

ANTI-DEMOCRATIC
LESSONS FROM THE
COVID-19 PANDEMIC?
DEWEYAN-CONFUCIAN
REFLECTIONS ON
DEMOCRATIC
ASPIRATIONS IN EAST ASIA

SOR-HOON TAN

Singapore Management University



Volume 5 · Number 2 · 2021 · Pages 150 - 161

With the election of Donald Trump, Brexit, and the drift towards authoritarianism in some third wave democracies and former members of the Soviet union that democratized in the nineties, accompanied by spreading discontent of voters in several developed democracies and increasingly vociferous attacks on liberal and democratic ideals both in and outside academia in the past two decades, the survival of democracy, especially liberal democracy, was already in question before the Covid-19 pandemic worsens its crisis. However, it is too early to write its obituary; not all critics either anticipate or welcome its demise. While some may see the pandemic having a dampening effect on democratic aspirations in East Asia, I argue that the mixed lessons of the pandemic suggest that East Asia would benefit from more, not less, democracy. The democracy they need is not the form of *de facto* American liberal democracy, but democracy suited to the Confucian cultures of various East Asian societies, understood as Dewey's idea of community.

Compared to other parts of the world, East Asian societies historically influenced by Confucianism – Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam – have ranked among those who have dealt most effectively with the pandemic, at least during its first year.¹ Despite facing troubling questions about the official handling of the initial outbreak in Wuhan and the origin of the virus, the measures taken by the Chinese government to contain the outbreak from January 2020 have been effective to the extent that a year later, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has far fewer cases and deaths per capita than the standard bearers for liberal democracy, the United States and the United Kingdom.²

¹ For statistics and research on Covid-19 pandemic, see Our World in Data website, a collaboration between researchers at the University of Oxford and the Global Change Data Lab in the United Kingdom, <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus>. See also David Kennedy et al., "How Experts Use Data to Identify Emerging Covid-19 Success Stories," Exemplars in Global Health, <https://www.exemplars.health/emerging-topics/epidemic-preparedness-and-response/covid-19/finding-covid-19-success-stories>; Ian Bremmer, "The Best Global Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic, 1 Year Later," Time, 23 February 2021. Wikipedia also has multiple entries on COVID-19 responses in various countries.

² For epidemiologists' assessment of the measures taken in the PRC to contain the pandemic, see David Cyranoski, "What China's Coronavirus Response Can Teach the Rest of the World," *Nature* 579 (2020).

The restrictions on individual freedom and compromises on privacy that made this achievement possible is all but unthinkable for citizens in liberal democracies, but are apparently supported by a large percentage of the Chinese population.³ Although the relative lack of free speech in the PRC raises questions about Chinese citizen's opinion about their government's handling of any issue, the CCP's control over public opinion is by no means absolute, and there is strong evidence – and cultural reasons, as the comments that follow will explain – that steps such as mandatory wearing of masks and lockdowns, which have sparked violent protests in some countries, are accepted by a large section of the population in the PRC.⁴ Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore have democratically elected governments who

³ Cary Wu, "How Chinese Citizens View Their Government's Coronavirus Response," *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/how-chinese-citizens-view-their-governments-coronavirus-response-139176>; Peter Wang to *Running Numbers*, 1 Jul, 2021, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/commentary-and-analysis/blogs/what-do-chinese-think-about-their-governments-response-covid-19>.

⁴ I thank a referee for drawing my attention to Amartya Sen's argument about this relation between freedom and democracy in *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

adopted less draconian and more calibrated but still effective measures to identify, trace, contain infected cases, keep the mortality rate low and temper the economic impact.

The ideological dimension of the current geopolitical struggle between the United States and China includes a contest between liberal democracy and the “China model” that has borrowed from Confucian political thought, interpreted as advocating a form of meritocracy.⁵ Trump’s catastrophic mishandling of the pandemic might be treated as a glaring example of democracy’s failure in ensuring good leadership, which is needed in times of crises. However, the key feature of democratic systems is the regular removal (without violence and chaos) of elected officials with fixed tenures when they fail in their responsibilities. The vast

⁵ Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Legitimacy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Daniel A. Bell and Chenyang Li, eds., *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Tongdong Bai, *Against Political Equality: The Confucian Case* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020). For arguments against such proposals of “Confucian meritocracy,” see Fred Dallmayr et al., “Beyond Liberal Democracy: A Debate on Democracy and Confucian Meritocracy,” *Philosophy East and West* (2009); Sungmoon Kim et al., “Confucian Political Meritocracy? Possibilities and Limits” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 46, no. 9 (2020): special issue.

improvement in managing Covid-19 in the United States that followed Joe Biden's election testifies to the resilience of democratic systems.

Taiwan and South Korea are democracies which have managed the pandemic relatively well. Beyond East Asia, liberal democratic New Zealand has handled the pandemic with impressive results from the very beginning. Whether political systems are democratic clearly does not determine the performance of governments in the pandemic. In contrast to Americans who consider wearing of masks an infringement on their individual freedom, most Taiwanese and South Koreans comply with government regulation to wear masks in public places, transport, and buildings, and submit without too much complaint to monitoring in order to identify infected cases and prevent further spread of the virus. Again, the difference does not lie in the political systems' protection of individual rights. Both South Korea and Taiwan have ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1990 and 2009 respectively. South Korea has the same total score (83) as the United States while Taiwan has a higher score (94) in the rating of

Civil and Political Rights in 210 countries by Freedom House.⁶ Nor is it because the Taiwanese and South Koreans do not value their rights as much as Americans.

The difference lies in the human relationships and habits. Dewey emphasized that a democracy is not merely a political system; it is also a moral ideal, the idea of community itself. Freedom in a democratic community does not mean that every individual is “sovereign” and any restriction on her speech or action is an intolerable assault on her rights. In a democratic community, reasonable restrictions of freedom are justified by mutual respect and care among members. Is the sacrifice of freedom in wearing masks too much to ask to safeguard fellow citizens (not to mention oneself and one’s loved ones) from a life-threatening virus? From a Confucian perspective, the virtue of humaneness (*ren*) disposes a person to respect and care for one’s immediate kin as well as fellow citizens – no coercion should be required for an act with the potential to

⁶ According to the rating of Civil and Political Rights in 210 countries by Freedom House, South Korea receives the same total score (83) as the United States, while Taiwan has a total score of 94. <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>.

save lives. While participants in rights-centered politics are prone to forget their responsibility of care for others in a zealous defense of their liberties, Confucians in East Asia may be too willing to sacrifice freedom for the “common good” when called upon to do so without critically assessing the need for the demanded sacrifice.

Confucius remarked that trust is more important than arms and food to a government, for without trust, the people will not stand together with the government (*Analects* 12.7). Suspicion of government’s motives and agenda clearly drives the resistance to various measures, justified by doubts that they are necessary. The virtue of humaneness must be accompanied by wisdom, acquired through continuous learning from experience. In Deweyan terms, this means that mutual care and respect as free and equal members of community are not enough; democratic life demands participation in social inquiry into problems. It is easy to shake our heads at what appear to be conspiracy theories and total disregard of scientific knowledge; it is more difficult to get a clear understanding of the situation with an overload of often contradictory (mis)information,

as well deliberate omissions in reporting, censorship both official and commercial. To gain trust, governments need to empower citizens by putting at their disposals the tools of inquiry (from timely information to open fora for discussion) that will enable them to learn as well as contribute to knowledge of the pandemic. Governments alone cannot succeed in fighting the virus, only a people with a shared commitment to the welfare of fellow citizens (and all human beings) can win this battle.

References

- Bai, Tongdong. *Against Political Equality: The Confucian Case*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020.
- Bell, Daniel A. *The China Model: Political Legitimacy and the Limits of Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Bell, Daniel A., and Chenyang Li, eds. *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Bremmer, Ian. "The Best Global Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic, 1 Year Later." *Time*, 23 February 2021.
- Cyranoski, David. "What China's Coronavirus Response Can Teach the Rest of the World." *Nature* 579 (2020): 479-80.

Dallmayr, Fred, Chenyang Li, Sor-hoon Tan, and Daniel Bell. "Beyond Liberal Democracy: A Debate on Democracy and Confucian Meritocracy." *Philosophy East and West* (Oct 2009): 523-60.

Kennedy, David, Hannah Ritchie, Daniel Bausch, Max Roser, and Anna Seale. "How Experts Use Data to Identify Emerging Covid-19 Success Stories." *Exemplars in Global Health*, <https://www.exemplars.health/emerging-topics/epidemic-preparedness-and-response/covid-19/finding-covid-19-success-stories>.

Kim, Sungmoon, Jingcai Ying, Roy Tseng, Kyung Rok Kwon, Zhuo Yao Li, Baogang He, Mark Warren, *et al.* "Confucian Political Meritocracy? Possibilities and Limits ". *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 46, no. 9 (2020): 1005-164.

Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Wang, Peter. "What Do the Chinese Think About Their Government's Response to Covid-19?" In *Running Numbers*. Chicago: The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2021.

Wu, Cary. "How Chinese Citizens View Their Government's Coronavirus Response." *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/how-chinese-citizens-view-their-governments-coronavirus-response-139176>.