

Preserving our humanity in the growing AI-mediated politics:

Unraveling the concepts of Democracy (民主) and

People as the Roots of the state (民本)

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<< Un-peer-reviewed Draft Paper No. VNAIEthics20241003-1 >>>

Artificial intelligence (AI) has transformed the way people engage with politics around the world: how citizens consume news, how they view the institutions and norms, how civic groups mobilize public interests, how data-driven campaigns are shaping elections, and so on (Ho & Vuong, 2024). Placing people at the center of the increasingly AI-mediated political landscape has become an urgent matter that transcends all forms of institutions.

In this essay, we argue that, in this era, it is necessary to look beyond certain limited notions of democracy and broaden our views of what it means to put people at the heart of political governance. Thus, we introduce some key features of a very, if not the most important concept, in East Asian political culture, ‘people as roots (of the state)’ or (*dân bản* in Vietnamese and 民本 in Chinese) (Nguyen & Ho, 2019; Sabattini, 2012). We propose that a more culturally sensitive analysis, which takes into account the diverse interpretations of people-centeredness within different political cultures, can provide valuable insights for researchers and leaders worldwide. Indeed, as the sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt succinctly puts, modernity does not and should not correspond to Westernization.

People as root (of the state)’ or (*dân bản*- 民本)

The concept of *dân bản* is one of the three pillars of Confucian political philosophy, alongside ‘heavenly mandate’ (*thiên mệnh* - 天命), which justifies the legitimacy of the ruling power) and ‘governance through virtue’ (*đức trị* - 德治). This concept, central to East Asian states influenced

by Confucianism during feudal periods, continues to be embraced by modern political figures and parties, including Ho Chi Minh, Hu Jintao's administration, and the Communist Party of Vietnam's 13th Party Congress, which emphasize "people-centered politics" and "considering the citizens as the center (of governance)" (*lấy nhân dân làm trung tâm*).

According to scholars of East Asian classical political philosophy, the theory of '*dân bản*' reflects Confucian metaphysical understanding of social class divisions, positions, and power, which Confucianists often refer to as 'duty.' Viewing the people as the root of the state, rulers recognized the immense power of the populace in contributing to the generation of material wealth, social life, and political stability, as they often state: the people can carry or overturn the boat. Although the populace belongs to a subjugated class, their collective will is seen as heaven's will, reflecting divine intent (linked to the 'heavenly mandate'). Changes in the people's will—caused by corrupt or unjust governance—signify changes in divine will and may lead to significant societal and political upheaval.

Thus, the political theorizing based on the concept of '*dân bản*' traditionally leads to strong focuses on people-centric political governance such as governance through virtue (e.g., by setting examples for the people via the ruler's virtue), Mencius's concept of government by benevolence (*nhân chính* - 仁政) ensuring stability for the people (*an dân*-安民), and sharing joy with the people (*dữ dân đồng lạc* - 與民同樂). Yet, contemporary thinkers argue that the concept of 'people as roots' emphasizes the outcomes of good governance, not the political procedures. Delivering results that improve citizens' well-being, economic and otherwise, serves as political legitimacy in cultures focused on this ideal.

Hence, many scholars argue that political processes based on the doctrine of 'people as roots' are incompatible with Western liberal democracy, which prioritizes democratic participation. Samuel P. Huntington is a prominent scholar who articulates this view, asserting that Confucian democracy is fundamentally contradictory. Huntington (1991) notes that traditional Confucianism, which values harmony, order, and respect, lacks a democratic tradition of rights against the state. However, the nested complexity of concepts, politics, cultures, and social norms will undermine this simplistic characterization.

Confucianism, democracy, citizenship tradition, and nested complexity

Nested within an operative concept of a political culture, i.e., Confucian political culture with its central concept of 'people as roots' and Western political culture with its focus on liberal democracy, are the norms of political behaviors for the stakeholders.

Western political culture tends to posit a normative political participant as a free-thinking, self-interested, private, and rational individual. Here, privacy often means the right to be left alone, to be free from state interventions. Built on this notion, the common understanding of liberal democracy is centered around the rights of a citizen, which encompass one's democratic rights by casting a vote for a leader who would best represent one's interests. According to recent nuanced analyses, democracy presents a complete certainty in the procedure that include liberty

and equality and perhaps faith in its intrinsic goodness, accompanying acceptance of uncertainty in the outcomes.

In recent years, there have been numerous critiques of the notion of democracy that focuses on the “one person, one vote” model, notably by political scientist Daniel H. Bell and philosopher Jason Brennan. The rise of AI tools—such as micro-targeting news, content recommendation algorithms, emotion-sensing algorithms, and AI-powered surveillance in political economics—further challenges the ideal of free-thinking, self-interested, and rational private citizens that Western democracy relies on. Compounding this issue is substantial evidence of flaws in how people participate in elections and, critically, in their reasoning processes, even before AI gained its current unprecedented political influence. This raises concerns among scholars about the implications of the increasingly sophisticated and potentially manipulative AI systems for democracy.

Meanwhile, based on Confucian teachings, we can reason that the ideal way for political stakeholders is when each person fully understanding, acting on, and following their moral compass (*đạo nghĩa* - 道義), which can be understood as the moral compass guiding individuals towards righteousness in their actions, fostering both personal integrity and societal harmony. This concept is metaphysically loaded because not only it emphasizes the link between human’s ethical way of living and the way of the universe, but also the interconnectedness between personal virtue and well-being of the community.

Importantly, within Confucian culture, a person ought to internalize respect for social relations, pay proper tribute with the right rituals and manners, and carry their entailed responsibilities/duty including words and actions they choose to speak out and act, respectively. Here, policies for AI regulation can be at least discussed in relation to how they help fostering these deeply held norms and traditions.

And at the heart of Confucian ideal for governance, losing the people’s heart (*tâm* 心) is equivalent to the ruler losing their heavenly mandate and legitimacy. Thus, the rulers must always put the people’s heart, interest, and will at the heart of their governance. Here, in Confucianism, when connecting the concept of governance through virtue and people as the roots of the state, there is an implication for moral leadership, as the state or those in power at their best, are considered as a source of moral guidance (Roberts et al., 2021). Moreover, when the timing is right and wisely chosen, moral interventions is warranted. Given the immense potential of AI technologies and their big-tech companies to change people’s minds and create societal changes, Confucian teachings related to *people as roots of the state* can provide certain moral grounds for state’ interventions in the development and deployment of AI technologies. These ideas need to be further examined.

CONCLUSION

Advanced informational, interactive, recursively improving technologies such as AI will give the citizens new ways of expressing their opinions and concerns, as well as constructing their social and political epistemic realities. A just political process in any culture must consider the new

technological developments and adapt to the new reality while continue to represent the people's interests as well as weed out corruption. Increasingly, the issue of preserving our humanity in the ever-growing influence of AI-mediated politics has become a priority. These issues are universal to all forms of government.

Daily interactions with AI systems like chatbots and recommender algorithms are challenging democratic norms by generating unfamiliar social dynamics, expectations, concerns, etc. The question, "How will democracy survive in the age of AI?" has become urgent for political thinkers worldwide (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Kaiser, 2019). However, the lived experiences of people, especially under the influence of advanced technologies, go beyond the narrow notion of democracy centered on rational, self-interested individuals. An enhanced multicultural understanding of how human lived experiences can inform their views of people-centeredness is essential for preserving humanity in a political life increasingly influenced by smart machines. Thus, more scientific and philosophical attention must be given to culturally specific concepts that inform political processes in non-Western countries and their implications for algorithm-mediated politics.

Data availability

There is no data associated with this study.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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