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Early Confucian Principles: the Potential Theoretic Foundation of Democracy in Modern China

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The subtle and complex relation between Confucianism and modern democracy has long been a controversial issue, and it is now again becoming a topical issue in the process of political modernization in contemporary China. This paper argues that there are some quite basic early Confucian values and principles that are not only compatible with democracy, but also may become the theoretic foundation of modern democracy in China. Early Confucianism considers ‘the people’s will’ as the direct representative of ‘Heaven’s will’, with which it legitimizes political power. Confucian theory of ‘human nature is good’ endorses equal potential good for every man. These principles can be used in reasoning towards a system of democracy. In terms of decision-making, the Confucian ‘Doctrine of the Mean’ accords with certain democratic principles. The independent personality and committed individualism advocated by early Confucianism is a required civic merit in a democratic society. These fundamental Confucian principles, through contemporary hermeneutics, may provide a philosophic grounding for democracy and support the construction of a democratic system with a Chinese dimension. To get democracy rooted in the spirit of traditional Chinese culture will benefit the healthy and smooth development of democracy in China.

I. Introduction

While China’s economic reform and development has achieved obvious and tremendous success in the past couple of decades, China’s political reform and its direction has attracted more and more domestic and international concerns. Literally speaking, in today’s China, almost everyone, even the ruling Communist Party leaders, agree that the general direction of China’s political reform is democracy, but what does ‘democracy’ mean in a Chinese cultural context? Does it mean exactly the same thing of its Western equivalent both in terms of value and in terms of system?

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Should China adopt exactly the same presuppositions, ideas and institutional mode of Western democracy, which is rooted in the profound and also very complex tradition of Western culture, or should China find from its own traditional culture some resource that will be able to legitimize the modern democratization thus making China's democratic reform more natural and following an autogenetic logic? Much research and discussion in recent years have been given to these issues, among which, the delicate and complex relation between democratization and Confucianism is of great interest. Will Confucianism, as the mainstream of traditional Chinese cultural spirit, be compatible with, or even further, will it support a modern democracy? This question has long been preoccupying Chinese intellectuals and recently again it has become a hot topic in both the formal academic arena and the Internet populace forums.

There are some quite divergent opinions concerning the above issue.¹ A lot of people believe that Confucian heritage is fundamentally opposite to modern democracy and provides a huge obstacle to China's democratization. Among these opinions, Samuel P. Huntington's was quite representative: 'Confucian heritage, with its emphasis on authority, order, hierarchy, and supremacy of the collectivity over the individual, creates obstacles to democratization' (Huntington, 1996, p. 238). It seems unbelievable but it is true that Huntington's opinion is quite similar to the Chinese Communist Party's criticism of Confucianism during the Cultural Revolution, and is largely shared in China today by some 'neo-liberalists' or the so-called 'angry youth' (*fen qing*) on the Internet, who insist that Confucianism holds back individual freedom and thus contradicts the spirit of democracy: therefore, it must be totally thrown away in order to push forward China's democratization.

However, some scholars believe that Confucian thought may provide a different meaning or understanding of democracy, thus providing an alternative choice for China's political reform, which is worth observing and appraising. For instance, some scholars think that the Confucian societies (such as Mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore, Korea, Vietnam and even Japan) do not understand democracy in the same way as Westerners, for they have 'alternative cultural baggage' and they seek neither equality nor freedom in the Western sense. These scholars point out some intersections between Confucian and communitarian thought, and believe that Confucian tradition is leading certain Asian countries towards a communitarian democracy, rather than liberal democracy (Bell, Brown, Jayasuriya, & Jones, 1995; Fox, 1997). Some of them suggest that 'a more communitarian form of democratic practice might have appeal in societies with Confucian moral traditions' (O'Dwyer, 2003).

By and large I agree with the opinion that 'attempts to justify democracy in Chinese societies must indeed acknowledge its moral traditions; appeals to Western concepts of individualism are less likely to be successful' (O'Dwyer, 2003, p. 39). Consequently, it is of great significance to find the legitimacy and reason for modern democracy from the Chinese traditional cultural resources, among which Confucianism is a main trunk. Some scholars have already point out some linkage between democracy and Confucianism. For instance, some indicate that despite the fact that Confucianism has provided strong support to the centralized

state authorities, there is also a tradition of opposition to autocracy in the history of Confucianism. Therefore, although Confucianism itself is not democratic at all, it may not be a resisting factor to democratization and democracy may even open a free space in which Confucianism can truly come into its own for the first time (Hahm, 2004). The controversial implication underlying the Confucian idea of 'people as the root' (*min ben*) has been frequently discussed in some research (see e.g. Li, 1997; Chen, 1998; Nuyen, 2000; Wang, 2000; Yang, 2003; Yang, 2004; Zhu, 2005).

When we discuss the relationship between Confucianism and democracy, it is necessary to distinguish the basic value and principle of democracy and the concrete institution of it; or to use traditional Chinese terminology, the *Dao* of democracy and the *Qi* (instrument) of democracy. Similarly, when we refer to Confucianism, it is also necessary to make a distinction between certain political theories and policies put forward by Confucian scholars in certain historical periodicals, or certain political institutional establishments supposedly created according to Confucian doctrines, and those basic and fundamental Confucian principles and values that had been the presupposition of those theories, policies and institutional establishments. My argument in this paper is that, although in the history of China, there may be some Confucian factors in the level of policies and institutions that are in contradiction with modern democratic political systems, yet there are some more fundamental and basic Confucian principles and values that are compatible with those of modern democracy. In my understanding, the compatibility between Confucianism and democracy is not just shown in certain ostensible Confucian political claims such as 'people as the root' (*min ben*) or 'people are superior' (*min wei gui*), but rather embodied in certain fundamental principles of traditional Confucianism, especially the original Confucianism of Pre-Qin time. It is a hermeneutic task for contemporary Chinese intellectuals to interpret and reveal the logical clue and potential links between the two, thus to plant the modern democratic system on the profound foundation of traditional Chinese culture. This, I think, is very crucial and significant in promoting a healthy, steady and smooth democratization reform in China.

In the following parts of this paper I will discuss some basic and fundamental Confucian principles, which are not only compatible with the value and idea of modern democracy, providing certain foundations for it, but will also possibly support the construction of a modern democratic system with Chinese features, and even imbue it with some more positive meanings.

II. Confucianism considered the 'people's will', which is the accountable evidence of the 'Heaven's will', as the source of approving the legitimacy of political power. This is compatible with the democratic view of political power

A widely accepted opinion is that Confucian political theory or the 'political Confucianism' strongly supports the authority of autocratic monarchy. Even some

scholars who advocate Confucianism distinguish ‘Confucian personal ethic’ from ‘political Confucianism’, with a latent assumption that ‘political Confucianism’ seems unavoidably to lead to autocracy (e.g. Tu, 1984, p. 90). Or even, as Fukuyama suggests, that ‘the essence of traditional Chinese Confucianism was never political Confucianism at all’ (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 25).

However, in my opinion, it is quite difficult to absolutely distinguish the ethical and political components in Confucian thought, and the political nature of Confucianism is obvious. Nevertheless, the basic principle underlying Confucian political thought is not predetermined to support, much less to create monarchy.

The word ‘democracy’ originates from Greek ‘δημος’ (demos), which means ‘people’, and ‘κρατειν’ (kratin), which means to rule, so the original meaning of democracy is ‘rule by the people’. Later it has been used to refer to a kind of political system that contrast with aristocracy, autocracy and monarchy (Bunnin & Tu, 2001, p. 242). However, it is impossible for every one of the people to manipulate political power simultaneously; therefore, representative democracy was created. In this typical form of democracy, people select through free voting, directly or indirectly, a group of persons who will represent the people to hold political power for a finite time. The basic democratic idea of political power includes the following meanings: any and all political power ultimately originates from the people; theoretically, every individual citizen has an equal right to participate in the public or political affairs; only those who are authorized by the people may represent the people in exercising political power.

Although never being very distinctly stated nor being further elucidated fully by later Confucian scholars, the basic principle of the same ideas underlies some discussion and stories that appeared in the pre-Qin Confucian classics. One case is in *Mencius* (see *Mencius* 5A:5),² which records a discussion between Mencius and his student Wan Zhang concerning the transfer of political power between the legendary ancient Emperors Yao and Shun. Wan Zhang asked Mencius if it is true that Yao gave the Emperor’s power to Shun by demise. Mencius answered: No! The Emperor cannot give the Empire to another by his own will, only Heaven and the people can give it to someone. Shun’s political power was not given by Yao, but by Heaven, and by the people. Mencius further explained the real meaning of ‘given by Heaven’. He cited a sentence from the Chapter *Tai shi* from *Shang Shu (Document Classic)* saying that ‘Heaven sees with the eyes of its people; Heaven hears with the ears of its people’ (*Mencius*, 5A:5). In other words, the so called ‘given by Heaven’, in a realistic sense, is actually ‘given by the people’. According to Mencius, Shun got the emperor’s political power not because of Yao’s demise, but because his talent and morality were approbated by his people. ‘When he was put in charge of sacrifices, the hundred gods enjoyed them. This showed that Heaven accepted him. When he was put in charge of affairs, they were kept in order and the people were content. This showed that the people accepted him. Heaven gave it to him. People gave it to him’ (*Mencius*, 5A:5). This is also true in the cases of the emperor’s power transferring from Shun to Yu, and from Yu to his son Qi (*Mencius*, 5A:6). Of course, there is a difference between self-abdicated demise and descent heritage. However, neither of the two forms itself

can justify the authority and validity of the Emperor's power. Authority and validity of political power can only be obtained from the people.

Traditionally, the Emperor's authority and political power was considered as a 'Heavenly mandate', and it is also the Emperor's will to transfer the throne to a successor, either by self-abdicated demise or heritage by descent. However, Mencius emphasized here that 'The Emperor cannot give the Empire to another', only Heaven and the people can give it to someone; and he even further indicated that the Heaven's will was actually demonstrated in the people's will. If we put Mencius' idea in a modern realistic context, it will be quite easy for us to deduce a conclusion: that, based on Mencius, the people's will and their accrediting are the only source to legitimize a political power. This idea is obviously compatible with the principle of democracy.

Furthermore, according to Mencius' narration, Shun was originally a peasant who 'rose from the farm fields' (*Mencius*, 6B:15), he 'was a farmer, a potter and a fisherman' before he became Emperor (*Mencius*, 2A:8), and he was even 'an Eastern barbarian' (*Mencius*, 4B:1). He had neither any noble kinship background, nor any evidence of divine omen indicating that he got a 'Heavenly mandate'. In the narration of Mencius, Shun was an ordinary individual of the people. He eventually became Emperor only because of his insight, personality and capability: for example he 'understood the way of things and had a keen insight into human relationship' (*Mencius*, 4B:19); 'was ever ready to fall into line with others, giving up his own ways for theirs, and glad to take from others that by which he could do good' (*Mencius*, 2A:8). Let aside the question of if Mencius' narration was truly reflecting the historical reality of Shun's situation, at least the opinion of Mencius himself embodied in this narration is obvious: that is, any individual, no matter an ordinary peasant, a potter, a fisherman or even an 'Eastern barbarian', has the right of participate in public affairs and even can become Emperor, only if he has the insight, personality and capability like that of Shun and has been recognized by his people, thus getting enough support from the people. Mencius claimed repeatedly that: 'Shun was a man, I am also a man' (*Mencius*, 4B:28); 'Yao and Shun were the same as anyone else' (*Mencius*, 4B:32); 'All men are capable of becoming a Yao or a Shun' (*Mencius*, 6B:2). These ideas show a value that is compatible with the democratic idea that all individuals have equal right to participate in political affairs.

Another important idea of Mencius relevant to the issue of political power is that, Mencius not only put the people's position above the Emperor, but also above the '*she ji*'. Mencius said: 'The people are of supreme importance; the '*she ji*' come next; last comes the ruler' (*Mencius*, 7B:14). The '*she ji*', originally meaning the altars to the gods of earth and grain, later became a symbol and synonym of 'state' or 'nation'. In a modern Chinese political context, it is quite natural to interpret '*she ji*' directly as 'state' or 'nation'. Mencius put the people's position not only above the ruler but also above '*she ji*'—this principle of priority is very valid in preventing those handful of ruling elites from invading people's right and exploiting people's benefits in the name of 'nation' or 'state' etc. Anyhow, according to Mencius, the people are the ultimate

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origin of political power. Only the political power that has accountably come from the people may be considered legitimate.

III. Confucian theory of 'human nature is good', which endorses equal potential good for every man, can be used in reasoning to the system of democracy

One scholar has mentioned that: 'The most striking area of apparent incompatibility between democracy and Confucianism is the latter's lack of support for individualism or a transcendent law that would stand above existing social relationships and provide the ground for individual conscience as the ultimate source of authority' (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 26). I will further discuss the issue of Confucian individualism in Section V of this paper. Here I agree that a transcendent reason is needed as the precondition for democracy, if we want to improve the compatibility between Confucianism and modern democracy. However, I think Confucianism's belief that 'human nature is good' has already provided such a precondition.

In the context of Western culture, equality and individual liberty are the basic values and principles that provide the precondition of the idea and institution of modern democracy. However, neither the proposition that 'all men are created equal', nor the proposition that 'all human beings are born free' is a true statement of real human existence in any society. Actually, individuals have been cast into the real world with neither equality nor freedom. Even in the egalitarian pre-civilized societies, there were also inequalities concerning sex and physical capability, etc., and the lack of freedom owing to the natural limitation of the human body, let aside the huge inequalities concerning family, parentage, birth place, family background, race, social status, fortune, prestige, etc., in almost all civilized societies. The truth of the statements that 'all men are created equal' and 'all human beings are born free' can neither be proved by experience, nor deduced from logic. If we further inquire why human beings are born free and equal, we will be introduced to the religious realm and given the answer that everyone is a child of God and every one has an original sin, etc. Therefore, these statements are only a sort of ontological commitment, or just beliefs, rather than scientific statements.

Similarly, the Confucian proposition that 'human nature is good' is also such a belief or ontological commitment. It is impossible to get enough scientific evidence, or employ any experimental or logical deductive means to prove that 'human nature' is really good or not. If we want to further inquire about the reason according to the Confucian Classics, we will be told about the 'Four germs' (*si duan*, see Mencius, 2A:6) or 'Heavenly Mandate', etc.

It is obvious that neither the Western proposition that 'all men are created equal' and 'all human beings are born free', nor the Confucian proposition that 'Human nature is good', is a true statement based on scientific evidence. These are all beliefs. Or we may say, these are only 'ought to be' or 'should be' in terms of moral value, rather than statements of reality in terms of epistemology. Accordingly, being used

as the precondition of certain political system, they should be of the equal validity, or the equal invalidity.

However, both the Confucian proposition that 'Human nature is good' and the Western proposition of equality and liberty promise that every individual is sharing something in common with any other individual, no matter whether you call it 'equality', 'liberty', 'good nature', or 'four germs'. As Mencius reiterated, man and man are all the same in nature, there should be no innate discrimination among them. Therefore, it is quite reasonable to deduce from Mencius' theory that every man has the equal right and equal potential quality to participate in social political affairs, so long as his original good quality has not been depraved and is well cultivated. Therefore the Confucian proposition that 'Human nature is good', like the Western idea of equality and liberty, can also serve as the precondition of democracy.

It is following a rational line to deduce democracy from the proposition that 'Human nature is good'. Because everyone's nature is initially and potentially good, and the nature of the majority of people is good in general, there is no reason to exclude anyone from public affairs. It is in the nature of things that all men have the right of free speech, of selecting their leaders by their own will, of choosing their way of life by themselves, because all of them have a good native endowment and good original heart. Only those who do not believe 'Human nature is good' may be afraid of people's free speech and free election. One such example is Han Feizi, the most famous representative of the legalist school in the pre-Qin period, who considered that ordinary people are just as ignorant as infants and can never be counted on. Consequently, he advocated that the ruler should be despotic, should never trust in anyone, and must ban free speech.

The Confucian ideal politics is called '*ren zheng*' (the benevolent governing), or '*wang dao*' (the kingly way), which was based on the proposition that 'Human nature is good'. It requires the most comprehensive public opinion and the interests of the vast majority as its foundation. According to the belief that 'Human nature is good', all men have the natural and innate tendency towards kindness. Therefore, it is possible for them to build an ideal society based on their common moral reasoning, without employing hegemony and military power. What is opposed to '*ren zheng*' or '*wang dao*' is '*ba dao*' (the hegemony way). It can be deduced logically that, if the extremity of '*ba dao*' will absolutely be autocracy, then the extreme and ideal form of '*ren zheng*' or '*wang dao*' will inevitably and logically lead to a kind of democracy.

The proposition that 'Human nature is good' is not only compatible with the idea of democracy, but also possibly provides a more positive and constructive significance to democracy compared with the doctrine of 'original sin' in the Christian religious tradition. According to the doctrine of 'original sin', every man is born with a sinful and defective nature, so every man is equally untrustworthy. Therefore, a democratic system, with all of its facilities, only served to restrict the expansion of the original sin. While according to the Confucian teaching of 'Human nature is good', however, all human beings share the common goodness of human nature, every man is innately and potentially good oriented; even though there may

be someone who has lost their original goodness, the majority is still good oriented. Therefore, a democratic system functions to accumulate every man's goodness in order to create and construct an even better life for all human beings. The vaster the scope of democracy, the deeper the foundation of goodness might be.

IV. In terms of political decision-making, the principle of Confucian 'zhong yong' or 'Doctrine of Mean' is compatible with certain values and principles of democracy, such as majority decision, compromise making, tolerance towards minority

As commonly understood, one principle of democracy is the principle of majority decision. In an information-open society, the decision made through a democratic process by the majority is usually an eclectic decision which makes compromises between those extremely divergent opinions, and between opposite political forces. The culture of democracy may be understood as a procedure through which a balance among the conflicting values can be reached. In a certain sense, this principle is compatible with the essential spirit and value of Confucian 'zhong yong' or 'Doctrine of Mean'.

Confucian 'zhong yong', customarily but not very accurately translated as 'Doctrine of Mean', has very rich and multi-facet meanings in early Confucianism. It is an unusual moral merit, a way of thinking, as well as a kind of wisdom for dealing with secular affairs. In terms of moral merit, it requires a personal tolerance towards different ideas and opinions; in terms of a way of thinking, it means the opposite of arbitrary and monomaniacal. In terms of dealing with secular affairs, it appreciates using peaceful ways to resolve conflicts, and promotes harmony among diversity. In the context of political culture, 'zhong yong' also provides a principle for political decision making, as Confucius praises Emperor Shun in *The Doctrine of Mean*: Shun 'took hold of their two extremes, determined the Mean, and employed it in his government of the people'. In terms of decision making, 'Zhong Yong' means making the eclectic, balanced and also most acceptable choice between the extremely opposite claims. The outcomes of a healthy and mature democratic decision-making process are usually compromised and eclectic rather than extreme. In most cases, they are also the most suitable and safe decisions that could be achieved under those certain situations. Extremists find it much easier to become dominant within a system under control of a dictatorship. Therefore, a democratic system will help the realization of the Confucian ideal of 'zhong yong', and the Confucian principle of 'zhong yong' may be well used to reason to democracy. There is no conflict between the two. They are compatible with each other and may bring out the best in each other.

As described in *The Doctrine of Mean*, Shun loved to consult others about their opinions, he studied their words, although they might be shallow, he compared the extremely opposite suggestions and selected the moderate and well situated ones, then applied it in his governing. Mencius also praised Shun: 'He was ever ready to fall into line with others, giving up his own ways for theirs, and glad to take from others

that by which he could do good'. Obviously, as an ideal model of Confucian politics, Shun's way of ruling was not autocratic at all. Actually, as Fukuyama has pointed out: 'Confucianism by no means mandates an authoritarian political system' (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 30). Shun's leadership was quite similar to the so-called 'leaders' democratic style' in contemporary Chinese political speeches. Of course, this way of ruling still cannot be considered as 'democracy' in its real sense. The linchpin is that Shun should not just use his own subjective judgment to decide what was the real '*zhong*' (or the Mean value, the moderate and well situated decision). He should have to employ certain institutional procedures to insure this decision-making process is more accountable and objective. In other words, the '*Zhong Yong*' should be guaranteed by institutions, rather than only guaranteed by the ruler's personal morality.

Another principle embodied in '*zhong yong*' is 'being harmony but not monotony' ('*he er bu tong*', see Analects, 13:23), which means that the gentlemen can be together in harmony with those who have different ideas, but not necessarily to echo them, nor force them to give up their opinions. The principle of 'being harmony but not monotony' shows a considerable tolerance to the existence of dissidents and minority views. It means that under the precondition of general 'harmony', the existence of diversity and dissidence should be permitted. It is impossible and also unnecessary to build a society based purely on monotony. Actually, the relation between '*zhong yong*' and extreme or dissidence is dialectic. Without extreme or dissidence, there will be no real '*zhong yong*'. If there were no 'two extremes' (*liang duan*), then the '*zhong*' would have been left as the only 'One'. As a result, the action of 'holding the *Zhong*', without its 'proper measure', will be no different from 'holding to one extreme', which is definitely not real '*zhong yong*' (see Mencius, 7A:26). This principle coheres with the modern democratic attitude towards dissidence and minority. In a democratic society, even though the decision is made by majority through a democratic institutional procedure, in order to keep a general stability and harmony of the whole society, it is still necessary to pay enough attention and care to the minorities and dissidents, at least permit the existence and expression of those dissidents and minority groups. This is an important connotation of a perfect democracy, and as well as an ideal 'gentleman' politics praised by early Confucianism. Contrarily, the way of the 'small man' (*xiao ren*) is 'monotony but not harmony' (*tong er bu he*): it forces all the individuals to keep a superficial 'monotony' in thinking and speech, and conceals the actual disagreement and disharmony. This kind of politics is the politics of the 'small man', not the politics of 'gentlemen' and democracy.

V. Confucianism advocates independent personality with the characters of responsibility, obligation and commitment, which is the civic merit required in a democratic society

Individual freedom is another important principle of modern democracy. Real individual freedom is composed of two related aspects: (1) individuals' free speech

and free action in society should be respected and protected; (2) every individual, as a human being, has his free will which cannot be deprived by anyone or any organization. It is widely accepted by many people both in China today and abroad that Confucianism only emphasizes collectivism while it neglects individualism—except a few scholars such as Wm. Theodore de Bary, who argues that although there may be some difference between the Confucian sense of personhood and Western concepts of the individual, Confucianism is not incompatible with individualism (De Bary, 1998). In my view, bonding Confucianism with something called ‘collectivism’ and then contrasting it with something called ‘individualism’ is only a modern misunderstanding. There are some scholars who have mentioned the liberalist or individualist tradition in Confucianism, but they mainly attribute it to the later stages of Confucianism, such as the Neo-Confucian scholar Wang Yang-ming in the early 16th century, who justified the assertion of independence of the individual (Rozman, 1997, p. 96). However, this tradition actually could be traced back to the original Confucianism in the Pre-Qin time, especially in the thoughts of Mencius. In early Confucianism, especially in *Mencius*, there is a strong emphasis on individual freedom, especially the independent and free will of the individual human being. This kind of early Confucian individualism featured active participation and responsible commitment, which makes it different from another tradition of individualism in Chinese culture represented by the Taoist philosopher Zhuang Zi and his later followers, who advocated a reclusive personal life away from society (Xu, 2003).

Pre-Qin Confucianism emphasizes that a gentleman or ‘*Jun Zi*’ should have an independent personal integrity. No matter whether the society is in peace and tranquility or in turmoil and disorder, no matter whether he himself is on the summit of his success or at the bottom of his fortune, he should always keep his personal independence and persist in his own moral beliefs, never lose his free will and succumb to outside authorities. In the court, a gentleman should rather obey the ‘*Dao*’ than obey the King. In a society, a gentleman should not give up his own stand to cater for the common vulgarism. The independent thought and free will of a gentleman can never be deprived, just as Confucius once said: ‘You can deprive the Three Armies of their commander, but you can never deprive even a single man of his will’ (Analects, 9:26). Mencius advocated a spirit he allegorically called ‘a great man’ (*da zhang fu*), which was in contrast to that of ‘a concubine’. The ‘great man’ stands firmly on the position of ‘*ren*’ (benevolence) and ‘*yi*’ (rightness), and goes along the great ‘*Dao*’ under the heaven. When he achieves his ambition he will share his ‘*Dao*’ with the people, when he fails to do so he will walk on the ‘*Dao*’ with himself alone. His independent personality will never be spoiled by riches and luxury, and he cannot be changed by poverty, or yield to threat of force and power (Mencius, 3B:2). This kind of self-independence and freedom of personal will is also expressed clearly in the chapter ‘*Ru Xing*’ (*The Behaviour of a Confucian*) in the *Record of Rites*. So we can see a vivid hue of independent personality and individual free will based on self-consciousness of morality in early Confucian teachings.

It is difficult to build a real modern democracy in a society that is full of ‘concubines’ who, as Mencius said, only ‘consider obedience and docility

the norm' (Mencius, 3B:2). It is also difficult to carry forward the spirit of freedom of will and self-independence advocated by pre-Qin Confucianism in a society where only 'concubines' are welcomed. As an individual citizen in a modern society, one should recognize that everyone is a naturally noble individual, because everyone has those innate germs of goodness, or as Mencius said, the 'honours bestowed by Heaven' (*tian jue*), which contrasts to secular status and titles, or as Mencius calls them, the 'honours bestowed by men' (*ren jue*, see *Mencius*, 6A:16). According to Mencius, the 'honours bestowed by Heaven' are much more valuable than the 'honours bestowed by men'. Therefore, no one should be servile in front of the 'honours bestowed by men', namely, the secular political authority. According to early Confucianism, the ruler and the subjects should be mutually committed, as Confucius said: only when 'the ruler employs the services of his subjects in accordance with the rites', then 'a subject should serve his ruler by doing his best' (*Analects*, 3:19). The real loyalty or 'doing his best', according to Mencius, includes 'rectifying the evils in the ruler's heart' (*Mencius*, 4A:20); and 'if the ruler made serious mistakes, they would remonstrate with him, but if repeated remonstrations fell on deaf ears, they would depose him' (*Mencius* 5B:9). Early Confucianism did not advocate absolute one-way loyalty to the ruler. They believed a good subject should obey his own innate conscience and the '*Dao*', rather than obey his ruler.

Confucianism even appreciates individuals' self-determined selection of their own action and position in a society, such as whether taking or rejecting an official position, or whether staying in a position for a longer or shorter period, etc. A gentleman is supposed to make these decisions freely according to his own moral judgment. As discussed in *Mencius*, Bo Yi, Yi Yin, Liu Xia Hui and Confucius, with their individual personality, had made quite different choices in participating in political affairs based on their own moral judgment and preference. Although a personal favorite of Confucius, Mencius appraised all of them positively as 'sages of old' (*Mencius*, 2A:2). In addition, Confucianism also emphasized that the gentleman should take responsibility for the result of his own choice. That means for instance, if he has chosen a position, he should be responsible for his duty, and be committed to it. As Mencius said: 'That one who holds an office will resign it if he is unable to discharge his duties, and one whose responsibility is to give advice will resign if he is unable to give it' (*Mencius*, 2B:5). We can see that Confucianism advocates a kind of individualism, which respects individuals' choice but also asks individuals to be responsible for that choice. Everyone has a free will and is able to make decisions freely by himself; consequently, everyone should be responsible for his own choice. This kind of individualism, which is quite different from that of Zhuang Zi, is also a presupposition of a matured and perfect democratic society based on law.

VI. Conclusion

My conclusion is that these fundamental principles of early Confucianism mentioned above may provide a philosophic presupposition for democracy and become the

domestic cultural foundation for the construction of a democratic political system in China with a Chinese feature. These Confucian principles may even give democracy some more positive significance in general, thus to enrich the democratic theory of humanity.

However, as indicated by the title of this paper, Confucian principles as the foundation of democracy is only a 'potential', which means that a contemporary hermeneutic and reconstruction is needed to make it a reality. What I want to emphasize here is that there are no fundamental value conflicts between modern democracy and Confucianism or traditional Chinese culture in general. Therefore, the traditional Chinese cultural heritage, especially Confucianism, should not be used as an excuse to reject democracy in modern China. Of course this does not mean that China should adopt the off-the-peg Western democratic system. The Chinese political system will surely enter the modern era largely on its own terms. Nevertheless, any democracy must be embodied in a suitable modern democratic institutional arrangement. In this aspect, the Western democratic institution may be used for reference in the democratization in China. The institutional arrangement of the Chinese-featured democracy may be different in some way from its Western counterpart, but it will still be democracy and will be helpful in realizing the Confucian values and principles mentioned above as well. Anyway, democracy itself is not the ultimate goal: we will not democratize only for the sake of democracy itself, but for the higher humanistic values, such as Confucian 'Ren' (benevolence) and 'Yi' (righteousness). To get democracy rooted in the spirit of traditional Chinese culture will surely benefit the healthy and smooth development of modern democracy in contemporary China.

Glossary of Chinese Characters

<i>ba dao</i>	霸道
Bo Yi	伯夷
<i>da zhang fu</i>	大丈夫
<i>Dao</i>	道
<i>fen qing</i>	愤青
Han Feizi	韩非子
<i>he er bu tong</i>	和而不同
<i>jun zi</i>	君子
<i>liang duan</i>	两端
Liu Xia Hui	柳下惠
<i>min ben</i>	民本
<i>min wei gui</i>	民为贵
<i>Qi</i>	器
<i>ren</i>	仁
<i>ren jue</i>	人爵
<i>ren zheng</i>	仁政

<i>ru xing</i>	儒行
<i>Shang Shu</i>	尚书
<i>she ji</i>	社稷
Shun	舜
<i>si duan</i>	四端
<i>Tai shi</i>	泰誓
<i>tian jue</i>	天爵
<i>tong er bu he</i>	同而不和
Wan Zhang	万章
<i>wang dao</i>	王道
Wang Yang-ming	王阳明
<i>xiao ren</i>	小人
Yao	尧
<i>yi</i>	义
Yi Yin	伊尹
<i>zhong</i>	中
<i>Zhong yong</i>	中庸
Zhuang Zi	庄子

Notes

- [1] Several books have been published in recent years focusing on the issue of the relation between modern democracy and East Asian cultural traditions. Some chapters in these books address the issue of Confucianism especially, see e.g. De Bary and Tu (1998); Hall and Ames (1999); Zhao (2000); Bell and Hahm (2003).
- [2] The English translation of citations from *Mencius* and *Analects* in this paper are based on Lau (2003) and Lau (1983), occasionally with my own revision.

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