

## **A Symposium on Tongdong Bai's *Against Political Equality: The Confucian Case***

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Tongdong Bai, *Against Political Equality: The Confucian Case*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020. Pp. 344.)

### **Introduction**

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In the past two decades, contemporary Confucian political theory has been propelled and enriched largely by the debate between two groups of scholars: Confucian democrats who explore a mode of democracy that is suitable to East Asian societies of the Confucian heritage, and Confucian meritocrats who reject core democratic principles, such as popular sovereignty, political equality, and the right to political participation. Tongdong Bai's *Against Political Equality: The Confucian Case* presents one of the most recent attempts by a member of the latter group to defend a Confucian political meritocracy. Central to Bai's political proposal is the establishment of a bicameral legislature consisting of a democratic lower house, whose members are elected by popular vote, and a meritocratic upper house, whose members are selected by nondemocratic means such as examination or recommendation based on experience. Bai calls this ideal mixed regime a "Confucian hybrid regime." According to Bai, the Confucian hybrid regime is normatively superior to Western-style liberal democracies predicated on the "one person, one vote" principle because by constraining popular sovereignty, which is expressed in the democratic lower house, the meritocratic upper house will achieve "rule by the virtuous and knowledgeable," which is singularly dedicated to the promotion of the well-being of the people, including the people of neighboring countries and future generations.

In making this argument, Bai is profoundly inspired by Mencius, one of the ancient Chinese Confucian masters. In Bai's interpretation, Mencius

supported rule *for* the people and arguably endorsed people's "real and ultimate ownership of the state." The reason that this endorsement did not lead Mencius to a further endorsement of rule *by* the people, Bai argues, is that Mencius believed in a special division of labor between the ruler, ideally a virtuous person with superior ability and knowledge, and the people, who, preoccupied with private affairs, lack the capabilities necessary for informed public decision-making with a view to the long-term public interest. Bai believes that Mencius's advocacy of rule for the people is still relevant in the modern world (and not only in China) because ordinary men and women are not capable of making good judgments, especially on matters concerning the public good, owing to their myopic self-interest. As Bai sees it, Confucian rule for the people can be best realized if the political elites—practically speaking, the members of the meritocratic house—who are presumably committed to good governance, exercise compassion, one of the cardinal virtues innate in human nature, according to Mencius.

For Bai, applying this Mencian insight to the modern world is not anachronistic, because ancient Confucianism was developed in the course of grappling with problems similar to those of modern times. More specifically, the Mencian rule for the people by means of compassion was precisely the "modern" Chinese response to address the emerging "societies of strangers" during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (SAWS) after the disintegration of the Zhou dynasty. Bai argues that just as the Confucian ethics of compassion played a critical role in forming bonds among the people, turning strangers into members of the same political community in ancient China, so can compassion, especially if exercised by the political elites, play a similar role in the modern world, enabling the people to develop patriotism toward their country, while encouraging them to extend their care for fellow citizens to the people of other countries as well. Thus, not only does compassion help the political elites to be oriented toward the public good, but it can also help strike a healthy balance between patriotism and cosmopolitanism. In Bai's vision of the new international order, in which people's love for their own countries is justified as long as their countries are "civilized," the "civilized states" guided by compassion and humaneness are morally authorized to engage in military intervention in the "uncivilized" or "barbaric" states if it is conducive to the well-being of the people of those states.

Though Bai presents the Confucian hybrid regime as an alternative to liberal democracy predicated on "one person, one vote," he does not believe that it will deteriorate into an authoritarian government as it fully embraces the rule of law and liberal rights, such as freedom of speech. Like other Confucians who insist on the compatibility between Confucianism and human rights, Bai argues that the Confucian conception of rights does not have to be premised on the conception of asocial and autonomous personhood or the conception of equality based on mutual respect. Without deconstructing hierarchical relations among the people, who, despite being equal in

moral potential, are actually unequal in terms of education, virtue, knowledge, and other moral and epistemic capabilities, Confucianism can defend rights as a “fallback apparatus” when the otherwise virtuous/affectionate relationship fails. In the end, Bai submits that Confucian rights would be “more contextual and less absolute than the rights” derived from liberal individualism and they are subject to “some higher goods rooted in and recognized by Confucianism.”

Thus understood, the political theory Bai advances in *Against Political Equality* is one of moderate Confucian political perfectionism and the regime that he espouses is a liberal nondemocracy. The four commentaries that follow critically investigate various aspects of Bai’s philosophical and interpretative arguments by focusing on his guiding philosophical methodology, the idea of modernity (and Chinese modernity), the relation between democracy and liberalism, and his interpretation of *Mencius*. All four commentaries and Bai’s response were presented in the book symposium organized, via Zoom, by City University of Hong Kong’s Center for East Asian and Comparative Philosophy on October 23, 2020. As the host of the book symposium, I would like to express my deep gratitude to all participants. I am also grateful to Ruth Abbey and Sue Collins, the editor-in-chief and the book review editor respectively, of the *Review of Politics* for publishing this book symposium, thereby helping it reach a broader audience in political theory.

## Between Philosophy and Political Reality

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At some risk of simplification, the argument of Tongdong Bai’s new book is that we can and should extract a set of core ideas from the early Confucian texts—those dating from the Spring and Autumn and Warring State periods (SAWS)—for solutions to certain problems that he believes modern democracy faces, all of which relate to the idea of “one person, one vote.” To be clear, Bai does not dispute the idea that liberal democracy includes other important principles. But, according to him, “what is often popularly considered essential to democracy, the institution of one person, one vote, is precisely the source of many problems with contemporary democracies” (53).

But what are these problems? Bai highlights four. The first has to do with a suspicion of popular government. The second is the lack of an effective way to ensure that present voters consider the interests of nonvoters past, present,