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ARTICLE

Merit, democracy, and the Confucian imagination: a response to critics

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ABSTRACT
I am deeply grateful to my commentators for their careful and thoughtful engagement with my book. Their critiques and reflections not only help refine the theory of Meritocratic Democracy but also contribute meaningfully to my own scholarly development. Unfortunately, due to space constraints, I am unable to address every point raised in their detailed and insightful commentaries. I have therefore chosen to focus on the most challenging and pressing questions, in the hope that readers will appreciate the rationale behind this selective response.

Jonathan Benson and I agree that political leaders often play epistemic roles in democracy, and therefore, more research in political epistemology should focus on this political agency. However, Benson believes that two main problems hinder my proposal for promoting more virtuous political leaders within democracy. First, conceptions of political virtues are inherently ambiguous, making them susceptible to manipulation by self-interested political actors. Second, a randomly selected jury of partisans is likely to be ineffective since partisans tend to be like-minded and generate homogeneous discussions. These two issues prompt Benson to advocate an ex-post check system, such as stringent standards of conduct that a randomly selected group of citizens could enforce on political leaders in office.

Benson's suggestion for discouraging leaders' unethical behaviour aligns well with the spirit of meritocratic democracy. However, the application of more stringent standards of conduct may only scratch the surface of the problem of bad political leaders occupying the top positions in democratic institutions. A case in point is a political leader like Donald Trump holding the

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highest office in his country. The core concern is not his plan to accept a luxury aircraft from Qatar nor the appointment of people from his inner circle to governmental positions. It is instead his strategic use of demagoguery and institutional power to realise a political vision that is detrimental to many American citizens and people in other parts of the world.

Another issue that we must consider in weighing alternative ways to constrain bad leaders is that ex-post conduct checks are often ineffective at containing charismatic bad political leaders already in power. Political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt demonstrated this in their book, *How Democracies Die* (2018). According to their comparative analysis, the best way for democracies to prevent the rise of dysfunctional political leaders is through effective gatekeeping at the party level, that is, before they run for democratic elections.

Based on Levitsky and Ziblatt's analysis, the question for theorists interested in institutional design is whether gatekeeping is more effective in the hands of party elites or a randomly selected group of partisans. Certainly, this question requires empirical investigation, but there may be good reasons to believe that the latter solution is the most viable. Although partisans have epistemic limitations, as Benson aptly notes, they may nevertheless be more open to deliberation and responsive to evidence than party elites, given their relatively lower personal stakes. If that is correct, my claim – that an intra-party ethical screening of political leaders could enhance the quality of political leadership in democratic politics – remains a plausible proposition that could be tested empirically.

Sungmoon Kim identifies a gap in my normative argument and suggests a way to address it. Kim argues that my parallel between Western epistemic theories of governance and Confucian political meritocracy has been insufficiently developed. For the comparison to hold, it should demonstrate that Confucian political theories, like their Western counterparts, rely on a concept of political truth. But it is not immediately clear how epistemic concepts – such as truth and the value of cognitive diversity – can be integrated into the practice-oriented framework of Confucian political thought. This is an important observation, and I agree that the philosophical similarities supporting my comparison could have been explored more deeply.

At the same time, I believe that Confucianism's emphasis on practice allows for the reconstruction of a conception of truth that shares fundamental elements with pragmatic understandings of truth. The latter differ from propositional accounts insofar as they emphasize people's satisfaction with practical situations.1 Furthermore, Confucian political meritocrats' direct reference to epistocrats' arguments and considerations suggests that contemporary theories of Confucian politics should rely on a more hybrid understanding of truth, where some action-oriented and propositional understandings are mixed together. Therefore, I agree with Kim that such

a reconstruction would advance a conception of political truth that is also graspable in propositional terms.

I also welcome the suggestion that pointing to arguments in the Confucian tradition for epistemic diversity would have strengthened my case. Evidence for the value of epistemic diversity may be found in early Confucian texts, such as the *Analects*. Confucius's statement summed it up aptly:

> The Master said, 'When walking with two other people, I will always find a teacher among them. I focus on those who are good and seek to emulate them, and focus on those who are bad in order to be reminded of what needs to be changed in myself'. (7.22)

This is precisely why I chose this statement to open *Meritocratic Democracy*. It reflects the distinctive Confucian belief that the search for ethical wisdom is ultimately a collective effort, impossible to achieve in self-isolation. As I hinted in the book, from this perspective, one can argue that ritually mediated social coordination practices are epistemically laden because, as a communicative network, they enable individuals to exchange information on the Confucian truth – the right way to live together and cultivate good personal character traits.

Such an exegetical argument could strengthen the case for *Meritocratic Democracy* in the eyes of Confucian democrats, who reject Confucian political meritocracy, though not for epistemic reasons. However, I doubt that it can move Confucian meritocrats since they could easily rebut it by pointing to other passages of the *Analects* (such as 2.1 and 12.17) or other ancient Confucian texts that might seem less sympathetic to epistemic diversity, such as *Mencius* 3A4. To this end, I remain convinced that my strongest epistemic argument against Confucian meritocrats is the one centred on recent findings on epistemic diversity and epistemic avoidance.

Yutang Jin finds my proposed agent-centred approach problematic as it is prone to multiple interpretations. Specifically, it is unclear whether it rests on a descriptive or a normative argument. I am happy to clarify this point. In the book, I offer both descriptive and normative arguments for an agent-centred approach. I argue that political leaders emerge spontaneously when individuals come together to define and solve collective problems. To this end, developing normative models of democratic governance that exclude the existence of political leaders seems unfeasible. If political leaders are here to stay, we should understand their role in democratic politics. A normative justification is presented in Chapter 5, where I argue that political leaders have three epistemic functions in democracy. They foster citizens' interests in politics, exercise imaginative functions in society through their creative agency, and mediate experts' testimony on policy plans.

Another problem Jin points out is that I build my argument on a false dichotomy between an agent-centred approach and an institutional one. After all, as he has observed, I propose an agent-centred approach through the institution of an ethical screening process for future political leaders, coupled with intra-party democracy. So, is there a meaningful distinction between these two approaches?

The difference between these two approaches lies in their distinct targets for achieving good governance. In other words, they offer different answers to the question, 'How can a state ensure good government?' It is true that both approaches ultimately support some form of institutional proposal in practice. However, most political proposals require a specific institutional or policy change to be effectively implemented at the state level. So, unique to the agent-centred approach is the conviction that certain character traits of leaders are crucial for good government. This supports institutional or policy changes that aim to cultivate the virtues of political leaders or to prevent bad leaders from coming to power.

In contrast, the institutional approach attempts to achieve good governance by controlling leaders' behaviour, regardless of whether their agendas are hidden or explicit. Immanuel Kant is a perfect example of a philosopher who defended an institutional approach and disregarded the value of political leaders' virtue. In *Perpetual Peace*, Kant argued that a constitution can be structured to ensure peace even if a nation is governed by 'devils' – that is, morally corrupt individuals. Kant thought that, as long as these devils are rational, peace and order can be ensured by a correct set of institutions and laws. In this vision, the personal virtue of political leaders is unnecessary for achieving just and stable governance. *Meritocratic Democracy* defends a more balanced position than Kant's: it acknowledges the relevance of both approaches while emphasising the importance of an agent-centred approach for contemporary debates.

Jin suggests that my emphasis on political leaders' morality for good government is unrealistic. According to him, I have mistakenly followed the overoptimism of classic Confucianism in believing that political leaders can be virtuous and '[t]his sense of optimism flies in the face of realpolitik where politicians constantly confront difficult moral dilemmas that dirty their hands'. Before discussing the problem of dirty hands, let me state that Jin and I seem to disagree on what a good realist perspective of politics should be. While the Confucian ideal of 'inner sageliness and outer kingliness' (*neisheng waiwang* 內聖外王) may be impossible to fully realise, I view the Confucian valuation of political leaders' virtue as an expression of realism rather than naivety. They understood that institutions are insufficient to contain bad leaders when the latter have sufficient power to ignore them or turn them to their own benefit. This is not to say that institutions and laws

are always ineffective, but that in times of political upheaval, leaders matter a great deal. A genuinely realist perspective, therefore, must acknowledge the fragility of institutional mechanisms in constraining political leaders, just as there are limits to the reliance on personal virtue.

Concerning the dirty hands problem, I am sympathetic to the Classical Confucian view of virtue politics, particularly its belief that expedient political measures (*quan* 權) can be justified and need not compromise the moral character of a politician who adopts them for higher moral reasons.2 However, I recognise that, in today's context, the Confucian justification of a single moral absolute – the Way (*dao* 道) – is problematic. In the book, I have sought to explain why it remains valuable to have morally upright political leaders who are capable of making difficult decisions. I follow Bernard Williams in arguing that political leaders should be pragmatic and willing to compromise, even if this requires them to violate some of their own principles. However, they should also have a 'sense of reluctance'. They need to be sensitive to the moral costs of their actions, feel the burden of breaking fundamental moral principles, and be hesitant to carry out morally disagreeable actions that are nevertheless politically justified. This is because, as I argue, 'only a political leader with this disposition will likely do the morally disagreeable only when necessary' (Ziliotti, 2024, p. 120).

Finally, I fully agree with Jin that '[a] successful a priori selection of virtuous leaders barely exists except in carefully crafted legends and fairytales', but I have never claimed that an intra-party ethical screening can guarantee us perfectly virtuous political leaders. I made a more modest prediction that my proposal could improve the chances of having political leaders who meet the public's expectations compared to the current system (Ziliotti, 2024, p. 133).

Franz Mang argues that I downplay citizens' responsibility for the ongoing crisis of Western liberal democracies. Citizens are responsible for electing morally upright political leaders, and voters' political ignorance stems largely from deficiencies in their intellectual abilities and character.

Mang's constructive observation allows me to clarify my position on the role of civic education in democracy and the crisis of democracy. My silence on civic education should not be taken as undervaluing its importance for the functioning of a healthy democracy. Similarly, my emphasis on political leaders is not meant to suggest that bad leaders are the only cause of the crisis of democracy. Rather, I see the current situation as the result of a combination of economic, historical, and political factors. That said, in current normative debates, the responsibility of political leaders is a factor that has rarely been discussed. At the same time, citizens' intellectual abilities and character may not be the most critical factors. Consider the European Union. Never before in history has the average European attained such a high level of education. European citizens enjoy free elementary and secondary

education, while higher education is either free or affordable for most. In many European countries, the curriculum includes civic education and the study of ethics from the upper secondary level. Notably, nearly 45% of Europeans aged 25 to 34 now hold a university degree (Eurostat, 2025).

Of course, European public education systems are far from perfect, but it is reasonable to believe that their limitations may not be the main reason behind the rise of political leaders advocating anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim policies, Euroscepticism, and the resurgence of a phantasmagoric European Christian culture. Historical examples suggest otherwise. Ireland's 1998 Referendum on the Good Friday Agreement, the 1946 Italian institutional referendum, and Poland's 1989 Parliamentary Elections all illustrate moments when citizens made pivotal choices. Similarly, the 1969 German Federal Election – marking Willy Brandt's attempt to ease Cold War tensions – shows that less-educated Europeans were fully capable of making sound decisions on critical political matters. This leads me to think that citizens may not be the most problematic political actors in contemporary democracies.

Mang points out that neglecting the relevance of civic education may be even more troubling if we consider that *Meritocratic Democracy* is a Confucian-inspired theory. Since Confucian scholars of the past have placed great emphasis on the importance of people's moral cultivation, especially of children's, the absence of civic education in *Meritocratic Democracy* is puzzling. However, it is also true that the ancient Confucian masters never blamed the people for social problems. Confucius attributed the main responsibility for people's shortcomings and political issues to political leaders (Analects, 2.20; 2.3; 13.11; 13.12). He believed that political leaders must put the interests of the people first, and that many political problems arise when those in power fail to fulfil this responsibility (Analects, 12.7; 12.9). *Meritocratic Democracy* seeks to bring a similar perspective to the ongoing debate on the crisis of democracy.

Loubna El Amine questions the cross-cultural nature of *Meritocratic Democracy*. In her view, it is unclear what makes my theory Confucian. The Classical Confucian understanding of politics emphasizes not only the people's well-being and the virtue of leaders but also the central role of the family. Thus, the book's limited attention to the Confucian concern for family undermines the cultural distinctiveness of *Meritocratic Democracy* as a Confucian political theory. In turn, this raises doubts about its cross-cultural character.

Developing a distinctively Confucian theory was never the primary aim of my book. In the first chapter, I follow Fred Dallmayr in arguing that a theory is comparative when it puts into dialogue ideas situated in different contexts. However, *Meritocratic Democracy* is a particular form of cross-cultural theory

because it highlights the differences and similarities between variously situated ideas and debates to generate a new political theory.3 To this end, although *Meritocratic Democracy* draws creatively on Confucian intellectual resources, it does not constitute a Confucian political theory in the strict sense of the term. Alternatively, it can be viewed as Confucian only if one adopts a broad and inclusive understanding of the tradition.

However, El Amine's objection raises an important question: when can a political theory be considered legitimately Confucian? As a leading scholar on Classical Confucian political thought, El Amine has assessed *Meritocratic Democracy* through the lens of Classical Confucian conceptions of the state's primary duties. From this perspective, the insufficient attention to one of these duties in *Meritocratic Democracy* raises concerns about its Confucian credentials. A pivotal question, however, is whether strict adherence to all of these criteria is required or even desirable for a contemporary political theory to be considered Confucian.

There are strong normative reasons to think otherwise. A fuller argument lies beyond the scope of this discussion, but it is sufficient to note that several contemporary Confucian theorists have developed new normative insights by selectively drawing on the core classical political ideas. So, if we were to adopt the stringent standards proposed by El Amine, even works that are routinely considered seminal in modern Anglophone Confucian political theory – for example, Joseph Chan's *Confucian Perfectionism* (2014), Sor-hoon Tan's *Confucian Democracy* (2003), Tongdong Bai's *Against Political Equality* (2019), and Sungmoon Kim's *Confucian Democratic Constitutionalism* (2023)—would fail to qualify as Confucian theories, because they do not place sufficient emphasis on the classical Confucian concern for family.

Finally, it would be misleading to view today's debate between Confucian meritocrats and democrats as a mere continuation of the 1990s 'Asian values' controversy. None of the speakers involved in the Confucian debate rejects the importance of basic civic liberties for Asian people. More importantly, in my view, these debates pursue radically different goals. While proponents of the Asian values discourse rejected Western liberal democracy by orientalising Asia (Inoue, 1999, p. 37), the contemporary debate between Confucian meritocrats and democrats aims to understand how Confucian intellectual resources can inform new political visions that are responsive to the needs and aspirations of contemporary East Asians. To this end, both parties share a profound commitment to the continuation and renewal of the Confucian political tradition.

This brings me to Joseph Chan's question about my decision to describe his institutional proposal as an expression of Confucian political meritocracy. Chan worries that the label of 'Confucian meritocracy' – in contrast to the label of 'Confucian democracy' – can

deceptively suggest that his theory is against democratic institutions. He therefore prefers to describe his cautious defence of a meritocratic legislative chamber designed to improve democratic government as 'a Confucian mixed regime'. He defines himself as a 'Confucian mixed-regime theorist', rather than a 'Confucian meritocrat'. I accept the point that Chan's position is too briefly sketched in the book. I should have explained more carefully the motivation behind Chan's institutional proposal and clarified that his institutional proposal (like mine) is open to empirically grounded improvements, should better alternatives prove possible.

But what should be made of my distinction between 'Confucian democrats' and 'Confucian meritocrats'? I believe this terminology offers significant advantages for making sense of the ongoing debate in Confucian political theory. In the book, I recommend differentiating Confucian theories of government based on the governmental body to which meritocratic selection criteria apply. The strength of this distinction lies in its ability to highlight the primary point of contention in this heated debate: namely, whether democratic or meritocratic principles should take precedence in selecting those with formal authority to enact laws. To put my point in another way, my proposed differentiation highlights that most scholars in Anglophone Confucian political theory disagree on whether democratic or meritocratic principles should have final authority concerning political decision-making. For some Confucian scholars (whom I call 'Confucian democrats'), democracy should *always* take precedence over meritocratic selection principles for lawmakers, while others (the 'Confucian meritocrats') believe that meritocratic ideas should have an equal or even superior influence over democratic selection mechanisms of the members of legislative institutions.

Chan's defence of a meritocratic chamber is highly contextual, but based on his analysis of contemporary democratic institutions, he also believes that certain societies may have good reasons to consider the establishment of a meritocratically selected legislative chamber with an equal or even greater role than a democratic legislative chamber in the political process that creates laws (Chan, 2014, p. 10). For this reason, I believe it is reasonable to consider his proposal as part of the group of Confucian meritocrats.

But does the label 'Confucian meritocrats' unfairly suggest to the reader that those in this camp disregard or undervalue democracy? As a scholar advocating full democracy who is nevertheless open to certain meritocratic political principles, I would argue that the same concern applies to the label of 'Confucian democrats'. Does this label suggest to the reader that so-called Confucian democrats have little regard for meritocracy? If so, would it not be better to discard both labels – 'Confucian democrats' and 'Confucian meritocrats'?

This would be a hasty decision. First, one of the main advantages of my terminology is that it accommodates significant differences within various positions presented in the debate. For instance, it explains why Chan's bicameral model is less meritocratic (and more democratic) than Bell (2015)'s vertical model, and why my proposed institutional model is more meritocratic than several Confucian democratic ideals presented before. The notion of 'Confucian mixed regime' does not allow for the expression of these subtle distinctions.

Second, before concluding that my proposed terminology is suboptimal, it may be relevant to clarify what we should legitimately expect from labels of this kind. In Western political philosophy, dichotomous labels – such as communitarians versus liberals, political constitutionalists versus liberal constitutionalists, cosmopolitans versus nationalists, and proceduralists versus substantivists – serve as heuristic tools to orient readers in complex debates. Their purpose is not to capture every descriptive or normative nuance but to highlight the main point of emphasis. This is why the distinction between proceduralists and substantivists remains analytically meaningful, even though proceduralists may still value substantive outcomes and substantivists may still recognise some degree of procedural legitimacy. If these considerations are valid, there are strong reasons to keep my terminology despite its inherent limitations.

Finally, Chan astutely takes issue with my claim for the lack of democratic legitimacy of a meritocratic legislative chamber by drawing a parallel with the British House of Lords. Chan argues that the status of the House of Lords remains a matter of dispute, but the chamber's political performance seems to be positive as a complementary institution to the more dysfunctional and politicised House of Commons. This may suggest that the lack of electoral legitimacy can be an asset for a meritocratic chamber because it can incentivise its members to work hard to prove their value to the people. Its performance also suggests that there is little reason to be concerned about its lack of epistemic diversity and potential epistemic avoidance.

However, the House of Lords' stronger performance compared to the House of Commons does not prove that democratic chambers are inherently epistemically inferior to a non-democratic legislative institution. It may simply reflect the troubling state of British democracy. Furthermore, a recent poll indicates a sharp decline in public support for the chamber. 60% of Brits support the current plan to remove hereditary peers from the House of Lords, 71% are in favour of restricting the size of the upper chamber, and 79% want to limit the Prime Minister's power to appoint new members (UCL Constitution Unit, 2025). Regarding epistemic diversity, the House of Lords remains predominantly composed of white males, with 31% of members being women, compared with 51% of the UK population (Pannell et al., 2025; Gov.UK, 2022). The House of Lords is becoming more diverse in terms of religious beliefs, but the 26 bishops of the Church of England retain their seats, while MPs with hereditary seats make up 12% of the chamber (Purvis,

2024). This level of homogeneity may raise doubts about the House of Lords' ability to represent the multiple perspectives and views within British society.

Finally, Chan points out that political parties may not be interested in adopting ethical screenings, as their ultimate goal is to win elections. Strategically, parties must support the most popular candidates, not the most virtuous. This is a thoughtful consideration. However, meritocratic democracy is not reducible to ethical screening at the party level. On the contrary, I argue that screenings should form only one part of a more complex selection process involving intra-party democracy. This would allow parties to choose the most popular candidate among those who have already proven morally suitable.

Notes

1. Hence Deweysuggests that 'things, like truth, are adverbial. They are modifiers of action in special cases' (1920, p. 167).
2. Notably, Sungmoon Kim (2016) argues, with reference to Classical Confucian texts, that the problem of dirty hands is not an inherent feature of politics across cultures.
3. This type of comparative theorising was first articulated by Arindam Chakrabarti and Ralph Weber in their discussion of cross-cultural political theory (2016, p. 19).

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