; and for conduct there exist the same rules.” This is stated with enthusiastic approval. The Kung-Yang School Confucianism almost took unity to be the only manifestation of Tao or the Way. In this tradition pluralism has no place.

The problem between Confucian and democratic values is that both sets of values are worthwhile. On the one hand, such democratic values as liberty, equality, and pluralism are desirable; and on the other, so are Confucian values like the family, duty, loyalty, and unity. Confucian values are as cherishable as democratic values. Traditional Confucian virtues such as loyalty, filial piety, paternalism, and unity are good values and ought to be retained. Just because Confucian virtues are in conflict with some democratic values, that does not mean they are less good or less valuable. The real strength of Confucianism is not in being or becoming democratic, but in the traditional virtues that are not democratic. It is a simple-minded fallacious inference that, since democracy is good, anything that is undemocratic must be bad. An argument can be made that in the United States and throughout the democratic West, healthy society has been threatened precisely by the diminishing of traditional values similar to these undemocratic Confucian values. Scholars like Samuel Huntington have made much the same mistake in thinking that because democratic values are good, undemocratic or non-democratic Confucian values must be abandoned or superseded.

At this historically critical and conceptually perplexing point, where ought China to go? Or, as the Confucian would ask, what ought Chinese intellectuals to advocate?

4. Democracy as an independent value system in China

Since Confucianism is the predominant value system in China and is not compatible with democracy in one integrated value system, will the two value systems clash with one another as democracy enters China? There are at least four possible answers to this question.

Let us call the first answer “Confucianism but not democracy.” Among its proponents, besides those outrightly rejecting democracy, I include people who would want China to have minimal democracy, or democracy without pluralism or rights to individual liberty and equality. Liang Shu-ming outrightly rejected democracy. Recently Western scholars such as Henry Rosemont, Jr. also have appeared to favor the alternative of minimal democracy in
Yet since the May Fourth Movement of 1919 some people have chosen the opposing view of complete Westernization in China. Westernization may include democratization. Therefore this view may be called “democracy but not Confucianism.”

Samuel Huntington provides a third answer. Pointing out the impending clash between democracy and some traditional cultures in some parts of the world, Huntington writes:

Great historic cultural traditions, such as Islam and Confucianism, are highly complex bodies of ideas, beliefs, doctrines, assumptions, writings, and behavior patterns. Any major culture, including even Confucianism, has some elements that are compatible with democracy, just as Protestantism and Catholicism have elements that are clearly undemocratic. Confucian democracy may be a contradiction in terms, but democracy in a Confucian society need not be. The question is: What elements in Islam and Confucianism are favorable to democracy, and how and under what circumstances can these supersede the undemocratic elements in those cultural traditions?

Huntington is evidently applying a Western hierarchical model of thinking here. For him, Confucianism can survive democratization by superseding or abandoning its undemocratic values. Admittedly, this option is not entirely impossible, just as a China with only residual Confucian values is not entirely impossible. But is that too great a price for Confucianism to pay? Can Confucianism do better than that?

I propose a fourth answer: that Confucianism and democracy independently co-exist in China. I believe that China needs both democratic and Confucian values. Because of essential tensions between democratic values and some undemocratic Confucian values, the two value systems cannot be integrated into a single system without undermining their integrity. Therefore the only way out has to be for democracy to exist in China independently of Confucianism. Chinese should not pursue a single integrated system of values, whether it is called “democratic Confucianism” or “Confucian democracy.”

Because of the tensions between democratic values and some undemocratic Confucian values, the two sets of values cannot be integrated into one coherent value system without substantially sacrificing either democratic or Confucian values. Unfortunately some New-Confucians try to do just that. Any attempt to make Confucianism democratic will only make it nondescript. As a value system, Confucianism is not unchangeable. It has changed in many ways since Confucius’ time, and it needs to change further. To some extent the vitality of Confucianism lies in its potentialities for change. But it does have
some elements which are so central to Confucianism that it cannot survive substantially without them. Features like its emphasis on the family, filial piety, and self-cultivation and self-constraint are an indispensable part of Confucianism. Since Confucian emphases lead away from individual liberty and equality, if the emphases were to shift, how Confucian would a democratic Confucianism be? Any attempt to democratize Confucianism by superseding its traditional values would jeopardize the integrity of Confucianism. The inevitable result would be a loss of the real value of Confucianism. This kind of integration, if applied to all the non-Western world, would indeed lead to “the end of history.”

China should become democratic and retain its Confucian heritage. The coexistence of two value systems cannot be that of institutional Confucianism with democracy as a social institution. Confucianism as a social institution no longer exists. As value systems, democracy and Confucianism may influence each other, even as they remain independent. Confucianism and democracy may coexist in two ways. Some people are more Confucian than democratic, and value Confucian values more than democratic values, while others are more democratic than Confucian, and value democratic values more than Confucian values. Perhaps more importantly, the values of Confucianism and democracy may co-exist in the same individual. Various values that are not consistent with each other may be worth pursuing. Where that is the case, we need to achieve a delicate balance among them.

History hints at how to balance the values. The three major existing value systems in China, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, have co-existed for a long time. As Wing-Tsit Chan observed: “most Chinese follow the three systems of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, and usually take a multiple approach to things.” Tao Yuanming was a Taoist and a Confucian at the same time; the so-called last Confucian, Liang Shuming, remained a Buddhist throughout his life.

Thinking is not a linear process that always follows a consistent pattern. In the West, people tend to overlook this by overemphasizing a unitary rationality. People have different values, desires, and needs which can be alternately pursued. A Confucian scholar once said that Buddhism is like floating on the water, drifting wherever the current takes you, and Confucianism is like having a rudder in the boat to guide it in a certain direction. This analogy was meant to show the advantage of Confucianism over Buddhism. But if we read it from a different perspective, we can find new meanings. Is it always so bad to drift along the current? Perhaps it is better to drift for a while before using the rudder again. Sometimes it may be better to follow both ways at different times. Reading the analogy this way may help us understand how someone can adopt Confucianism along with Buddhism.
Democracy may enter China similarly. The Confucian, the Taoist, and the Buddha, who have been engaged in a dialogue for an extended period of time, may invite another participant, the democrat, to join them. Then we will see the four different value systems side by side. The primary characteristic of the dialogue should be one of harmony. When one party is too loud, it is time to shift attention to another party. For instance, the concept of rights should be voiced when there is too much emphasis on paternalism and the paternalistic practice has become oppressive; but Confucianism, Taoism, and perhaps Buddhism should be voiced when rights-based talk has aroused too much individualism. Thus, despite tensions between Confucianism and democracy, the four systems can nevertheless keep themselves in balance and harmony in the same land.36

Notes
2. Ibid.
9. The relation between democracy on the one hand and Taoism and Buddhism on the other is complex and cannot be adequately dealt with in this essay. Confucianism, the predominant value system in Chinese culture, is my main concern here.

14. Female monarchs were evidently not a possibility at Mencius’s time.


19. Ibid., p. 15.


24. Wing-Tsit Chan, op. cit., p. 41.

25. Ibid., p. 40.

26. Ibid., p. 69.


35. For a detailed account of how a person can incorporate different values, see my “How can one be a Taoist-Buddhist-Confucian?,” *International Review of Chinese Religion and Philosophy*, 1 (March 1996), pp. 29–66.

36. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Seventh East-West Philosophers’ Conference at the East-West Center and the University of Hawaii. I would like to thank Joel Kupperman, Charles Hayford, Craig Ihara, Ira Smolensky, Walter Benesch, Ruiping Fan, and Qingjie Wang for reading previous drafts of the paper, and the Midwest Faculty Seminar, the Center for East Asian Studies of the University of Chicago, the Center for Chinese Studies of the University of Michigan, and Monmouth College for their generous support.