



PROJECT MUSE®

Introduction: *Confucian Perfectionism's* Wary Embrace of Democracy

Yvonne Chiu

Philosophy East and West, Volume 67, Number 1, January 2017, pp. 1-2 (Article)

Philosophy East and West



A Quarterly of
Comparative Philosophy
Volume 67 - Number 1

University of Hawai'i Press

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2017.0000>

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/643853>

SPECIAL FEATURE: JOSEPH CHAN'S *CONFUCIAN PERFECTIONISM*

Introduction: *Confucian Perfectionism's* Wary Embrace of Democracy



Yvonne Chiu

Department of Politics and Public Administration, The University of Hong Kong
yvchiu@hku.hk

With the stunning spread of democracy over large swathes of the globe since 1975 seemingly coming to a halt and perhaps receding in recent years, it is now a fitting time to revisit the question of whether democracy is really compatible with all types of cultures and philosophies, particularly those from Asia, where nearly two-thirds of the world's population lives. Joseph Chan's *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times* (Princeton University Press, 2014) tackles an enormously important project by reconstructing Confucianism in order to meld it with democracy in a mutually advantageous marriage.

Among the many reasons that democracy has become popular as a form of governance is that it can address the dangerous problem of the lack of accountability—the historical record is quite clear about what happens when rulers, even those who are wise and well-meaning, are unconstrained. This, unfortunately, is a problem that Confucianism shares. On the other hand, Confucianism can bring to the table not just virtues in general, but particular virtues that are often sadly lacking and sorely needed in democratic politics such as civility, benevolence, integrity, knowledge, and honesty. The democracy literature focuses heavily on institutions, but just as virtue alone cannot bring about justice, neither can institutions. There are always ways to get around the rules; as a result, diverse, prosperous, safe, and stable democracies need a population that has a host of potentially contradictory virtues, including patience, obedience, civility, industriousness, empathy, self-restraint, self-sacrifice, and a certain kind of nationalism, but also independence and a willingness to resist tyranny.¹

The presence or absence of such virtues will make a difference in how the democratic system operates. For example, the recent mass protests in 2014 of the Sunflower and Umbrella movements in Taiwan and Hong Kong, respectively, intrigued locals, neighbors, and older Western democracies with their civility, and observers took note of how such civility could confer greater legitimacy and enhance the citizens' voices. Given the struggle that many contemporary democracies have with incivility, which has affected the smooth functioning of their governments and raised questions about the long-term viability of extensive public political participation, the democratic practices embedded in Confucian cultures may be able to point toward some answers.

Clearly, Confucianism and democracy are compatible in practice, insofar as “compatible” means that democracy can be successful in societies heavily influenced by Confucian culture, for example Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan. There are competing visions of modern Confucianism within East Asia, however, including that of the largest and potentially most powerful country within it, which offers a rather idiosyncratic conception of both democracy and Confucianism that in reality is not quite either, but who lays claim to the superiority of its peculiar conception of both on the grounds that it has managed to sidestep the pitfalls of electoral democracy through its particular form of “meritocracy.” This is an understandably seductive, yet potentially perilous, narrative, and in this context it is especially important to ask hard questions about what both democracy and Confucianism should mean in the modern world and what they can be together.

Joseph Chan’s *Confucian Perfectionism* starts by confronting enormous fundamental questions concerning ideal and non-ideal theory, the foundations of political authority, and the legitimacy of constitutional constraints, then delves into the difficult details about actually how to mix Confucianism and democracy, ambitiously addressing both virtues and institutions and how they should interact with and reinforce each other. He then moves on to challenge the popular philosophical justifications that liberals offer for democracy (e.g., human rights and moral and personal autonomy), and tries to reground democracy in Confucian terms. It is a delicate negotiation, and he ends by talking about one of the major preoccupations of modern democracies: the question of distributive justice and social welfare. This is especially relevant given that both Western and Asian democracies are re-examining their respective welfare models, and even still-developing democracies are being forced to address this question at early stages. *Confucian Perfectionism* is an incredibly wide-ranging, ambitious, and thought-provoking work, and the articles that follow in the present issue of this journal emerged from an author-meets-critics symposium, “A Wary Embrace of Democracy,” held in May 2015 at The University of Hong Kong, which offered some answers but, of course, raised more questions. The critiques track the ordering of the issues in Chan’s book, and we hope that this is just the beginning of a long and fruitful conversation.

Note

- 1 – Chiu, Yvonne and Robert S. Taylor. “The Self-Extinguishing Despot: Millian Democratization.” *The Journal of Politics* 73, no. 4 (2011): 1239–1250.

Table of Contents


Special Feature: Joseph Chan's *Confucian Perfectionism*

Introduction: *Confucian Perfectionism's* Wary Embrace of Democracy

Yvonne Chiu

pp. 1-2

DOI: 10.1353/pew.2017.0000

 [View](#) | [Download](#) | [Save](#)

Confucian Authority, Political Right, and Democracy

Sungmoon Kim

pp. 3-14

DOI: 10.1353/pew.2017.0001


 [View](#) | [Download](#) | [Save](#)

Confucian Justification of Limited Government: Comments on Joseph Chan's *Confucian Perfectionism*

Stephen C. Angle

pp. 15-24

DOI: 10.1353/pew.2017.0002

 [View](#) | [Download](#) | [Save](#)

Institutional Structures and Idealism of Character

David B. Wong

pp. 25-36

DOI: 10.1353/pew.2017.0003

 [View](#) | [Download](#) | [Save](#)

Education as a Human Right: A Confucian Perspective

Chenyang Li

pp. 37-46

DOI: 10.1353/pew.2017.0004

 [View](#) | [Download](#) | [Save](#)

Democracy without Autonomy: Moral and Personal Autonomy in Democratic Confucianism

Yvonne Chiu

pp. 47-60

DOI: 10.1353/pew.2017.0005

 **Viewed** | [Download](#) | [Save](#)

On How to Construct a Confucian Democracy for Modern Times (or Why Democratic Practices Must Not Lose Sight of the Ideal)

Roger T. Ames

pp. 61-81

DOI: 10.1353/pew.2017.0006

 [View](#) | [Download](#) | [Save](#)

Confucian Perfectionism: A Response to Kim, Angle, Wong, Li, Chiu, and Ames

Joseph Chan

pp. 82-95

DOI: 10.1353/pew.2017.0007

 [View](#) | [Download](#) | [Save](#)

Philosophy East and West



A Quarterly of
Comparative Philosophy
Volume 67 · Number 1

University of Hawai'i Press