

Confucian Digital Democracy: On the Role of Digital Technology in Confucian Democracy

Abstract:

In Confucian political philosophy, “Confucian meritocracy” and “Confucian democracy” have long been a core debate. Confucian democrats argue that political participation in a democratic society contributes to the moral development of citizens, and therefore Confucians should support democratic institutions. However, Confucian meritocrats criticize democracy on the grounds that it often leads to political polarization, fosters self-interest and narrow-mindedness, and may thus hinder moral cultivation. This paper agrees with Confucian meritocrats’ critique of the shortcomings of existing democratic systems, but contends that such criticisms are mostly based on the traditional model of party-based parliamentary democracy. With the rapid advancement of modern digital technology, the design of democratic institutions can in fact become more open and more effective in facilitating collective deliberation and collaboration. Therefore, this paper argues that Confucian democracy need not be confined to the traditional model of parliamentary democracy, but can instead evolve into a new form of democracy that integrates digital technology and fosters the cultivation of virtues through democratic participation. Democratic participation plays an indispensable role in nurturing Confucian virtues. Through participation, citizens have the opportunity to engage and deliberate with people from diverse backgrounds and with different values, thereby transcending their own standpoints and making decisions from the perspective of the common good. These processes help citizens cultivate core Confucian virtues such as “ren” (benevolence) and “li” (ritual/propriety). Therefore, Confucian democracy should make full use of digital technology to promote mutual understanding and civilized exchange among citizens of different classes and groups, and to advance the broad distribution of decision-making power. This paper will further discuss several institutional innovations, and point out how these digitally-enabled innovations provide Confucianism with even stronger reasons to support democracy.