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Moral Virtue, Civic Virtue, and Pluralism

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KIM Sungmoon's *Confucian Democracy in East Asia: Theory and Practice* makes many important contributions to our understanding of what is at stake in thinking of Confucianism as a viable political theory in the modern world. One of the book's most interesting features is its grounding in the on-going practice of Confucianism in South Korea, on the one hand, and yet its emphasis on pluralism within Korean society, on the other.¹ Kim thus aims to describe and defend a polity that, while not relying on its citizens' unanimous acceptance of Confucianism as comprehensive doctrine, nonetheless can legitimately maintain a distinctively Confucian public, political culture. One key to this balancing act is arguing both that modern Confucians should distinguish between moral and civic virtue, but also that civic values are rooted in behaviors and values learned in less public contexts (especially the family). I am sympathetic to Kim's aims but suspect that the balance I have described is somewhat more complicated to maintain than Kim acknowledges; this is especially true when we take into full account the significance of immigrant multiculturalism. I argue here that Kim's aims are nonetheless achievable if we both avail ourselves of a more nuanced idea of ritual than he deploys and more explicitly embrace a restricted version of perfectionism.

Let us begin with an analysis of the types of pluralism that exist in present-day Korean society. During the Choson 朝鮮 dynasty (1392–1910) it is arguable that Korea was an ethically monistic Confucian society (282).² Koreans shared Neo-Confucianism as a comprehensive doctrine that was both rooted in their personal, family practices and expressed in their public, political interactions. Unlike a liberal society that depends on a type of hypocrisy to sustain public civility (253), the Confucian civility that was manifest in Choson-era public culture was sincere, rooted in corresponding individual virtues that initially had been cultivated in the family. A central driver of Kim's argument is the recognition that Korea is no longer ethically monistic. Today, we can identify three distinct elements of Korean society. There are still individuals with a comprehensive ethical and/or religious commitment to Confucianism, but they are now a small minority. The second and largest group is composed of those whose families trace back to the Choson era (or before) but no longer have a comprehensive Confucian identity. Many of these people in fact have an alternative religious identity. The third group, finally, consists of more recent immigrants who in many cases arrive in Korea with pre-existing religious or ethical identities. Taken as a whole, this increasingly pluralist society is a challenge to any kind of modern Confucianism.

Kim takes this challenge seriously; he emphasizes that a major strength of the understanding of Confucianism presented in his book is that it acknowledges and respects such pluralism, whereas competing, more fundamentally monistic versions of modern Confucianism either ignore or repress pluralism. At the core of his response to pluralism is the argument that Confucians today should emphasize "civic virtues," which can be expected of everyone, instead of "moral virtues," which apply only to Confucian "believers." He says that "While for Confucian democrats Confucianism is concerned

¹ All mentions of "Korea" hereafter refer to South Korea, unless otherwise specified.

² Parenthetical page references are all to Kim 2014.

with how to live a decent public life as a citizen, for Confucian believers Confucianism is about how to live a good life as a human being” (121). Rather than being concerned with moral perfection, Confucian democracy focuses on public political life. Its “civic” virtues are those necessary for public “civility”; its rituals (or *li* 禮) are political or constitutional in nature, rather than moral. The goal of developing civic virtues is to transform “a private individual (in the market and his or her self-chosen private association) into a characteristically Confucian public citizen by helping him or her to restrain his or her unsocial passions and untrammelled self-interest” (116). Kim’s idea is that at least in the special circumstances of Korea’s continuing acceptance of a Confucian public culture—now unmoored for most citizens from deeper, comprehensive ethical commitments—it is possible to have shallower but still genuine civic virtues and rituals that bring about collective civility.

Kim is somewhat reticent about what exactly these civic virtues and constitutional rituals are. He says explicitly that they are not the “moral virtues associated with comprehensive moral ideas ... such as Dao [道], Heaven, human nature, or sagehood” (121). But when he does talk about specific virtues, he almost inevitably refers to the moral virtues of traditional Confucianism. For example, he writes that “Confucian civility is what naturally results from the moral virtues (such as *ren* [仁], *yi* [義], *li* [禮], *zhi* [智]) one has cultivated” (256). Indeed, Kim regularly refers to the civic virtues as being “extended” from more intimate contexts (especially the family) into the public area. Traditional Confucianism of course says the same thing, but without making a distinction between moral and civic virtues. Kim stresses that “the inextricable intertwinement between one’s inner and outer worlds” (256, n33) continues to be extremely important in Korea; again, this continuity with the tradition puts pressure on Kim’s idea that there are now, or can be, distinct “civic” virtues that do not depend on a comprehensive moral framework.

The one civic virtue that Kim does discuss at some length is *chong* 敬, which he also characterizes as “*uri* 우리 (we) responsibility” (see Chapter 8). *Chong* is individually-exercised collective responsibility, based on a “creative dialectic between ‘I’ and ‘we’ in dealing with common problems” (226). It is motivated, he says, by “civil passions broadly shared by the public” (225). This suggests that perhaps the way to understand the relation between moral and civic virtues is this: moral virtues and full Confucian rituals go together, supporting a maximalist or comprehensive kind of civility. Civic virtues (of which *chong* is our only instance) are based on a thinner emotional and practical base, but also one that is more widely shared. One does not have to have, or be committed to developing, Confucian moral virtues in order to have, or at least be committed to developing, *chong*. On the other hand, in one place Kim says that civility “is extended from the moral virtues, however imperfect they may be” (258). This suggests a different model of moral versus civic virtue: in this case, all citizens are assumed to have some degree of (Confucian) moral virtue, or at least the commitment to developing such virtue, on the basis of which civic virtues—imperfect approximations of moral virtues—can emerge. The question is whether there is some continuity between moral and civic virtue (model 2) or whether they are psychologically separable, operating in parallel (model 1).

No matter which model is correct, we will still have a question of how this civic virtue is developed and sustained in light of the pluralism that characterizes modern Korea. The argument of Kim’s Chapter 10 is that, on the one hand, shared Confucian civility underpins a pluralist democratic civil society, while on the other hand, democratic socialization has helped citizens to recognize that too strong of an emphasis on civility by the government can lead to too much docility on the part of the citizens. Thanks to this dialectic, modern Confucian civility therefore puts considerable emphasis on the strand of “incivility” that already lay within traditional (comprehensive) Confucian civility. This is an astute observation as far as it goes, but where does this modern Confucian civility come from? Where, in particular, do the noncomprehensive-Confucians (i.e., the large majority of society) get it from? Kim’s reply is primarily to simply emphasize that they do have it: he looks at survey and other evidence to argue that watered-down Confucian virtues and practices—that is, civic virtues and rituals—still are strongly present in Korean society. For the purposes of this essay, I am happy to grant that this is true. But what makes it true, and can it serve as a robust “underpinning” for a continuing, distinctive form of democratic polity? Remember the three elements of Korean society: comprehensive Confucians, Choson-heritage

non-Confucians, and recent immigrants. Our question is about why members of the latter two groups would share the civil passions and civic virtues under discussion. For the heritage group, it might be unconscious inheritance or even conscious emulation of certain aspects of their ancestors' values; for the immigrant group, the only explanation that immediately presents itself is an effort to fit in to their new society. The question is, are these explanations sufficient to make Kim's "Confucian democracy" a sustainable proposition?

What I would like to do in the balance of this essay is to elucidate three strategies that Kim might want employ in order to explain (and, perhaps, to normatively endorse) how a Confucian democracy might be able to sustain a mutually reinforcing mix of affect, virtue, and ritual among its citizenry to enable it to rely on the "Confucian civility" that Kim describes. If we imagine a continuum with a purely "political," neutral state at one extreme (let us call it the "left"), and a coercive, perfectionist state at the other extreme (the "right"), my hypothesis is that Kim's description of Confucian democracy, while obviously in between these two extremes, is nonetheless still too far to the left. The three strategies that I propose, each focusing on a slightly different theoretical level but aiming at similar practical ends, can be employed to nudge the polity to a more stable and central position on the continuum.

My first strategy is to appeal to certain similarities between what Kim says and what John Rawls describes as a "decent" society. Rawls is concerned to defend the legitimacy of certain types of nonliberal societies, which he calls "decent" peoples. These polities are characterized in part by their commitment to a specific common good which is to be maximized, albeit only in ways that are endorsed by the local "consultation procedure, which provides the institutional basis for protecting the rights and duties of members of the people" (Rawls 1999: 71). Consider now what Kim has to say about why non-Confucians in Korea should "submit themselves to the Confucian political/civic culture" (120). His answer is that while democratic citizens "should entertain the freedom of moral pluralism within civil society, they are simultaneously obligated to maintain and reproduce the constitutional integrity, which is at once cultural and political, of their political regime" (120–121). In practice, this means that non-Confucians "are better advised to take advantage of Confucian public discourse and appeal to Confucian public reasons to advance their cultural rights" (288). Kim gives the example of Muslim immigrants to Korea appealing to the Confucian ideals of a loving family, moral development, and benevolence in order to justify their practice of educating children according to their own precepts (288).

My argument here is not that Kim should acknowledge that Confucian democracy can only take place in a "decent" society as Rawls defines this. Rather, taking something like the idea of a decent society as a point of departure, Kim should more confidently put weight on the obligation of citizens in a Confucian democracy to endorse its conception of the common good, at least at a suitable level of generality. Notice that when speaking of the Muslim immigrants, he qualifies their obligation by saying that they are "better advised to take advantage of" Confucian reasons, rather than they must or ought to do so. This fits in with the overall fragility of Kim's structure—they are better advised for now, things being as they are, but things could change; nothing deeper than expediency obligates citizens to use the language of Confucian reasons—that worries me, and is leading me to suggest strategies for shoring up the foundations of Confucian democracy.

One way to conceptualize the needed relationship between citizens and their substantive common good, and the second strategy I propose for Kim to consider, is to embrace what Joseph Chan has called "moderate perfectionism." Kim already proposes that Confucian public culture should be the "reference through which the public good is identified and deliberated" (287). He states that currently in Korea, Confucian public culture in fact is, by and large, the language of public deliberation, but what will keep it that way? Kim has concerns about the precise relation between moderate state perfectionism and democracy in Joseph Chan's specific proposal (127, n90), but what is keeping him from more explicitly endorsing moderate (or limited, if one prefers) state perfectionism in the case of his Confucian democracy? We need to be careful to stipulate the ways in which such perfectionism is limited, of course. We also need to emphasize that the results of deliberation over the public good via Confucian reasons are open-ended, and may in fact lead to the over-turning of long-standing "Confucian" practices. For example, the open-minded discussion of gender relations may well—in fact should, according to the argument of

Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy's Chapter 7—lead to a critique of the oppression that results from traditional gender-based hierarchies. This means that a society that embraces Confucian reasons need not be regressive, but may be progressive. Still, all of this rests on finding ways to teach the basic vocabulary of Confucian reasoning.

Such education might take place through schools; though families are of course also important venues for this kind of education, albeit without state direction or oversight. My third strategy focuses on ritual as a means through which Confucian virtues may be learned, rather than a specific venue. This strategy is thus a specific way that the first two strategies might be realized in society. In his book, Kim makes two main points about rituals. First, he argues against what he calls “ritual aestheticism,” which he describes as a “pre-political, non-dialogic, ritualistically orchestrated ‘tacit’ consensus in the name of ‘authentic social harmony’” (59); second, he tends to think of ritual (*li*) as simply the sincere manifestation or externalization of virtues, and often talks about ritual and civility interchangeably (256). In modern Korea, Kim says, ritual functions as “bridging social capital” rather than the older “bonding social capital” (268). Ritual helps us to communicate and bridges our differences via the way it manifests our sincere civic virtues.

I worry that this characterization of ritual is too flat, too stripped-down, to accomplish the important aims that Confucian theory assigns to it. Ritual is expressive/communicative, yes, but it also disciplines our behavior and transforms our dispositions. Both of these functions rely on the crucial possibility that ritual can make us act in ways that we are not already otherwise disposed to do. Even though Kim is correct to see a difference between liberal civility as a kind of hypocrisy, on the one hand, and Confucian civility on the other, he overemphasizes the degree to which ritual is always “sincere.” Its ability to outrun our current, sincere dispositions is what allows it to shape us. It shapes (disciplines) our overt behaviors in ways that are not yet sincere expressions of our virtues. What makes this different from liberal hypocrisy is that rituals simultaneously help to shape our dispositions so that we will gradually become more virtuous, more sincere and less (merely) conscientious. Confucian citizens are always somewhere on a spectrum between heavily disciplined “petty people” and fully spontaneous and sincere sages.

Kim might object that this educational function of ritual applies only to comprehensive Confucian believers and not to the shallower kind of Confucian civility that he envisions; if so, I worry that we have then lost track of insights crucial to the way that Confucians understand ritual to function. We can even see elements of this insight in one of the Western theorists whom Kim cites. He says that ritual’s function is similar to what Iris Young assigns to “greeting”: a moment in which trust is communicated “in order to establish and maintain the bond of trust necessary to sustain discussion about issues that face us together” (117, n61). Note, though, that ritual/greeting is here understood to create a “bond” and not just a bridge. It changes something about the way that agents relate to one another. In short, ritual without its educational/transformational functions is not ritual.

In a way, this brings us back to the distinction between moral and civic virtues with which we began. We all agree that there was no such distinction in traditional Confucianism. Our question has been: can there indeed be a kind of civic, widely shared virtue in a modern Confucian polity that is sufficiently distinct from Confucian moral virtues? I want to agree with Kim that there can be, but for it to be sufficiently robust and sustainable, it needs to be supported by more than just the historical accident that the large majority of Koreans today have not yet gotten out of the habit of using Confucian reasons. Korean Confucians, whether comprehensive or not, need to embrace their conception of the common good that their society is trying to achieve, and also embrace the institutional mechanisms that are essential to helping newcomers (whether children or immigrants) learn to see and value—and debate and critique—through the lens of Confucian reasons.

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