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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Thinning Out Ritual, Diluting Identity

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Kim's book is rich with thought-provoking ideas that are relevant to contemporary societies. I focus on its discussion of the "pluralism dilemma" and Kim's appeal to "public reason Confucianism" as a response. The pluralism dilemma is the dilemma that a Confucian democratic theory has to meet both "the pluralist demand" and "the Confucian demand" (70). While the "Confucian" part of the theory is supposed to prefer Confucian doctrines over other doctrines, the "democratic" part is supposed to "accommodate as many reasonable conceptions of the good and comprehensive doctrines as possible" (70). What is original about Kim's theory is that it seeks to accommodate both.

Kim's solution hinges largely on what he calls "public reason Confucianism," a mode "of Confucian democratic perfectionism in which a special style of public reason is affiliated with (partially) comprehensive Confucianism, as best suited for dealing with moral disagreement among citizens with sufficient moral justification without forfeiting its moderately Confucian character nor suppressing pluralism in civil society" (98). Public reason Confucianism in turn hinges largely on Confucian ritual (*li*). In Kim's view, ritual facilitates and motivates the cultivation of "civil dispositions" to "engage in public dialogue civilly [...] followed by a long process of reason-giving and reason-taking public deliberation and public decision-making that ultimately will rely on (deliberative) voting" (113). Kim is optimistic that, "in public reason Confucianism, public culture is the shared culture of civil society that houses an infinite number of social groups, communities, and associations as well as an equally countless number of comprehensive doctrines" (110). Citizens can form various "dual identities" such as "Confucian-Buddhists, Confucian-Daoists, Confucian-Christians, and Confucian-Muslims" (91).

I agree that Confucian ritual facilitates the cultivation of civil dispositions. However, I am not so optimistic that Confucian ritual could support a shared Confucian public identity in a pluralistic society. I suggest a difference between having a shared public identity and a compromised public identity. My worry is

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that public reason Confucianism will lead to the latter, losing the Confucian-ness of Confucian democratic perfectionism eventually.

Consider a hypothetical example of a society that started off as a Confucian and non-pluralistic. Every member upholds a set of core Confucian ideals, follows Confucian teachings, and practices Confucian rituals. The society becomes a Confucian constitutional democracy at t_1. Since all members are "Confucianist-Confucians"—a term Kim introduces in Chapter 2—even when the members disagree, they engage with one another civilly, for they have strong civil dispositions buttressed by a stable, shared system of Confucian ritual. And when they reason publicly, they balance a member's constitutional rights with Confucian values in the way Kim describes in Chapter 3. Over time, at t_2, the society starts to become increasingly pluralistic, with more members taking on multiple identities. Group *A* and group *B* have inconsistent beliefs. While it is identity-defining for A to consider seeing a certain fruit *f* as an offence, it is identity-defining for *B* to believe that seeing *f* is sacred and should be consumed every day.

Kim might say that the difference between *A* and *B* does not threaten any core Confucian values. *A*, *B*, and other groups can still be reasonable and provide public reasons in public deliberation, rather than "reasons employed by citizens as private individuals or as members of specific social organizations within civil society" (114). The society can make certain arrangements to accommodate both groups, such as ensuring that there are with-*f* and without-*f* food stalls. Members of *A* and *B* can continue to interact in a civil manner and avoid discussing *f*.

However, even if individuals or groups of the Confucian society are willing to bracket what is significant to their identities and offer Confucian public reasons, it does not mean that the public identity that they eventually arrive at is one that everyone, even partly, shares. Rather, it could mean that everyone compromises their identities to partake in a public identity. Suppose I am a member of *A*. When I deliberate with the public, I can bracket my individual-specific and group-specific reasons to have *f* removed from public sight. Are members of *A* able to partake in a shared public identity that allows *f* to be seen in the public? For me and my fellow members of *A*, it still is an offence to see *f* in public. Seeing it constantly feels like an affront to our identity. Identity is not something that can easily be compartmentalized. If a person is Confucian-Christian, she probably does not naturally see herself as comprising two distinct parts. If she were to deliberate, she deliberates as a holistic agent, as someone who is Confucian-Christian, rather than someone who is partly Confucian and partly Christian. If she were asked to offer only Confucian public reason in public deliberation, she might be able to do so. But this does not mean that one half of her is sharing a public identity. Rather, it means that she compromises a significant part of her identity, and what has been compromised does not straightforwardly translate to the remaining half of her identity.

Compromising individual or group identities to arrive at a public identity itself does not necessarily pose a problem to Kim's theory. What is worrying for Kim's theory is that the public identity that comes out of finding the common denominator for all the pluralistic groups is a diluted one. When the public identity of a society is diluted, there is a limit to how strong the ritual system can be. Citizens could only agree on a small range of things that they can

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ritualistically perform with one another in a way that does not factor in individual- or group-specific preferences. If different groups have strong opposing views about whether robes should be worn at work, eventually there will not be any ritual regarding whether robes should be worn at work. If different religious groups have strong opposing views about whether Confucius should be worshipped as a deity, eventually there will not be rituals that publicly worship Confucius as a deity. While there will remain some commonly accepted ritual practices that do not offend anyone, the robust ritual system that started off at t_1 will be significantly pared down by t_3.

If the Confucian ritual system is pruned to accommodate "an infinite number of social groups, communities, and associations" (110), it is not clear how well it can accomplish the task of supporting Confucian citizenship. When the Confucian ritual system gets thinner, the Confucian public identity gets more diluted. When the Confucian public identity gets more diluted, it will threaten the public conception of the common good of a *Confucian* constitutional democracy. A commitment to filial piety, for example, is at the very core of a Confucian public identity on Kim's view. When the public identity is too diluted, different individuals and groups might interpret filial piety differently. One group might think it requires living with one's parents, whereas others might think it requires one to not live with one's parents as a mark of one's establishing oneself in the society. If no agreement can be reached, public deliberation about filial piety will be in deadlock. If some level of agreement can be reached, the question is whether the broad interpretation of "filial piety" that all groups can agree on is still the concept of filial piety that is characteristic of a Confucian society.

I have tried to tease out a seemingly problematic element in Kim's attempt to avoid the pluralism dilemma. My worry is that Confucian constitutional democracy, on his understanding, might be unable to meet the Confucian demand and pluralist demand diachronically. Pluralistic differences could start off with something seemingly non-threatening to core Confucian values and Confucian public identity. Different groups would interact civilly and respect one another. However, the process of finding an increasingly narrow common ground among pluralistic groups could dilute the Confucian public identity. A diluted Confucian public identity could, in turn, pare down the ritual system so much that the system is too weak to support a *Confucian* civil society.

My worry is a theoretical one. Perhaps it will never obtain in practice. Kim's account intends to handle the realities of East Asian societies, and this worry does not affect the practical insights that his account offers. Kim has skillfully woven together his mastery of scholarship, knowledge of the Confucian tradition, and insights into East Asian societies. This book is valuable as a monograph and as an expansion of the philosophical system Kim has developed in his earlier works.

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