**Does Confucianism Hinder Democracy?**

Hope Dewell Gentry, PhD  
Lecturer, Political Science  
Montana State University Billings

Bora Jeong, PhD

Visiting Assistant Professor, Political Science

Macalester College

WPSA 2022

Abstract:

While attention has been given to Huntington’s (1996) assertion that Islam impedes democracy, this article addresses his other commonly cited impediment to democracy: Confucianism. This paper proposes that it is possible to synthesize the currently divided literature by taking a constructivist approach, arguing that individual governments determine whether or not Confucianism is a hindrance to democracy. Elements of Confucian values can be used by states to justify both democratic and authoritarian regimes, depending on their goals. For instance, Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew argued that Singapore needed to refocus on Asian/Confucian values, and thus away from democracy, but South Korea’s Kim Dae Jung was upset by the comparison of Asian values to authoritarianism. Using the World Values Survey, this article tests the assumption that Confucianism hinders democracy. We argue that political officials shape their regimes and political institutions based on their own interests and only use their construction of Confucian values as a means of justifying their political choices. Thus, people within Confucian states should vary in their regime type preferences comparably to other states, given similar political, social, and economic circumstances.

**Key Words:**

Confucianism, democracy, constructivism, World Values Survey

**Does Confucianism Hinder Democracy?**

In his 1996 book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order,* Huntington contends that certain cultures are more conducive to supporting democratic values than others, and that some types of cultural attributes impede democracy from taking root at all. Islam and Confucianism are both often used as examples of cultural attributes that keep democratic values from developing in Middle Eastern and Asian states. Since Huntington’s book, scholars are divided on whether certain religions are less inclined toward democracy than others, with theoretical framing and empirical evidence finding support for non-western religions both being an impediment and a benefit to democracy.[[1]](#footnote-1) Focusing on Confucianism, this paper proposes that it is possible to synthesize the currently divided literature by taking a constructivist approach that argues individual governments determine whether or not Confucianism is a hindrance to democracy. [[2]](#footnote-2) These choices are based on the state’s desire to justify their regime choice grounded in Confucian values, meaning they pick and choose to promote the particular Confucian values that they see as a help and/or hindrance to democracy.

In order to explore this constructivist theoretical framework, this paper will first discuss the divide in the literature between the scholars who believe that Confucianism constrains democratic values, those who argue that Confucian values facilitate democracy, and those who lie somewhere in the middle. After establishing these three different camps and the particular aspects of Confucian values that they believe to be a help or a hindrance, the paper will then turn to constructivism as a theoretical framework that can help explain the variance in the findings of the extant literature: individual states create and justify their practices through their constructed Confucian values, which then reify that particular state’s ability to democratize. We will use the World Values Survey to test the notion that respondents from Confucian countries have similar opinions regarding governmental preferences. Please note that due to structural changes that have occurred to the paper since submitting the abstract, we were unable to finish the analysis in time for the conference. We look forward to your comments and would particularly appreciate any help in making sure our theoretical framework matches our proposed methodology.

**Literature Review**

Spina (2011) argues that scholars are divided between three camps regarding the combination of Confucianism and democracy: compatibility, incompatibility, and convergence. Those scholars in the compatibility camp believe that Confucianism and democracy not only can mix, but that their values are comparable. The second group argues that Confucianism is so incompatible with democracy that it becomes a hindrance to it. Finally, the convergence camp scholars claim that while there are differences between democratic and Confucian values, it is possible to have both sets of values within a society. Spina contends that the true problem between the three camps is that the scholars themselves are choosing a conceptualization of democracy and Confucianism that best fit their expectations. Spina states:

Specifically, democracy is conceptualized procedurally as government *by the people* or substantively as government *for the people*. Confucianism is conceptualized liberally in terms of benevolence, reciprocity, and other humanistic values, or illiberally in terms of conformity, duty, and other authoritarian values. Those who define democracy substantively and Confucianism liberally tend to promote the compatibility argument. Those who conceptualize democracy procedurally and Confucianism illiberally tend to advocate the incompatibility argument. Those who define democracy procedurally and Confucianism liberally or democracy substantively and Confucianism illiberally are likely to subscribe to the convergence argument (145).

Huntington certainly falls into the incompatibility argument camp. When discussing the Asian Economic Miracle experienced by East Asian countries in the 1980s, Huntington stated that “culture almost always follows power” (91). He argued that when the Western world was most powerful, non-Western countries tried to emulate Western practices. However, as the West experienced any decline in their power, the non-Western cultures started to take pride in their non-Western (Confucian) traditions, saying these traditions are what made them powerful and successful in improving their economic growth in the first place. Additionally, according to Huntington, the first generation of non-Western scholars and leaders become educated in Western countries and are thus more open to Western ideas and values. However, the second generation is educated in the schools set up by the first generation, which Huntington says is of poor quality. As a result, there is created an “indigenization”, where the second generation rejects Western influence and wants to promote their own society and culture. Further, Huntington contends that China is attempting to be the main power in the region, and that because of the historical legacy of power that China originally held in the region and the importance of the hierarchical nature of Confucianism, the other East Asian countries will more naturally fall in line with authoritarian China due to their shared Confucian values, rather than support of democratic values.

Huntington is not the only scholar to believe that Confucian values can be a hindrance on the ability of democratic values to take root. Shi and Lu (2010) also argue that cultural legacy matters in a state’s ability to democratize. Hoping to explore why modernization theory’s assumption of economic growth leading to democratization did not take hold in all Asian states that experienced rapid economic prosperity, they examine public opinion polls conducted by the Asia Barometer Survey that asks respondents about their commitment to democracy. They conclude that cultural traditions do have an effect on how people understand the concept of democracy, which can have a negative influence on their commitment to democratic values. Specifically, they focus on the philosophy of “government by guardians”, where the rulers are in charge of overlooking the wellbeing of the citizens (Shi and Lu 2010, 125). Related to the Confucian hierarchy, Shi and Lu argue that being governed by guardians does not imply citizen participation in government, but instead has a more paternalistic intent, where the guardians make the decisions for the citizens based on what they believe to be in their best interest.

Alternatively, some scholars contend that Confucian values are not a hindrance to democracy, but instead are compatible with democratic values. Ackerly (2005) maintains that Confucian thought actually provides training for development of a liberal democracy outside of the Western context. She explains that Confucian societies can socialize the people, providing them with opportunities to develop themselves into political citizens who participate in political institutions and offer the chance to criticize political authorities. Further, the promotion of education in Confucianism is often linked to the promotion of education in Lipset’s modernization theory (1959). Fukuyama (1995) goes so far as to argue that due to Asia’s economic development and Confucianism’s emphasis of education, Lipset’s modernization theory will hold true in Asia, given enough time.

Instead of considering that Confucian values as a whole are compatible or incompatible with democracy, some scholars believe that specific Confucian values need to be considered, as democratic and Confucian values can converge. In their article, Park and Shin (2006) test the notion of Confucianism’s compatibility with democracy in South Korea. More accurately, they test the public’s support of democracy if they also support more traditional Asian values. They argue that some types of Confucian values, like collectivism and Confucianism’s hierarchical structure, are less conducive to democratization while others, such as the importance of education, might promote the combination of Asian values and democracy. Going even further than to say that Confucianism can either hurt or hinder democracy, Huang and Chang (2007) argue that Confucianism itself can change over time to better fit democratic values. Instead of considering whether modernization constrains Confucianism or if Confucianism impedes modernization, the authors conclude that modernization transforms Confucianism. Instead of being the most prominent aspect of society or disappearing from society altogether, Confucianism adapts or abandons some of its traditions in order to become a more widely applicable worldview. According to their argument, because Confucianism can adapt and change, Confucianism does not inherently hinder democracy, but the Confucian state can choose Confucian elements to either promote or inhibit democratic values and democratization.

**Theory**

Similar to Huang and Chang’s (2007) assertion that Confucianism can adjust to be more applicable to a variety of worldviews, this paper makes the theoretical argument that individual Confucian governments can adapt the Confucian value(s) of their choosing in order to justify their practices and regime choices. Thus, the individual country’s promotion of specific Confucian values will have more of an effect on democratization than anything else. It is not only the scholars who decide which versions of Confucianism and democracy to use, but states can also decide which definitions they prefer in order to best suit their interests. Consequently, the people within the state become socialized according to the values of the governmental regime. Rather than Confucianism informing a person’s opinion on regime preferences, the state instead *chooses* to emphasize certain values within Confucianism to justify and reinforce its regime type. Thus, it is political culture more broadly that informs a person’s preferences regarding regime type.

In a 1994 interview with *Foreign Affairs* aptly titled “Culture is Destiny”,former Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew discussed the rapid modernization and economic growth experienced by Singapore, attributing this success to the state’s adherence to East Asian (Confucian) values (Zakaria 1994). Comparing the system of the United States to Singapore, Lee argued that there were admirable institutional attributes and features in the United States, such as relatively open relations between people of different classes and religions. However, Lee argued that there was a limit to his appreciation of the democratic system:

But as a total system, I find parts of it totally unacceptable: guns, drugs, violent crime, vagrancy, unbecoming behavior in public -- in sum the breakdown of civil society. The expansion of the right of the individual to behave or misbehave as he pleases has come at the expense of orderly society. In the East the main object is to have a well-ordered society so that everybody can have maximum enjoyment of his freedoms. This freedom can only exist in an ordered state and not in a natural state of contention and anarchy (Zakaria 1994, 111).

By allowing individual citizens too many rights, Lee argued that the United States is weakening its sense of morality and control. Instead, based on the Confucian values of hierarchy and government by guardians, Lee contended that it is the place of the government to control its citizens and their actions in order to best protect them, which is only possible under an authoritarian government.

Former South Korean President, Kim Dae Jung, however, was adamantly opposed to Lee Kuan Yew’s assertion that Confucian and democratic values are inherently opposed, resulting in Kim writing to *Foreign Policy* with a direct response to the interview. In his response, Kim contended that democratic values and Asian culture are not only compatible, but that “Asia has a rich heritage of democracy-oriented philosophies and traditions” that predates western democracies (Kim 1994, 191). One such philosophy is the mandate of heaven that allows the people the right to overthrow their government if the emperor did not practice good governance based on the will of the people. Kim also argued that democratic institutions existed in ancient China through the Confucian civil service examinations. In order to properly judge if an emperor still held the mandate of heaven, the citizens of the state needed to be educated on what a just and competent government looked like. Moreover, the civil service examinations were open to all classes of Chinese citizens, which also allowed for opportunities of positive social mobility, which should reduce social inequality. Kim concluded his response stating, “Asia has much to offer the rest of the world; its rich heritage of democracy-oriented philosophies and traditions can make a significant contribution to the evolution of global democracy. Culture is not necessarily our destiny. Democracy is” (Kim 1994, 194).

This paper argues that Confucianism neither helps nor hinders a state’s level of democratic-ness. Instead, Lee and Kim used their views on the values of Confucianism to construct Asia’s compatibility with democracy. Thus, no significant relationship would exist between regime type and whether or not the state is a Confucian state.

*H1: There is no relationship between Confucian states and preference for/rejection of democracy.*

Instead, perhaps it is the specific values that each leader ascribes to Confucianism that affects whether the people within a state are accepting of democracy. Despite both representing Confucian states, Lee and Kim held vastly different opinions regarding the compatibility of Confucian values with democracy. Both political leaders asserted that Confucian values helped shape the experiences of East Asian countries, so what explains the variance between Confucian states and their respective regime types? Analogous to how both Lee and Kim focused on different types of Confucian values to explain how East Asia is compatible or incompatible with democratic values, this paper argues that governments can construct and justify their support for either authoritarian or democratic regimes based on the Confucian value(s) of their choosing.

Based on Lee Kwan Yew’s view of Confucian values, East Asian governments should value strong control held by the government due to Confucianism’s hierarchical nature and the belief in government by guardians. As a result, the following hypothesis is derived:

*H2: Since Confucian states value Confucian hierarchy, then respondents who want a strong leader that can act with limited constraints will reject democracy.*

*H3: Since Confucian states value government by guardians, then respondents who believe the government should surveil the public will reject democracy.*

In Kim Dae Jung’s interpretation of Confucian values, East Asian governments should value public participation in government based on the mandate of heaven, as well as low levels of inequality, grounded in Confucianism’s emphasis on education and positive social mobility from the civil service exam. Accordingly, two hypotheses follow:

*H4: Since Confucian states value the mandate of heaven, then respondents who believe the government should give people more say will prefer democracy.*

*H5: Since Confucian states value education, then respondents who believe the government should make sure everyone is provided for will prefer democracy.*

Both Lee and Kim argue that Confucian values matter in shaping East Asian government. If Confucian values do have an effect on democracy, then these values should have an overall effect, whether a positive or negative one, on any Asian state. However, if the support for the regime’s design is a construct of the political official’s choosing, and particular Confucian values are specifically promoted in order to justify those regime choices, then Confucian states should follow a similar trajectory to other states within Asia.

**Research Design**

*Dependent Variable:*

Since this paper is concerned with societal preferences regarding political regime based on Confucian and political values, we use the World Values Survey to measure respondent opinions regarding regime type. The question is worded as follows: “How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically? On this scale where 1 means it is ‘not important at all’ and 10 means ‘absolutely important’ what position would you choose?” (Haerpfer et al. 2022). Due to the ordinal nature of the dependent variable, an ordered logit is used to test the hypotheses listed.

*Independent Variable:*

The relationship between Confucianism and democracy has been explored by other researchers, but much of the scholarship is theoretical in nature, and in the few cases that include empirical tests, public opinion surveys are used. While individual support for (or opposition to) democracy is an important element to understanding if a particular society is willing and capable of democratizing, it does not directly address the causal mechanisms behind why some Confucian states have been able to successfully democratize while others have not.

In order to determine if Confucianism hinders democracy, it is important to determine what a Confucian state is. Huang and Chang (2017) required that the countries have used Chinese characters for their writing, have Confucian influence, have Mahayana Buddhist influence, and have had a centralized government. The countries that fit into these categories are listed in Figure 1.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Figure 1: List of Confucian Countries and their 2018 Polity IV Score** | |
| China | -7 |
| Japan | 10 |
| Malaysia | 6 |
| Mongolia | 10 |
| North Korea | -10 |
| Singapore | 4 |
| South Korea | 9 |
| Taiwan | 10 |
| Vietnam | -7 |

The countries listed above that are also in the World Values Survey are China, Japan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan ROC, and Vietnam. These countries are listed in our dataset as Confucian countries.

*Alternative Independent Variables:*

In the event that it is not Confucianism itself that makes a state more or less likely to value democracy, perhaps it is the values that Lee and Kim ascribe to Confucianism that affect the state’s democratic likelihood. The variable for *strong leader* (H2) is based on the WVS question “Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections.” This variable is set up with a background statement by the interviewer where they ask the respondent to think about ways to govern a country. The variable coded on a scale of 1-4, with 1 indicating very good and 4 being very bad. *Surveil* (H3) is coded from the question “Do you think that your country’s government should or should not have the right to…keep people under video surveillance in public areas” where definitely should have the right is indicated by a 1 and definitely should not have the right is represented by a 4.

In order to indicate values regarding *more say* (H4), we use whether the respondent ranked “Giving people more say in important government decisions” as most or second-most important. For the *provided for* (H5) variable, respondents rank on a 1-10 scale whether they think the “Government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for” versus whether “People should take more responsibility to provide for themselves”.

The data is based on the 7th wave of the World Values Survey, which was conducted between 2017-2021. The variables are first tested among the Confucian states, and then these results are compared to findings across Asia in order to determine if Confucian states perform differently from their global counterparts. Age, marital status, education level, and social class are all used as control variables.

**Possible Conclusions**

While many scholars have written on the relationship between Confucianism and democracy, little research has been conducted to test this relationship, other than analysis of public opinion surveys regarding individual levels of support for democratic and Confucian values. The extant literature is valuable for establishing a framework of discussion on why scholars might expect Confucian values to impact democratic transitions and consolidation, but this framework needs to be more directly tested, and at the level of the state, since it is the state that can enact policies based on their interests and values. If Confucian values do affect a state’s ability to democratize or to consolidate that democracy, then the adherence to and performance of those values should follow a similar trend, regardless of if the state is a democracy or not. This would be the case whether Confucian values were a help or a hindrance to democracy. However, if political officials shape their regimes and political institutions based on their own interests and only use their construction of Confucian values as a means of justifying their political choices, then people within Confucian states should respond comparably to other states around the world, given similar political, social, and economic circumstances. By conducting a test cross-nationally, we will better understand whether or not Confucianism hinders democracy.

# Works Cited

Ackerly, Brooke A. 2005. "Is Liberalism the Only Way toward Democracy? Confucianism and Democracy." *Political Theory* 33 (4): 547-576.

Cingranelli, David L., and David L. Richards. 2010. "The Cingranelli and Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Data Project." *Human Rights Quarterly* 32 (2): 401-424.

Deininger, Claus, and Lyn Squire. 1996. "A New Data Set Measuring Income Inequality." *World Bank Economic Review* 10 (3): 565-591.

Fukuyama, Francis. 1995. "Confucianism and Democracy." *Confucianism and Democracy* 6 (2): 20-33.

Gibney, Mark, Linda Cornett Cornett, Reed Wood, Peter Haschke, Daniel Arnon, and Attilio Pisano. 2017. *The Political Terror Scale 1976-2016.* Accessed 12 4, 2018. http://www.politicalterrorscale.org/.

Haerpfer, C., R. Inglehart, A. Moreno, C. Welzel, K. Kizilova, J. Diez-Medrano, M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin, and B. Puranen, . 2022. *World Values Survey: Round Seven - Country-Pooled Datafile Version 3.0.* Madrid: JD Systems Institute & WVSA Secretariat.

Huang, Min-Hua, and Shu-Hsien Chang. 2017. "Similarities and Differences in East Asian Confucian Culture: A Comparative Analysis." *Journal of Multicultural Society* 7 (2): 1-40.

Huntington, Samuel P. 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Kim, Dae Jung. 1994. "Is Culture Destiny? The Myth of Asia's Anti-Democratic Values: A Response to Lee Kuan Yew." *Foreign Affairs* November/December 73 (6): 189-194.

Lipset, Seymour. 1959. "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy." *American Political Science Review* 53: 69-105.

Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. 2011. *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide.* 2nd. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Park, Chong-min, and Doh Chull Shin. 2006. "Do Asian Values Deter Popular Support for Democracy in South Korea?" *Asian Survey* 46 (3): 341-361.

Ross, Michael L. 2001. "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?" *World Politics* 53: 325-361.

Ross, Michael L. 2008. "Oil, Islam, and Women." *American Political Science Review* 102 (1): 107-123.

Schrodt, Philip. 2018. "CAMEO: Conflict and Mediation Event Observations Codebook." *The GDELT Project.* Accessed December 4, 2018. https://www.gdeltproject.org/.

Shi, Tianjian, and Jie Lu. 2010. "The Shadow of Confucianism." *Journal of Democracy* 21 (4): 123-130.

Smith, Christian. 2017. "What is Religion." In *Religion: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters*, 20-76. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Spina, Nicholas, Doh C. Shin, and Dana Cha. 2011. "Confucianism and Democracy: A Review of the Opposing Conceptualizations." *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 12 (1): 143-160.

Zakaria, Fareed. 1994. "Culture is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew." *Foreign Affairs* March/April 73 (2): 109-126.

1. While Confucianism is not necessarily a religion since it does not contain supernatural elements, Confucianism does have attributes in common with religion, as it establishes a moral value system upon which members of society base their cultural traditions and practices (Smith 2017). As a result, this paper will use the word “religion” to describe Confucianism, while acknowledging that there is a debate over the accuracy of this classification. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For responses to Huntington’s assertion that Islam impedes democracy, see Norris and Inglehart 2011; Ross 2001; Ross 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)