

Comparing Liberalism and Confucianism: A Perspective on the Problem of China's Political Modernization

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Abstract:

After three decades of reform, China is now the second largest economy in the world. However, its undemocratic political system has been increasingly criticized. The reform period also saw the resurgence of two traditions of political thinking, liberalism and Confucianism, which are competing in the discussions concerning China's political modernization. The objective of this thesis is to explore how liberalism and Confucianism can be integrated to provide a philosophical foundation for China's future political reform. The first part of the thesis is a comparison of liberalism and Confucianism. Chapter 1 examines the differences of their political theories: liberal rights are equally given to every individual, while Confucian virtues have to be cultivated with effort; liberalism advocates the establishment of constitutional state through a social contract, while Confucianism argues for benevolent government ruled by the sage king and morally superior officials. Chapter 2 discusses the underlying similarities of these two political theories: both liberal rights and Confucian virtues agree with the claim of equality at the level of human nature and with the principle of reciprocity in social relationships; there is in both traditions a similar dialectical relationship among the individual, the state, and the people. Chapter 3 further explores the similarities in their moral philosophies: both liberalism and Confucianism see humanity as a fundamental moral principle, and both put forward the political morality of justice. The second part is a comparison of the models of modern nation state and of ancient Chinese state. Modern nation state and ancient Chinese state constituted the goal of China's political modernization and the object to be transformed respectively; they also form the historical background of liberalism and Confucianism. Based on the findings of these two comparisons, the conclusion part discusses what the present fundamental problems of China's political modernization are, and in order to solve those problems, how and to what extent liberal concepts such as democracy, freedom, the rule of law, etc. can be incorporated into the framework of China's traditional political thinking, Confucianism.