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**The Intrinsic Values of Confucian Democracy  
and Dewey's Pragmatist Method  
Sor-hoon TAN**

***Introduction***

Given the historical association of Confucianism, or rather the *Ru* school of thought, with autocratic government since the Han dynasty, one of the challenges for contemporary scholars of Confucianism is to interpret and reconstruct Confucianism to guard against authoritarian tendencies without surrendering its distinctive ethical-political vision. Confucianism is incompatible with the conventional understanding of democracy as liberal democracy best represented by the United States, focused on limiting government with checks and balances, prioritizing protection of the civil and political rights of individuals, regular elections of representatives in which partisan competition for power offers citizens very little real choice, and it is debatable if the changes of political party in power have improved the lives of ordinary Americans, whichever side they support. This model of democracy is premised on possessive individualism, which assumes individuals to be fundamentally separate from one another, the only legitimate valuable social relationships are those each enters into by choice, and government is legitimized by citizens' consent and a social contract. Its politics is focused on relationships of conflict and competition, and cooperation is possible and justified only from an individualistic self-interested perspective.

Confucianism, in contrast, understands human beings as persons constituted by their social relationships, which are defined by mutual responsibilities of care and trust. Conflicts and competition are viewed as corruption of human relationships, not their natural state, and result from people not living up to their moral potential, failing to conduct themselves with virtue. The primary responsibility of a Confucian government is the people's welfare rather than individual rights, and government officials are expected to conduct themselves with virtue and set an example for the governed. There is no need to limit or check a virtuous Confucian government. Historically, those in power have seldom been virtuous. The Confucian concept and practice of remonstrance is an attempt to curb abuses of power when self-restraint proves unreliable. While not completely ineffective, all too often it had resulted in sacrifice of lives and fortunes of conscientious Confucian officials rather than successful checks on bad rulers. Beyond the basic issue of whether it is possible for Confucianism and democracy to coexist, integrate, or merge, contemporary explorations of Confucian democracy debate different approaches to the project of rendering Confucianism and democracy compatible and the pros and cons of different models of Confucian democracy.

Dewey's conception of democracy has inspired an approach to Confucian democracy, which has been called "Deweyan Confucian Communitarianism." It is based on a view of individuals as fundamentally social, and emphasizes the value of community on par, perhaps even above, freedom and equality. Although Dewey considers himself a liberal, he was critical of movements that identify democracy with individualism that neglects the value of fraternity.<sup>1</sup> Dewey views individuals as socially constituted and individuality as the product

of social interactions. One is human only when in intrinsic relations to other human beings. His liberalism is not just about limiting government and prioritizing the protection of negative liberty; it is a liberalism that emphasizes social action and requires government to provide the means for individuals to develop their human capacities in association with others. For him, democracy as an idea is “not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself.”<sup>2</sup>

From the standpoint of the individual, it consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain. From the standpoint of the groups, it demands liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common.<sup>3</sup>

Dewey’s idea of community is one in which individuality and sociality enhances each other.

The democratic values of freedom, equality, and fraternity are understood from this perspective. In the context of Deweyan community, fraternity is not denial of the possibility or probability of tensions and conflicts in social relations, but a recognition that human beings could relate to one another in ways that produce goods which are consciously appreciated and shared by all, and the production of such goods direct the conduct of each member so that she contributes to the production of those goods. Such direction of the individual’s conduct is in no way the collectivist suppression of individual interests for the sake of the common good. Rather, the power to make a distinctive contribution to the shared goods of human association and to enjoy those goods in one’s own way is the meaning of liberty in the context of a Deweyan community. It is in the exercise of this power that a person’s potentials and capacities could be developed and released with positive results, an achievement only possible in diverse enriching social relationships. Members of a Deweyan community are equal not because they receive the same goods from the association – the most important goods are often unquantifiable and even incommensurable – but because each of their share of the results of associated action are not determined by others or some external standard but by their own unique need for growth. “He is morally equal when his values with respect to his own possibilities of growth, whatever they are, are reckoned with in the social organization as scrupulously as those of every other.”<sup>4</sup> Dewey’s conception of democracy is conducive to Confucianism which emphasizes personal cultivation that simultaneously contributes to communal life, and provides a good starting point for a reconstruction of Confucian political philosophy to accommodate democratic participation, even though this was not part of the traditional Confucian political vision.

### ***The value of democracy***

For Dewey, democracy is never *only* a form of government and he would reject instrumental definitions of democracy as means to collective, political, or other ends, be it resolution of conflicts, legitimate exercise of coercion, satisfaction of varied individual preferences, etc. “Democracy is a form of government only because it is a form of moral and spiritual association.”<sup>5</sup> Democracy is valued as a way of life that enables all to pursue the moral end of human growth in every sense. It does not differ from other ethical conception of government (for example the Aristocratic ideal) in its goal of the best form of association which harmonizes the varied needs, capacities, desires of individual human beings, it differs in how that goal is to be achieved.

Aristocracy and democracy both imply that the actual state of society exists for the sake of realizing an end which is ethical, but aristocracy implies that

this is to be done primarily by means of special institutions or organizations within society, while democracy holds that the ideal is already at work in every personality, and must be trusted to care for itself.<sup>6</sup>

Ethical governments must serve the governed; from the democratic perspective, this purpose cannot be achieved unless each member of the community shares in selecting its governors and determining their policies.<sup>7</sup> However, the democratic ideal does not and cannot work through the limited forms of participation characteristics of today's electoral democracies, consisting primarily in periodically voting for government representatives. Democratic politics for Dewey consists of publics engaging in social inquiries to find solutions to shared problems that arise from the indirect consequences of transactions that merit regulation. The democratic way of life, that is participation in cooperative inquiries, must also prevail in the family, the neighborhood, places of religious worship, schools, and at the workplace.<sup>8</sup>

Dewey's conception of democracy is the inspiration for what Sungmoon Kim calls "Deweyan" conceptions of democracy, which privilege the intrinsic value of the democratic way of life to the exclusion of the instrumental value of political institutions as a method to arrive at political decisions.<sup>9</sup> Kim contends that such Deweyan conceptions depart from Dewey's own view that instrumental value and intrinsic value are inseparable, which Kim interprets to mean that intrinsic value is conditional upon instrumental value. Applied to his own model of public reason Confucian democracy, Kim contends that democratization of East Asian Confucian societies, such as South Korea and Taiwan, came about because people dissatisfied with authoritarian regimes valued democracy instrumentally as a better way for "coordinating complex social interactions under the circumstances of modern politics."<sup>10</sup> And, "once introduced and justified instrumentally as a political system, democracy in a Confucian society attains its noninstrumental value as it becomes consolidated as a way of life in which democratic institutions, rights, and practices are socially mediated and negotiated with Confucian values, habits, mores, and moral sentiments."<sup>11</sup> This mediation and negotiation is not a matter of keeping Confucianism in the private sphere while public life is conducted within the framework of liberal democratic political institutions. Kim maintains that the Confucian public culture that characterizes East Asian society justifies collective, that is, political decision making by Confucian public reason. Instead of the philosophical reconstructions favored by those he calls "Deweyan Confucian Communitarian democrats"<sup>12</sup> which reinterpret Confucian texts to engage democratic philosophies in order to reconstruct the concepts central to democracy, he advocates political reconstruction which takes Confucianism to be defined by the public culture – comprising ritual, habits, moral sentiments, social mores – of East Asian societies. His theory of Pragmatic Confucian democracy then serves to explain what has been happening in East Asia, or at least in South Korea, which is the case study grounding his theory, as well as justifying his particular model of democracy for Confucian societies.

Kim criticizes the Deweyan Confucians for dismissing the different contexts in which Dewey upheld democracy's intrinsic value in a society with democratic political institutions securely established, and contemporary East Asian contexts in which they are advocating the intrinsic value of Confucian democracy, where democratic political institutions are either absent or recently introduced.<sup>13</sup> Dewey's discussion of the democratic way of life serves to strengthen already existing political institutions, whereas East Asian societies need to first recognize the instrumental value of democratic political institutions, and could only realize its intrinsic value when those institutions are well established. From this perspective, Deweyan Confucians' philosophical reconstructions are at best unpragmatic in being irrelevant to practice, at worst, it could distract us from the more important work of democratic political

reforms, which must focus on political institutions. Understanding democracy as a way of life does not exclude concern with political institutions. If Deweyan Confucians have not recommended specific political institutions in a Confucian democracy (which admittedly is work that has to be done, though not necessarily by themselves), it is not because they misunderstand Dewey by dualistically separating intrinsic value from instrumental value and then dismissing the latter. Nor do they commit the error of thinking political institutions unimportant, although they would emphasize, as did Dewey, that these (if limited to structures of government) are not the only important institutions in a democracy.

Besides the philosophical resonance between Dewey's conception of democracy as a moral ideal premised on a social conception of the individual and their interpretations of Confucianism, the appeal of Dewey's conception of democracy as a way of life for Deweyan Confucians, as I understand it, lies in his critique of the democratic political institutions of his day even as he defends the moral ideal. This is important in two ways: the current problems of *de facto* American democracy therefore cannot count against the Deweyan model of Confucian democracy philosophically or practically, and it opens up possibilities for the institutional forms democratization in China can take, instead of a procrustean attempt to impose already malfunctioning Western democratic institutions on China. This could apply to other societies, but Deweyan Confucians have been primarily concerned with Confucianism in mainland China.

Given the differences in contexts, Deweyan Confucians' reconstruction of Confucian democracy cannot start from democratization having occurred or will occur in China for purely instrumental reasons, in the sense of adoption of the full range of political institutions associated with democracies including universal suffrage for regular election of representatives to the highest legislative organ of the state with multiparty competition, independent judiciary, regime of civil and political rights, and the rule of law. Political changes for instrumental reasons are common in the People's Republic of China (PRC), but they have hitherto served to strengthen the single Party administrative state rather than democratization in the sense that matters to Kim. While elections have been introduced for Village Committees since the mid-eighties and at the township level from 1998, whether they are democratic is a matter of debate, and the Communist Party of China (CPC) remains adamantly against the country's leadership role ever passing to any other political party.<sup>14</sup> National laws have been passed in the PRC requiring consultation and public hearings to ensure popular participation in the policy making process. However, even with innovations and experiments such as deliberative polling and participatory budgeting, the Party state's active role in any consultative process or deliberative forum tends to undermine both the representative and deliberative quality of institutions and practices, although Baogang He remains optimistic that, "The Chinese practice of authoritarian deliberation can be seen as a governance-driven democratization process."<sup>15</sup>

Kim's claim that South Korea' and Taiwan's experience of democratization has lessons for China in the search for a Confucian democracy is highly problematic if it implies that democratization will happen for the same instrumental reasons. Conceived as a tool for "coordinating complex social interactions," democratization is not likely to inspire political changes towards a multiparty democracy in the People's Republic of China similar to South Korea's and Taiwan's experience. Even in the latter cases, it is unclear that this instrumental conception suitably describes the ideal that had inspired heroic sacrifices in their historical battles for democracy, which were at times violent. In mainland China, Liu Xiaobo and those of similar persuasion who have called for the rule of law, human rights, citizens' freedom,

protection of the right to property, and an end to one-party rule, justify such liberal democratic political institutional reforms as embodying *universal values*, not because they value democracy instrumentally. The divisive politics and citizens' discontent in societies which could boast of established liberal democratic political institutions, including South Korea and Taiwan, do not incline those who acknowledge that the PRC is not democratic, despite the CPC's rhetoric of "socialist political democracy," towards democratization as the search for a better way to coordinate complex social interactions, certainly not if democratization means universal suffrage in election of national leaders and multiparty politics. It is more likely that China's democratization, if it does progress, will be unique institutionally in many respects, and it would be too hasty to rule out the motivational potential of ideas emphasizing the intrinsic value of democracy

### ***Dewey's Pragmatist Method***

In contrast to Deweyan Confucians' philosophical reconstructions of Confucian democracy based on reinterpretations of Confucian classics and conceptions of democracy emphasizing its intrinsic value as a way of life, Kim's own "political reconstruction" presents Confucian democracy as a model to explain how democratic political institutions in Confucian societies could be consolidated through the mediation with Confucian public culture to achieve a Confucian democracy. From a Pragmatist perspective, this model drawing on the experience of South Korea has the virtue of beginning with real problems of reconciling democracy and Confucianism in a specific society. If one shifts one's attention away from democratization according to Western criteria and consider innovations in Chinese political institutions with potential for popular participation to influence government policies and governance, which arguably have come about for instrumental reasons particular to China's own circumstances, then Kim's model could be helpful if there is also a Confucian public culture in China, which however is not beyond doubt. However, the usefulness of political reconstruction even if it happens does not preclude philosophical reconstruction. The political reconstruction Kim describes requires criteria to determine whether any mediation of democratic political institutions with Confucian culture is both democratic and Confucian, I contend that such criteria are clarified or generated in philosophical reconstructions of the Confucian-democratic ideal.

Unlike Kim, Dewey would not have dismissed philosophical reconstructions aimed at providing ideals and norms to guide social, including political, reforms. Dewey's key work in political philosophy, *The Public and Its Problems*, is a philosophical reconstruction of the democratic ideal. In reconstructing the concept of "the democratic state," what it offers is not, as Kim surmises, "primarily an overarching scaffolding of political institutions."<sup>16</sup> The reconceptualizing of democratic politics as social inquiry by publics does not yield a mode of government in institutional terms, since the organization of publics into a state "depends upon the ability to invent and employ special instrumentalities."<sup>17</sup> Nor did he take for granted that the specific political institutions of his own political contexts must be present in order for the democratic way of life to be reality and for people to be able to realize and to value democracy intrinsically. Dewey specifically discussed political institutions as historical products specific to each society,<sup>18</sup> and did not prescribe specific political institutions as means to realize the democratic ideal. Quite the contrary:

There is no sanctity in universal suffrage, frequent elections, majority rule, congressional and cabinet government. These things are devices evolved in the direction in which the current was moving, each wave of which involved at the

time of its impulsion a minimum of departure from antecedent custom and law.<sup>19</sup>

Not only does it not prescribe institutions that are supposed to work universally for all democracies, it acknowledges the power of “antecedent custom and law” and implies democratic progress is more likely to succeed as gradual rather than revolutionary change, reforming the particular prevailing institutions of a society rather than replacing them with a completely different set of institutions. The *Public and its Problems* is explicitly not concerned with recommending improvements to political forms but with a deeper problem, which “is in the first instance an intellectual problem: the search for conditions under which the Great society may become the Great Community.” That the conditions Dewey was referring to were not political institutions is very clear when he went on, “When these conditions are brought into being they will make their own forms. Until they have come about, it is somewhat futile to consider what political machinery will suit them.”<sup>20</sup>

Contrary to Kim’s claim, one does not have to personally experience the intrinsic value of democracy by living under conditions of democratic political institutions supporting a democratic way of life to be inspired by it. Dewey’s Pragmatist method does not impose a rigid sequential order placing institutional democratization before realization of the democratic way of life. Furthermore, the inseparability of instrumental and intrinsic values is not about intrinsic values being conditional upon instrumental value in a unidirectional causal relation. They are inseparable in the sense that an intrinsic value is always also an instrument, and an instrumental value is always also an end. All value propositions are generalizations about means-ends. Means and ends are not merely causally, externally, related; they are internally related in that the meaning of each cannot be fully understood without the other. Dewey rejected “intrinsic values” in the sense of “ends-in-themselves” which are absolute and pre-given.<sup>21</sup> Intrinsic values are instead “ends-in-view,” which specifies *testable* relation between themselves and certain activities as means for accomplishing it. Ends-in-view are always also the means for bringing about change.<sup>22</sup> Nor do intrinsic values have to be personally experienced to be understood and “pragmatic” in influencing our actions. Dewey recognizes that “abstract” ideas, if they are valid generalizations can serve as intellectual tools in our understanding and decision making.

Similar situations recur; desires and interests are carried over from one situation to another and progressively consolidated ... these general ideas are used as intellectual instrumentalities in judgment of particular cases as the latter arise; they are, in effect, tools that direct and facilitate examination of things in the concrete while they are also developed and tested by the results of their application in these cases.<sup>23</sup>

If ideas of intrinsic values developed from others’ experience could not serve as instrumentalities in our experience, it would not be possible to learn from others’ experience and be inspired by others’ teachings to change our lives.

In the discourse of Confucian democracy, philosophical reconstructions provide new democratic Confucian ideals that encompass the intrinsic values of democracy (freedom, equality, community). While these inevitably start out as “abstract” values, such reconstructions are premised on past unsatisfactory experiences of Confucian and democratic institutions and practices, and as Deweyan reconstructions, intended not as absolute ends-in-themselves, but as “ends-in-view,” which are means to critique and improve the status quo in practice. The reconstructed philosophical ideals of Deweyan Confucian democracy, while encompassing the intrinsic values of democracy and Confucianism, have instrumental value in diagnosing current problems, critiquing or assessing current political institutions and social

practices, as well as setting out more concrete steps towards a democratic way of life. Rather than always being “conditional on” and resulting from living under political institutions, an understanding of the Confucian-democratic ideals as intrinsic values are also needed to specify actions that need to be taken, what kind of political and other institutions need to be established or which existing ones need to be reformed and how. The challenge for Deweyan Confucians is whether their philosophical reconstructions of Confucian democracy as an ideal way of life at once both democratic and Confucian meet Dewey’s requirement that an end-in-view be “constituted in terms of the conditions of its actualization.”<sup>24</sup>

This challenge will be fully met only by recommending specific reforms to existing institutions or practices, or institutional and practical innovations that would realize democratic values, keeping in mind Dewey’s insight that political institutions are historical products which evolve over time, each incremental change involving “a minimum of departure from antecedent custom and law.” This requires careful study of existing political institutions, and other institutions and practices that are related to and influence political participation. It is a project that is best tackled collaboratively with expertise from the social sciences rather than attempted by philosophers whose expertise is limited by the training of their discipline. Even better, the philosophical reconstructions of Deweyan Confucians would best achieve its Pragmatic potential if it inspires participants in practices intended to give the people a voice in governing themselves to reflect on the conduct of those practices, its institutional and noninstitutional aspects, to measure them against those Confucian-democratic values, and to engage in a social inquiry to improve them with those values as guides.



## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> John Dewey, *Collected Works of John Dewey, Later Works 1925-1953*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), Vol. 2, p. 329.

<sup>2</sup> Dewey, *Later Works*, Vol. 2, p. 329.

<sup>3</sup> Dewey, *Later Works*, Vol. 2, pp. 327-328.

<sup>4</sup> Dewey, *Later Works*, Vol. 7, p. 346

<sup>5</sup> John Dewey, *The Early Works of John Dewey, 1882-1898*. Ed. J. A. Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1971), Vol. 1, p. 240.

<sup>6</sup> Dewey, *Early Works*, Vol. 1, p. 243.

<sup>7</sup> Dewey, *Later Works*, Vol. 2, p. 327.

<sup>8</sup> Dewey, *Later Works*, Vol. 2, p. 325.

<sup>9</sup> Kim, Sungmoon, "Pragmatic Confucian Democracy: Rethinking the Value of Democracy in East Asia," *The Journal of Politics* 79 No. 1 (2016), p. 238. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/687762>.

<sup>10</sup> Kim, "Pragmatic Confucian Democracy," p. 244.

<sup>11</sup> Kim, "Pragmatic Confucian Democracy," p. 237.

<sup>12</sup> David L. Hall, David L. and Roger T. Ames, *Democracy of the Dead: Dewey, Confucius, and the Hope for Democracy in China* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1999), and Sor-hoon Tan, *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Kim, "Pragmatic Confucian Democracy," p. 243.

<sup>14</sup> This resistance to multiparty competition is shared by academics such as Pan Wei, "Toward a Consultative Rule of Law Regime in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* (2003) 12 (34):3-43, and a certain section of the Chinese population. See Harry Harding, "The Halting Advance of Pluralism." *Journal of Democracy* 9, No. 1 (1998), pp. 11-17.

<sup>15</sup> He, Baogang, "Western Theories of Deliberative Democracy and Chinese Practice of Complex Deliberative Governance," *The Search for Deliberative Democracy in China*. Edited by Ethan J. Leib and He Baogang (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 133-148.

<sup>16</sup> Kim, "Pragmatic Confucian Democracy," p. 240.

<sup>17</sup> Dewey, *Later Works*, Vol. 2, p. 276.

<sup>18</sup> Dewey, *Later Works*, Vol. 2, p. 286.

<sup>19</sup> Dewey, *Later Works*, Vol. 2, p. 326.

<sup>20</sup> Dewey, *Later Works*, Vol. 2, p. 327.

<sup>21</sup> Dewey, *Later Works*, Vol. 13, p. 226.

<sup>22</sup> Dewey, *Later Works*, Vol. 13, p. 202.

<sup>23</sup> Dewey, *Later Works*, Vol. 13, p. 230.

<sup>24</sup> Dewey, *Later Works*, Vol. 13, p. 218.