Bai's Confucianism and the Problem of Urban Modernity

Russell Arben Fox

Friends University, Wichita, KS, USA

Tongdong Bai's *Against Political Equality* is a sprawling and ambitious book, from which I learned much. In these comments, I focus solely on the provocative framing Bai sets up to situate the theoretical alternative he believes Confucian arguments can provide to liberal democratic assumptions about the necessity of democratic equality in our modern world.

Bai's framing challenges one of the longest-standing assumptions about Confucian "familism," which L. H. M. Ling describes as the way in which classical Confucianism collapses all the "various domains of human activity —political (ruler-to-subject), familial (father-to-son, parent-to-child), conjugal (husband-to-wife), and fraternal (brother-to-brother, friend-to-friend)—into one set of family relations writ large" (see Ling, "Borders of Our Minds: Territories, Boundaries, and Power in the Confucian Tradition," in *States, Nations, and Borders: The Ethics of Making Boundaries*, ed. Allen Buchanan and Margaret Moore [Cambridge University Press, 2003], 87). It has been generally treated as uncontroversial that such familism invariably orients Confucianism's social teachings towards (though does not necessarily restrict them to) more communitarian and premodern contexts. Bai, who centers his analysis on the claims of the classic Confucian teachings found in the *Analects* and *Mencius*, does not dispute this assumption by approaching the ideas of community or modernity in a different or critical way; on the contrary, he explicitly grants that modernity involves the establishment of "large, populous, well-connected, mobile, plebeianized states of strangers" (28). His argument is rather that the Confucian "introduction of compassion-based humaneness" was itself an answer to the problem posed by the emergence of "a society of strangers" in ancient China, thus establishing that classical Confucianism can provide direct guidance to societies characterized by contemporary mobility and anonymity (120). This is an audacious historical framing, to say the least.

That classical Confucianism lays out a moral and social system of signification and ritual, which as a matter of theory serves, and in practice through Chinese history frequently did serve, to tie people together beyond their basic family or village units, is well understood. These ties are often understood as involving a "civil," as opposed to a "civic," formulation of the possibilities for a Confucian politics. That is, the civilizing aspects of Confucian universalism are seen as tied not to the maintenance of any specific place

or polity (much less a city), but rather to the simple presumption of humans being everywhere in intimate community with one another, beginning with the family and expanding out potentially to encompass anyone from any other community that one could name (and be named by), thereby giving real affective meaning to the obligations and bonds between them. How well can that vision of ritually realized civil relationships be adapted to the socioeconomic reality of diverse populations capable of independent movement, pursuing distinct, private goals in pluralistic civic spaces? Bai surprisingly suggests that such adaptation was actually a part of Confucianism's articulation of humaneness in the first place.

His argument is that the centuries-long period of transition from the Zhou dynasty, through the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (a time which he abbreviates as the "SAWS"), was a time of modernization—though not the "modernity 2.0" brought on by the "industrial revolutions" of Western Europe, which "eluded traditional China" (26). Bai posits the collapse of Zhou-era feudalism and its replacement by "a few large and populous states in which the kings had to deal with thousands of strangers without the nobility-based delegatory system available to them anymore." Confucianism thus emerged in part as a response to "the demand for new political orders" which this early modern moment required (26). Bai elucidates this interpretation through some innovative use of well-known passages from *Mencius*, concluding that "after the collapse of close-knit communities in feudal times [meaning the Zhou dynasty], the lord of a state lost the motive to care for his people, most of whom were now total strangers." The Confucian tradition, in the hands of Mencius, presents compassion and humaneness "as a new bond between the ruler and the people, and as a new motivation for a leader of state to rule his people" (122). Thus the humane meritocracy of classical Confucianism, Bai goes on to argue, should be understood as a philosophical resource of direct applicability to the challenges facing liberal democracy today, since Confucian compassion and fellow feeling were articulated in socially very similar—if culturally very distinct—milieus of modernity.

My struggle with this justificatory argument is that Bai's attempted association of the unique circumstances of the period of Confucianism's emergence with the same period in European history that bequeathed so many of the conceptual developments lumped into "modernity" lacks one of the fundamental elements his own original description of modernity depends on: urban spaces of genuine mobility, diversity, and personal subjectivity. This is not to deny that the ancient Chinese cities of Linzi, Yangzhou, Jicheng, or others lacked any sprawling or cosmopolitan character; on the contrary, the evidence is clear that many did. But for the Confucianism of Bai's "SAWS modernity" to be truly accepted as, in his words, an order fit for "a society of strangers," then it must incorporate some analog to the kind of "heterogeneity of anonymity" which slowly but surely emerged through the late Middle Ages and the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Western Europe. (On this characteristic of

early European modernity, see Stephen Schneck, "City and Village," in *Urbanization and Values*, ed. George F. McLean and John Kromkowski [Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1991].) It is not clear that is the case, which consequently puts his whole framing into question.

Bai suggests, in reference to the long periods of disruption in Chinese history, that the overwhelmingly agricultural and local "close-knit society of acquaintances" which most take to be the default character of Confucian communities might be better seen as temporary refuges which developed in the wake of turmoil, or perhaps even "a mistaken projection of contemporary observations on the whole history of China." His evidentiary support for this revisionary history is thin, however. Acknowledging this point, he follows with the observation that "even if we accept the judgment that the economy of traditional China was agriculture-based, and its villages were societies of acquaintances that were mobile . . . only at a rather slow pace," that still does not account for "the mobility of government officials who were often not even allowed to take a post in their hometowns." He thus argues that his interpretation of Mencius's emphasis on the bonds provided by humaneness is compatible with a "dual structure . . . in which there were communities of acquaintances on the level of the common people and societies of strangers on the level of the political and commercial elite." Admitting that while "for businessmen and officials in traditional China living in cities, their economic base was still often in rural areas, and thus they couldn't sever the ties with the communities of acquaintances they grew up in," he concludes that "nonetheless, the bond developed by Mencius for the society of strangers remains relevant" (123–25).

I do not dispute at all the relevance of Confucian humaneness to conversations about representation, gender equality, health care, civil rights, international institutions, and so much more, whatever the framing employed to bring about that comparison. But it is equally vital to acknowledge that assumptions about Confucian familism run directly against Western assumptions that are deeply tied up with liberal constructions of all of the above concepts. Those contrary assumptions became as widespread as they did not solely as a result of the material success of liberal democratic states, but also because those states recognized, and institutionalized practices pertaining to, the new forms of social life that emerged concomitant to the modern urban space. The cry of the apocryphal fifteenth-century German peasant—*Die Stadtluft macht frei!*—reflected far more than the particulars of feudal law, but rather a general appreciation of the diversity, privacy, and distant formality that urban spaces came to offer in modern Europe (see Schneck, "City and Village," 170–71). Thus have historical arguments about strengthening the kind of intimacy and community which the shift from *gemeinshaft* to *gesellschaft* arguably weakened, perhaps fatally—arguments which, in his own defense of hierarchy, Bai sometimes parallels—always had to struggle against accusations of agrarian nostalgia and find ways to express themselves in the context of modernity's seemingly inevitable liberal and urban character.

(See Warren Magnusson's apt observation that "liberalism is . . . a doctrine that articulates principles implicit in urban life" [*Politics of Urbanism: Seeing Like a City* (Routledge, 2002), 23].)

It is unfortunate that Bai did not consider building parallels between what he presents as the modernity-compatible Confucian conceptualizations of humaneness, and the large literature on republican civic virtues, civil religion, and other communitarian articulations of social organization, especially considering that a fair amount of that literature includes reconstructions of the Confucian tradition itself.[1] Without that comparative work, the conceptual reach of some of Bai's most interesting arguments remains an open question. To posit the classical Confucian tradition as possessing conceptual elements that can wrestle with the same theoretical dilemmas that liberal democracy has and continues to have, simply by virtue of that tradition's having supposedly developed in response to similarly "modern" conditions, means that Confucianism must possess, within its teachings about civil morality, resources that can be adapted not only to the context of "strangerness" that elites may encounter in carrying out their ritual roles and responsibilities (as hypothetically adapted to the contemporary moment), but also to the "mass strangerness" that characterizes modern civic spaces. This Bai does not show.

My belaboring of a gap in the framing of Bai's argument should not be taken as a greater criticism than it actually is; disputes over the actual "modernity" of classical Confucian ideas do not compromise the value of what Bai suggests regarding the prioritization of equality, as well as much more, in modern life. Bai's work stands as a great accomplishment, even if the way it presents its valuable political engagements may be less than fully persuasive on its own.

---

[1]For explicitly Confucian interventions in the republican/communitarian literature, see Elton Chan, "Huang Zongxi as a Republican: A Theory of Governance for Confucian Democracy," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2018): 203–18; Wm. Theodore de Bary, *Asian Values and Human Rights: A Confucian Communitarian Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Russell Arben Fox, "Confucianism and Communitarianism in a Liberal Democratic World," in *Border Crossings: Towards a Comparative Political Theory*, ed. Fred Dallmayr (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999); and David B. Wong, "Community, Diversity, and Confucianism," in *In the Company of Others: Perspectives on Community, Family and Culture*, ed. Nancy E. Snow (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).