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Confucian Leadership Meets Confucian Democracy

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*The Master Said, "To conduct government by virtue can be compared to the North Star: it occupies its place, and the many stars bow before it."*²

1. Introduction

Many famous images of the inspirational, almost magical character of Confucian leadership seem very distant from any idea of democracy. Some modern Confucian celebrate this distance, arguing that modern Confucian polities should be ruled by elites, and perhaps that these elites should be venerated in something like the traditional way.³ Confucian democrats, in contrast, hold that the roles of Confucian political leaders must be rethought, just as the modern Confucian polity must shift from a monarchy to a constitutional democracy. This does not mean that modern Confucians must turn their backs on traditional Confucian views of leadership: the key traditional insights are still important, although to some degree they take on new significance in the new context of modern democratic Confucianism. In this essay I will articulate and defend this democratic vision of leadership; I make my case in four steps. First, drawing on recent work by Joseph

¹ My thanks to participants in the "Workshop on Democratic Leadership in Northeast Asia" for fruitful discussion, and to Max Fong for his editorial assistance.

² *Analects* 2:1; translation from [Brooks & Brooks 1998, 109].

³ For an important articulation of Confucian-inspired "meritocracy," see [Bell 2015]. For a more extreme view, see [Jiang 2013].

Chan and Elton Chan, I outline a traditional Confucian view of the “inspirational” leader, and examine the view that process and institutions played a decidedly secondary role in traditional Confucianism. Second, I unpack and then critique Jiwei Ci’s argument that Confucian leadership rests on an “identification model” of agency that is incompatible with democracy. Third, I build on some of the argument from my book *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy: Toward Progressive Confucianism* to the effect that modern Confucians need to resolve a tension within traditional Confucianism by embracing a person-based democracy instead of mass-based authoritarianism. Finally, I conclude by making explicit why Confucian democracies still need leaders playing roles that are very much in the spirit of traditional leadership.

2. Inspirational Leadership

Let us begin with the succinct and charitable presentation of traditional Confucian leadership in the recent essay “Confucianism and Political Leadership” by Joseph Chan and Elton Chan. In their view, Confucian leadership has four key characteristics: (1) it depends on a bond between ruler and ruled; (2) it is based on the leaders excelling in “ordinary aspects of being human”; (3) it is “inspirational,” in that a leader’s ethical authority enables leadership by example rather than coercion; and (4) it, rather than political institutions, is the basis of political order. I will look at each of these and then examine the ways in which this model of leadership is incompatible with democracy.

According to Chan and Chan, political leadership is truly authoritative not just because of a ruler’s ability to promote people’s well being, but also due to “...the willing acceptance of his rule by the people. That is to say, authority to lead is not merely

externally justified but also internally constituted by a mutual commitment from both sides—the ruler’s commitment to care for the people and the people’s willing acceptance” [Chan & Chan 2014, 58]. *Analects* 12:7 is perhaps the most famous expression of this idea: food and weapons are both keys to good government, but most important is the people’s “confidence (*xin*).” The passage concludes, “Since antiquity there has always been death, but if the people lack confidence, [the ruler] cannot stand.”⁴ Chan and Chan cite other passages that reinforce the idea of the people happily following a good leader; there is no question that the people’s acceptance of leadership plays a significant role in Confucian political thinking. In Section 4 I will question one aspect of this—namely, whether the people are really agents who can exercise “willing acceptance”—but for now let us move on to the rest of their picture.

As Chan and Chan very nicely put it, Confucian leadership does not rely on a special kind of genius; a great leader is “someone who is excellent at the most ordinary aspects of being human” [Ibid, 61]. They offer a long list of leadership qualities (things like being kind, benevolent, strong, diligent, and so on), and comment that these qualities:

...are but adjectives of daily usage, and are qualities of which almost anyone will have a little bit. The difference between a leader and a commoner is simply that the former insists on living out these virtues, while the latter does not; and the difference between a leader and a virtuous commoner is merely that the former assumes public office, while the latter does not. [Ibid, 62]

In short, as with the importance of a two-way commitment that was mentioned above, Chan and Chan see a considerable continuity between leaders and led.

⁴ Translation from [Brooks & Brooks 1998].

Leadership grounded on willing acceptance and based in excellence at shared human qualities is, say Chan and Chan, “inspirational.” The people do not just find leaders agreeable, but also treat their leaders as exemplars, as role models. We can find many statements in the *Analects* that articulate this idea; here is 13:6: “The Master said, If his person is correct, then without his giving an order it will be carried out; if his person is not correct, even though he does give an order, it will not be obeyed.”⁵ Chan and Chan explain the mechanism at work here in the following fashion:

When the people follow their leaders, they are not merely taking orders from them but also deferring to their judgment; and they do so because they believe that the leaders are more virtuous than they are themselves. The leaders, therefore, exercise not only an institutional authority over their followers, but also a moral one. [Ibid, p. 63]

In other words, this is a matter of “inspiring [the people] to act voluntarily for the greater good” [Ibid.].

The flip-side of Confucian emphasis on the inspirational ability of rulers is a skepticism about institutions. Drawing on thinkers from throughout the Confucian tradition, Chan and Chan argue that there are two basic reasons for this skepticism: (1) that only morally excellent leaders can make correct situational judgments, whereas institutions are rigid and incapable (on their own) of needed adjustments for circumstance; and (2) that institutions are of limited use in restraining not-so-virtuous leaders. This latter concern may be grounded in Confucius’s well-known opposition to litigation, but comes out particularly clearly in a statement that Chan and Chan quote from the seventeenth century

⁵ Translation from [Brooks & Brooks 1998].

Confucian Gu Yanwu: “When the institution is complicated, those who are crafty and cunning will be able to manipulate the rules like traders in the market; even if there are virtuous people, they will find themselves unable to help the situation” [Ibid., 60].

In addition to the two reasons that Chan and Chan give for worrying about institutions, I would add a third: namely, that at least some kinds of institutions (such as penal codes) seem incapable of encouraging the development of moral virtues which would enable the people to regulate themselves (and, perhaps, to be responsive to the ruler’s inspiration). If we look at the most famous expression of this idea in *Analects* 2:3, however, we will immediately see that things are not quite as simple as I have been making it seem:

The Master said, “Lead them with government and regulate them by punishments, and the people will evade them with no sense of shame. Lead them with virtue and regulate them by ritual, and they will acquire a sense of shame and moreover, they will be orderly.”⁶

Leading with “government” is worse than leading with virtue: this is consistent with what we have seen so far. But note the text’s endorsement of “regulat[ing] by ritual.” “Ritual” refers to a broad scope of formalized human activities, from state ceremonies to life-cycle rituals (like funerals) to everyday social practices. Confucians do not rely on inspirational leadership alone, but also on rituals that discipline our behavior and—the Confucians believe—also help to transform our dispositions.

Indeed, even though Chan and Chan are certainly correct to say that Confucians emphasize leadership over institutions, it is vital to notice the kinds of institutions that Confucians rely upon in order to cultivate and select virtuous leaders. In addition to rituals,

⁶ Translation from [Brooks & Brooks 1998].

the classical textual canon, generally taken to have been composed by sages of outstanding virtue and insight, is a second important type of institution. Mastering these texts, internalizing their values, and thus transforming oneself, was a central means of becoming virtuous, and so it made sense to use examinations based on this textual tradition as a method of selecting future leaders who could be expected to be relatively virtuous. In short, Confucians have never felt that politics can proceed through inspirational leadership alone; good leadership depends on a background set of institutions to support and develop its exercise. Keeping this in mind will be one key to my argument for the role of leaders in a Confucian democracy.

To conclude this section, let us reflect on the ways in which the traditional Confucian model of leadership relates to democracy. (1) “Willing acceptance” seems compatible with democracy, though we will see a problem with this below. (2) The idea that leaders have excellent ordinary qualities seems compatible with democracy, in that citizens can potentially rule, though the Chans’ breezy attitude toward the *min-ren* tension will be a problem (see below). (3) “Inspirational leadership” seems compatible with democracy, although we will shortly see that Jiwei Ci disagrees about the nature of the leader-led relation. (4) The opposition to institutions is a problem, though if we interpret this in the way I suggest near the end of the prior paragraph, then while the actual institutions are a problem, the idea of institutions may not be.

3. Identification

According to the model of traditional Confucian leadership that we have just examined, the barriers to incorporating Confucian leadership into a democratic framework

are relatively low. That is, while traditional Confucian political theory was certainly not democratic, if we today have independent commitments to democracy and to Confucianism, their basic compatibility means that it should be possible to construct a theory that combines them.⁷ As I will argue in the next few sections, though, there is good reason to hold out for a stronger conclusion: namely, that democracy is not merely loosely compatible with Confucianism, but actually necessary for Confucianism to attain its deepest aims. To get closer to seeing democracy's necessity, I now turn to an argument at the core of Jiwei Ci's *Moral China in the Age of Reform*. Paradoxically, Ci's view that Confucianism is deeply undemocratic will help us see why it must become democratic.

Moral China in the Age of Reform is a complex work; here I focus only on a strand of the argument that is made most clearly in the chapter titled "Freedom and Identification." Ci's central concept is agency, which he defines as "power organized as subjectivity through stably plausible attributions requiring objective conditions" [93].⁸ In other words, our self-understood capacities for influencing the world around us depend on certain stable attributions of values and practices, and the stability of these values and practices, in turn, rest on certain objective arrangements of social and material reality. Ci refers to these robust patterns of values and practices as "moral cultures," and is concerned to contrast two types of agency and their attendant moral cultures: on the one hand individualism and agency-through-freedom, and on the other hand Confucianism and agency-through-identification. Because of my interests, here I will concentrate on the latter. Ci writes that under the identification model,

⁷ It is certainly worth noting that both Chans elsewhere go further, arguing that Confucianism and democracy (or, in the case of Elton Chan, republicanism) contribute things to one another, so that the combination is stronger than either separately.

⁸ Throughout this section, bracketed references refer to [Ci 2014] unless otherwise indicated.

...the source of whatever is valued, or at least the means of access to it, is some authority or exemplar with whom ordinary people identify, and only through such identification are ordinary people supposedly able to stand in a proper relationship to the good or the correct and acquire the full-fledged motivation to act accordingly. [94]

Ci emphasizes that “the individual must perform such identification with a significant measure of willingness: the individual must will such identification. Thus the existence of individual free will is presupposed, indeed honored, in the very act of self-denial” [95]. Still, “the exemplar alone supposedly stands in a direct relation to that which he exemplifies, such that ordinary people have no access to the real meaning of the tradition or community or movement except through such exemplification or mediation. By the same token, conformity to that which is exemplified takes the form of identification with the exemplar” [98].

In many ways this looks like Chan and Chan’s “inspirational leadership,” according which leaders inspire the people “to act voluntarily for the greater good.” In both cases, the people act voluntarily rather than being coerced. What Ci brings out, though, is the idea that the only access people can have to the good is via identification with (or, if you prefer, being inspired by) their leaders. There is a critical hierarchical differentiation between the rulers, who have direct access to the good, and the ruled, whose access is mediated. The people—the ruled—thus do not make free choices that this or that is good; their only choice is whether to identify with their leaders or not. Ci says that this is still a form of agency, but it seems clear that is a form of agency in which the people can exercise no independent judgment about what is good. If this is a correct description of Confucian

moral culture, then it would seem that democracy would be forever foreclosed within such system of values and practice.

Advocates of the possibility of Confucian democracy have two choices at this point. On one hand, we can deny that Ci has correctly characterized the form(s) of agency enabled by Confucian moral culture. This is the route that I would expect Chan and Chan to take: their emphasis on the continuity between people and ruler (for example, in stressing the ordinariness of ruler's virtues) suggests that they would deny the strong hierarchical distinction on which Ci depends. And indeed, the classical canon contains famous statements to the effect that all people are fundamentally the same as the sages, as I shall discuss further below.

However, Ci has not invented his identification model out of whole cloth. The classical canon—not to mention imperial Chinese practice—also contains evidence for a constrained model of popular agency something like the one that he describes. Most famous is *Analects* 8:9, “The Master said, “The people can be made to follow it; they cannot be made to understand it.””⁹ This fits very well with Ci's contention that the people can only identify with, and follow, a model of the good, rather than understanding it in their own right.

A more thorough explanation of the status of the people comes in *Mencius* 5A:5, which can also be understood in line with Ci's model. The passage is worth quoting at length:

Wan Zhang said, “Is it the case that Yao gave the world to Shun?”

⁹ Translation from [Brooks & Brooks 1998].

Mencius said, "It is not. The Son of Heaven cannot give the world to another person."

Wan Zhang asked, "In the case, when Shun had the world, who gave it to him?"

Mencius said, "Heaven [*Tian*] gave it to him."

Wan Zhang said, "When Heaven gave it to him, did it openly decree (*ming*) it?"

Mencius said, "It did not. Heaven does not speak, but simply reveals the Mandate through actions and affairs."

Wan Zhang asked, "How does it reveal it through actions and affairs?"

Mencius replied, "The Son of Heaven can present a person to Heaven, but he cannot make Heaven give him the world. The various lords can present a person to the Son of Heaven, but they cannot make him give that person a state . . . Formerly, Emperor Yao presented Shun to Heaven, and Heaven accepted him. He made him known to the people (*min*), and the people accepted him. Hence, I say that Heaven does not speak but simply reveals the Mandate through actions and affairs."

Wan Zhang continued, "May I ask how he recommended him to Heaven and Heaven accepted him, how he presented him to the people and the people accepted him?"

Mencius replied, "Yao put Shun in charge of the ritual sacrifices, and the various spirits were pleased with him. This was Heaven accepting him. He put Shun in charge of affairs, and the affairs were well-ordered, and the people were at ease with him. This was the people accepting him. Heaven gave it to him, and the people gave it to him . . . The *Great Announcement* says, 'Heaven sees as my people see; Heaven hears as my people hear.' This expresses what I mean.

There are two key ideas here. First, the people play a critical role in manifesting *Tian's* acceptance of the proposed ruler. It is not the case that one can know independently of the people's actions—say, via divination—what *Tian* decrees. Treating the people well is not just a responsibility of the ruler, but a necessary condition for legitimating authority in the first place. Conversely, a ruler who treats the people extremely badly has—on at least one reading of the text—thereby lost his legitimacy and authority. No direct divination of *Tian's* intentions is available or needed. In the famous words of 1B:8:

King Xuan of Qi asked, “Is it the case that, when they were their subjects, Tang banished Jie and Wu struck down the Tyrant Zhou?”

Mencius replied, “That is what has been passed down in ancient texts.”

The king said, “Is it acceptable for subjects to assassinate their rulers?”

Mencius said, “One who mutilates benevolence should be called a ‘mutilator.’ One who mutilates righteousness should be called a ‘crippler.’ A crippler and a mutilator is a mere ‘fellow.’ I have indeed heard of the execution of this one fellow Zhou, but I have not heard of it as the assassination of one's ruler.”

By virtue of his tyrannical treatment of the people, Zhou lost his legitimacy, no longer merited the designation “ruler,” and could be overthrown and executed.

By building such a critical role for the people into what we might call his authority system, Mencius helped to see that the people's interests would be taken seriously by Chinese leaders ever after. The people's contentedness with their well-being was not just a good policy goal, but the actual conduit of the state's legitimacy. (To be sure, in actual practice this commitment to the people's interests was all too often honored in the breach. Still, the ideal was clear.) It is important, however, not to exaggerate the status of the

people. Crucially (and the second key point for our purposes), the leader chooses policy and puts it into effect; the people only react. In other words, what we see here is consistent with Ci's understanding of agency-through-identification. The people cannot directly see or choose the good, but act via a leader: either identifying and then reacting well, or identifying and then reacting badly. They are therefore not the source of authority, but only its sign. Mencius is not offering a theory of popular sovereignty. Neither—contrary to frequent readings of 1B:8—is he offering a theory of popular rights. The people do not have the “right” to rebel against a tyrant. Mencius says that it is predictable that people will resist bad rule, and in a sense people cannot be blamed for striving violently after the necessities of life. He says that only the cultivated gentlemen have “constant hearts” such that their moral commitment does not flag even in straightened circumstances, but he goes on to say, “As for the people, if they lack a constant livelihood, it follows that they will lack a constant heart. No one who lacks a constant heart will avoid dissipation and evil. When they thereupon sink into crime, to go and punish the people is to trap them.”¹⁰ Trapping the people is not something of which any good ruler would be proud; Mencius adds, “When there are benevolent persons in positions of authority, how is it possible for them to trap the people?” Nonetheless, what the people are doing is still a crime, rather than a just rebellion. This is even clearer in 1B:4. In response to a question about whether worthy people delight in beautiful surroundings, Mencius says, “They do. But if others do not also enjoy it, they will certainly condemn their superiors. Those who condemn their superiors because they do not share in such delights are wrong. But those who are the people's superiors and do not share the same delights with the people are also wrong.” There is no

¹⁰ 1A7.

hint here of a “right” to such delights. Denied their share, the people will predictably complain. There is a kind of justice in their complaint, since as Mencius also says, those who hoard delights are themselves wrong. We can summarize all this by saying that the people are reliable indicators of good or bad rule, but they are not themselves in a position to exercise choice or agency. *Tian* remains the source of authority. The people are like thermometers, measuring the quality of rule and thereby indicating the presence or absence of legitimate authority.

What, though, of famous passages like “we and the sages are the same in kind” (*Mencius* 6A7) and “Everyone can be a [sage like] Yao or Shun” (*Mencius* 6B22)? Such ideas help to ground Chan and Chan’s assertion that sage-leaders are simply those who excel in ordinary virtues, as well as their assertion that today, anyone can be a Confucian leader:

Confucians believe that such leadership is rooted in the moral qualities shared by all human beings. Historically the ranks of such leadership endorsed by Confucianism were mostly filled with the economically well-off; this phenomenon, however, should be deemed only as historical contingency. Considering the theoretical perspective of Confucianism, anyone can become a great leader if she recognizes her own moral nature and is willing to develop herself into a morally exemplary person.

[Chan and Chan 2014, p. 70]

There is no question that this idea of continuity between oneself and the sage is of great importance, but both Ci and I think that there is a deeper tension within Confucianism than Chan and Chan’s breezy remark about “historical contingency” implies.

4. Tensions Within Confucianism

I noted above that according to Jiwei Ci, one's identification with a leader must be voluntary rather than coerced, and this fits with Chan and Chan's emphasis on the people's "willing acceptance" of leadership. As Ci reflects on the nature of this voluntary identification, though, he discerns a tension at the heart of Confucian moral psychology. The tension emerges from the fact that voluntary identification, according to Confucian theory, is a kind of self-cultivation. Ci writes:

In cultivating oneself, one must be presumed an agent, and yet with respect to the standards that one is supposed to internalize by means of self-cultivation, one must defer to an exemplar. That is to say that one is regarded as an agent – as free and reasonably discerning – in one respect but not in the other. [99]

And furthermore:

These two imperatives, identification with exemplar and cultivation of self, make up the inner logic of Confucianism. It is a mistake to regard the hierarchical elements of Confucianism as somehow less fundamental than or subordinate to the idea that every person has the capacity for reflective self-direction. If anything, the hierarchical dimension of Confucianism is even more basic, in that it is a direct expression of the identificatory character of agency in Confucianism whereas individual initiative comes into play only as a presupposition and enabling condition of wholehearted identification. [100]

Which leads him to conclude:

The central challenge, then, is to align, on the levels of moral culture and of individual moral psychology, these two imperatives or components—the complete denial of power to oneself with regard to the setting of standards on the one hand

and the indispensable role of individual initiative in cultivating oneself in accordance with these standards on the other. It is noteworthy that while these two components are treated separately in the Confucian canon, their dialectical relationship has not been noticed, let alone resolved. Thus, the presumed capacity for willing and discerning identification is always on the verge of exceeding itself and dispensing with the need for compulsory identification in the first place and yet this logic has not been allowed to run its course. What we find, again and again, are unconvincing half measures—the recognition of just enough individual initiative for purposes of identification and no more. [101]

Ci adverts to moments in the Confucian tradition when thinkers have made some progress toward unraveling this tension, but argues that even the most radical of them did not “take the decisive final step of dispensing with external moral authority and exemplar in principle and attributing moral power directly to the individual moral agent. In the end, what might have been the Chinese equivalent, as it were, of the Protestant Reformation never took place in the Confucian tradition—even in thought” [103].

I quote Ci as such length because I think that his challenge is one that modern Confucians must take very seriously. I believe that we can read between the lines that Ci believes that if Confucian theorists ever were to fully work out the tension between self-cultivation and identification, they would end up unraveling Confucianism completely. The result would not be democratic Confucianism, but no Confucianism at all.

I believe that Ci is right that there is a serious tension at the heart of Confucianism, but think that he has slightly misidentified it, and as a result is overly pessimistic about the possibility of its being resolvable in a way that points toward a viable modern, democratic

Confucianism. Remember that Chan and Chan thought that the problem had to do with economic stratification. This is partly right, but does not go deep enough. The problem lies in the way that “the people (*min*)” are conceptualized as a reactive mass. I would say that to attribute voluntary identification to them is to go too far, and to see them as undergoing self-cultivation is also a mistake. Their “confidence (*xin*)” in their ruler has to do with their positive reaction to the outcome of identifying with his leadership, and the resulting development of an internalized sense of shame—not through willed self-cultivation, but as a byproduct of participation in social rituals.

. If the people are a reactive mass, who, then, are the proper subjects of self-cultivation (who can become the same as a sage)? Let us look at a distinction made some time ago by Roger Ames and David Hall.¹¹ My translations have been obscuring an important difference in Mencius’s Chinese: when he is speaking of “the people,” his term is *min*; when he says things about the commonalities of “all people,” his term is *ren*. We could clarify the difference by rendering *min* as “the masses” and *ren* as “persons.” Ames and Hall note that *min* tend to act collectively and that early uses of the term *min* have strong connotations of blindness, ignorance, and sleep. In contrast, *ren* is typically used in the sense of “a particular person *qua* human being” and carries a positive connotation; Ames and Hall also argue that one “becomes *ren* as a consequence of that personal cultivation and socialization that renders him particular.” In other words, “Edification permits one to move from the indeterminate masses (*min*) to the expression of one’s particularity (*ren*) and, ultimately, to the expression of one’s authoritative humanity (*ren*)” [Hall and Ames 1987, 139–141]. While some aspects of this account have proven controversial, we can prescind

¹¹ This paragraph and the next are based on [Angle 2012, 40-41].

from those and still accept the basic *min-ren* distinction as helping to explain the tension observed above. Insofar as people are conceptualized as individuals distinct from the mass, they are of the same type as Yao and Shun.

Even if this distinction helps us to understand how Mencius could say all the things he does, though, it does not dissolve the tension. Few mechanisms seem to be considered for systematically moving people from the category of *min* to *ren*. Furthermore, contemporary thinkers might well find the characterization of the “ignorant masses” as hopelessly condescending and deeply out of touch with these people’s lives. One does not have to be a radical individualist to think that there is something missing: can Mencius really conceptualize life from the perspective of a given peasant farmer? His universalist talk about *ren* calls for such an “extension” of perspectives and of caring, but his political ideals seem far too restricted to allow for taking the people’s distinct perspectives seriously. He sometimes analogizes the ruler to a parent, but should not a parent treat children as distinct—as making unique demands on the parent-child relationship—rather than as a mass with set needs? Problems like these, and the solutions toward which they point, will drive us toward a democratic Confucianism.

5. Resolving the Tension With *Ren*-Based Democracy

Having examined two perspectives on the roles of leaders for Confucianism—one loosely compatible with democracy and one completely inconsistent with democracy—it is now time for me to build on these discussions and make clear why I think that Confucianism must change and embrace a form of democracy. I will do so in two steps: first, disputing some of Ci’s claims about Confucianism, particularly with regard to the

relationship between politics and freedom; and second, sketching the ways in which a *ren*-based democracy would differ from a *min*-based authoritarianism.¹² I will explain why a distinctive form of Confucian democratic leadership is still essential to a successful contemporary Confucian politics in the essay's concluding section.

As discussed above, I agree with Ci that there is a tension within Confucianism, but not that the tension is between a mode of agency (via identification) and a demand for free self-cultivation, each applying to all people. Instead, my diagnosis is that the problem lies in an unresolved tension between what is asked of the masses (*min*) and what is asked of individuals (*ren*). Perhaps it is apt to speak of two different types of agency applying to *min* and *ren*, respectively, although I tend to read the classical tradition, at least, as denying any kind of full-fledged agency to the *min* altogether. Be this as it may, a key element of my argument is that with respect to the *ren*, Ci has misidentified the type of agency that Confucians envision, mainly because he denies that Confucians assign a positive value to freedom in this connection. Ci writes that for Confucians, freedom is not “thematized and valorized in such a way as to inform how people conduct and see their lives” [Ci 2014, 44]. Furthermore, instead of there being a constructive relation between freedom and order (as in the modern Western view of freedom):

...freedom is typically pitted against order in Chinese moral culture. Behind this understanding of freedom is an idea that has profoundly informed mainstream Chinese moral and political culture to this day, namely, that the two primary tasks of society—the promotion of agency and the establishment of order—are to be so conceived that they must be carried out separately. [Ibid.]

¹² Just as a reminder, throughout this essay *ren* refers to the Chinese term for “person (人),” not the homophonous word meaning “humaneness” or “benevolence.”

This separation of agency and order is another manifestation of the underlying tension that Ci has diagnosed.

My brief here is neither to explain nor defend the practices of Chinese rulers, either historically or in the present. Instead, I am arguing that the best understanding of traditional Confucian political thinking—which is reflected to some degree in Chinese moral and political culture more broadly—has a different shape than Ci claims. Consider, for example, these lines from early in the *Great Learning*, one of the best-known and most influential of all Confucian classics: “Wanting to light up the bright virtue of all in the world, the ancients first put their states in order. Those who wanted to put their states in order first regulated their families. Those who wanted to regulate their families first cultivated their selves.”¹³ The passage goes on to elaborate further steps that enable the cultivation of oneself, the detailed explication of which engendered considerable controversy in the later Confucian tradition. For our purposes, though, the first sentence is most important. The point of politics—that is, of ordering the state—is to enable people more fully to realize their inherent capacity for virtue. In other words, order is not an end in itself: its point is to create conditions in which people can become agents.¹⁴

Two clarifications are important here. First, the *Great Learning* passage uses neither “*min*” nor “*ren*”; it speaks of “all in the world” (literally, “all under heaven”), but it is consistent with other universalistic claims made in terms of *ren*. We can thus see it as one

¹³ *Daxue* 1; my translation.

¹⁴ Admittedly, there is a partially independent strain within some Confucian writings that emphasizes order-for-order’s sake, even though this order is still usually understood as ultimately valuable because of its contribution to ethical flourishing. See [El Amine 2015] and the discussion of traditional Confucianism opting for a “second-best” approach as their non-ideal theory in [Chan, Elton 2014].

aspect of the tension examined above.¹⁵ Second, the implication in the *Great Learning* that virtue is an inherent capacity that people have, rather than something that is imposed from without (perhaps, in accordance with some external model of goodness), is taken very seriously in the later Confucian tradition. As developed within Neo-Confucianism, a supportive socio-political context is important to individual cultivation (and see below for more on the role of leaders), but the key achievements are still attained by oneself (“*zi de*”) based on one’s own inherent capacity to perceive and be moved by the good.¹⁶ Indeed, most Neo-Confucians emphasize that one’s own unbiased reactions are partly constitutive of the good. This does not mean that the good is altogether up to oneself, but it must be understood as a mode of free agency, rather than simply identification with an external model.¹⁷

If my goal were to resolve the tension that Ci identified in Confucian thought, then perhaps I could stop here, content that for *ren*, at least, their mode of agency does not conflict with the idea that they can freely pursue self-cultivation. The tension I want to resolve is a different one, though: namely, the problematic distinction between *min* and *ren*. With its assumption of a strong distinction between *min* and *ren*, traditional Confucian politics directed the *ren* to rule in the interests of the *min*—this has come to be called “masses-as-root” (*minben*) thought—but gave the masses no say in how they were to be ruled. As noted above, if they are ruled badly, they can be expected to resist and perhaps even overthrow the regime, but this is not based on a robust ability to perceive the good or

¹⁵ It vagueness about how, exactly, “all in the world” are to develop their virtue is one way in which it avoids overt contradiction with the “passive *min*” side of the tension.

¹⁶ [DeBary 1989] is one good discussion of this theme.

¹⁷ Wang Yangming, whom Ci discusses, is particularly emphatic that there is no set, unchanging, external model that has moral authority over us, but Zhu Xi also views Coherence (*li*) as being partly constituted by our unbiased reactions. For discussion, see [Angle 2009].

exercise agency.¹⁸ My suggestion is that we dispense with talk of the “masses” altogether, and replace this traditional *min*-based authoritarianism with a *ren*-based democracy. This will allow modern Confucians to thoroughly rid themselves of the tension, embracing the idea that all people are *ren*, and all such individuals contribute to the authoritative entity of “the people” from which the state earns its legitimacy. The key difference with traditional Confucianism is that in such a *ren*-based democracy, it is not merely that rulers heed the interests of the large majority, but that rulers recognize that each individual member of this majority has a unique and valuable perspective on his or her interests and on the broader good. Each individual not only has interests, but also a perspective and a voice.

Ren-based democracy is thus built on the foundation of agency and moral equality accorded to all *ren* within traditional Confucianism. I develop further arguments on its behalf in other writings, where I also emphasize two caveats, one concerning relationality and one concerning limitations and practical inequalities.¹⁹ On the first score, while there is nothing incoherent in talking about Confucian “individuals,” we must be careful not to think of individual *ren* in an atomistic way, disconnected from their roles and relationships. Rather, we must recognize the ways that each individual perspective is shot through with relationality. For example, my own perspectives on matters before me are articulated by the facts that I am son, father, spouse, and teacher, as well as member of a variety of organizations and partly overlapping communities. To various degrees, the perspectives of others (such as my daughter’s and my wife’s experiences in middle school, as I understand

¹⁸ In addition to *Mencius* 1B:8 (discussed already), another famous statement of this idea comes from the early Confucian Xunzi, who writes: “When the common people feel at ease with the government, only then will the gentleman feel at ease in holding his position. There is a saying, ‘The lord is the boat. The common people are the water. The water can support the boat. The water can also overturn the boat.’” (*Xunzi* 9; translation from [Xunzi 2014, 70]). As in *Mencius*, there is no right to participation or rebellion articulated here.

¹⁹ See [Angle 2012], especially chapter 3.

them) shape how I view things. Capacious relationality will tend to correspond to a broad inclusiveness of perspectives, though seeing the way to harmonize many different perspectives is not always easy, and it is important that the perspectives of distant others not drown out one's concern for those close to one.

This last point, that seeing how to harmonize different perspectives can be difficult, corresponds to the second caveat referred to above. As those contemporary Confucians who resist democracy have been quick to point out, all citizens in modern polities are ignorant of important facts, sometimes appallingly so. Other sorts of epistemic failings, not to mention ethical shortcomings, are also widespread. And the ways that money and power infiltrate existing democratic systems goes a long way toward undermining confidence that a given citizen's perspective, however legitimate, will be given the weight that it deserves. There is no denying the gravity of these concerns, though there is considerable debate about how deeply they actually corrode democratic functioning. For my present purposes, the key things to keep in mind are that: first, there are many concerns, both theoretical and practical, that have been raised about modern Confucian alternatives to democracy, such as "meritocracy";²⁰ and second, that modern heirs to *min*-based authoritarianism should not be seen as unproblematic interpretations of the tradition. They suffer from the same tension that is built into traditional Confucian political theory, as discussed throughout this essay, and can only be thoroughly justified by rejecting some of Confucianism's most important teachings.

6. Confucian Democratic Leadership

²⁰ [Kim 2014] contains a good, critical discussion of some of the leading meritocratic proposals.

One simplistic way of characterizing what leaders should do in a democracy is: whatever the people tell them to do. There are any number of problems with this model, but it is perhaps enough to introduce the basic question with which we are now faced: in a Confucian democracy, why should there be leaders at all? We must reject Mencius's sentiment that "some work with their minds, while some work with their muscles" as reflective of *min*-based authoritarianism.²¹ How much of the traditional Confucian conception of leadership can even survive in a *ren*-based democracy?

Recall that Chan and Chan identified four features of Confucian leadership: its dependence on willing acceptance, its being based in excellence at ordinary forms of virtue, its inspirational nature, and its relative autonomy from institutions. The first seems completely unproblematic, since any kind of leadership in a Confucian democracy will also depend on the willing acceptance of the citizenry. The second is more interesting. In his chapter in this volume, Jun-Hyeok Kwak discusses the problems that come from stressing "virtuous" leadership in contemporary Korea, and argues that East Asians today should adopt a different model of leadership, based on reciprocal non-domination instead of on virtue.²² Kwak's worries about "virtue" tally with those of other commentators, who see a pattern whereby East Asian leaders make unrealistic claims, and are then held to unrealistic standards, concerning their moral "purity." The result can be dramatic swings in popular support that are often out of tune with the leaders' pragmatic successes and failures. I appreciate these worries, but a Confucian can respond by pointing to the narrow, even impoverished conception of "virtue" that both these analysts and East Asian citizens are employing. Purity, especially of the type that is automatically soiled by encounter with

²¹ *Mencius* 3A:4.

²² Kwak, this volume.

the real world of ethical and political decision-making, is not what Confucian virtue is about. An easy shorthand for thinking about Confucian virtue is the four central virtues articulated by Mencius: humaneness, appropriateness, propriety, and wisdom. All people realize these to some degree, but just as Chan and Chan say, Confucian leaders are expected to do better at realizing these virtues than most. And this is just what we should want in a leader: someone whose commitment to public service is rooted in compassionate concern, who aims to respond appropriately to all situations, who appreciates the gravitas associated with serving as a representative of the citizenry, and who has the imagination and open-mindedness to balance different concerns and think for the long-term. Some of these qualities may be harder to judge than others in an era of soundbites, but choices and commitments that politicians have made over their careers will give us quite a bit of evidence. And in any event, the question before us is not how easy our task of judgment is, but whether a conception of leadership revolving around such a conception of virtue is compatible with democracy. I can see no reason to think that it is not.

I will take the last two characteristics, inspiration and institutions, together because the right way to think about Confucian leaders is as a kind of external model or authority, vis-à-vis each individual citizen, and in this way they serve as a kind of institution: one among a number of necessary external checks on the individual judgment of any given citizen. Confucians, for all their stress (as noted above) on the need for people to freely “get it themselves,” also emphasize the need for such external checks, other instances of which are teachers, parents, ritual instructions, and classic texts. The relationship between internal, personal attainment and matching with an external model is much debated within the tradition: often, it seems as if a pendulum is swinging back and forth, from extremes of

inner-reliance, through various more balanced positions, to extremes of outer-reliance, and back again. I feel that Confucians today can learn the most from the balanced positions that recognize the importance of both sides. One excellent example is the Ming dynasty Confucian Luo Qinshun (1465-1547). He was concerned about thinkers of his day who advocated sole reliance on one's own moral intuition. He calls this "onesidedness," and adds: "If one's learning is not extensive and one's discussion is not detailed, one's vision will be limited by the confines of one's own heartmind, and however one may wish to be free from error, it will be impossible."²³ What, then, is one to do? He says: "Thus to 'seek within oneself' one must begin with one's own nature and emotions. One then goes on to extend to other things what one has perceived in oneself, and if it is found to be inconsistent, then it is not ultimate Pattern."²⁴ Like most of his fellow Neo-Confucians, Luo holds that the coherent Pattern of the universe is one-and-the-same, no matter whether examined within oneself or in external things. Therefore, by looking for ways in which one's own emotional reactions tally with external models (such as the reactions of role models to similar situations), one can locate Pattern within oneself and avoid being led astray by superficial or self-centered reactions. Similarly, if external models cannot be made to tally with one's own emotions, then this is reason to question those models. The goal is to "achieve corresponding illumination of things and the self."²⁵

This is all rather abstruse and a thorough explanation would take us far afield. Suffice to say that it shows a way that one's free determination of the good—based on one's own reactions—can be constrained by external models without those models over-riding

²³ Translation from [Luo 1987, 55 and 106], slightly modified.

²⁴ Translation from [Luo 1987, 56], slightly modified.

²⁵ Ibid.

or over-ruling our individual reactions. The Confucian presumption is that it is possible to work toward a state wherein one's interpretation of putative models can match with one's freely experienced reactions. To this extent this fails, that suggests that either the models are false (e.g., a poor leader, as in *Mencius* 1B:8) or one's reactions are biased. But exactly what has gone wrong is never definitively marked: all one can do is keep trying to find good models and unbiased reactions, seeking the most robust and stable match possible.

Leaders, therefore, are expected to lead, to set standards, to inspire. If they merely try to mimic the citizenry's existing reactions (for example, by shaping their own message around the latest poll results), they eliminate their most important function, which is precisely to serve as an external source of constraint and guidance. That is, leaders are a check on self-centered and short-term thinking, nudging citizens to be more inclusive, to see broader or longer-term solutions that previously eluded them—and to have the citizens come to see for themselves that these are, indeed, satisfying solutions. This is how a modern Confucian should reinterpret the traditional role of leaders as “inspirational.” I would also like to suggest that while we have not abandoned the person-centered view of early Confucianism, we have found a way to give more of a role to at least some kinds of institutions. The institutions surrounding leadership—which in a modern Confucian democracy may include campaigning and elections, though I set the details aside for the time being—and the institutional existence of political leaders themselves are examples of a broader type of institution: namely, those institutions that prove to be supportive of effective external standards, against which one's internal judgments can be checked. Another example of such institutions is public schools with apt teacher training and curricula. It would never be satisfactory, from a Confucian perspective, to be content with

whatever the results of institutional mechanisms produce: this will always have to be balanced against our individual best efforts at unbiased judgment.

One way to summarize the role of leaders in a Confucian democracy is to see them as an important part of the perfectionist design of the political system. “Perfectionism” is the idea that states should take active interest in the ethical improvement of their citizens, rather than adopting a “neutral” stance that leaves the question of ethical education entirely up to private individuals. While the details are currently under debate, proponents of Confucian democracy generally agree that some form of perfectionism is essential.²⁶ Confucians call on us to select leaders with vision and character, people who can encourage us to see things in broader perspectives than we are typically wont to do. Leaders should be more than more than cheerleaders for pre-existing private interests We should not expect perfect moral purity from our leaders, but Confucians tell us that we are right to look for people whose several virtues surpass those of the average citizen. Confucian democracy is robust: it will not collapse if we are less than fully successful in selecting the right kind of leaders. To the extent that a democracy is led (at whatever level of government) by a modern Confucian leader, though, both the citizens and the democracy itself should benefit. The marriage of Confucian leaders with Confucian democracy looks very promising.

²⁶ See [Chan, Joseph 2014] and [Kim forthcoming] for considerable discussion.

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