Between Confucianism and Democracy:
A Response to Sungmoon Kim

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There are two general areas of disagreement among contemporary Confucian political theorists. First, as Sungmoon Kim points out in his response to me, there is strong disagreement between Confucian democrats and Confucian meritocrats over the relationship between Confucianism and democracy. Second, there is disagreement among liberal-minded Confucian political theorists over how Confucianism ought to interact with liberal and democratic ideals and institutions. Kim's recent work on pragmatic Confucian democracy and public reason Confucianism make substantial contributions to clarifying both disagreements. In "Political Confucianism and Multivariate Democracy in East Asia," I set out to achieve two objectives corresponding to the second area of disagreement by critically engaging with Kim's work. First, I argue that pragmatic Confucian democracy is problematic primarily because it fails to justify the unique role Confucianism plays in accommodating democracy when it is one among many comprehensive doctrines in East Asia. Based on the first argument, I then propose an alternative model of democracy in order to demonstrate that an antiperfectionist political structure is both plausible in the context of East Asia and superior to Kim's perfectionist model.

Kim raises three insightful questions regarding my appraisal of his work. First, he takes issue with the concept of hyperpluralism, which, as deployed by Alessandro Ferrara, describes the nonideal situation when citizens can no longer endorse constitutional essentials in their entirety from within their comprehensive doctrines.[1] This is different from reasonable pluralism which makes such an overlapping consensus possible.[2] In Kim's view, since hyperpluralism tries to capture the sociopolitical condition of mature liberal democracies, it is irrelevant to East Asia, where liberal and democratic ideals and institutions have just begun to emerge. However, I am not arguing that East Asia is experiencing hyperpluralism in the way Ferrara has in mind for mature liberal democracies. I am suggesting that a similar lack of overlapping consensus exists in East Asian societies where citizens have radically different reasons to endorse (or reject) democracy.

[1]Alessandro Ferrara, *The Democratic Horizon: Hyperpluralism and the Renewal of Political Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
[2]Ibid., 100.

The kind of hyperpluralism I have in mind is in fact present in Kim's two-stage model of pragmatic Confucian democracy. Kim distinguishes between the first stage of transition, where the instrumental value of democracy motivates regime transition, and the second stage of consolidation, where democracy becomes "the only game in town" and citizens recognize its intrinsic value with the help of a mutually accommodating relationship between democracy and Confucianism.[3] The first stage, where the instrumental value of democracy is emphasized, is where Kim makes the pragmatic turn. I question the necessity to resort to Confucianism in the second stage if a pragmatic turn is necessary in the first. If a pragmatic turn is required in justifying democratization in East Asia, does this not mean that a fully or partially Confucian argument for endorsing democracy may be insufficient to convince most people after all? Does this not also signal that there are radical disagreements over democracy and democratization because citizens are not differing over what the most reasonable form of democracy is on the basis of an overlapping consensus on the core value of democracy? Instead, they are unconvinced of the core value of democracy to begin with, which requires a pragmatic turn to the instrumental value of democracy in order to motivate citizens to embrace it. The concept of hyperpluralism is intended to capture this radical disagreement on how to come to terms with democracy in East Asia. Therefore, my use of hyperpluralism is in the same spirit as Kim's pragmatic turn, which is why I see my paper as pushing the pragmatic tendency to its logical conclusion rather than overthrowing it altogether.

As I see it, what differentiates Kim's position from mine is where we go next. Whereas Kim goes on to advocate a (moderately) perfectionist state, I propose an antiperfectionist argument for a neutral state. Kim briefly challenges my argument for this neutral state. While it is impossible for me to do justice to this issue within the scope of this short response, Kim's challenge misses the mark. Elsewhere I have argued that moderate Confucian perfectionism ultimately leads to more extreme consequences.[4] A neutral state follows from my argument that Kim's pragmatic Confucian democracy is not pragmatic enough. As I contend above, accepting the pragmatic turn does not necessitate a return to Confucianism later in the process of democratization. To be truly pragmatic about democracy is to hold a pluralistic attitude toward how people will come to terms with it.

Guided by this more thoroughly pragmatic approach, I distinguish among three types of citizens: citizens who embrace democracy (1) in light of principles rooted in their comprehensive doctrines, (2) partially in light of principles rooted in their comprehensive doctrines and partially for prudential reasons,

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[3]Sungmoon Kim, "Pragmatic Confucian Democracy: Rethinking the Value of Democracy in East Asia," *Journal of Politics* 79, no. 1 (Jan. 2017): 241.

[4]Zhuoyao Li, "The Discontents of Moderate Political Confucianism and the Future of Democracy in East Asia," *Philosophy East & West* 68, no. 4 (Oct. 2018): 1193–218.

and (3) out of prudential reasons alone. A neutral state leaves enough room for such a plurality of ways that both Confucian and non-Confucian citizens can come to endorse democracy.[5] As this indicates, Kim mischaracterizes my concerns. Although avoiding potentially undesirable features of traditional Confucianism is certainly one of them, my endorsement of a neutral state *in the context of pragmatic democracy* is a reasonable conclusion which follows from the premise that citizens have radically different reasons to endorse democracy.

Kim then takes issue with my "why Confucianism" question, which I raise to anticipate the objection that the mutual accommodation thesis links the first and second stages of democratization. According to Kim, once citizens have pragmatically accepted democracy based on its instrumental value, Confucianism and democracy can accommodate each other in a mutually beneficial way to cultivate Confucian citizens who in turn strengthen the democratic spirit. But it is questionable to say that Confucianism alone has normative privilege to support political structures in East Asia, because East Asia has always exhibited a plurality of local and imported comprehensive doctrines. Kim's response is twofold. On the one hand, his description of Confucian citizens is much thinner than traditional Confucianism would entail. Both pragmatic Confucian democracy and public reason Confucianism are developed on the basis of shared Confucian habits, mores, and sentiments, even if citizens actually subscribe to a wide variety of non-Confucian doctrines. On the other hand, he charges that I am not doing justice to the accommodating capacity of Confucianism by formalizing it and regarding it as categorically incompatible with other comprehensive doctrines.

Yet these two parts of Kim's response contradict each other somewhat. From the perspective of a Confucian classicist, focusing only on a thin layer of Confucian habits, mores, and sentiments and presenting Confucianism in a moderate rather than comprehensive fashion is already formalizing Confucianism to a large degree.[6] The burden is on Kim to show why his view of Confucianism is diluted just right. As for the former point, the larger problem is how we can figure out what habits, mores, and sentiments are actually shared and can be used as the foundation for a reasonable political theory. Kim takes it for granted that such a consensus exists but overlooks the disagreements citizens may have regarding their shared identity. By no means do I deny the accommodating capacity of Confucianism, or any full-fledged reasonable comprehensive doctrine for that matter. Imagining

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[5]Page 468–469.

[6]I am using Kim's terminology here. A Confucian classicist is someone who is devoted to the exposition and (re)interpretation of Confucian classics and commentaries. See Sungmoon Kim, "Public Reason Confucianism: A Construction," *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 1 (Feb. 2015): 199.

someone who subscribes to Confucianism, Christianity, and Buddhism at the same time is beside the point. Favoring Confucianism when other reasonable comprehensive doctrines also exist and contribute to the identity of citizens is highly questionable. It is problematic to say that citizens who adopt non-Confucian doctrines will have to negotiate with Confucian public reason first, and only then can they negotiate with particular rights, duties, and liberties. In the case of one whose identity is shaped by three comprehensive doctrines, Kim's theory would suggest that the person must prioritize the Confucian component of her identity whenever she engages in public and political discourse. This is neither necessary nor desirable because free and equal citizens ought to have the right to shape and reshape their identities at their own discretion while still enjoying the same right to political participation as others. This is why I intentionally adopt a formalistic understanding of Confucianism so that different comprehensive doctrines are on an equal footing. Unlike Kim's theory, my critique tires to push the pragmatic tendency further without singling out any particular comprehensive doctrine.

Kim's last question deals with the issue of justification. According to him, I do not discuss how reasonable pluralism is distinguished from hyperpluralism, nor how to transform the fact of pluralism into that of reasonable pluralism. As noted above, I use hyperpluralism not to describe the sociocultural condition of East Asia but to highlight the radically pluralistic attitudes toward democracy at the initial stage of democratization, which then calls for a pragmatic approach that allows citizens to come to terms with democracy in their own ways, including working from within their own comprehensive doctrines and/or using prudential reason. Reasonable pluralism, on the other hand, refers to the pluralism of reasonable comprehensive doctrines. As Rawls says, reasonable comprehensive doctrines are those that "reasonable citizens affirm and that political liberalism must address."[7] I see no substantial reason why this view cannot be transferred to the multivariate account that I propose. The democratization process serves as a critical factor in transforming citizens' hyperpluralistic positions. Shared democratic value then contributes to an overlapping consensus that distinguishes reasonable pluralism from the mere fact of pluralism.

For Kim, however, shared democratic value is not enough to maintain reasonable pluralism. Widely shared Confucian habits, mores, and sentiments are needed to facilitate the transformation of the fact of pluralism into reasonable pluralism. Kim admits that it is unclear if Confucian public reason is acceptable to either Confucian or non-Confucian citizens. Instead, his primary focus is to "create 'Confucian citizens' in a normatively and politically robust sense." Kim's use of the word "create" implies that the kind of citizens he has in mind require additional cultivation. It is perhaps

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[7]John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, expanded ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 36.

unproblematic for some Confucian citizens to be cultivated into accepting Confucian public reason, but is it equally so for non-Confucian citizens, especially those who reject core Confucian values? If pluralism has to be negotiated with Confucian public reason in order to become reasonable, many comprehensive doctrines risk becoming unreasonable. Does this mean that citizens who subscribe to these unreasonable comprehensive doctrines are unreasonable themselves? If so, public reason Confucianism unfortunately facilitates the division between two classes of citizens. If not, these citizens, despite their reasonableness, will still need to be cultivated into Confucian citizens before being able to participate in the domain of the political, which again distinguishes them from other citizens who require less or no cultivation and have more direct access to their political rights. Both possibilities clash with Kim's obvious respect for the value of free and equal democratic citizenship. Once again, Kim's commitment to Confucianism and his commitment to democracy conflict. Despite the ingenuity of pragmatic Confucian democracy and public reason Confucianism, pushing Confucianism and democracy together reveals a larger gap between the two than Kim has realized.