Where Does Confucian Virtuous Leadership Stand

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For over a decade Daniel Bell has been a pioneer in the study of democracy and human rights in an East Asian context. His remarkable book *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* elevates his research to a new level. This new volume offers a critical examination of the “uniquely parochial” Western liberal democracy, which has been promoted in various parts of the world as universally valid regardless of local conditions. Based on his years of firsthand experience and personal knowledge of East Asian societies, Bell proposes a rather ambitious alternative model of democracy that would be suitable to a cultural setting where there is a long history of Confucian influence.

Chapter 6, “Taking Elitism Seriously: Democracy with Confucian Characteristics,” is probably the most exciting and provocative part of the book. In it Bell argues for taking seriously not just one but two important values, namely democracy and political elitism. Confucian political elitism is defined as the “rule of the wise.” It exemplifies the ideal that “the best and the brightest” should exert more influence in order to build a good society. On the one hand, this kind of political elitism may be particularly appropriate for today’s “knowledge-based” societies; on the other, Bell argues, there is an equally profound need to institutionalize the democratic virtues of accountability, transparency, and equal political participation. Balancing these two considerations leads Bell to propose his version of “modern Confucian democracy.” Specifically, this would involve the establishment of “a bicameral legislature, with a democratically elected lower house and a ‘Confucian’ upper house composed of representatives selected on the basis of competitive examinations” (pp. 165–166). The upper house would decide on policies by means of a majority vote following open and public deliberation. When the upper and lower houses disagree, Bell seems uncommitted as to which house should have the final word. Anticipating the obvious challenge, he proposes that deputies from the upper house be selected through an examination mechanism rooted in Chinese culture. Such an examination would be designed to single out the most desired traits in a candidate.

This idea of a bicameral legislature is intriguing, to say the least. It is arguable that if the United States had such a system, Congress might not have given its approval to the disastrous war in Iraq. As Phil Donahue’s recent film *Body of War* shows, when the call to war in Iraq was brought to a vote on the floor of Congress, the Bush administration timed the debate so that the vote would take place just prior to the November election (the vote in the U.S. Senate took place on October 11, 2002). Facing a very angry post-9/11 nation, both houses were under tremendous pressure to support the war. It can be argued that if members of Congress in one of the two chambers had been selected through a knowledge-based examination process rather than by popular vote, these members would have been less likely to
succumb to public pressure. Furthermore, if we accept the argument that well-educated and knowledgeable people are less likely to support wars like the one in Iraq,\(^1\) Congress might not have approved of the invasion of Iraq had there been a national legislature on Bell’s model.

To many, Bell’s proposal may sound like a twenty-first century Confucian fantasy. But it may not be as far-fetched as it first appears. Besides the Confucian cultural factors that Bell enlists in support of his view, recent political history in China may also give it plausibility. First, Sun Yet-sen’s scheme of a “Constitution of Five Powers” (Wu Quan Xian Fa) deliberately included a branch of government called the Kao Shi Yuan, the Ministry of Examinations. The Kao Shi Yuan was charged with selecting government officials through a carefully devised examination system. The Kao Shi Yuan was of such importance that it was given the same level of authority as, and independence from, the legislative branch (Li Fa Yuan), the executive branch (Xing Zheng Yuan), the judicial branch (Si Fa Yuan), and the supervisory branch (Jian Cha Yuan). More than just a theoretical construct, this system is a political reality in the Republic of China (Taiwan) today. Under this system, it is conceivable that the Kao Shi Yuan could be assigned the responsibility to select deputies to the Xian Shi Yuan, as in Bell’s proposal.

Second, as Bell has pointed out in his book, in the China of today, besides the People’s Congress, which is the legislative body, there is another assembly called the “Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).” The CPPCC is currently composed of the Communist Party, other political parties, mass organizations, and representative public personages—that is, compatriots from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao as well as returned overseas Chinese and other specially invited people. It includes many social elites from all walks of life. Its function, according to the official definition, is to engage in political consultation and to exercise democratic supervision—that is, to organize various noncommunist political parties, mass organizations, and public personages to take part in the discussion and management of state affairs. The actual roles of both the People’s Congress and the CPPCC in the political life of China today are disputable, to say the least. However, it is conceivable that, once the Party steps back from power, the People’s Congress and the CPPCC may become transformed into a political arrangement similar to what Bell proposes, following some degree of modification.\(^2\)

While Bell’s proposal is definitely consistent with Confucian political elitism, he fails to provide a strong justification for such an arrangement. What gives the elites the right to occupy a separate upper house? Merely referring to tradition and a “knowledge-based society” does not create a strong case here; there is a need for moral justification. The issue ultimately has to do with the Confucian standpoint on equality. As I have discussed elsewhere,\(^3\) under Confucianism people are born with equal potential but ultimately find themselves unequal because they have arrived at different levels of attainment. Confucians believe that every person is born with the potential to become cultivated and even to become a sage, yet in real life everyone’s potential is actualized differently due to varying degrees of personal effort and different circumstances. Consequently some people are more morally “worthy”
than others in terms of political decision making. This Confucian view is the foundation of the kind of political elitism that Bell would implement, even though it is unpopular among a modern generation for whom “the affirmation of ordinary life” is a dominant theme. Without addressing this fundamental issue, Bell cannot establish a solid justification for his proposal. Attempting to do so would put Bell in direct confrontation with the popular view of universal equality advocated by liberals such as Ronald Dworkin.

I will not attempt to develop a Confucian philosophy of equality here. But I would like to suggest that such a philosophy would include two aspects. On the one hand, all human beings possess equal dignity because each has the potential to become cultivated into a knowledgeable, and virtuous person. Animals do not possess this capacity and are thus unequal to human beings. As far as our capacity to achieve is concerned, all human beings are equal. On the other hand, human beings do not necessarily achieve the same level of cultivation in terms of knowledge and virtue, and are thus not equal in these respects. When the making of important political decisions requires exceptional knowledge and virtue, we are not equally qualified in participating in this process. Again, such a view is not popular today, and Bell cannot make a strong case for his proposal without addressing this question.

My second criticism of Bell’s proposal is that he has basically dismissed the requirement for virtuous leadership in Confucian political philosophy. Bell’s version of the Confucian “rule of the wise” is based on the reality of the prevailing knowledge-based society of today. Because present-day society is highly dependent on knowledge, it would seem that its political leaders must necessarily possess appropriate kinds of knowledge. Confucian elites are supposed to be well educated and wise. When they are in positions of authority, they must be able to make informed decisions. However, here Bell discusses only one aspect of Confucian elitist political philosophy, for Confucians feel that a leader should be not only knowledgeable but, and perhaps more importantly, virtuous as well. Confucian political philosophy places emphasis on the “rule of virtue” (de zhi 德治), the idea that the best form of government is one where the rulers are virtuous and lead by setting an appropriate example for the rest of society.

In the Confucian view, the practice of government is not merely a bureaucratic exercise, but also a moral praxis. To make a bureaucracy function, all we need is knowledge and the technical skills of political maneuvering, but the key to success in moral praxis is ethical excellence or virtue. In Chinese, governance is called zheng 政. Confucius defined this word in terms of another word zheng 正, namely “setting things right.” The “Aigongwen” chapter of the Liji records a conversation between Confucius and Duke Ai of the state of Lu, in which the duke asks Confucius what is most important in human affairs. Confucius replies that governance (zheng 政) is most important. The duke further inquires what governance is about. Confucius says, “governance is about setting things right” (政者, 政也). Here the second zheng means “correct,” “to make something right,” and “upright.” To set things right in politics requires leaders to “govern with virtue” (為政以德), an ideal traceable to the Confucian classic Shangshu (Book of history). The idea of virtue-based leader-
ship is a prominent one for both Confucius and Mencius. In the “Weizheng” chapter of the *Analects* Confucius says, “If you lead with government decrees and regulate with penal law, people may avoid doing things so that they are not punished, but they will not develop a sense of shame. If you lead with virtue and regulate with rules of propriety, people will develop a sense of shame and will form good character” (道之以政，齊之以刑，民免而無恥。道之以德，齊之以禮，有恥且格).

The goal of government in Confucianism is the building of a harmonious society. In such a society, people live in prosperity and peace. This goal requires the government not only to regulate society through rules and laws but also, more importantly, to foster a climate of virtue. The way to achieve this goal is by providing a role model. In the “Yanyuan” chapter of the *Analects* Confucius says that “if the leader strives for goodness, the people will follow him in being good. The virtue of the morally cultivated person (junzi) is like wind; the common people’s virtue is like grass. Grass always bends in the direction of the wind” (子欲善而民善矣，君子之德風。小人之德草，草上之風，必偃). When virtuous leaders lead the way, the people will tend to be virtuous. Again in the “Weizheng” chapter Confucius says that “One should govern with virtue. This is like the northern star: it takes its proper place and the rest of the stars rotate around it” (為政以德，譬如北辰，居其所，而眾星共之). The philosophy behind the “rule of virtue” is that rulers themselves should be virtuous in the first place; then they will not only make good decisions in the interests of the people, but also serve as role models and foster the development of an uplifting moral climate.

Confucian elitism is thus defined as consisting of equal amounts of knowledge and virtue. Bell aptly calls his upper house “Xian Shi Yuan,” which roughly means the House of Virtue and Talent, but his proposed arrangement is based on the presence of knowledge and misses the part played by virtue. On the ideal of “rule by the virtuous,” Bell is willing to go so far as making ethics tests a part of the examination for Xian Shi Yuan deputies (p. 168) and requiring that these deputies be “public-spirited” (p. 159). But this is still far from what is required by Confucian political philosophy. Without virtue as a requirement for leadership, Bell’s proposal is less than adequate from a Confucian standpoint.

In this regard, Bell’s proposal may be a step back from the model already developed in contemporary China in the form of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). Surely the CPPCC includes knowledgeable people as its members, such as well-trained scientists. But it also includes people who are not typically considered knowledgeable in the usual sense. It includes model workers, accomplished actors and actresses, and military heroes. These people are there in part because they represent the “best” one can be in various walks of life. They are considered role-model personages (mo fan ren wu), and insofar as they are role models they set an example for the rest of society. Inseparable from their career successes is their personal virtue. Let us take a member of the eleventh CPPCC named Zhang Haidi 張海迪 as an example. Paralyzed when she was a young girl, Zhang never gave up on herself. Displaying a tremendous amount of endurance and determination, she worked hard to become a popular author. But what she is known for
primarily is her personal virtue, not her knowledge. Zhang is not alone on the CPPCC. There have been many CPPCC members who were manual workers and peasants, selected in part because they demonstrated virtue. This is not to say that the current CPPCC is full of virtuous people. But at least it purports to include those who are held up as exemplary role models, and this may reflect the importance attached to the Confucian “rule of virtue.”

Some may argue that in today’s world the philosophy of the “rule of virtue” is outdated—that true democracy is about open competition for political leadership in a social marketplace where there are no established requirements with regard to the personal character of society’s leaders. After all, it may be asked, who is to say what virtue is and who possesses it? I believe that those who raise these kinds of questions have lost sight of what it means to be Confucian. Confucianism is a philosophy with a strong emphasis on ethics. It is not value-neutral; it is not some obscure, abstract political theory. The significance of Confucianism lies in what it stands for: a just society led by virtuous persons who possess qualities such as benevolence (ren), rightness (yi), propriety (li), wisdom (zhi), and trustworthiness (xin). In the Confucian view, a person without these qualities cannot be a good leader, and a good society, however it produces its leaders, must have virtuous leaders.

A related question, then, is how does a society find virtuous leaders? Bell proposes that the Xian Shi Yuan select knowledgeable members through an examination process, as in pre-twentieth-century China. But it is problematic whether a society can obtain virtuous leaders via an examination process. Bell’s solution of having an ethics test (p. 168) does not achieve this goal. But there are cultural resources in Chinese society that can be utilized. For example, the Chinese now use a method of sampling public opinion known as qun zhong ping yi during elections. This involves the assessment of the opinions on not only a candidate’s ability as a leader but also the candidate’s trustworthiness and relationships with other people (qun zhong guan xi). The latter reflects a candidate’s degree of virtue. When a university needs a new department chair, they first call for applications and nominations. Then they go through the qun zhong ping yi process to gather opinions from faculty and staff. Then the university administration makes public the choice of a candidate or list of candidates. After this, an election takes place to fill the new chair. This process is by no means flawless, but it has its merits and can be useful in helping us to think through issues associated with political leadership.

An alternative method is to combine the examination process with a qun zhong ping yi to produce deputies in the Xian Shi Yuan. Specifically, there would be two committees involved, one in charge of the examination and the other in charge of the qun zhong ping yi. A candidate would have to pass both phases of the process before being appointed to the Xian Shi Yuan. In this way, not only would Xian Shi Yuan deputies be certain to possess the necessary knowledge requirements, but they would also be admired by others for their virtuous character.

In summary, I believe Bell’s proposal is both interesting and promising. But I feel that aside from the issue of equality he has not included one of the most important elements of Confucian political philosophy, namely the quality of virtue. Without it,
Bell's proposal is inadequate. In recent times, Confucianism has encountered many challenges, and it has appropriately adapted to accommodate itself to changing social realities. However, there are traditional elements that Confucianism should never abandon, and one of them is the rule of virtue. If Confucianism is to continue in any meaningful way, virtue must be among those personal attributes upon which it places the greatest emphasis.

Notes

1 – The philosophy club at my university sponsored a public panel on campus just prior to the war; most people at the panel were opposed to an invasion of Iraq.

2 – Right before the June 4 incident in 1989, a few members of the People’s Congress Standing Committee stood up and called for an emergency session of the standing committee so that they would be able to discuss the student-led demonstration. These deputies were contained by the Communist Party before they could exert any influence. It is conceivable that in the future, when the time is right, the CPPCC could evolve into an independent branch of the government.

