Confucian Alternatives to a Liberal Democratic Order  
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Liberal democracy and a liberal international order have been widely believed to be “the end of history,” since the collapse of the Soviet Union. But domestically, newly democratized countries are often plagued with ethnic violence, and developed liberal democracies also fail to face up with many challenges, such as the recent financial crisis, the growing inequality, and, as a result, the rise of populism from both the left and from the right. Internationally, there are the troubles with the EU, the refugee crisis, and populist uprising against globalization.

It is perhaps the time to explore new political models with an open mind. In the following, I will argue that Confucianism may offer some promising alternatives. Here I understand Confucianism to be a political philosophy that is meant to be universal, not something applicable only to the Chinese.

To understand the Confucian alternatives, let me go back to the early Confucians. They lived in a time of transition, from 770 B.C.E. to 221 B.C.E. There emerged a few de-facto sovereign states in a newly globalized “world,” the world known to the Chinese. This transition may be a forerunner of the European transition to modernity, and even of the globalization in our times. Common to all these transitions is the need to answer three key political issues in this new world: the bond of a large state of strangers, the principles of international relations among independent states, and the selection of the ruling members of the state and even the world. These questions were also faced by early modern European thinkers, and in a sense, our contemporary world is but an enlarged version of the Chinese world for early Confucians. But different from the ones offered by the Europeans, Confucians offered their own answers. On the issue of a new social bond, Mencius, an important early Confucian thinker discovered that all human beings have the sentiment of compassion, a sense of care toward strangers. A famous thought experiment he offered to show this is, if you suddenly see a baby who is about to fall into a well, that is, to be killed, would you feel a sense of alarm and distress? It is a beautifully designed experiment for many reasons. It uses a baby that embodies innocence, rather than an adult who might have done something to deserve to be killed; it asks our immediate rather than calculated response; and it asks us how we feel, not what we will do. It is hard to answer no to his question about whether we have this sentiment of compassion or not. But he also realized that this sentiment, though universal, is also very fragile. In order for it to be strong enough to hold strangers together, it needs to be cultivated, and family is the first and universal institution in which this cultivation can take place. But Confucianism is no philosophy of Don Corleone the God Father (“never go against the family”), as some have criticized. Rather, family is an institution where we learn to care others by first learning to care about family members, and if we keep expanding our care, it will eventually embrace the whole world. Family is our path to transcendence, and in this transcendence, the world of strangers is united.

But even at this stage of universal care, however, Confucians think that one still does and
should care about the closer ones more than the more distant ones. The Confucian moral ideal is universal but unequal love.

Therefore, by compassion, the whole world can be bonded together, but at the same time, one is justified to care about one’s own state more than other states. Patriotism is thus justified. Moreover, all the states with compassion should form an alliance that protect the civilizedness of these states, and they should perform the role of world police. They should never fight war against each other, because they are civilized and compassionate, and a fight against another state for material gains is an act of beasts, not humans. But if the people of another state suffers greatly from a bad regime, the alliance of civilized states should intervene, even with military forces. In short, the Confucian world order is a hierarchy based on compassion. It is different from the UN model where each state is treated equally, or the five permanent members of the security council are the de-facto dominant forces due to historical contingencies.

The principle beneath this world order is that for Confucians, humaneness, not human rights, overrides sovereignty. But unlike cosmopolitanism, according to which everyone should be treated equally and states should eventually be abolished, Confucians consider the existence of states legitimate, and the Confucian model puts a state’s interest above other states’. But unlike in the nation-state model, this priority is not absolute, and the legitimacy of a state is limited by how humanely the state treats its people. Confucians would argue that the cosmopolitan model is too good to be true, because it demands too much from human beings, and that the nation-state model is too demeaning to human beings because it treats human beings as self-interest-driven animals only. Thus, the Confucian model is more realistic than the cosmopolitan model, and is more idealistic than the nation-state model. It is a “realistic utopia” that strikes a golden mean between the two.

Domestically, Confucians also believe that the state is for the people and of the people, and it should be held accountable for the service to the people. It should be the people who decide on whether they are satisfied with the service or not. But a crucial difference between Confucians and democrats is that the former do not think that the state should be by the people. Like the democrats, they believe that all human beings have the equal potential to govern themselves, and are the best judge of how they feel. But unlike the democrats, Confucians also believe that in reality, only the few have the moral and intellectual capacities to govern, and the masses are not morally and intellectually competent to make political decisions even for their own benefit. Thus, Confucians would endorse a hybrid regime that combines democratic elements (through which people’s will is expressed) with meritocratic elements (through which morally and intellectually competent political decisions are made), for example, a bicameral legislature with a democratically elected lower house and a meritocratically selected upper house. It is to be noted that this regime should be firmly built upon constitutionalism that protects rights and liberties. Constitutionalism is perhaps the real contribution the West has made to humans’ search for an ideal regime, and Confucians can embrace it.
Now, why is this constitutionalism-based Confucian hybrid regime a good one? To see this, we have to realize that the present democratic institution, especially that of one person one vote, has four problems. 1) It encourages radical individualism and anti-intellectualism. An example I liked to mention before was Sarah Palin being considered a serious political candidate in the U.S., but now we have President Trump! 2) It gives all the political authority to the present voters. But in a globalized world, the policy of one state has effects on non-voters, such as foreigners and future generations. But they have no vote and thus no influence on domestic policies. 3) It often overtly or tacitly encourages the majority to silence the minorities. In a recently democratized state without the rule of law and the protection of rights, it is often expressed through ethnic cleansing and genocide. In a liberal democratic state, now we have the election of an anti-immigrant president in the U.S., which gives hope to Marine Le Pen and many other “Trump-sters” in the world. 4) It builds upon an unrealistic premise that voters are rational about their own self-interests. It is unrealistic for two reasons. Almost all modern states are way too large for common people to understand state-level affairs, and the majority of people who are so busy with working don’t even have time to understand them. These problems are the root cause of many problems plaguing democracies today. The Confucian hybrid regime that, while preserving the democratic element, introduces the meritocratic element may be the ultimate solution.

The last question is: how do we get there even if the problems with liberal democracy are structural, and the Confucian hybrid regime is indeed a better alternative? The answer is: through more and more crises that plague democracies. Then, if a state tries the Confucian hybrid regime and prospers, perhaps people will finally listen. However, before this could happen, if it could ever happen, we may end up listening to one after another false prophet. After all, the Brits chose Brexit, and the Americans chose Trump. A few more are on their way.