Where does Confucian Virtuous Leadership Stand? – A Critique of Daniel Bell’s Beyond Liberal Democracy

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For over a decade, Daniel Bell has been a pioneering figure in the study of democracy and human rights in an East Asian context. This remarkable book takes his study to a new level. Bell offers a critical examination of the “uniquely parochial” Western liberal democracy, which has been promoted to various parts of the world as universally valid regardless of local conditions. Based on years of first-hand experience and knowledge of East Asian societies, Bell proposes a rather ambitious alternative model of democracy that would suit a land under the long-lasting influence of Confucianism.

The book opens with a critical reflection on Ronald Dworkin’s 2002 visit to China. During that visit, Dworkin “unilaterally believed that his China tour was a valuable opportunity for China to be privy to his ideas of liberty” (2). He showed no sensitivity to China’s cultural tradition and demonstrated no knowledge of China’s social context and its recent substantial improvement of legal practice. In the meantime, he was taken for a ride by the Chinese government to showcase China’s new freedoms. Dworkin’s case is a good example of showing the superficiality of some Western scholars’ attempt to force their “parochially developed” ideas of Western liberal democracy on East Asia in a “one size fits all” style. It calls urgently for a close examination of democracy and human rights in the Chinese context, an examination that comes not out of ignorance and arrogance. Calling for a culturally sensitive approach, Bell offers this much needed alternative. He argues that there are morally legitimate alternatives to Western-style liberal democracy in the East Asian region. Democracy in East Asia does not lie simply in implementing Western political ideas and practices; it involves drawing upon East Asian cultural resources and political realities. The art on the cover of the book says it all: an American Statue of Liberty holding a copy of Confucius’s *Analects*!

The book is divided into three parts. Part One discusses human rights in an East Asian context. Part Two explores democracy in an East Asian context. Part Three investigates issues of capitalism in an East Asian context. The book ends with the author’s responses to critics, an interesting addition to the main body of the book. Following the Introduction, Part One begins with Chapter 2 on general Confucian principles of good government and
just war theory, and their implications for the contemporary world. The author differentiates
the Confucian ideal world and non-ideal world. In the non-ideal world, Confucius and
Mencius would approve practical maneuvers conducive to the good society, including
warfare. There has been little, if any, serious study of the Confucian theory of just war;
Bell’s discussion of Mencius’s theory of just war alone makes a unique contribution in this
regard. Chapter 3 reflects on the East–West dialogues on human rights and the so-called
“Asian values” debates (Bell calls it “values in Asia” to make it a more accurate
description). Being a veteran on these matters, Bell draws on his rich experience and
knowledge in arguing for the legitimate differences in value prioritizations between the
West and East Asia. Political actors, both intellectuals and officials, in East Asia typically
endorse a set of fundamental human goods somewhat different from their counterparts in
Western societies. They may opt for different trade-offs when human values compete with
one another. Bell concludes that East Asian conceptions of vital human interest may well
justify deviations from the human rights standards typically endorsed by Western liberal
theories. I find his argument powerful and persuasive. Furthermore, Bell argues for the need
of strategic considerations in promoting human rights in East Asian societies with local
cultural sensitivities in mind. For example, attempts to promote human rights by posting a
stark choice between peoples’ religion and human rights, as opposed to reconciling
religious insights with human rights, may turn people away from the human rights
movement. Given these considerations, cultural dialogues on human rights are essential.
Chapter 4 brings readers to practical issues of human rights, looking into the ethical
challenges to international human rights NGOs in their efforts to promote human rights.
Bell concludes by urging human rights practitioners and theorists to engage each other for
their common cause.

Part Two is the most challenging and ambitious part of the entire book. It moves on to
the issue of democracy in East Asia and makes a case that Confucianism can shape “rule by
the people” in ways that may be appropriate for the modern world. This part begins in
Chapter 5 with a comparative study of physical education in ancient Greece and ancient
China. Bell’s finding indicates that whereas the Greeks found it necessary to develop
systematic state-sponsored programs of physical education to train soldiers for wars, their
Chinese counterparts of the Warring States period did not develop such programs to the
same extent. One of the reasons, Bell suggests, lies in political differences in the two
societies: whereas ancient Greece was characterized with citizenship politics, ancient China
from early on was characterized with elitist politics. Bell also aptly cites Hannah Arendt
that, “Historically, it is very likely that the rise of the city-state and the public realm
occurred at the expense of the private realm of family and household” (144). I find this
observation pertinent and plausible. As I have argued elsewhere, no pursuit of value is
without costs. Different considerations of these costs may justify different configurations of
values (“The Confucian Ideal of Harmony,” Philosophy East & West, 56.4 [2006]: 583–
603).

Chapter 6 is the most provocative and exciting chapter of the entire book. It proposes a
“democracy with Confucian characteristics.” Bell argues for taking not just one, but two
important values seriously, namely democracy and political elitism. Confucian political
elitism is the “rule of the wise.” It is the ideal that “the best and the brightest” should exert
more influence in order to build the good society. On the one hand, this kind of political
elitism may be distinctly 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 consists in “a bicameral legislature, with a democratically elected lower house and a ‘Confucian’ upper house composed of representatives selected on the basis of competitive examinations” (165–166). The upper house can decide on policies by means of a majority vote following open and public deliberations. When the upper house and the lower house disagree, Bell seems uncommitted as to which house should have the final word. Anticipating the obvious challenge, Bell proposes that deputies of the upper house be generated by an examination mechanism rooted in Chinese culture. Such examinations would need to be further tailored to identify the desired traits of political actors.

To many, Bell’s proposal may sound like a Confucian fantasy in the twenty-first century. However, it may not be as far-fetched as it first appears. Besides the Confucian cultural factors that Bell enlists in support of his view, the current political arrangement in China may also add plausibility to it. In China, beside the People’s Congress, which is the legislative body, there is another assembly called “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, representatives of compatriots of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao, as well as of returned overseas Chinese and other specially invited people. It amasses many social elites from all walks of life. Its function, according to the official definition, is to conduct political consultation and exercise democratic supervision, to organize its members from various non-communist 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 China’s political life today are disputable, to say the least. However, it is conceivable that, once the party steps out of power, the People’s Congress and the CPPCC may transform into a political arrangement similar to what Bell proposes, perhaps after much modification. 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 hold a separate upper house? Merely referring to tradition and “knowledge-based society” does not make a strong case here. There is a need for a moral justification. The issue ultimately has to do with the Confucian view on equality. As I have discussed elsewhere (“Whether Confucianism and Democracy Are Compatible,” in The Tao Encounters the West, SUNY Press, 1999, 172–180), in Confucianism people are born with equal potential but transform themselves into non-equals because of different levels of moral attainment. Confucians believe that every person is born cultivatable and has the potential to become a sage; yet in real life everyone is actualized differently due to various degrees of personal effort and circumstance. Consequently some people are more morally “worthy” than others in political decision-making. This Confucian view is the foundation of the kind of political elitism that Bell attempts to implement, even though it is unpopular in the contemporary time that is characterized by “the affirmation of ordinary life” (Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989, Part 3). Without addressing this fundamental issue, Bell cannot build a solid justification for his proposal. Addressing it would put Bell in a direct clash with the popular view of universal equality advocated by liberals such as Dworkin. Today, fighting on such a front would be an extremely challenging task.

In Chapter 7 Bell argues that popular democracy may not be the best way to protect minority rights and that less-than-democratic states may have some advantages in protecting minority interests. Using his intimate knowledge of Taiwan and Singapore, Bell makes a compelling case for his claim. Drawing on his personal experience teaching at the National University of Singapore, Bell in Chapter 8 builds a case for the need of inclusive multiculturalism and argues that “a teacher should make an effort to design a curriculum
that draws on the scholarly contributions of all ethnic groups in the class (217).” As a
teacher myself, I find this advice worth noting.

Part Three of the book is on capitalism in an East Asian context. Bell tries to show that
Confucian cultural heritage may have influenced the development of capitalism in some
East Asian countries and, specifically that this is reflected in the Confucian constraints on
property rights. For example, the author observes that, the Nationalist Party of China, the
Communist Party of China, and the Hong Kong government have all passed laws that
curtail the freedom of individuals to disinheriit needy members of their families, out of a
fear that more individual-centered property rights would undermine the Confucian value of
care for needy family members. The family is at the core of Confucianism. If Confucianism
exerts any influence in the political arena today, it would include protecting the family. For
this reason, Bell’s argument is both insightful and compelling.

The last two chapters, 10 and 11, are on economic productivity, public policy on social
welfare, and justice for migrant workers. Bell investigates various economic and social
problems that have emerged in the process of modernization in some East Asian countries,
and suggests some pertinent solutions. In Chapter 12, the concluding chapter, Bell offers
responses to critics, ranging from using Western methods of scholarship in discussing an
East Asian context to multicultural sympathies. It is a useful supplement to a book of such
broad scope.

This book is a major achievement in the study of democracy and human rights for an
East Asian context. As such, it deserves to be celebrated. Every person interested in issues
of democracy and human rights in East Asia must read it. I personally find it both
persuasive and stimulating. There are points to be disputed, as can be expected in a book of
such large magnitude, ranging from such important issues as equality, discussed above, to
some trivial points. One example is that the author quotes an unreliable source and asserts
that the Chinese character 和 (he), composed of a part meaning “grain” and a part meaning
“mouth,” indicates that “a decent supply of food underpins social harmony” (238). However,
this character was a result of the evolution of two earlier characters, which had
formed the meaning of harmony before 和 came to gain currency (see my “The Ideals of
Harmony in Ancient Greece and Ancient China,” in this issue of Dao: A Journal of
Comparative Philosophy). Therefore the composition of 和 does not tell us much about the
Chinese understanding of harmony. These disputes do not, of course, negatively affect the
substantial contribution of Bell’s book to the discourse of democracy and human rights in
East Asia. For years to come, scholars interested in meaningful discussion of these
important issues will need to refer to Bell’s book.