DEMOCRACY AND MERITOCRACY: TOWARD A CONFUCIAN PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

The relation between democracy and Confucianism has been a subject of controversy ever since the Western idea of democracy was introduced to China in the late nineteenth century. Even today scholars have reached no consensus on this issue. Some argue that democratic ideas are not only compatible with, but are also embedded in, Confucianism, while others assert that Confucianism endorses a monarchy based on a heavenly mandate and therefore cannot endorse democracy. Still others hold that Confucianism is “a-democratic,” a personal ethic that can coexist with any kind of political system. Much of the controversy stems from the fact that scholars use different conceptions of democracy and give different interpretations of Confucianism to support their positions. As a consequence, any careful analysis of a possible compatibility between democracy and Confucianism needs to start with an explicit definition of democracy, state why the definition is adequate for tackling the issue of compatibility, and avoid selective interpretations of Confucianism. This article aims to provide an analysis of the issue of compatibility that meets these requirements.

I. Democracy as a Political System

In discussing the compatibility of Confucianism and democracy, it is important to distinguish between democracy as a justificatory moral principle or value, such as popular sovereignty or political equality, and as a particular type of political system (understood in terms of universal franchise and competitive elections, for example). This distinction is important for our present purposes, for under certain conditions Confucianism may be able to accept democracy as a political system even if it does not endorse the principle of popular sovereignty or political equality.
Sometimes the literature conflates the endorsement of democratic values with the endorsement of democratic institutions by arguing that because Confucianism has no democratic values, it cannot accept democratic political institutions. This is a fallacy, for it ignores the possibility that there are different kinds of reasons for accepting democratic institutions, democratic principles or values being just one kind. The other kind is instrumental reasons. A reason is instrumental if it justifies democracy in terms of the good effects it brings to society. In the literature on democracy, there are two common kinds of effects to which theorists often appeal:

Direct effects:

1. Democracy has a reasonably strong ability to produce right outcomes, in the sense of meeting people’s demands or needs and solving social problems.
2. Democracy offers a better protection against tyranny or abuse of power than other political systems.

Indirect effects:

1. Democracy promotes self-respect, civic responsibility, governing ability, a sense of belonging to society, and so forth.

So it is clearly possible that a tradition of thought may find an instrumental justification of democracy convincing even though it may not accept any justification that appeals to the intrinsic worth of popular sovereignty or political equality. In the case of Confucianism, we shall see that the instrumental justification played an important role in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time when many leading Confucian-minded intellectuals advocated democracy.

A second distinction to make is between democracy and liberal democracy. Some scholars have adopted what I shall call an inclusive view of democracy in their discussion of the compatibility of Confucianism and democracy. For them, democracy contains not only certain procedures in decision making and a particular distribution of political power, but also a set of laws and public policies that promote liberal values such as individual rights and freedoms, individualism, personal autonomy, and so forth. On this view, “democracy” is equivalent to “liberal democracy.” But this may not be a good way to tackle the issue of compatibility. Using this inclusive definition, we could easily conclude that Confucianism is incompatible with democracy simply by arguing on the ground that Confucianism does not endorse liberal values. Put in another way, for Confucianism to be compatible with democracy, we would need to show that Confucianism would not only accept a certain set of political institutions but also a core set of liberal values. But it may be the case that Confucianism is compatible
with just one set of principles. For example, it may be the case that Confucianism endorses an illiberal form of democracy.

In the history of political thought, the concepts of democracy and liberalism track two different sets of concerns and issues. “Democracy” as a concept deals with the source and distribution of political power, whereas “liberalism” primarily concerns the scope and limit of political power (and hence the scope and limit of individual freedom). To adopt the inclusive view would turn our attention away from the question of power distribution—the focus of this article—to the question of human rights and civil liberties, issues that have independent importance and can be conceptually separated from the issue of democracy. The relation between Confucianism and liberal freedoms is a different issue and should be tackled separately.

I do not mean to suggest that democracy is not conceptually linked to certain types of individual freedom and rights. Indeed it is. But this fact is best comprehended not as an accidental marriage between the two sets of ideas but as a consequence of viewing democracy as a certain type of decision-making power and procedure. Following David Beetham, I shall define democracy as a mode of decision making about collectively binding rules and policies over which the people exercise control. Indeed one of the most commonplace definitions of democracy—namely, democracy as rule by the people—is defined procedurally. The notion of rule is understood as the activity of making authoritative decisions (e.g., laws and public policies), and the phrase “rule by the people” should therefore be understood to mean the idea that the people as a whole are entitled to make authoritative decisions.

As a procedural concept, democracy concerns how collective decisions should be arrived at, not what constitutes the proper content of those decisions, except insofar as they relate to the procedure itself. As Brian Barry puts it,

“Democracy” contains no constraints on the content of the decisions produced, such as respect for human rights, protection of individual liberty, rule of law, concern for the general welfare, or economic equality—except those required by democracy itself as a procedure.

So the idea of a democratic procedure conceptually presupposes that participants in the procedure have certain rights or liberties which are constitutive of the very procedure itself. The right to take part in a collective decision-making process presupposes the right to form, express, and aggregate political preferences, which in turn presupposes the civil right to free expression, communication, and association. But other individual rights or liberties also cherished by liberals, such as freedom of choice with regard to marriage, occupation, and travel, for instance, are not conceptually presupposed or required by
the idea of a democratic procedure. A democratic procedure is still possible even if the participants collectively decide that they have no rights of choice in these arenas. Confucianism may still embrace democracy even if it does not embrace full-fledged liberal values.

The third and last distinction to make is between the *constituents* of democracy and the *conditions* that make it work satisfactorily. In defining democracy procedurally, that is, as a set of decision-making procedures or institutions, I have left out certain social, economic, moral, and cultural conditions that make this set of institutions work. Of course I do not mean to suggest that these conditions are not important as far as the effectiveness of democratic institutions is concerned. Indeed contemporary political science literature agrees that certain conditions are conducive to the consolidation of democracy, such as a culture of tolerance, civility and civic duties, a vibrant civil society, a participatory culture, public reason and deliberation, a developed state bureaucracy, a politically neutral army, the absence of deep social cleavages, an independent media, and so forth. But however important these conditions are, they are merely conditions of a democracy, not its defining constituents. Even if a political society possesses all these conditions, it is not yet a democracy if its political system does not permit its citizens to have the right to take part in competitive elections of their government. A participatory society and a consultative government together do not make a democracy. This point is important for the purposes of this article, for according to some interpretations, Confucianism does endorse consultation, tolerance, civility, or even a participatory community. But these interpretations, even if true, are still far from being able to show that Confucianism endorses democracy as a political system.

This article defines democracy as a political system rather than a set of values, a way of life, or a set of social conditions, because the issue of constitutional design has been the central focus in the debate on the compatibility of democracy and Confucianism since the late nineteenth century. The key issues that had first motivated this debate were about the direction of political reform in modern China: What kind of constitutional structure is appropriate to China? Who should rule? Should citizens have the rights to political participation? If democracy is the answer to these questions, would Confucianism endorse it? Would Confucianism contribute to the criticism or development of democratic political institutions? These issues about political reform are still very much alive in China today and hence they need to feature in any discussion about the relation between Confucianism and democracy. Any concept of democracy that defines away these issues would be inappropriate for this reason.
II. Alleged Democratic Ideas in Confucianism

Having clarified the concept of democracy, I shall now come to Confucianism. One argument for a positive relation between Confucianism and democracy is that Confucianism contains democratic ideas or values that can justify the adoption of democracy as a political system. Some commentators have argued that the Confucian theory of political authority, although not a full-fledged democratic theory as such, contains fundamental democratic values. Perhaps the most famous statement of this position can be found in *Manifesto to the World on Behalf of Chinese Culture*, coauthored by four leading Chinese Confucian scholars in the 1950s: Carson Chang (Zhang Junmai), Tang Junyi, Xu Fuguan, and Mou Zongsan. They argue that traditional Chinese systems of thought, especially Confucianism, contain “democratic seeds” that can develop into a clear, unmistakable demand for democracy as a political institution. These four highly regarded thinkers have influenced several generations of scholars in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and the following analysis is based on a selection of their main arguments, as well as later scholars who share this line of thought.

1. Tianxia Weigong

In arguing that Confucianism contains democratic ideas, many scholars, including the above four, appeal to two popular ideas in traditional Chinese political discourse: "tianxia weigong" and "tianxia fei yi ren zhi tianxia ye, tianxia zhi tianxia ye." But in what sense are these ideas democratic? Some argue that they express the democratic idea of popular sovereignty. But do they? Let us examine these two ideas and the contexts in which they appear. The notion of *tianxia weigong* appears in the famous passage about the Confucian ideal theory of social order—the Grand Union—in the *Liji* (*The Book of Rites*). Confucius says:

> When the grand course was pursued, *a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky (tianxia weigong)*, they chose men of talents, virtue, and ability. . . . Thus men did not love their parents only, nor treat as children only their own sons. A competent provision was secured for the aged. . . . They showed kindness and compassion to widows, orphans, childless men, and those who were disabled by disease, so that they were all sufficiently maintained. . . . [They accumulated] articles [of value], disliking that they should be thrown away upon the ground, but not wishing to keep them for their own gratification. . . . In this way [selfish] schemings were repressed and found no development. Robbers and rebellious traitors did not show themselves, and hence the outer doors remained open, and were not shut. Thus was [the period of] when we call the Grand Union.10
In this passage, what does tianxia weigong mean? I believe James Legge, the translator of the Liji, captures the meaning well when he translates it as “a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky.” The passage says nothing about where sovereignty lies or who possesses it, but instead describes what the ideal world amounts to. In the ideal world, according to Confucius, people act in a “public and common spirit,” to promote the common good. They care not only for their own family members but for others as well; they do not pursue power and opportunities to satisfy their own selfish interests but impartially select talented and virtuous individuals to run the community’s affairs so that everyone benefits. This notion of gong does not tell us who owns the sovereign power of the ideal world, but rather suggests an ideal that stresses the common good and impartiality.

2. Tianxia Fei Yi Ren Zhi Tianxia Ye, Tianxia Zhi Tianxia Ye

How about the popular saying that the world does not belong to one person but the whole world (tianxia fei yi ren zhi tianxia ye, tianxia zhi tianxia ye)? Doesn’t this suggest some notion of common ownership or popular sovereignty? The phrase appears in the Lushi Chunqiu (The Annals of Lu Buwei), a major classical text that incorporated early Confucian, Legalistic, Daoist, and Mohist ideas. Chapter four of Book I, entitled “Honoring Impartiality (Guigong),” often cited by later Chinese scholars, says in part:

The world does not belong to one person; it belongs to the whole world (tianxia fei yi ren zhi tianxia ye, tianxia zhi tianxia ye). The harmony of the Yin and Yang forces does not favor growth in only one species of thing, the sweet dews and seasonable rains are not partial to one thing, and so the ruler of the myriad people does not show favoritism toward a single individual . . .

Heaven and Earth are so great that while they give life they do not raise anything as their own, and while they bring things to completion they do not possess them. The myriad things all receive their blessings and obtain their benefits, but no one knows whence they first arose. So it is with the Power of the Three August Ones and the Five Sovereigns.

When Duke Huan acted with impartiality (gong), set aside selfish interests and private aversions, and used Master Guan, he became the most important of the Five Lords-Protector. When he acted in pursuit of selfish interests, showed favoritism to those he loved, and used Shudao, maggots crawled out from his door.11

What this passage suggests is quite clear: The forces of the world (yin and yang) do not favor particular individuals or groups but give blessings to every living thing on earth. Similarly, political rule should
practice impartiality and public spiritedness by promoting the good of everyone without prejudice or discrimination. The contrast to this ideal is political favoritism and partiality, which is the subject of the next chapter, “Dispensing with Selfish Partiality (Qusi).” Like the passage in the Liji, then, this passage says nothing about popular sovereignty; it is about the importance of impartiality (gong) in political rule. Impartial governance is consistent with either democracy or monarchy. A monarch can be as impartial and public-spirited as a democratically elected ruler.

3. Heavenly Mandate Expressed through Acceptance or Consent of the People

Where, then, does political sovereignty lie, according to Confucianism? Where is the ultimate source of political authority? The answer, in my view, is Heaven. A legitimate political ruler is one who receives a mandate to rule from Heaven. But Mencius, who most explicitly endorses the heavenly mandate theory, also holds that this mandate is revealed through the people’s acceptance. For some scholars, this emphasis on the people’s acceptance or consent represents a democratic value or principle. The most explicit statement of this theory is as said in Mencius 9.5.

Wan Chang said, “Is it true that Yao gave the Empire to Shun?”
“No,” said Mencius. “The Emperor cannot give the Empire to another.”
“In that case who gave the Empire to Shun?”
“Heaven gave it him.”12
“You say Heaven gave it him. Does this mean that Heaven gave him detailed and minute instructions?”
“No. Heaven does not speak but reveals itself through its acts and deeds.”
“How does Heaven do this?” . . .
“In antiquity, Yao recommended Shun to Heaven and Heaven accepted him; he presented him to the people and the people accepted him . . .”
“May I ask how he was accepted by Heaven when recommended to it and how he was accepted by the people when presented to them?”
“When he was put in charge of sacrifices, the hundred gods enjoyed them. This showed that Heaven accepted him. When he was put in charge of affairs, they were kept in order and the people were content. This showed that the people accepted him.”13

In this passage, Mencius says that Heaven speaks through the gods (through religious sacrifices) and through the people. Heaven’s acceptance of a ruler can be seen by the people’s and gods’ acceptance (the latter is shown when no unusual things happen during sacrifices). Later Mencius even says that “Heaven sees with the eyes of its people.
Heaven hears with the ears of its people.”¹⁴ Some scholars argue that this strong emphasis on the people’s acceptance and opinions as the basis of the heavenly mandate, and hence rightful rule, reflects a democratic value or principle.

In another passage Mencius also says that the people’s acceptance is the basis of successful political rule:

Mencius said, “It was through losing the people that Chieh and Tchou lost the Empire, and through losing the people’s hearts that they lost the people. There is a way to win the Empire; win the people and you will win the Empire. There is a way to win the people; win their hearts and you will win the people. There is a way to win their hearts; amass what they want for them; do not impose what they dislike on them. That is all. The people turn to the benevolent as water flows downwards or as animals head for the wilds.”¹⁵

So for Mencius, Heaven reveals its choice through the people. Any ruler who hopes to attain stable rule must win the people’s hearts. Acceptance or consent of the people is necessary for the ruler’s political legitimacy. Among all the ideas in Confucianism examined so far, this one comes closest to the idea of democracy. But “consent” and “democracy” are not identical, and this can be seen in two ways. First, the fact that a political system has the consent of the people does not make the system democratic. For example, it is possible that people may consent to a system of monarchy so long as the monarch’s performance is satisfactory to the people. Second, if consent is necessary to the legitimacy of a system, then even a democracy may not be legitimate if some or many individuals do not consent to it. So “the people’s consent” does not seem to have any conceptual relation with democratic institutions. Nor does it have any conceptual relation with popular sovereignty or political equality. The latter two ideas refer to the equal right of individuals to participate in decision making on common affairs, and this right must be expressed through certain institutions or procedures, such as voting. The people’s voluntary consent to political authority is not an institutional expression of popular sovereignty or political equality.¹⁶

This leads to yet another way in which the distance between Confucian consent and democracy can be shown. In Mencius’s view, if the ruler is benevolent, morally upright, and able to deliver basic services to the people, the people will accept him as the legitimate ruler. Legitimacy is ultimately assessed in terms of results rather than processes (Mencius, 7.9, 9.5). Mencius sees a unity of the Way (daο) and the will (or heart) of the people (7.9). If a ruler practices the Way in his governance, he will gain the hearts of the people and their voluntary submission. For Mencius, and for other classical Confucian masters as well, the people’s wishes and wants, to which any benevo-
lent ruler must give first priority, are as clear and stable as objective human needs. The people desire sufficient material subsistence, protection of private land and property, low taxation, leisure time to enjoy basic human relationships, and a virtuous leader who can serve as an exemplary model for their moral lives. The problem for Confucians is not that it is difficult to ascertain people’s wants and needs, but that in reality rulers do not often put them as their first priority. But Confucians believe that if a ruler can deliver the goods and satisfy their wants, the people’s consent is automatic: “The people turn to the benevolent as water flows downwards or as animals head for the wilds.” A benevolent, virtuous monarch will automatically obtain the people’s consent, and hence consent is consistent with a monarchy where the subjects have no rights whatsoever to participate in politics.

If the arguments so far are correct, we may conclude these Confucian ideas do not express democratic ideas or imply such principles as popular sovereignty or political equality.

III. Democracy or Guardianship?

At the start we argued that even if Confucianism does not contain any democratic ideas, that fact does not preclude its accepting democracy as a political system. For example, Confucianism might accept democracy if democracy is believed to be instrumentally useful in promoting Confucian values and goals. Now we must consider the question: Does Confucianism contain ideas or resources that may somehow lead to an endorsement of democracy as a political system? Let us consider some ideas that might have this implication.

1. Political rule is established for the benefit of the people. Numerous passages in the classical texts (Mencius, Xunzi, Zuozhuan) suggest that Heaven establishes political rule for the sake of the people, and not the other way around. Xunzi writes, “Heaven did not create the people for the sake of the lord; Heaven established the lord for the sake of the people.” We can call this the service conception of authority. The main task of the ruler is to protect the people from external or internal attack and to create the conditions they need to make a good living and lead a moral life. The ruler should also care for the people in an impartial or fair way.

2. The ruler does not necessarily have moral authority. For Confucians, moral authority rests with the junzi (gentlemen), who correctly grasp the Way and have the moral virtue to behave in accordance with the Way. The actual political ruler may or may
not be a *junzi*, and vice versa. Political rulers will lose their legitimate authority if they do not govern in accordance with the Way.

3. Political criticisms are legitimate. All classical Confucian masters hold the view that a healthy polity requires that the ruler listen to criticisms from ministers and gentlemen.

4. The opinions of the people matter. Classical Confucians do not all agree on this point. Confucius and Xunzi do not appear to think that the people’s opinions matter very much. Mencius, however, elevates the people even over ministers on this issue.

5. Rebellion by the people. Mencius clearly argues that the people may justly overthrow a ruler who harms them.

Do these ideas necessarily lead to endorsement of democracy as a political system? The answer is no. Although they together constitute a strong case for democracy, they do not necessarily require democracy, for democracy is not the only way to achieve these goals or fulfill these conditions. Confucians have a strong belief in the rule by the good man who is virtuous, benevolent, learned, wise, and capable. They believe in a political meritocracy—that is, political power should be distributed according to merit, and merit is assessed in terms of the above personal qualities. If such a good man exists and is willing to serve as ruler, he will care for the people and listen to advice and criticisms, and so the need for rebellion will not arise.

The classical Confucian theory is one of guardianship. It holds that a political community should find ways to breed and select the best individuals to take up political office. The best way to rule is not through democracy, for democracy appeals to the opinions of everyone, not the moral elite. Historically, ministers in traditional China were often selected by open competitive examination. Selection of the ruler, however, was for Confucians too grand and sacred a business to be formalized or institutionalized. Somehow, they believed, the best person would simply emerge from the mass or would be recognized by the current ruler, who would recommend him to Heaven for succession.

**IV. DEMOCRACY AS A SECOND-BEST SOLUTION**

However, we could argue that the theory of guardianship, attractive though the ideal may be, is not realistic. Classical Confucians themselves were aware of the difficulty of finding a good man to assume political leadership. Confucius and Xunzi admit that it is difficult for anyone to become a *junzi*. (Mencius holds a more egalitarian view of the moral potentiality and actual moral capacities of the people, but
he still accepts guardianship and welcomes any junzi to rule.) But even if an appropriate junzi is found, it is difficult to make sure that he will not be corrupted under a political system of guardianship. In a nonideal situation, it appears, Confucians would be inclined to accept democracy as a second-best solution, because democracy seems to better serve Confucian concerns. Democracy is an important mechanism to prevent tyranny and abuse of power. It allows and protects the freedom of political expression, and hence of political criticism. It also satisfies in an institutional way the requirement that the people accept their “ruler.” The opinions of the people certainly matter a great deal in a democracy, and their leaders are institutionally compelled to work for their benefit. On the whole, the performance of democracies is not bad in societies that have reached a sufficiently advanced level of economic and social development. Even if a democratically elected government performs badly and makes blunders in policy making and governance, it can be voted out of office in the next general election.

Confucians might therefore accept an instrumental justification of democracy, because in reality democracy seems quite effective in promoting Confucian political values and concerns. Notice that taking democracy as a second-best ideal is not equivalent to taking it as a modus vivendi. Democracy as a second-best is a realistic ideal, in the sense that it better promotes Confucian values than guardianship does in a society that has the essential social, economic and cultural conditions conducive to democracy exist.\(^{20}\) A modus vivendi, however, is merely a balance of forces, not of reasons or values.\(^{21}\) In fact, it appears that this instrumental attitude underlies the thinking of many modern Confucian intellectuals about democracy. Yu Yingshi, a leading contemporary historian, has pointed out that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many Confucian scholars and the Chinese elite generally were quite ready to embrace democracy. He has argued that “the Chinese elite culture has proved to be, paradoxically, more receptive than hostile to the idea of democracy.”\(^{22}\) This is because “in traditional Chinese elite culture, Confucian education often inculcates into the minds of the young, along with other values, the sense of justice, social responsibility, human equality, the well-being of the people, which may be regarded as some of the closest Confucian equivalents to Western civic virtues.”\(^{23}\)

Yu cites passages written by Confucian scholars at that time which, in my view, show that they accepted democracy largely on the belief that western democracy could more effectively promote their values and concerns than their own traditional system of monarchy. One of these passages is from Wang Tao (1828–97), the Chinese assistant to James Legge (the first English translator of the Confucian classics), who gave the following characterization of the British government
and people after a two-year trip to the British Isles and Europe in the late 1860s:

The real strength of England, however, lies in the fact that there is a sympathetic understanding between the governing and governed, a close relationship between the ruler and the people. . . . My observation is that the daily domestic political life of England actually embodies the traditional ideals of our ancient Golden Age. In official appointments the method of recommendation and election is practiced, but the candidates must be well known, of good character and achievements before they can be promoted to a position over the people. . . . And moreover the principle of majority rule is adhered to in order to show impartiality. . . . The English people are likewise public-spirited and law-abiding: the laws and regulations are hung up high (for everyone to see), and no one dares violate them.24

Similarly, Xue Fucheng (1838–94), who was concurrently China’s minister to England, France, Italy, and Belgium from 1890–94, extended this kind of praise of English democracy to America, saying that “America is like the time of the Golden Age of Ancient China.”25 Yu commented that:

It is particularly revealing that Wang Tao and Xue Fucheng praised, respectively, but independently of each other, England and America in terms of the Golden Age in China’s high antiquity. It would seem to suggest that they saw the democratic West as the Second Coming of the Confucian Golden Age. This is indeed the highest tribute the traditional Confucian elite could have possibly paid to the idea of democracy.”26

This highly positive assessment represents an early stage of the Confucians’ reaction to western democracy. As Chinese intellectuals had greater exposure to, and understanding of, democratic politics in the west, they also became more aware of its shortcomings and inadequacies. Sun Zhongshan (1844–1925), founder of modern China and a strong advocate of democracy, was very alert to what he regarded as the institutional weaknesses of democracy. Several decades later, Tang Junyi (1909–78), one of the four Confucian scholars cited above, was even more critical of Western democracy, although he and his colleagues also tirelessly advocated that democracy should replace communism in China. These two thinkers, and many others as well, were primarily concerned about the problem of leaders in a democracy. Sun was concerned whether democracy could generate capable leaders and provide effective, nonpartisan checks on them. Tang was concerned about the moral and political qualities of leaders—whether democracy could select leaders who would put the common good above their own or their party’s interests.27

These two concerns—the personal qualities of political leaders and their commitment to the common good—are central to Confucian-
ism. They reflect the long-standing Confucian meritocratic conception of political rule that political leaders must be capable, upright, fair, benevolent, and willing to work for the common good. Although many Confucian-minded intellectuals today believe that democracy can better serve Confucian values than a monarchy, they would not completely give up meritocracy and the common good as important standards to evaluate leaders, institutions, and processes in democracies. How to combine democracy and meritocracy is one of the most interesting and challenging issues for Confucianism today.28

By way of conclusion, it may be useful to summarize the main claims in this article. First, contrary to the views of some leading contemporary Confucian scholars, Confucianism does not contain any fundamental democratic values or principles, such as political equality or popular sovereignty. Second, despite the fact that there are elements in Confucianism that might favor democracy as a political institution, the most favored model in Confucianism is one of meritocracy and guardianship. Confucians hope that the most virtuous, talented person will rise above the rest, receive the heavenly mandate, and win the acceptance of the people to rule. Third, Confucianism would prefer democracy as a second-best option in the nonideal situation because instrumentally it can better serve Confucian values and concerns than a monarchy without a virtuous, competent person in power. Fourth, Confucians today do not embrace democracy without hesitation or doubts. Confucians are concerned whether democracy and political parties can select the best people and whether those selected will work for the common good rather than partisan gains. How democracy can be combined with meritocracy for the sake of promoting the common good is a central concern for Confucians today.

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ENDNOTES

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1. Sun Guangde, Zhongguo Zhengzhi Sixiang Zhanqian Yanjiu Ji (Taipei: Guiguan Tushu Gufen Youxian Gongsu, 1999), 159–211.
6. People’s rights to make public decisions can be expressed directly, through full democratic procedures where everyone participates, such as referenda, or indirectly, through representative democratic procedures. Representative democracy requires certain basic institutions, such as free, fair, competitive elections and universal suffrage, and some basic rights, such as freedom of association and expression.
13. Ibid., 143.
14. Ibid., 144.
16. Similarly, the fact that the people are regularly consulted by their government does not imply that they have the institutional right to participate in decision making on public affairs.
17. Ibid., 122.
18. Xunzi, Book 27.72.
20. I do not mean to suggest that China has all these conditions today and is ready for democracy. So democracy remains an ideal for China.
24. Ibid., 201.
25. Ibid.

Chinese Glossary

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