

## *Is Confucianism Beneath or Beyond Ethics and Politics?*

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BIN SONG

Washington College, Chestertown, Maryland, USA (bsong2@washcoll.edu)

Shaun O'Dwyer. *Confucianism's Prospects: A Reassessment*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019, pp. 272 + xvi.

*This article reviews Shaun O'Dwyer's latest book, Confucianism's Prospects: A Reassessment (SUNY, 2019). By critiquing philosophical theories of "Confucian democracy" and their shared sociological assumption that Confucianism still functions as a cultural matrix for East Asian societies, O'Dwyer argues that visions on the future of Confucianism alternative to what the currently fixed institutional infrastructure of liberal democracy entails are flawed. This is mainly because if unconstrained by the infrastructure, the hardwired paternalism and elitism of Confucian ethics would necessarily impose morally taxing burdens upon a de facto pluralistic society. This article assesses O'Dwyer's counterarguments to "Confucian democracy," and proposes a different approach to estimate the prospects of Confucianism in the contemporary world.*

**Key words:** paternalism; elitism; Confucian democracy; transcendent; individualism; pluralism

What are the prospects of Confucianism in an increasingly pluralistic East Asia, with its major countries either having transitioned into or needing to confront the influence of liberal democracy? This is the central question Shaun O'Dwyer asks in *Confucianism's Prospects: A Reassessment*. As manifested in varying chapters of the book, the outline of O'Dwyer's answer to this question can be summarized as following: first, O'Dwyer analyzes varying philosophical and sociological arguments for the theories of "Confucian democracy," and then he provides his own counterarguments to dispute these theoretical visions. Eventually, O'Dwyer states in very concrete terms his own prospect of Confucianism, one that is strict in keeping the current institutional infrastructure of western liberal democracy intact and unchallenged. In this review, I will summarize major moments of O'Dwyer's thought in the indicated order before offering my critiques of it.

O'Dwyer's interlocutors are varying theorists of "Confucian democracy." Under the assumption that Confucianism is still the cultural matrix for East Asian societies, the theorists in question advocate revisions of western liberal democracy to transform it into a uniquely Confucian praxis, and accordingly, the revised versions of liberal democracy with their identifiable Confucian traits are denoted by the term "Confucian democracy" in the book. The revision in question has been proposed in multiple ways. For instance, it could be purely philosophical, such as in Roger Ames's vision to highlight the commonality of Confucian ethics with Dewey's idea of democratic community stripped of unfettered individualism (170-79). Or it could be institutional, such as in Daniel Bell's view (elaborated by O'Dwyer) to embed a non-elective chamber of congress comprising of intellectual elites to veto legislations by a potentially ill-informed elective chamber (189-94). Or it could be something in between, such as when Kim Sungmoon argues for a Confucian public reason by which Confucianism plays a fundamental role in shaping the public discourse in a democracy operated upon a Confucian cultural matrix (217-29).

According to O'Dwyer, arguments for these revisions share some commonalities. Universally, theorists of Confucian democracy utilize Confucianism's emphasis on meritocracy, perfectionism, and human inter-connection to contest the current liberal democracy based upon individualism, and thus intend to provide a better form of democracy in theory. Particularly, they rely upon the vitality of modern East Asian countries and the persistence of Confucian mentality there to argue for a local accommodation of liberal democracy within a Confucian soil.

In contrast, from the very first beginning of the book, O'Dwyer cites Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum to advocate an unabashed ethical individualism: "moral and political values, principles, and conceptions of the good, as instantiated in practices and institutions, are to be evaluated according to whether they enhance, or inhibit, the fundamental capacities 'for truly human flourishing' in individual human beings" (xiii). Based upon this, O'Dwyer reassesses those above arguments so as to propose a different vision for the prospects of Confucianism: for O'Dwyer, the idea of Confucian democracy is undesirable because liberal democracy cannot be dominated by any comprehensive doctrine that demands a particular conception of goodness upon a pluralistic society. Hence, it lacks legitimacy to put an adjective before Democracy to make it a uniquely cultural and political identity. Instead, the role of Confucianism in a pluralistic society should be constrained within the currently fixed structure of liberal democracy so as to enjoy three major prospects that O'Dwyer envisions, and these prospects serve as the conclusion of the book: first, Confucianism joins global conversations on moral and political philosophies; second, Confucianism inspires spiritual and ethical practices in the non-profit and religious organizations of a civil society; and third, Confucianism is a source for conviction politics in representative democratic polities, "articulating high standards of ethical conduct for elected officials" (229). Obviously, none of these prospects implies a structural change of either the philosophical or institutional nature of liberal democracy. In other words, Confucianism's role in these prospects will be similar to Christianity operating on the principle of the separation of church and state in a liberal democracy.

Before assessing O'Dwyer's conclusion, we need to go into details of his counterarguments. Theoretically, the idea of Confucian democracy based upon any sort of political perfectionism is undesirable because, according to O'Dwyer, Confucian perfectionism is hardwired with epistemic paternalism and elitism. When a superior in a power dynamic demands that seemingly ill-informed inferiors obey his authority in the name of acting for the benefit of the latter, this would provide "inadequate protection for the individual against being coercively instrumentalized for the good of the family and of the state" (58). The inadequacy in question runs counter to Dewey's idea of democratic community where ordinary citizens can critique or evaluate expert policy proposals (176). It also undermines Kim Sungmoon's "Confucian public reason," which intends to delineate the legitimate boundary of state action and provide moral content for "basic rights, duties and liberties" (220).

Theorists of Confucian democracy also assume that Confucianism functions as a cultural matrix of East Asian societies, and thus, the non-reflective deep attachment of East Asian people to Confucian ideas urges the accommodation of liberal democracy in a culturally identifiable way. However, O'Dwyer challenges this assumption, using evidences from sociology to indicate that conducted social surveys do not match the assumption. One of these surveys shows "[the region] is no longer a single cultural zone in regard to the public's attachment to the legacies of Confucian social and political ethics" (27). O'Dwyer also cites evidences from philosophy to indicate that so-called Confucian ideas, such as *qing* or *chong* (feeling), in contemporary East Asians' mind cannot be proved to derive from one singular Confucian resource (223). Therefore, O'Dwyer thinks that the monolithic social reality assumed by the arguments for Confucian democracy simply does not exist.

One of O'Dwyer's most valuable contributions is to show us historical details about how Confucianism was utilized by Japan to facilitate its militarism and invasion of other Asian countries in the 1930s. In the face of rising conservative Confucianism in the mainland of China, O'Dwyer furthermore projects that "if Confucianism is ever going to be institutionalized as the ruling ideology in East Asia's political orders, [...] its more likely embodiment is in a legitimating nexus with an illiberal nationalism that would, in present-day geopolitical conditions, be self-defined in cultural antagonism against both 'the West' and against other East Asian states" (157). This is a prospect to strengthen the aforementioned conclusion of the book.

Overall, O'Dwyer furnishes delicate arguments for a palatable conclusion, and provides nuanced and balanced analysis for many views currently debated in the scholarship of Confucian and comparative political philosophy. In the following, I will offer some of my critiques and my own prospect of Confucianism before concluding this review with my final kudos to O'Dwyer's work.

My first critique is the title of the book. What O'Dwyer has conducted a fine research on is Confucianism in East Asia. However, to estimate the prospects of Confucianism in general, as intended by the title and the philosophical side of the book, we should also take into consideration how Confucianism in history interacted with the Enlightenment movement in Europe, and furthermore how it influenced the thought of American founding fathers such as Benjamin Franklin. Although the image of Confucius and Confucianism started to decline after the colonial encounter between the west and China, and has been normally depicted as contrastive with modern thought ever since, this is not the case when Confucianism was firstly introduced to founding thinkers of liberal democracy. It is unfortunate that O'Dwyer did not include any thought on this topic so relevant to this grandly titled book.

If we broaden our historical perspective to how Confucianism has influenced the formation of liberal democracy, we will have more resources to rethink of the term "Confucian democracy." The current institution of western liberal democracy is not immune from serious flaws. It succumbs to risks of populism, from which may derive authoritarian leaders who undermine its very foundation. Nazi Germany was one such historical instance providing us with enough to ponder. Also, in an age of the COVID-19 pandemic, these risks can be easily translated into incompetent governmental management, leading to tragic demises of ordinary citizens, including those who supported their authoritarian leader. What is fascinating about the historical interaction between Confucianism and liberal democracy is that Franklin already anticipated the risks of liberal democracy if governed solely by laws. When urging government by virtue as a necessary complement to liberal democracy, Franklin's thought was inspired by Confucianism, which landed in the emerging republic of the U.S. through European Enlightenment writers.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by this historical encounter between Franklin and Confucius, I think the term "Confucian democracy" need not be thought of as one of cultural identity to refer to a form of liberal democracy customized in East Asia. Instead, it could be a worthy philosophical ideal argued with Confucian and other related sources, aiming to refine the current institution of liberal democracy for the benefit of humanity. In this sense, the qualifier "Confucian" does not circumscribe democracy with an identity, but modifies it with an ideal attribute. Although this pluralistic and attributive understanding of "Confucian democracy" is compatible with O'Dwyer's three prospects of Confucianism listed above, I am cautious about his sanguine and uncritical prospect of liberal democracy.

My second critique is about O'Dwyer's understanding of Confucian ethics. Because the historically indicated rapport between Confucianism and liberal democracy is overlooked, I also take with a grain of salt O'Dwyer's idea that Confucian ethics is hardwired with paternalism and elitism,

and thus cannot provide adequate protection for people vulnerable to abuses in a power dynamic. To discuss these sorts of issues, we need to differentiate the historical and social realities into which a philosophy coalesced from the inner logic of the philosophy per se. From a philosophical perspective, respect towards authority and expertise is not necessarily coupled with paternalism and elitism. Per the Confucian ethic of five relationships (五倫) presented by Mencius,<sup>2</sup> in a relationship that demands reciprocal duties between human partners who are naturally (such as parents and children) or socially (such as superiors and inferiors in an organization) in a hierarchical power dynamic, the more powerful is expected to be a virtuous and exemplary leader accountable to all the less powerful. If the more powerful person mis-leads, historical writings of Confucian ethics consistently demand the less powerful to “remonstrate” against it, and thus to rectify their leader’s wrong-doing. The political remonstrance in this case would be similar to the “civil disobedience” advocated by heroes of human rights in the west such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Most importantly, “remonstration” in the Confucian ethic is seen as an extrapolation of “exhortation” that friends should give to each other in a much more egalitarian relationship,<sup>3</sup> similar to what is assumed by liberal democracy about all citizens. Therefore, in the Confucian ethic of five relationships, humans are equal even if they are in a hierarchical power dynamic because they all need to shoulder duties fit for their roles, including the one of remonstrance. Only if a more powerful human is granted an authority to act on behalf of the less powerful without being held accountable would such an ethic be justly seen as paternalistic or elitist in the derogatory sense of these two terms.

I admit the reality that societies in ancient East Asia prevalently lacked an institutional arrangement to secure remonstrators from being revenged by the leaders under critique. This is the reason why a check-and-balance polity like liberal democracy will be more conducive to the practice of remonstrance or civil dissent. However, considering how hard it is to curb the possible abuse of the power of the majority vote in a liberal democracy, I see the issue of accountability as shared by all political philosophies in addressing authority. In other words, since respect towards authority does not entail paternalism and elitism, I do not think the issue of accountability can demarcate Confucian ethics as being less adequate to protect the interests of vulnerable humans.

This discussion on accountable authority leads to my final critique of the metaphysical assumption crucial to O’Dwyer’s argument of the book: the contrast between the “disencumbered self” embodied in Henrik Ibsen’s *Nora* and the more relational concept of self in Confucianism (chapter 2). When depicting this contrast, O’Dwyer does not differentiate the negative from the positive form of freedom and thus misplaces critiques towards Confucianism. Seen from the perspective of negative freedom, Confucianism would agree with Nora’s decision to leave her household, because virtues, including familial ones, cannot be imposed, and thus must be practiced with a full-hearted consent from each individual, as Confucianism’s idea of “sincerity” or “authenticity” (誠) implies. However, seen from the perspective of positive freedom, Confucianism would remain suspicious towards Nora’s decision, which is mainly based upon a reason to affirm the negative freedom embodied by her disencumbered self. Similarly, historical Confucianism often held a critical view towards all ethics, such as some Daoist and Buddhist ones, which tend to encourage social disengagement. This is because the “relational self” of Confucianism runs deeper than family, school, or state. It is actually about the relationship of an autonomous human individual with all components of their own personality, as well as with all beings in the universe. In this sense, even if Nora intended to disencumber herself from her patriarchal family, per a Confucian understanding, she would still need to treat the relationship to her own self and enter other relationships. As long as her autonomous self still operates on varying relationships, the Confucian teaching on relational virtues such as

humaneness and harmony would still remain incumbent. In other words, given the Confucian approval of both negative and positive forms of freedom, a Confucian's reaction to either a socially disengaged ethic or human individual like Nora would be much more nuanced and complex than what O'Dwyer's contrasting analysis indicates.

Finally, I offer my own prospect of Confucianism to respond to the central question of the book: in order to appropriately estimate prospects of Confucianism in the contemporary world, we need to take into consideration the entire history of the tradition, covering varying countries and civilizations. More importantly, we need to look into the depth of Confucian discourse, which is spiritual, metaphysical, ethical, and political all at once. Per the most long-lasting and impactful form of Confucianism so far, the one of the so-called Neo-Confucianism in ancient China, the virtue of "loyalty" to a state is subordinate to the one of "filiality" to one's parents, since even emperors need to be filial towards their own parents. "Filiality" succumbs to the virtues of "humaneness" and "righteousness," since children have their right to remonstrate against wrong-doing parents. But the practice of "humaneness" and "righteousness" succumb to humans' feeling of awe and piety towards the all-encompassing, constantly creative power of the universe, *Tian*, so that we need to constantly adjust our concrete ways of practicing humaneness and righteousness in varying situations of human life.<sup>4</sup> In other words, any particular political regime, democratic or not, and any particular form of social ethics, paternalistic or not, cannot exhaust the evolutionary novelties of Confucianism inspired by its more transcendent metaphysical and spiritual commitment. Guided by the transcendent commitment, it is not only possible for scholars to evaluate the natures of varying political and ethical systems, Confucian or not, but to enable themselves to remain critical of their own philosophical advocacies and their own way of living. In a more positive tone, in light of the book's central topic on the relationship between Confucianism and liberal democracy and my above discussions of it, my view is that in less democratic countries, Confucianism can be leveraged by social activists to advocate more democratic reformations, while in more democratic ones, Confucianism is not only compatible with their philosophical and institutional infrastructure, but has the potential to perfect it.

In a word, I find that O'Dwyer's contribution in this book is scholarly, fine, and thought-provoking. His approach to evaluate the prospects of Confucianism represents a type of scholarship on similar topics, and therefore, I also hope my response can be on a par with a typical response to it from a cosmopolitan Confucian scholar.

**Bin Song** is an assistant professor of philosophy and religion at Washington College, U.S. His research focuses upon Asian and comparative philosophy, religion, and theology, particularly Confucianism (Ruism). His most recent publications include: "Robert C. Neville: A Systematic, Nonconformist, Comparative Philosopher of Religion," in *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 40, no. 3 (Sep. 2020): 11-30; and "Comparative Metaphysics and Theology as a Scientific Endeavor: A Ruist (Confucian) Perspective," *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 203-224.

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<sup>1</sup> See Dave Wang, "Confucius in the America Founding: The Founders' Efforts to Use Confucian Moral Philosophy in Their Endeavor to Create New Virtue for the New Nation," *Virginia Review of Asian Studies* 16, (2014): 11-26.

<sup>2</sup> trans. Bryan W. Van Norden, *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2008), 71.

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- <sup>3</sup> A pithy representation of this thought is “friendship is the way between a ruler and the ministers (友, 君臣之道),” in Li Ling, *A Reading of the Chu Bamboo Strips at Guodian* (Beijing: Bei Jing Da Xue Chu Ban She, 2002), 160.
- <sup>4</sup> The ontological order of the four mentioned virtues can be found in Zhu Xi’s “A Treatise on Ren” and other related thought. See Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 593-97.