

## Book Review:

# Confucian Political Thought, Its Possibility as a Critical Theory: A Review of *Daedongminijujuui-wa 21 segi yugajeok bipaniron-ui mosaek* (Daedong Democracy and a Search for a Confucian Critical Theory in the 21st Century)

Na Jong-seok 나중석. *Daedongminijujuui-wa 21 segi yugajeok bipaniron-ui mosaek* 대동 민주주의와 21세기 유교적 비판 이론의 모색 (Daedong Democracy and a Search for a Confucian Critical Theory in the 21st century). Seoul: Yemoonseowon, 2023. 984 pages. ₩69000. Hardcover. ISBN 9788976464798.

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## I. Confucian Democracy as a Critical Theory

Can democracy be favorably combined with Confucianism, which is considered the core of East Asia's intellectual and cultural tradition? This question may seem trite if we recall the existing research and debate on this issue. However, if it can be said that, like Western democracy, the Confucian tradition of East Asia refers to a huge tangible and intangible trends that encompass ideology, philosophy, institutions, culture, customs, and so on, then the possibility of a friendly combination of democracy and Confucianism can also be examined in various dimensions and horizons.

The author attempts to answer the above question through this big book of nearly 1,000 pages, viewing that the possibility of so-called "Confucian democracy" is reflected in the political realities and experiences of 20th-century Korea and further that it may correspond to the form of democracy required in the 21st century. In

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his previous book entitled *Daedongminju yuhak-gwa 21 segi shilhak: hanguk minjujuuiron-ui jaejeongnip* (Confucianism of Great Harmony Democracy and Shilhak of the 21st Century: Re-establishment of Korean Democracy Theory) (Na 2017), the author argues that the Confucian tradition, which constitutes the basis of Koreans' consciousness structure of and social customs, has functioned as an important cultural potential for the introduction and development of democracy. In his view, the achievement and development of Korean democracy in the 20th century are a collaboration between Confucian political culture and Western modern democracy. In this context, he says, "Daedong (Great Harmony) Democracy is a crucial concept that allows us to understand the unique nature of the democratic ideology that has been realized in Korea's modern and contemporary history" (Na 2017, 26).

In the present book under review, *Daedongminjuui-wa 21 segi yugajeok bipaniron-ui mosaek* (Daedong Democracy and a Search for a Confucian Critical Theory in the 21st century), the author goes one step further to deepen the existing discussion on Confucian democracy; he specifies the meaning of the concept that was previously referred to as "Confucian democracy," explores the universal value contained in it, and presents the concept of "Daedong Democracy." As is well known, the word *daidong* 大同 (great harmony; *daedong* in Korean) appears in the "Liyun 禮運" (The Conveyance of Rites) chapter of the *Liji* 禮記 (Book of Rites). The author presents the "Daedong" ideology stemming from Confucianism as a medium for communication between the people-centered doctrine of Confucianism and Western democracy and as a better normative criterion for a democracy that would make it possible to surpass the bias of Western-centrism. This bold conception is possible because the author sees the Confucian tradition not as a fixed entity, but as a cultural foundation that has had a lasting impact on the history and reality of East Asia and, at the same time, as an accumulation and process of the so-called "understanding the new by learning things old" (*ongo jishin* 溫故知新), which is open to the future. And at this point, the possibility arises for what he calls "Confucian critical theory," in which, in my view, "criticism" can be said to have three implications. First, it means the inheritance and practice of "Confucian hermeneutics,"

which includes both a philological interpretation and a modern reinterpretation of Confucian classics.<sup>1</sup> For example, the author brings new light to the normative meanings and universal implications of Confucian concepts such as *daitong* 大同 (great harmony), *junzi* 君子 (gentleman), *renzheng* 仁政 (benevolent governance), and *gonggong* 公共 (public), which appear in the *Lunyu* 論語 (Analects of Confucius), *Mengzi* 孟子 (Book of Mencius), and *Liji* 禮記 (Book of Rites). Second, he aims for a shift in perception of tradition and a mutual comparison between Eastern and Western traditions, breaking away from the framework of Western-centrism or Orientalism. For example, he criticizes the concept of individualistic autonomy, which can be said to be the philosophical foundation of Western democracy, and proposes the concept of “autonomy of care” that incorporates the Eastern view of humans as interdependent. Third, he seeks the direction for and practice of the sort of democracy required in the 21st century, based on the theoretical potential and universal values of “Daedong Democracy.” Above all, he pays attention to the violence latent in Western modernity and emphasizes that the coming democracy should be a “democracy of ecology and Great Harmony” founded on the ideology of life and “freedom of care.” The three aspects of “criticism” examined thus far can be defined as: (1) criticism as a “text hermeneutics,” (2) criticism as a “dialogue and communication” between Eastern and Western intellectual traditions, and (3) criticism as a “regulative idea” or “innovative transformation” for the future democracy.

## II. Beyond Hegel's Philosophy of Harmony

This book consists of four parts and thirteen chapters, with one part composed of three to six chapters. The titles of each part are as follows: part 1, “Confucian Tradition and Daedong Ideology” (chapters 1-4); part 2, “Confucian Tradition, Korean Democracy, and Daedong

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Junjie Huang 黃俊傑 consistently discusses the value and modern significance of East Asian Confucianism in terms of the succession and development of “Confucian hermeneutics” (see Huang 2005).

Democracy” (chapters 5-7); part 3, “Daedong Democracy and the Methods of Critical Theory” (chapters 8-13); and part 4, “The Era of Civilization Transition and Ecology: The Possibility of Daedong Democracy” (chapters 14-18). Parts 1 and 2 explore the philosophical and historical origins of “Daedong Democracy” and trace how it has been passed down in modern and contemporary East Asia. Parts 3 and 4 point out the limitations of the concept of subjectivity or freedom, which is based on individualistic autonomy conceived in the modern West, and discuss the potential of the Confucian view of humanity that emphasizes reflection on the interdependence of human relationships. Here, while respecting the modern Western ideology of democracy and autonomy, the author suggests that the Confucian theory of freedom, which stresses awareness of the vulnerability of life and the care of others, the so-called “theory of freedom to care,” can contribute to the control of capitalist violence and the creation of an ecologically civilized society. This book covers such a vast amount of topics and content that it is virtually impossible to conduct sufficient review and discussion in this short book review. Therefore, I will limit its scope by sharing below my academic concerns and addressing some of the topics covered in parts 3 and 4.

In chapter 8, entitled “Reconciliation, Wounded Life, and Realistic Utopia,” the author first deals with the limitations and possibilities of Hegel’s “philosophy of reconciliation.” According to the author’s explanation, Hegel was concerned that Kant’s doctrine of autonomy or subjectivism could lead to political terrorism or a politics of terror by encouraging excessive appeal to the emotions (Na 2023, 379-381). The author argues that although Hegel’s criticism carries its own persuasive force, Hegel’s perspective, which emphasizes the possibility of political reconciliation with existing reality and the sociality of humanity, cannot be completely free from the accusation of being the “identity philosophy” that fails to accept the “heterogeneity of others” in its own right. At this point, the author introduces Adorno’s and Gadamer’s criticisms of Hegel’s philosophy. For example, Adorno saw that Hegel’s dialectical thinking might lead to blind affirmation of given reality or justification of violence, and Gadamer believed that hermeneutical practice and dialogue, including encounters and

conversations with history, were required to overcome the limitations of Hegel's "conciliatory reason." While expressing agreement with these criticisms, the author goes one step further and says that it would be possible to "reinterpret the rational core of Hegelian dialectics as a thinking that affirms the insurmountable dissonance and inconsistency between reality and reason, or between the object and the subject." He also says, "I would like to define the rational core of Hegelian philosophy as a mediating thought that underlines the impossibility of sublating a process mediated by others, and I believe that Hegel's philosophy understood in this manner has a deep affinity with hermeneutics" (Na 2023, 410-411). In conclusion, the author affirms the significance of Hegel's philosophy of reconciliation, Adorno's hermeneutics of pain, and Gadamer's hermeneutics of language, but stresses that in order to truly embrace the "non-identity of others," these philosophical thoughts must be extended to the "hermeneutics of life and ecology" and the "hermeneutics of benevolence (*ren* 仁)." And at this point, the ideology of Confucianism, which values the essential value of all things in the universe, awareness of the suffering of life, and the practice of caring for others, is able to provide the possibility of new thinking.

Interestingly, many Confucianism scholars in East Asia, including Chen Lai 陳來 and Huang Junjie 黃俊傑, are currently working hard to inherit and reestablish the Confucian study of benevolence.<sup>2</sup> Korean

<sup>2</sup> Representative examples include the following: Chen (2014) and Huang (2017). Chen (2014, 81-83) says:

"Benevolence is not only about overcoming oneself (*keji* 克己), but furthermore about loving others (*airen* 愛人), and it is to care not only for oneself but also for others. . . . In his *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité* (Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority), Emmanuel Levinas attributes ethics as the "first philosophy," describing the ethical relationship between the self and the Other as "ethical metaphysics." . . . When viewed from the Confucian perspective, the relationship between me and others is "benevolence." The Chinese character "仁" (benevolence) composed of "人" (man) and "二" (two) contains in itself such an ethical direction. Benevolence is the friendly relationship between two or more non-kin people and the relationship of mutual respect and consideration between them. . . . Confucian moral cultivation is oriented toward the self, and Confucian ethics is oriented toward others. According to Liang Shuming's 梁漱溟 explanation, Confucian ethics is a study for others, not for oneself, thus securing the priority of ethics for others."

academia is no exception in this trend.<sup>3</sup> Considering this situation, Na Jong-seok's study can be said to be a very encouraging and timely effort. And above all, now when the climate crisis and ecological crisis have become the greatest threats to our current civilization, a philosophy for the transition to an ecological civilization is needed, as the author says, and in the process, the "hermeneutics of benevolence" based on the ideology of Confucianism can be sought. However, within Chinese philosophy, there has been constant criticism that Confucianism is relatively closer to the "philosophy of identity" or "essentialist philosophy" compared to Taoism or Buddhism. For example, it can be said that the excessive optimism about human nature in Mencius's doctrine of good human nature implies in it exclusion of the heterogeneity of others or the inevitability of conflict. At that point, Mencius's doctrine shares to some extent the limitations of Hegel's philosophy of reconciliation, pointed out by the author. In addition, despite its ethical meaning, the Confucian idea of the unity of Heaven and humanity (*tianren heyi* 天人合一) or that of respect for the will of all things to live, I believe that a critical examination is needed as to whether Confucianism can indeed present realistic and practical alternatives to the conflict, pain, and violence that occur between individuals or between individual and society in the modern world.

### III. Political Meritocracy and Cultural Theory

Chapter 9, entitled "A Critical Contemplation on Political Meritocracy and the China Model," deals with the discourse of political Confucianism developed by the group of so-called "Mainland New Confucians." The author particularly focuses on Jiang Qing's 蔣慶 "Political Confucianism" and Daniel A. Bell's "China Model." These two scholars

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<sup>3</sup> For this, refer to Kim (2016). Kim (2016, 108) says: "Confucius's benevolence can hardly be comparable to Habermas's 'communicative rationality,' which focuses on procedural rationality. The two belong to completely different paradigms. Nevertheless, Confucius's concept resembles Habermas's concept in that it encompasses truth, goodness, and beauty, but above all, it centers on the impulse of communication. Or it would rather be called an impulse of response than an impulse of communication."

basically believe that Confucianism is friendly to “political meritocracy” and that if the Confucian tradition of selecting political leaders based on their moral qualities and abilities is properly inherited and utilized, it would provide effective inspiration to overcome the limitations of Western liberal democracy, which is based on electoral competition. Of course, some may dismiss these arguments as nothing more than an ideological effort to defend China’s political system, but in the author’s view the theoretical conception of the Mainland New Confucians is meaningful in that it moves away from the Eurocentric perspective and seeks a political system that would suit their history and culture (Na 2023, 439). However, the author points out, for example, that there are some problems and contradictions in Daniel Bell’s defense of political meritocracy. Meanwhile, chapter 10, “Yao-Shun Democracy or Political Meritocracy,” introduces in detail the content and issues of the modern discourse of meritocracy, based on an ideological and historical review of meritocracy, and further deals with the relationship between Confucian ideology and meritocracy.

Political meritocracy, represented by the belief in the values of equality of opportunity, fair competition, and efficiency in a liberal capitalist system, is far from the form of meritocracy practiced in China, which Daniel Bell speaks of. Due to the various contexts surrounding, and the difference in definitions of, the concept of meritocracy, applying this concept to Chinese philosophy or Confucianism carries a considerable theoretical burden, but the author makes delicate efforts to examine the history of the concept. What I want to discuss here is whether the political philosophies of Confucius and Mencius, or the Confucian idea of great unity, imply a defense of so-called meritocracy. In the view of Confucian scholars such as Jiang Qing and Daniel Bell, the defense of political meritocracy is rooted in the Confucian tradition from the beginning, and the political order based on it can prevent various evils of liberal democracy and help establish a political system suitable for the reality of China. For example, “Joseph Chan conceives the Confucian idea of ‘All under heaven is for the good of the people’ (*tianxia weigong* 天下為公) as an ideology that represents a kind of political meritocracy, not as democracy” (Na 2023, 502). However, it is still questionable whether Mencius’s “royal politics of

virtue” (*wangdao zhengzhi* 王道政治) or the idea of “All under heaven is for the good of the people” presented in *Liji* 禮記 (Book of Rites) can be interpreted as a defense of political meritocracy. Of course, the concept “man of virtue” (*junzi* 君子) set forth by Confucius and Mencius refers to a person with virtue and the ability to play the role of serving and representing the people, and Mencius’s “visionaries” (*xianjuezhe* 先覺者) and “those who labor with their minds” (*laoxinzhe* 勞心者) can also be included in the category of “men of virtue” or intellectuals. However, does this discussion reflect Confucianism’s defense of political meritocracy, which acknowledges the privileges of political elites in relation to the operation of power? Na (2023, 497-498) perceives that Jiang’s and Bell’s advocacy of political meritocracy is meaningful in that it entails an opportunity for reflection on Western centrism and stimulates introspection on the political order based on cultural identity. However, he again criticizes its limitations, for example, saying: “If a small number of political leaders have the superior knowledge of the political goals pursued by the government and the means to achieve them—as scholars who advocate political meritocracy hypothesize—it would be hard to explain why they should listen to the people and share goodness with them like King Sun did. Therefore, we need to pay more attention to the element in Mencius’s political thought, which emphasizes that the ultimate legitimacy of a political authority lies in the consent of the governed” (Na 2023, 519). I also agree with this argument because I think that Confucianism’s acceptance and affirmation of political meritocracy focus on the role of the “men of virtue” and intellectuals, which is to mediate and communicate the political orientation and consent of the people, rather than on acknowledging the superiority and arbitrariness of the political elite. In this context, we can refer to the perspectives of Qian Mu 錢穆 and Yu Yingshi 余英時, who find the core of Confucian political thought not in the ideas related to the political meritocracy, but in the role of as mediators between the monarch and the people (for example, see Yu 2004, 157-183). And at this point, intellectuals refer to, above all, those who actively demonstrate human ability of reflection and critical spirit from a humanistic horizon. If so, Qian Mu’s and Yu Yingshi’s interpretation of Confucian political thought can be read as



an emphasis on intellectuals' critical consciousness and humanistic concerns, not as a defense of elitism or meritocracy.<sup>4</sup> In this line of thought, it should be possible to see Confucian political thought, represented by ideas such as “royal politics of virtue” (*wangdao zhengzhi* 王道政治) and “All under heaven is for the good of the people” (*tianxia weigong* 天下為公), not as a political meritocracy but as a cultural theory in a broad sense that emphasizes the importance of intellectuals' sense of responsibility, critical mind, and free communication; then, it can be said that this rather implies checks and criticisms of “political meritocracy.” Na (2023, 506–507) assesses that Qian Mu viewed Confucian political thought as a kind of political meritocracy, but considering its background and context, it needs to be understood that Qian's position was to place more emphasis on intellectuals' sense of responsibility, humanistic tradition, and cultural consciousness than on politics or institutions.

#### IV. Confucianism as an Ethics of Care and Consideration

Chapter 12, “The Confucian Concept of *Ren* (Benevolence) and the Freedom of Care,” explains the implication of the view of justice held by Confucianism as an ethics of care and consideration. Various discussions are underway in the academia regarding whether Confucian ethics should be viewed as a deontological system comparable to Kant's concept of autonomy, as a kind of virtue ethics, or as an ethics of care and consideration. However, I suggest that it is reasonable to view that Confucianism has elements or traditions that emphasize the ethics of care and consideration, but that there has always been a backlash against the emotional and sentimental tendencies of such hermeneutical orientation. For example, the tradition of emphasizing loyalty rather than considerateness and understanding benevolence

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<sup>4</sup> De Barry pointed out the limitations of understanding the political ideals of Neo-Confucianism of the Song dynasty as restricted to elitism and sought to discuss them in terms of the free exchange of ideas among intellectuals, the identity of intellectuals, and the emphasis on cultural attainments. It can be said that, in a larger context, his viewpoint is close to that of Qian Mu and Yu Yingshi (for this, see de Bary 1983, ch. 3).

as an “ethic of friendliness” in interpreting the concept of *zhongshu* 忠恕 (loyalty and considerateness) dates back to the Han and Qing dynasties.<sup>5</sup> Zhu Xi, who this interpretation regards as the target of criticism, was negative toward the moral system based on emotions and feelings, and as an extension of this, he criticized the theory of unity of all things (*wanwu tongti lun* 萬物同體論) and the ethics of “human love” (*renai* 仁愛) emphasized by Cheng Hao 程顥 and his disciples. Coming back to modern times, Li Zehou 李澤厚 argues that Mou Zongsan’s 牟宗三 “moral metaphysics,” which highlights a priori reason, is a misreading of Confucian ethics in that it excludes the richness of emotions and compassions inherent in human relationships.<sup>6</sup> Na (2023, 627) also says, “Confucius’s ‘theory of benevolence’ basically has the character of emotional morality based on empathy and compassion for the suffering of others.” When considering this differentiation of philosophical interpretations within Confucianism, wouldn’t it be reasonable to see that multiple ethical systems or interpretations have coexisted or competed within the Confucian tradition rather than to define Confucianism as an ethics of consideration and care?

In this book, the author seeks to explore the intellectual dialogue between Eastern and Western thought, drawing on his deep understanding of and broad perspective about Eastern and Western philosophy, and to clarify the normative and practical meaning of the Confucian tradition based on his creative thinking. This theoretical work can be construed as Korean academia’s active response to and critical reflection of the reinterpretation of Confucianism by the so-called “New Confucians of Hong Kong and Taiwan” and “Mainland New

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<sup>5</sup> As Na (2023, 606) mentions, Joseon scholar Jeong Yak-yong emphasized “ethics of relationships.” Meanwhile, for example, Ruan Yuan 阮元, a scholar of Evidential Learning (*Kaozhengxue* 考證學) in the Qing dynasty, criticized Neo-Confucianism and interpreted *ren* (benevolence) as an “ethic of love.” These two scholars’ stances represent the tendency to define Confucianism as an ethics of care and consideration, so to speak, while resisting the Confucian concept of benevolence. Considering this, it would be reasonable to assume that there was a hermeneutical tendency to emphasize the ethics of care and consideration within the Confucian tradition, rather than to define Confucianism itself as an ethics of care and consideration. For more on Ruan Yuan’s perspective, see Chou (1994, 199–200).

<sup>6</sup> For more on Li Zehou’s perspective, see Jung (2017).

Confucians.” I conclude this short book review with the expectation that expanded discussions on the above topics will bring depth and vitality to the discourse on Confucianism in East Asia.

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