Confucian Sentimental Representation

KWON Kyung Rok (Center for Political Thought, Academia Sinica)

Although many political philosophers have sought to conceptualize political representation since Hanna Pitkin’s seminal work *The Concept of Representation*, their consensus is that the concept of representation is a contested one in that ‘any conception of representation, of whatever type, is bound to contain within it tensions that allow it to be deployed in different ways’ (Runciman and Vieira 2008: xi). The difficulty of conceptualizing political representation mainly comes from the fact that it is a ubiquitous concept or idea that can be applied to non-political activities and relationships. This fact becomes clear when we examine key concepts and their core ideas in political philosophy: democracy is characterized by political equality and collective self-determination; liberalism’s core idea rests on basic freedoms and the protection of them against government; and republicanism is defined in terms of non-domination or the pursuit of common good. Each has its own origin and institutional arrangements. Quite the contrary, representation denotes a certain kind of action or state resulting from the way that the representative and the represented relate to each other. So, representation ‘encompasses an extraordinary range of meanings and applications, stretching from mental images to economic transactions, and from legal process to theatrical performance’ (Runciman and Vieira 2008: xi).[[1]](#footnote-1)

In this book, I conceptualize a unique mode of political representation in East Asian society, which derives its moral foundation from Confucian virtue politics. Contemporary East Asian societies understand democracy differently than Western societies do. Even citizens in consolidated democracies such as Taiwan and South Korea have different conceptions of an ideal relationship between a political leader and ordinary citizens, as well as a political leader’s accountability and political legitimacy. A political leader’s proper conduct, including his/her everyday languages, behaviors, and expressions when facing citizens’ sorrow, anger, and resentment, plays a crucial role in evaluating whether his/her has political legitimacy in East Asian society. This book analyses how this ‘affective accountability’ forms the basis for political representation in these societies and examines how this can be reconciled with liberal democracy.

1. For the development of the idea of representation in the Western religious and political tradition since the Roman period, see Runciman and Vieira (2008). On the emergence and development of the concept of representation in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, see Knights (2005). Recently, many political theorists have paid close attention to newly emerging types of representation which do not fall into political representation within nation-state or electoral democracy. For example, representatives often represent the interests of constituents who live out of their electoral district (Mansbridge 2003); in the post nation-state era, non-government organizations such as the WTO, the UN, and Greenpeace represent people’s interests without democratic authorization and accountability (Rehfeld 2006); and even world-famous celebrities can represent citizens’ voices, emotions, and discourses (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)