

## REFLECTION ON DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION IN CONFUCIAN CULTURE AREA

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### Abstract

Although, in confucian cultural area, different political entity shows different individuality in the democratic transition process, all of them have to face the conflict problem between western-style democracy and confucian culture, the path selection problem during the democratic process, the process coordination problem between society economic and democracy, the impulse and resolve problem for populace. We will discuss and analyse the above four problems from both theory and practice points of view, according to the democratic transition experience of South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and China. We conclude that Eastern Confucian civilization is fundamentally different from Western civilization. A Comparative Study of Confucianism and modern democracy should be based on a deeper knowledge based on the comparison of Chinese and Western culture. Western liberal democracy does not have a universal value and significance, Confucianism, as a kind of cultural forms and Western cultures of equal value, will develop a community that corresponds with democratic ideals. But globalization and integration of today, the market economy, democratic politics has long been an irresistible trend of the world. This requires a common East Asian governments and people of the People beyond the traditional political and populist, but also beyond the confines of Western democracy, construct a set of democratic political system for their own economic and social sustainable development. The future development of East Asia Confucian culture of the country, the region will remain benign, stable long-standing trend, the key also depends on establishing such a democratic political system.

**Keywords:** Confucian cultural ; Democratic transition ; Western democracy

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### 1. Introduction

Confucian culture area mainly refers to East and Southeast Asia which take Chinese traditional "caring" culture as basis. The democratic transition of countries in confucian culture area is marked with free and fair elections, the government's executive power, judicial and legislative power are generated by the democratic process, from traditional democracy to modern democracy or the democratic process of the Western democratic transition.

The transition background of East Asian authoritarian democracy transition is very complex and influenced deeply by historical, economic, political, social, cultural, international environmental and so on. Impact of traditional totalitarian and despotism and political legacy of colonialism is its historical origins; the implementation of the extreme backward economic and catching-up-with type economy development strategy form its economic incentives; incompleteness of political elements of democratic institutions and lessons of failed democratic political attempts is its direct reason; weak social forces and

the presence of "Patronage" social relationship is its social condition; eastern traditional political culture and Western culture cemented its cultural foundation; and the Cold War confrontation and ideological struggle are its international environment of the formation.

Since World War II, some countries in the Confucian cultural area, such as South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, etc., have introduced Western-style democracy and carried out a democratic transition, copied or improved. Although all of them are in the Confucian cultural region, these democracy transition shows different individuality for different political entities. Comparing these entities, we found that there are several problems that need to be considered carefully during their democracy transition process for countries in the Confucian cultural area.

After we compare these places that the democratic transition process in the Confucian cultural area, there are four questions that need such careful thought and discussion: the conflict of Western-style democracy and Confucian culture, the democratic process in the path selection, economic coordination of social process and the democratic process, the mass democratic impulse and troubleshooting.

## 2. Literature

Dae Jung (South Korea's Former president, 1995), the biggest obstacle of democracy is not its cultural heritage, but the authoritarian rulers and their apologists who are obstructed. Asia can set an example for other nations of the world. Value-oriented philosophy and tradition of Asian Democracy which is a rich heritage, can make a significant contribution the development of global democracy. Culture is not necessarily our destiny, instead Democracy is our destiny ."(Dae-Jung, 1995) Lee Kuan Yew (Singapore's Prime Minister, 2009) advocated to take oriental culture and Confucianism as the background, establish an Asian-style democracy in Singapore by amending the concept of Western democracy. Asian-style democracy is characterized mainly as Confucian ethics and authoritarian leadership. "(Liang, 2009) Xukai Yi (China,2008), pointed out that the successful experience of Singapore under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew showed if Confucian cultural circle country plan to achieve modernization, they must handle the relationship between Confucian culture and Western culture.(Kaiyi, 2008) Yi Zhongtian (China, 2009) argued that the Confucian culture can not save the world. (Zhongtian, 2009) John k. Fairbank pointed out, Confucianism is impossible to become a breeding ground for the idea of democracy, the traditional Chinese politics is a "mild despotism" which does not have the seeds of democracy. "(ZhangBin, 2005) Levinson (United States, Joseph R.Levenson) that" In the end, under the impact of the external world and internal subversion, Confucianism dispels gradually(Xiaobin, 2002; Zhang Bin, 2005)

Path selection problem on the democratic process. "Comparative study of Confucianism and democracy conducted by the academic circle of the United States has high academic value. Its theoretical perspectives and research paradigm of Chinese Confucian culture have had a great impact on Chinese Confucian scholars, the research becomes strong external motive forces to accomplish the modernity transition of Confucianism. The research results found a suitable path for the transition

(Zhang Bin, 2005; Shuchang, 2007). In Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea, Confucianism and the market order has been linked up. It is not difficult to see, this route is the three-points on one line: the Confucian tradition (as the inherent traditional starting point) --- market Economy (intermediary and basic goals) --- democracy (another target modernization), rather than bypass open market economy, and take a direct confrontation or against democracy. "(Chenwen&Ran Maochun, 1996; Xiao Bin, 2002)

Impulse and resolve problems of Mass democracy. Thomas A. Metzger found that facing difficulties in Confucian society can not bridge the gap between the political reality and the ideal, but it will produce changes in the traditional, releasing tremendous energy and creative power. In a comparative study of Confucianism and Western democracy, the American scholar to realize that it is impossible to produce or hold competitive modern Western democracy in the Confucian society. "Moody's (Peter R. Moody Jr)," Confucianism does not proceed to autocracy definitely, its core concept and the concept of modern democracy does not conflict with each other. The reason why East Asia, especially mainland China can not form a democracy in history is because there is no corresponding social forces or system to restrain the exercise of power, or to compete with the state power. "(Zhang Bin, 2005).

In short, some scholars believe that Confucian Culture and impede the transition to democracy. Some scholars believe that: Confucianism and modern democracy is harmonious integration and promote each other. They argued that Confucian culture and Western democracy have harmonious and conflicts and resolvable. This work mainly focus on the following four issues: conflict between Western-style democracy and Confucian culture, the path selection in the democratic process, the coordination of economic and social process and the democratic process, the impulse and reconcile problem of mass democratic.

### **3. Discussions**

#### **Conflicts between Confucian culture and Western - style democracy**

As we all know, there is no system without culture, and no culture without system; system depends on some specific culture, and culture needs a variety of systems to reflect and extend itself. System and culture are interdependent of each other with exterior-interior relationships. So if we want to imitate or learn western-style democracy in the background of confucian cultural, inevitably we have to face up the compatibility problem — how to plant western system based western democracy into confucian culture. We know that "Modern, western culture have three important foundations: take scientific rationality as its precondition of spirit, the democratic politics as the precondition of the system, and industrial revolution as the precondition of material. However, the culture of non-modern Western countries, apparently lack the these necessary preconditions due to the subject to the traditional cultural factors and the lack of internal revolution. " And in the history, confucian culture never produced any style of democracy except unified imperial power and central authority system. Bureaucratic centralised system is the native political model of confucian culture. Some scholars

argue that people-oriented thought in confucian culture is the same with democratic ideas in western culture.

But so called “people-oriented” implies a top-down attitude, which is germinated from the subconscious “people are parents”. So actually “people-oriented” is completely opposite to democracy. What “People-oriented” produce is universal system and centralized authority, and democratic idea is public institutions and decentralization.

So it is a dead end to have confucian culture to generate democracy automatically, that is to say, the conflict between Confucian culture and Western style democracy is great. and which has been verified by the process of democracy transition, either carried out or ongoing ones, in the confucian culture zone.

First of all, confucian culture is a kind of culture style which is accompanied by agricultural civilization. In quadrant of agricultural civilization, the culture will show its own distinct characteristics. For example, in the society of agriculture civilization, people rely on the weather and confront nature directly, a single person and families will understand the reality of their weak, and has a sense of helplessness and awe for the power of nature in the whole world. So fatalism is very popular in the agriculture civilization, which is shown in the history of Middle Ages in western and the Opium War in the East. Some scholars say, “in agricultural society, individuals can not be independent of family, clan ; important decisions in a people life are made by parents or clan elders, so they develop a personality characteristic and attitude of obedience to authority.” Although the eastern agricultural civilization has long been burn out by the western powers, as confucian culture, as a symbol system that has been transferred for thousands of years, still has a comprehensive influence in some extent.

Secondly, the “taking rationality as its basis, modern western culture showed its inherent characteristics of confrontation and aggression which encounter different forms of culture”. Different from confucian culture which yield huge inclusive, western culture has a parochial narrowness, usually viewed other culture as low culture and itself high culture. The spread of modern Western culture in the East, on the one hand, brought some positive factors such as rational thinking, emphasis on science and technology, the spirit of law, the concept of fair competition, the pursuit of efficiency, respect for individual rights and so on. On the other hand, there are some culture negatives, such as grave individualistic style, worships money and thought, human indifference and luxurious pleasure...

And such western culture with its good and bad, in a way of culture aggression, become popular in eastern. Such culture spreading procedure makes confucian culture, together with the agricultural civilization, fled in confusion. Meanwhile, it will take a long time for eastern to absorb new culture, so the invasion of western cultural to eastern culture and the devouring of western culture by eastern culture, a serious indigestion is caused. That’s why, most of the countries in East Asia holding both “nationality” and “democracy “ flags on the road of independence and political development after independence also give the strong impression of “walking with two legs.” On one hand, dominated by the traditional oriental culture, on the other hand engraved with deep imprint of Western culture. ”

Democratic transition in confucian culture area also proved a problem, that is, “the Confucian tradition to

support modern democracy need two conditions: the first one is the system environment --- the establishment of economic and legal framework in the confucian society, the second is ideological premise --- the reposition of individuals in society after the self-limitation of confucian moral idealism.

If western-style democracy want to survive and develop in the confucian region, it has to face up to the confucian culture and find proper soil which is suitable for the breed of democracy from the confucian culture.

For example, the ideas of overall situation of "be the first to become concerned with the world's troubles and last to rejoice in its happiness", the elitism feeling of "to study the phenomena of nature in order to acquire knowledge, cultivate one's moral character, regulate the family, administer a country, conquer the world", the responsibility notion of "everybody is responsible for the fate of his country", all of them can become the source for the growth of democracy.

In Confucian culture area, there is a typical of successful integration of confucian culture and western culture. That is Singapore which is on the throat from east to west. The successful experience of Singapore showed that if a country in confucian cultural circle wants to achieve modernization, she must handle the relationship between Confucian culture and Western culture: on the one hand, only when modernization is based on the tradition, tradition take modernization as its goal, they may achieve their respective functions. On the other hand, confusion culture country must learn the essence of Western culture, it is difficult to achieve modernization without the world's best cultural achievements. However, modernization does not equal to westernization. That is to say, while absorbing the two cultures, the dross and decay of them must be abandoned. It is not a choice problem between the two cultures, but organic integration of them which may complement each other and promote the process of modernization.

#### **4. The path selection problem in democratic process**

Japan is the first confucian culture country running into Europe, whose regime is not democracy before World War II. And after World War II, with the help of the United States, Japan had to conduct a democratic transformation. Such democratic transition is imposed by the United States, and its democracy is synchronized with its overall culture. Therefore, Japan democracy does not come internally. And the unrest of his current democratic regime has become one of its distinctive features. It's noted that the achievement of Japan society and economic was also preminent before World War II --- at that time non-democracy system is what they had been using. Korean mass seems to have strong motion inertia during the anti-colonial struggle before Korea came into being. Korean people had been fighting for their people's sovereignty for a long time, repeatedly. Of course, the democratic transition conducted by the ruling authority of Korea is also under the pressure from Western countries, for example, before 1988 Seoul Olympics Game, the pressure exerted by western countries to the Korean government largely contributed to its democratic process.

But it should be said, Korea people played a leading role and drive their democratic transition. But we should also note that such situation(The ruling party in the house of Parliament less seats, the opposition party more seats.) after its democracy transition would continue to be existing in a very long period of

time, which has become an important instable hidden danger.

Let us look at Taiwan. Taiwan's democratic transition began in 1987 when Chiang Ching-kuo lifted "prohibition of political parties." This hard choice is made because of both widespread corruption within the Chiang government and external the pressure from the United States. Unfortunately, after the democratic transition, what we see is an increasingly chaotic Taiwan. Democracy grows together with black gold politics and rogue politics.

Singapore, inherited democracy from the British Empire, also experienced a period of democratic chaos. But since 1959, the ruling party — People's Action Party took advantage of his ruling authority to keep its one-party rule through suppressing and system reformation and reconstruction of the core values of society, which turned to confusion value from past strong westernization tendency past. The running system now is generally referred to as in political circles is authoritarian political system. What shall we call Singapore's political transition, a democracy transformation, or a variant of democracy? Or the resurgence of democracy as Huntington talked about?

We can see that the political democratization in confucian culture area may happen internally or externally, also, may be driven jointly by both inside and outside, or derived from the colonial legacy. However, we analysed and found that the outcome of democratization doesn't achieve a stable and harmonious democratic which people expected, but on the contrary a variety of discomfort emerged. So can we assert that political democratization is not necessarily the only political solution for a latecomer country in confucian cultural zone? Yes, we should see is that the worldwide prevalence of democratic ethos is inseparable with the flourishing scene of Western countries. Especially for developing Countries, their enthusiasm for democracy is largely originated in the people's yearning for Western prosperity. A typical representative of the Western culture is the United States. We understand that what the Statue of Liberty represents is not itself, but the prosperity of the United States-led Western substances.

The aura of its highly developed economics makes US political system also glamorous. Huntington mentioned in his famous "third wave": "American democracy model has appeal, partly because it symbolizes freedom, partly because strength and success. As the second wave of democratization after World War II, people are willing to mimic the model of winning.

So in today's Confucian culture area, some political leaders and scholars advocate the Confucian culture, unlike Western culture heterogeneity to advocate to suppress democratization process because of the heterogeneity between confusion culture and wesern culture.

But we see "a unavoidable result of industrialization, family-centered East Asian community move quickly towards self-centered individualism. Nothing in human history is immutable." What we can not ignore is that some profound changes in our confucian culture is also undergoing. It seems to become increasingly untenable to use heterogeneity to deny democracy.

We can not adopt Western-style democracy completely, but at the same time we must also clearly see that

we can not therefore reject democracy. In a Confucian culture district with its own distinct features, in the end what form of democracy path should be chosen, external and highly imitation of Western democracy, or internal and new democracy after the transformation of Confucian culture, is a challenging issue in the Confucian cultural region.

## **5. Coordination of the economic and social process and the democratic process**

It is known that politics is not the unexpected presence of human civilization. The political system carried out by a political entity is unlikely to be implemented independently of its national conditions. And the growth and development of the political system must match the phase of economic development and process of social development. If the political system is not consistent with its economic and social process, many problems will inevitably arise. If the political system is behind its economic and social development process, the entire society will be inhabited while affects the overall development, or will result in conflicts among inside and outside the system due to obstruction in regime. And if the political system is ahead of its economic and social process, the whole society will pay the cost for political leap which may be more serious sometimes, such as economic development, embarrassed, people overheated political and social conflicts, and so on.

Perhaps, just like Maslow's hierarchy theory of human needs, people has different hierarchical needs, such as physical, safety, emotional, belonging, respect, self-realization, As is there a similar hierarchy needs for a country or region which acts as a political entity? There is no ambiguity that different countries and regions have different important issues at different stages of development.

For a country who is still in the fight for political independence or waiting for confirmation of identification, the national independence and political self-determination is the first demand. For a country who has obtained the status of sovereign, if the society is still turbulent, then the greatest demand will be to achieve social stability.

Similarly, if a foreign country and regions are facing the risk of aggression and subversion, its first requirement is to maintain its own security. If a sovereign country has no urgent foreign aggression and social unrest, the country would put the economic development in the first place.

A political entity with internal stability would seek political identity and position in the world for the outside world. And each country or region hope to be rich, powerful and gain dominant position in the international arena, which is the desire for self-realization. So through a brief analysis of the above, we found that there also exists a need hierarchy for a country and region differences, just like the human needs of Maslow's hierarchy theory. If we do not respect this order and needs beyond style to political process, then inevitably that generate problems. It is noted that Western democracy is built on the basis of fully developed economic and society. It is impossible for a country to be successful by simple imitate.

"Western democracy has been two hundred years of experience, democratic elections is the competition between political parties on their ruling skills, the result weighted and judged by the mass based on different policies, and the fight about policy instead of the core value. For Asian countries getting out of

the shadow of war or colonial, just a few decades of trying of democracy is not enough to resolve the ethnic hatred, as well as the social orders linked by patriarchal, royal and consanguinity. “ For example, for Taiwan, its basic political status problem is not solved yet, can’t political democratization be caught in troubles? The social integration of Korea has not reached the desired state, so it’s democratization is problematic also.

So before carrying out the building of political democracy and the democratic transformation of political system in confusion culture area, we must have a accurate knowledge and grasp about their own economic and social processes. We must know, it is not inevitable that Western democratic system will produce a highly developed Western productivity levels and the democratic life does not means the social order of Western civilization.

While looking at the superiority of the Western democratic system, it must be noted that this style of democracy came into being from the lasting habit of western democracy, and became mature after a long history of practice, and is based on the background of highly successful material civilization (of course western democracy also have freckles which are hard to be removed). In terms of democratic culture, democratic traditions, the stage of economic development, or the social order status, confucian cultural area fall behind the US-led Western world greatly. From this perspective, in this case introducing Western-style democracy into confusion culture area blindly is like to equip a low-level worker with a complex machine to operate, which may result in chaos definitely.

## **6. Mass democratic impulse and resolve**

Mass democracy built on the basis of the equalitarianism has its advanced side. As an associated products of social large-scale production, mass democracy represents an effort direction of social development. It broke the old tyranny and privilege system and impelled the transition of political power to civilians, which makes toiling masses be viewed as common citizenship in society instead of a tool or a burden. This is a significant progress in the history of human civilization. But at the same time, mass democracy has some inherent limitations, such as recklessness blind obedience, pure democracy, tyranny of the majority and so on. For a confusion culture area which has no democracy experience, the mass has no idea of democratic thought and democratic system, naturally the impulse for individuals to participate in politics is not a very common, clear, compelling phenomenon. After the western democratic culture exposing to the east, along with its continuously increasing influence in Confucian culture area, the passion for Asians to seek to regime is fired up. Just like a oilbath, Western culture continues to heat this oil bath which cause temperature of oil to rise increasingly; if the temperature is high enough, it may burst into flames, and even explosive reaction. Oriental passion for democracy would be like such a pan. For a long time, the passion for mass to participate in politics has been repressed. Once such repression is released suddenly, it is bound to have a a significant impact on normal society. But the idea of democracy seems to be difficult to be driven away and scared away. Mass democratic impulse is already a reality. Now it’s meaningless to discuss whether mass democracy is necessary or not. On the contrary, the issue should now be considered is how confusion culture to deal with the inundated mass democratic impulse. Mass democratic maturity is consistent with democratic literacy and practical experience. Mature mass

democracy requires the public not only to carry out the democratization process ideologically, but also to learn democracy in a practice way, which determine this is a fairly long procedure. So during this procedure, we need to estimate and grasp the nature of the public and formulate realistic and reasonable policies to resolve.

However, during the process of democratic transition in Confucian culture zone, rare attention are paid on this mass democracy impulse problem. So unnecessary shock and loss are brought into the society. Like low turnout of American presidential elections does not mean mass distrust politics, on the contrary, it shows politics maturity of the mass.

In the 1970s and 1980s mass democracy movement in Korea is a typical political overheating behavior, resulting in "the amount of tear gas that South Korean police fired is the highest in the world." At the same period, there were frequently large-scale political demonstrations, marches, etc., in Taiwan. Such massive mass democracy behaviors become less until South Korea and Taiwan accomplished the democratic transition, and the scale is much more limited. But turbulent times caused by mass democratic impulse is irreversible. From the mass democracy history of these countries or regions who carried out democracy transition, we can see that mass democracy impulse is a serious problem to be considered during the democracy transition process.

## 7. Conclusion

Democracy is not only a culture of political system, but also a way of governance or rule, especially refers to the state of the system and its management. Eastern Confucian civilization is fundamentally different from Western civilization. A Comparative Study of Confucianism and modern democracy should be based on a deeper knowledge based on the comparison of Chinese and Western culture. Western liberal democracy does not have a universal value and significance, Confucianism, as a kind of cultural forms and Western cultures of equal value, will develop a community that corresponds with democratic ideals.

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