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Book Review

Public Reason Confucianism: Democratic Perfectionism and Constitutionalism in East Asia

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Public Reason Confucianism: Democratic Perfectionism and Constitutionalism in East Asia
Sungmoon Kim, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016, xi + 276 pp., \$99.99
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In an attempt to adapt traditional Confucianism to a modern democratic-constitutional society while embracing value pluralism, Sungmoon Kim defends and constructs *public reason Confucianism* as a plausible model of **Confucian democratic perfectionism** in East Asia's pluralist context. Kim's book is generally addressed to those who are working on Confucian political philosophy, those who are interested in liberalism, modern democracy and value pluralism, and those who are interested in East Asian politics. In the background of reconstructing Confucian political philosophy while confronting the challenge of value pluralism, three major kinds of Confucian perfectionism have existed including Confucian democracy (David L. Hall, Roger T. Ames) Confucian political meritocracy (Daniel A. Bell), and a possible hybrid version of the above two, Confucian meritocratic perfectionism (Ruiping Fan, Jiang Qing, Joseph Chan, Tongdong Bai). As a partially comprehensive perfectionism, Kim's *public reason Confucianism*, prescribing a modern and practical proposal that synthesizes both Confucian values and democracy as its normative ground, is an outstanding reconstruction of modern Confucian political theory, and I admire the book's exceptionally detailed arguments and a significant contribution to the discourse of reconciling Confucian traditions, modern democracy, and value pluralism.

Chapter 1 lays out the sketch of *public reason Confucianism* as a partially comprehensive perfectionism, instead of *political perfectionism*, *comprehensive antiperfectionism* or *political antiperfectionism*. For a Confucian polity, Kim argues that it must be comprehensive Confucian perfectionism, since it is impossible for the Confucian state not to be committed to promoting the Confucian values of the good life. While both reject political meritocracy, Joseph Chan's *moderate political Confucian perfectionism* differs largely from Kim's model in the question of whether a comprehensive doctrine, specifically the Confucian collective way of the good life, is compatible with value pluralism. Under the assumption of an incompatibility between comprehensive Confucianism and modern pluralism, Chan proposes that Confucian perfectionism must be non-comprehensive but political, which entails a list of civilities. However, Kim responds that Chan's *civility consideration* (46-52) is more akin to John Rawls's "liberal neutrality," undermining its normative ground as a Confucian theory. Instead, Kim proposes a type of moderate, comprehensive Confucian perfectionism supplemented with "the intelligibility condition" (45), which makes Kim's Confucian perfectionism potentially compatible with pluralism or even with civility. Under these conditions, Confucian perfectionism must be moderate, with an acknowledgment of the plurality of moral values and the results of moral disagreement, and most importantly, the public recognition of "the *intrinsic* [rather than the *instrumental*] value of democracy," such as popular sovereignty, political equality, and the right to political participation (27). In a sum, "[Confucian democratic perfectionism] justifies *public promotion of Confucian cultural*

values in the service of democratic citizenship under the normative constraints of core democratic principles” (68).

In chapter 2, to avoid possible tensions between Confucian perfectionism and value pluralism, Kim lists two normative premises and six propositions to elaborate *public reason Confucianism*, and argues that Confucian democratic perfectionism compared to John Rawls’s public reason liberalism is more suitable for the contemporary politics of many East Asian societies (71). Kim describes John Rawls’s political liberalism as moderate, since Rawls’s scope of public reason is only limited to “constitutional essentials and matters of basic structure” (74). Such “limits of public reason” also mark Rawls’s political liberalism as a kind of political antiperfectionism (74-75). Further, Kim points out that Rawls’s non-Hobbesian conceptualization of public reason inevitably leads to “the possibility of plural interpretations of public reason” as well as the possible “intertwinement” between public reason and perfectionist values (80-81), due to its promotion of “substantively” liberal values (86). With the recognition of a possible “overlap between public reason and comprehensive doctrines” (81), Kim suggests a kind of public reason Confucianism as a mode of public reason perfectionism, where Confucian “public reason” is defined as the “[shared] reason of [Confucian] democratic citizens” (98-101).

Different from traditional, fully comprehensive Confucianism, Kim’s partially comprehensive Confucianism is a “democratic-constitutional normative” theory (171), with practical implications for the constitutional rights derived from the public reason of democratic citizens. In part II of the book, chapters 3 and 4 specifically discuss the constitutional implications of Kim’s public reason Confucianism, particularly the practical implications of the third proposition (P3) of public reason Confucianism, which states, “*in a Confucian society, all citizens are equal to one another qua public citizens and together they exercise popular sovereignty*” (88). Through the case of the abolition of the family-head system and the case of the traditional clan’s membership from the South Korean Supreme Court, Kim aims to show that “public reason Confucianism has an active political interest in ensuring that (nonsectarian) Confucian values as well as democratic-constitutional ideals endorsed by Confucian public reasoning are promoted within civil society” (171). Take the example of a traditional clan’s membership that excludes women’s equal membership. Public reason Confucianism could be a normative guide to reconcile both traditional values of filial piety and the modern constitutional right of gender equality.

To argue that modern Confucian polity’s constitutional order depends upon the shared reason of democratic citizens (173) and a set of civic traits, say, “patriotism, a sense of justice, a sense of common fate, moral criticism, self-restraint, tolerance, and... active

political participation” (177), Kim explores the relationship between “moral virtue” and “civic virtue” in chapter 5. Scholars have been greatly interested in understanding whether any qualitative difference exists between civic virtue and moral virtue in classical Confucianism. With an endorsement of Confucian virtue monism, Joseph Chan justifies the preference for moral virtue over civic virtue in terms of “the motivation reason,” “the opportunity reason,” and “the assurance reason” (Chan, 2013, 94-100). According to Chan, one is more motivated, with more opportunity as well as assurance from others, to cultivate one’s moral virtues rather than civic virtues, and correspondingly “moral education is more effective than a political version of civic education in engendering the virtues necessary for a well-functioning democracy” (Chan, 97). However, Kim points out that Chan cannot consistently take a monistic approach to virtue while insisting there be a sharp distinction between moral and civic virtues (179), which is used to solve the tension between comprehensive Confucian doctrines and value pluralism. In addition, Chan’s promotion of certain selective Confucian moral values, such as “respect, reverence, trustworthiness, sincerity, and beneficence without accepting the whole philosophy of Confucianism” (Chan, 100), would either make his Confucian perfectionism too akin to liberal perfectionism but less to Confucian perfectionism, or would become impossible if the “wholistic structure of Confucian virtue ethics” (181) is assumed. In a sum, Kim claims that Chan mistakenly “identifies comprehensive doctrine solely in terms of a *fully* comprehensive doctrine” (182), while public reason Confucianism as a partially comprehensive doctrine, under the ground of “tempered virtue monism,” allows “room for civic virtue, distinct *practically, if not conceptually*, from moral virtue, which can bring citizens who are internally diverse as private individuals or members of associations into one political world under one consideration” (193-194).

Specifically, Kim emphasizes “the ethical continuum [and intertwinement] between moral virtue and civic virtue” (184) instead of a sharp distinction between these two by appealing to classical Confucian texts, such as the *Daxue* and the *Shujing*. As for the challenge of “how human/moral virtue can be extended to politics without transforming into something qualitatively different, specifically tailored for public realm” (188), Kim introduces Mencius’s developmental and analogical reasoning on moral extension, and points to a possible political virtue for a political leader that can be discerned from Mencius’s account of Yi Yin (189-190). In addition, in the Story of Guan Zhong, Kim’s interpretation is that Confucius seems to praise a type of “political relevant virtue” for political agents in a nonideal situation, specifically regarding the notion of *ren*, which might relevantly contribute to a Confucian polity’s constitutional integrity (190-191). According to Kim, although there is the *practical* but *not conceptual* distinction, civic virtue is extended and justified from moral virtue, and its instrumental and practical

value lies in its promotion and “reproduction” of “the Confucian public character of the polity” (199). In Kim’s picture, some Confucian virtues, such as “filial piety, fraternal responsibility, respect for elders, harmony within the family, ancestor worship, and ritual propriety” (194) could be labelled as civic virtues as long as they practically and publicly contribute to a constitutional order and “common citizenship” (199).

In chapter 6, Kim argues that the right to political participation is a necessary constituent to public reason Confucianism, granted by his public equality proposition (P3). Such a strong requirement on the right to political participation marks Kim’s proposal not only different from traditional, comprehensive Confucianism but also many contemporary Confucian political theories. For example, Daniel Bell’s Confucian meritocracy demonstrates a preference for social participation over political participation (205-206), and Joseph Chan, being skeptical about political participation, supports “popular political participation” (205). To justify his view on Confucian political equality, Kim reinterprets, and reconstructs a type of Mencian political philosophy, which could disconnect sagehood and kingship along with the sense of democratization of the ideal of sagehood as well as “the universal accessibility of public office” (209). Kim firstly asserts that a Mencian view of *moral equality* from Mencius’s *Xing-Shan* thesis, which declares all human beings are equally born with the capability of cultivating moral sprouts and becoming moral sages, could entail a universal sense of individual dignity for all human beings (209-217). As for the contradiction between Mencius’s moral equality and “old aristocratic ideal of political inequality” (220), Kim suggests reconstructing Mencian political philosophy directly derived from those moral assumptions of moral equality and human dignity, given the historical restrictions of Mencius’s political ritualism. Further, Kim asserts that the idea of “*equal moral opportunity to become a public official*” is able to “derive and justify seminal Mencian Confucian ideas of popular sovereignty and the right to political participation” (209). Here, “popular sovereignty” granted by “the right to political participation” different from “popular participation,” is possibly compatible with “the qualified few taking action” (223-225) in public affairs. To further bridge “the people’s right to political participation and democratic representation,” Kim revisits *Mencius* 6A10, and reinforces the value of human dignity particularly in the context of value pluralism (227-230). Human dignity should include both material interests and ideal interests under Kim’s agreement with Max Weber (228-231), and correspondingly, the protection of both types of interests would require a Confucian democratic citizen to affirm Rawls’s *duty of civility*, which embraces a right to political participation (231). Then, prescribed by public reason Confucianism, political participation as a kind of civic virtue would uphold a certain version of democratic representation. Responding to the assurance problem that might be associated with civic virtue, Kim ascribes its new features, beyond John Locke’s

“inconveniences,” to value pluralism in an era of modern politics, which necessitates the right to political participation and the promotion of democratic citizenship. As Kim concludes, “the Confucian democracy justified by public reason Confucianism establishes the government for, of, and by the people” (240).

It is impossible to dive deeply into all the insightful features of Kim’s *Public Reason Confucianism: Democratic Perfectionism and Constitutionalism in East Asia* in a brief book review. Instead, my central interest is to understand Kim’s public reason condition as a restriction to reconcile the tension between a type of Confucian perfectionism and value pluralism. I agree with Kim that it is impossible for democratic citizens to completely set aside deep justifications for controversial values while merely endorsing a freestanding and political doctrine of justice, and that some Confucian values might be able to offer an alternative beyond “liberal neutrality” to sustain a variety of competing comprehensive moral doctrines. Here are just a few questions to further explore the details of Kim’s public reason condition. What presumptions and Confucian values contribute to a type of shared reason known and accepted by the public in a modern Confucian society? What are the qualifications for Confucian democratic citizens? For example, would a person who refuses to take care of seniors while practically promoting democratic deliberation and political participation qualify as a Confucian democratic citizen? Would the essentials of such Confucian shared reason and its specifications and implications be conceivable and possibly supported by non-Confucian proponents, say, Buddhist monks, who hold different moral, religious, and philosophical worldviews? Regarding the grounding values, Kim seems to more directly base his work on some thin notions of moral equality and human dignity rather than on some thick Confucian values, while insisting that the value of democracy is intrinsic. In Kim’s picture, some Confucian virtues, such as “filial piety, fraternal responsibility, respect for elders, harmony within the family, ancestor worship, and ritual propriety” (194) could be justified as civic virtues as long as they are practically and publically contributing to a constitutional order and “common citizenship” (199). For example, derived from the fully comprehensive notion of filial piety (X) or its pluralistic versions (X1, X2, X3...Xn) within particular Confucian communities, the civic filial piety (x) is partially comprehensive in the sense that its character is negotiated with the “democratic principles of individual dignity and gender equality” (201), and it contributes to “the public identity of ... Confucian citizens” (201). Must Kim’s moderate, comprehensive Confucian perfectionism with the priority of the intrinsic value of democracy, grant the equal status of divergent comprehensive doctrines to effectively leave substantial content of public reason wide open to value pluralism? The notion of democracy, to a certain extent, contains some liberal assumptions of the representation and compromise of conflicting private interests. Under those assumptions, Kim’s commitments to

the instrumental values of some Confucian virtues seem to undermine its normative grounds as a Confucian theory but appear more akin to a liberal model of democratic representation. Within a foundationally liberal framework, the limit of democracy in dealing with moral disagreement still remains. The distinctive strength of modern Confucian political theory in the context of moral conflicts, I feel, does not merely lie in whether some Confucian values could satisfy their instrumental values to contribute to a democratic-constitutional order, but probably should also be credited with its non-polarized dimensions of a Confucian form of life, such as the Confucian doctrine of “Harmony in Diversity” (和而不同), which entails the coexistence of a variety of moral values. Some historical perspectives on cultural integrations and transformations in East Asia might affirm the value of “Harmony in Diversity.”

As for the project of modernizing traditional Confucianism, I also found Kim’s key reconstruction of Mencian political philosophy very illuminating, particularly his highlighting of the possible disconnect between Confucian sagehood and kingship. As Kim argues, “Mencius’s conscious refutation of the exclusive connection between sagehood and kingship not only enables what can be called the *democratization* of the ideal of sagehood but, more importantly, the universal accessibility of public office to *any* virtuous person regardless of his social pedigree, engendering a new ideal of political equality” (209). I agree with Kim that both Bo Yi and Yi Yin in *Mencius* were praised as good politicians who strategically practiced their political ideals and moral commitments without blindly obeying ancient kingship, but interestingly the Confucian sagehood was ranked higher than the above two. Mencius says,

When one should take office, he would take office; when one should stop, he would stop; when one should take a long time, he would take a long time; when one should hurry, he would hurry. This was Kongzi. All were sages of ancient times. I have never been able to act like them, but my wish is to learn from Kongzi. (*Mengzi*, 2A2.22)

In these passages from *Mencius*, the Confucian governance appears to be a mixture of realism and idealism, which might affirm Kim’s public reason Confucianism as the middle path between Paul Weithman’s “perfectionist republicanism” and William Galston’s “political realism” (199). With possession of something like practical reason, Bo Yi, Yi Yin, and Kongzi, as ideal citizens, were able to judge and revise their political actions in terms of empirical situations. On the other hand, their political decisions must be rooted in both moral and political grounds. “And if any could obtain the world by performing one unrighteous deed, or killing one innocent person, he would not do it. In these things they are the same” (*Mengzi*, 2A 2.24). For a modern project of reconciling Confucian values and modern democracy, Mencius’s historical notion of “Ming Gui Jun Qing” (民贵君轻) might be compatible with Kim’s *public reason Confu-*

cianism. As Mengzi says, “The people are the most important, the altars to the land and grain are next, and the ruler is the least important” (7B14.1-14.2). Here, when the will of the people and the will of the ruler are not congruent, the will of the people should be more fundamental. However, for the question of to what extent, a right to political participation could be entailed from Confucian sagehood, we still need to be more cautious about the inference. As Stephen Angle lists in his *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy: Toward Progressive Confucianism*, there have been various textual interpretations of the term *Min* prescribing the ethical progress of a people, while the highest stage is identical with *Ren*. Complex interpretations of the term *min* supplemented with the Mencian analogical reasoning might suggest a loose conclusion of political rights and flexible implications of practical judgements rather than a merely top-down constitutional order or a universal requirement. Correspondingly, the intertwined but also puzzling connection between Confucian values and East Asian economic development, and a wide variety of memberships and associations not limited in a political community, would suggest something beyond a merely vertical dimension of constitutional-democracy. However, Kim’s book is invaluable in integrating classic Chinese philosophy, practical politics, and modern democracy together with sophisticated analytic arguments rooted in the contemporary background. Regarding current threats to global liberal democracies, it is particularly worthwhile to pursue a project like Kim’s work, which shed a light on our ways to conceptualize public reason and democratic citizenship beyond liberal neutrality.

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