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REPORT

INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES

Giri Deshingkar
Memorial Lecture



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LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND CONFUCIANISM: CREATING A HYBRID FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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15th Giri Deshingkar Memorial Lecture

Liberal Democracy and Confucianism: Creating a Hybrid for the 21st Century

Speaker: Dr. Tongdong Bai, Dongfang Chair Professor of Philosophy, Fudan University; Adjunct Professor, NYU-Shanghai, China

Chair: Mr. Ravi Bhoothalingam, Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies

Date: 6 September 2023

Venue: Zoom Meeting

The Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS), New Delhi, and the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), New Delhi, co-hosted the 15th Giri Deshingkar Memorial Lecture, with ThePrint as the media partner on 6 September 2023. The lecture was titled “Liberal Democracy and Confucianism: Creating a Hybrid for the 21st Century”, and featured Prof. Tongdong Bai as the speaker. The Chair, Mr. Ravi Bhoothalingam, began the session with a brief introduction to the Lecture series, commemorating the life of Giri Deshingkar, a pioneer in the field of China studies in India. Mr. Hilal Ahmed, representing CSDS, further expounded upon Prof. Deshingkar’s contributions to institution building, having served as the director of both ICS and CSDS, thereby enhancing the field’s scholarly landscape.

Prof. Bai commenced his lecture with an emphasis on the conceptual foundations of liberal democracy. He expounded upon recent scholarly discussions on liberal democracy, particularly in the context of the “one person, one vote” system, which have brought several complex issues to the forefront. He underscored the necessity of distinguishing between the *liberal* and the *democratic* components of liberal democracy, as they are theoretically in conflict with each other. While democratic and liberal thinkers, scholars, and professionals have endeavoured to address these concerns within the existing framework, the speaker challenged the efficacy of such attempts, highlighting the inherent flaws within the aforementioned political system. Instead, the speaker proposed a more comprehensive approach- a hybrid regime that combines elements of democracy and meritocracy, drawing inspiration from Confucian philosophy, interspersed with liberal values.

In his lecture, Prof. Bai revisited the chief arguments with regard to the hybrid model of

governance which had been the subject of his recent publication titled, *Against Political Equality: The Confucian Case*. The speaker posited that there exist four primary issues of concern with the theoretical framework of the democratic system. First, democracy is premised on an unflinching belief in the power of the people, and an inherent suspicion of the elite sections of society. Second, a democratic system invariably overlooks the impact of state policies upon non-voters, and the resultant outcomes. Third, there exists an underlying preference for the concerns and issues of the vocal sections of society, as against those of the non-vocal. Fourth, the ability of voters to accurately assess, in general, the interests and needs of the population at large remains unreliable.

To address these intrinsic flaws, the speaker invoked the wisdom contained within the works of the Ancient Chinese philosophers namely, Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi. While Confucius' *Analects* prescribed the approaches to uplift society, Mencius and Xunzi challenged prevailing notions by proposing that virtue and the potential for virtuous leadership were not the sole purview of a select elite. This perspective questioned the legitimacy and necessity of an entrenched ruling class. Their advocacy for a new source of political legitimacy grounded in service to the people resonates with the principles of modern democracy, opening new avenues for exploration, which were taken up by Prof. Bai as he developed his hybrid model of governance.

The speaker argued that meritocracy can harmoniously coexist with democracy. While acknowledging the complexities and potential pitfalls of this proposed model, including the risk of a potential reversion to the status quo ante, Bai presented a compelling case for a Confucian-inspired system of governance that places meritocracy and education at its core. This system seeks to strike a balance between empowering the people and recognising the intrinsic value of competence and ethical leadership. Regarding the implementation of this system, Prof. Bai argued for a bicameral legislature, with a lower and an upper house, similar in structure to what most present-day democracies possess. The lower house, or the "House of the People", resonating the conceptualisation of the Mencian ideal regime, would comprise popularly elected leaders, who would then become the "mouthpieces of the people". In turn, the upper house, or the "Meritocratic House", would comprise a set of leaders with sound intellectual and moral qualities, enabling them to formulate policies and take ethical, informed decisions, as part of their commitment to serve the people.

Prof. Bai further elucidated upon the selection of the leaders of the 'Meritocratic House' within the aforementioned hybrid model, revealing three realistic methods. Terming the first of these methods as a "levelled model", Prof. Bai argued that the members of the lower house could be popularly elected, but, with a prerequisite of prior exposure to high-level policymaking. Such leaders could then be considered eligible to partake in the selection of leaders for the upper house. Invoking the practice of competitive examinations, especially from Chinese history, Prof. Bai acknowledged the potential arbitrariness of employing such a system in the present. As a result, in the second method, he suggested a structure that employs exam results as a precondition for voting

for members of the upper house, and for participating in elections to the same. Here, the votes could either be drawn from the public or from the members of the lower house. Alternatively, upon passing the examinations, the selected few could undergo training in academics, or in local offices for policy- and decision-making experience. Finally, Prof. Bai introduced the third method of selecting leaders for the upper house, that is, through a quota system. Here, experienced individuals from local offices, and various organisations dealing with service to the people, could be placed in the upper house. According to Prof. Bai, their past services, in a way, reveal their established moral aptitude, rendering them eligible based on merit and morality, and intellectual capabilities. Furthermore, Prof. Bai noted that these three methods could also be melded together in different ways to achieve the required results. The focus on merit, as displayed in the aforementioned three methods, also reveals the importance of proper education as a determinant in the selection process of leaders.

The lecture thus challenged the conventional tenets of western liberal democracy, highlighting its inherent shortcomings and theoretical contradictions. By amalgamating Confucian values with democratic ideals, the lecture unveiled an intriguing vision of a hybrid governance model, where a concerted focus is granted to education, merit, and morality in the selection of leaders, who then serve the people, in line with Confucian ideals of governance. This model, underscored by principles of meritocracy and unwavering commitment to serving the people, according to Prof. Bai, shall offer a pragmatic alternative to conventional democratic structures.

The session concluded with the Chair's remarks, which summarised Prof. Bai's arguments, and commended the originality of thinking of the speaker. A short interactive session followed, during which various thought-provoking questions were raised, including the feasibility of implementing such a model within the contemporary political arena of China.

This report is prepared by Akshat Mayne, Research Assistant at the Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Read more about the Lecture and find previous lectures on our website: <http://www.icsin.org/>

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