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Questions for Hierarchical Confucianism

Elena Ziliotti 

Abstract: Through a new argumentative strategy, this article shows that the claims offered by some contemporary Confucian scholars in support of hierarchical social relations do not hold in contemporary societies. Exegetical disagreements that are arguably difficult to overcome are sidestepped and empirical claims in support of hierarchical Confucianism are assessed. Empirical evidence and recent developments in Western philosophy suggest that social hierarchies are detrimental to key factors for people's material well-being, ethical development, and the political order. Egalitarian social relations organized in a representative democratic system appear to be more suitable for the pursuit of the fundamental aims of a Confucian government which are accepted by the proponents of hierarchical Confucianism.

The hierarchical nature of Confucianism has been often taken for granted in Confucian scholarship. During the Han dynasty, Confucian teachings were interpreted as defending the state's duty to enforce codes of conduct (*li*, 禮) and maintain hierarchical social relations among individuals. The use of Confucianism to justify sociopolitical hierarchies continued in the following dynasties but hierarchical interpretations of Confucianism were not left unchallenged. For example, at the end of the Qing dynasty, Kang Youwei, together with his student Liang Qichao, advocated social and institutional

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reforms inspired by Confucian teachings.¹ For modern China, Kang envisioned a community without arbitrary differentiations such as social class, family, and profession.²

Attempts at progressive readings of Confucianism faced a backlash after the collapse of the Qing dynasty. For the leaders of the May Fourth Movement, Confucianism was inherently hierarchical and there was no place for it in a modern Chinese progressive society. According to Chen Duxiu, "In order to advocate Mr Democracy, we are obliged to oppose Confucianism, the codes of rituals, chastity of women, traditional ethics, and old-fashioned politics; in order to advocate Mr Science, we have to oppose traditional arts and traditional religion."³ A shift in perspective occurred in the works of the New Confucian philosophers. For instance, Tu Wei-ming opposes authoritarian readings of Confucianism and believes that Confucianism is a philosophical resource for contemporary East Asian societies to develop unique forms of democracy and capitalism.⁴

Although not representative of the variety and complexity of debates on the relation between Confucianism and hierarchy, the above overview reveals that owing to the political and cultural influence of Confucianism in East Asia, these debates were "politically loaded" as they were concerned with the kind of society Confucians must defend and strive for in the real world. In the past century, Confucianism might have lost some of its political and

¹Kang Youwei, *The Forged Classics* (Zhonghua Book Company, 1891); *Confucius as a Reformer* (Zhonghua Book Company, 2012 [1897]).

²Laurence Thompson, *Ta T'ung Shu: The One-World Philosophy of K'ang Yu-wei* (London: Routledge, 2011 [1958]).

³Chow Tse-tung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 59.

⁴Tu Wei-ming, "The Rise of Industrial East Asia: The Role of Confucian Values," *Copenhagen Papers in East and Southeast Asian Studies* 4 (1989): 81–97. The significance of the relation between Confucianism and social hierarchies is not reducible to Chinese Confucian scholarship and one can look at debates in postwar Western scholarship to understand the importance of this issue for Western scholars. For example, John K. Fairbank, Mary Wright, and Joseph Levenson expressed scepticism about the conservative and oppressive nature of Confucianism (John Fairbank, Edwin Oldfather Reischauer, and Albert Craig, *East Asia: Tradition and Transformation* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973]; Mary Wright, *The Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism: The T'ung-chih Restoration, 1862–1874* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957]; Joseph Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*, vol. 1, *The Problem of Intellectual Continuity* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958]). A different view of Confucianism was offered by Herrlee Creel in *Confucius: The Man and the Myth* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951) and Theodore de Bary, *The Trouble with Confucianism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). In particular, de Bary stressed that by drawing a distinction between the educated ruling class and the peasant class, Mencius did not forswear "his egalitarian principles in favour of social or political elitism" because such a distinction "reflected a functional differentiation" (*The Trouble with Confucianism*, 96).

social legacies, but debates about social hierarchies have maintained a political edge. Supporters of Confucian democracy defend the nonhierarchical nature of Confucianism by pointing to the presence in ancient Confucian texts of a conception of human equality. For Ranjoo Herr, a Confucian conception of equal human dignity can be developed from the principle (in both the *Analects* and the *Mencius*) that “persons are equals in their possession of the moral mind or their moral capacity to cultivate themselves to realize their authentic moral selves.”⁵ A similar idea, Chenyang Li argues, can be found in the *Xunzi*.⁶ Sor-hoon Tan develops a Deweyan reconstruction of Confucian equality according to which “the Confucian social order is not inherently hierarchical in imposing some absolute transcendent stratification principle.”⁷

These ideas are opposed by Confucian scholars who believe that early Confucians recommended not only a functional distribution of social and political labor but also inequalities of social status. Daniel Bell and Wang Pei maintain that Confucian reasons support the development of social hierarchical relations in contemporary China that are mutually beneficial for the material and moral well-being of the parts involved.⁸ For Tongdong Bai, “Confucianism embraces a form of hierarchy” based on mobility.⁹ In a Confucian hierarchical society, the ruling class “is not a class by birth, and although it refers to social and political status, one has to ‘earn’ this status by the service offered to the people.”¹⁰

This article moves normative discussions in Confucian scholarship forward through a new argumentative strategy. It circumvents exegetical disagreements that are arguably difficult to overcome to instead assess the empirical ground of the recent claims of hierarchical Confucianism. The focus is on contemporary efforts to revive and implement some version of Confucian social hierarchies in contemporary societies, using empirical studies and contemporary Western philosophical works on social hierarchies to assess key assumptions in contemporary arguments for hierarchical Confucianism. I engage those contemporary Confucian scholars whose defense of social hierarchies rests on the idea that the latter can be instrumental for political order and the material and moral well-being of the people. These claims are weakened by empirical evidence on the detrimental effects of social hierarchies on the

⁵Ranjoo Herr, “Confucian Democracy and Equality,” *Asian Philosophy* 20, no. 3 (2010): 266.

⁶Chenyang Li, “Equality and Inequality in Confucianism,” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 11, no. 3 (2018): 298.

⁷Sor-hoon Tan, “Why Equality and Which Inequalities? A Modern Confucian Approach to Democracy,” *Philosophy East and West* 66, no. 2 (2016): 490.

⁸Daniel Bell and Wang Pei, *Just Hierarchy: Why Social Hierarchies Matter in China and the Rest of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

⁹Tongdong Bai, *Against Political Equality: The Confucian Case* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 87.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

health of those treated as morally inferior. Empirical evidence also suggests that social hierarchies hinder the self-esteem of those at the bottom, hampering their moral development. More egalitarian social relations appear to be a more suitable social setting for social organizations and ensure that an unequal distribution of power is beneficial for political order. This does not entail that no social distinction among members of societies is admissible. Contemporary Confucians can reject hierarchical social relations while avoiding radical egalitarian claims against all forms of social distinction.

Contemporary Hierarchical Confucianism

This section presents contemporary claims for hierarchical Confucianism and challenges them through a novel approach. The concept of “hierarchy” is often used to refer to either a functional division among members of an organization or a social structure in which individuals have different social status. Social hierarchies differ from functional hierarchies in that they entail a distinction of rank or social standing, where some persons are deemed to be morally superior to others or are regarded differently. In Bell and Wang’s view, hierarchies tend to have a normative dimension: they are social systems in which individuals or groups are ranked according to a specific social dimension.¹¹ A difference in social recognition or social status is, therefore, a necessary condition for any form of social hierarchy. A similar claim is supported by Carina Fourie¹² and Ricardo Blaug.¹³ In their view, a distinction of status is the essence of social hierarchy. The point of social hierarchy is a “relation between inferiors and superiors” and “a status hierarchy occurs when a behaviour, social practice or policy expresses a particular kind of unequal relationship between a person or group of people, and others.”¹⁴

In practice, both functional and social hierarchies entail an unequal distribution of power, esteem, responsibilities among members of a society or social entity, and leadership. What differentiates the two lies in social hierarchies where power asymmetries mirror the allocation of different social status to the involved parties.¹⁵ A hierarchical decision-making system presupposes a clear social distinction between the “followers” and the “deciders.” The deciders set the political vision and influence the direction of the community; they have the discretion to decide whether to collect/incorporate inputs from the rest of the community for their collective directions. The deciders are

¹¹Bell and Wang, *Just Hierarchy*, 8.

¹²Carina Fourie, “What Is Social Equality? An Analysis of Status Equality as a Strongly Egalitarian Ideal,” *Res Publica* 18 (2012): 107–26.

¹³Ricardo Blaug, “Why Is There Hierarchy? Democracy and the Question of Organisational Form,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (2009): 85–99.

¹⁴Fourie, “What Is Social Equality?,” 111.

¹⁵Blaug, “Why Is There Hierarchy?,” 87.

responsible for the consequences of collective decisions and their will is realized through the followers' deference and obedience.

In Confucian political theory, the defense of inequalities of social status is based on their supposed positive contribution to fundamental goals, such as the material and moral well-being of people. According to this view, early Confucians believed that the government was ultimately responsible for providing people with the necessary conditions to develop morally. Sufficient material conditions are a precondition to ensure that people have a chance to pursue ethical development. As written in the *Mencius*, "when they [the people] have a constant livelihood, they will have constant minds, but when they lack a constant livelihood, they will lack constant minds. When they lack constant minds, there is no dissoluteness, depravity, deviance, or excess to which they will not succumb."¹⁶ The exception to this rule is the gentlemen (*junzi*, 君子) who can flourish ethically even in harsh conditions.¹⁷

Ethical development remains a central issue in several contemporary models of Confucian politics, but scholars hold different views on whether social hierarchies are instrumental to it. Bell and Wang maintain that hierarchical relations among human beings in some social spheres are justified if they are mutually beneficial for the material and moral well-being of all parts involved in the relation. Hierarchies between intimate lovers that involve role reversal are justified against fixed hierarchies because "they can change the patriarchal relations that typically characterize other spheres of social and political life."¹⁸ Reversible hierarchical relations among family members are advocated on the possibility that effective distributions of decisional power vary according to contexts. Generally, an elder member of the family is "(1) owed thanks due to previous love-infused work on behalf of the family, (2) more likely to have most knowledge, (3) more likely to have superior emotional intelligence, and (4) more likely to be in control of his or her sexual urges."¹⁹ But the hierarchy reverses if elderly parents lose their capacities to make decisions.²⁰ Hierarchical political relations in East Asia, with China at the top of the hierarchy, are justified if they benefit "the people in both powerful and weaker states."²¹ They must ensure certain material conditions, like security and economic cooperation,

¹⁶Irene Bloom and Philip Ivanhoe, *Mencius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 3A3, 51. See also Edward Slingerland, *Confucius Analects* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2003), 13.9, 143.

¹⁷Edward Slingerland, *Confucius Analects*, 6.11, 56.

¹⁸Bell and Wang, *Just Hierarchy*, 45.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 52.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 54. For a discussion of the challenges for reversible hierarchical relations between family members, see Elena Ziliotti, review of *Just Hierarchy: Why Social Hierarchies Matter in China and the Rest of the World* by Daniel Bell and Wang Pei, *Res Publica* 27 (2021): 515–20.

²¹Bell and Wang, *Just Hierarchy*, 107.

but they also must serve an ethical goal: China must set a good example for the other countries.²² In its interactions, China should be modest and humble and show willingness to listen and to learn. Bell and Wang defend some forms of hierarchies of status, not just hierarchies of responsibilities or unequal distributions of decisional power. "Morally justifiable social hierarchies should structure our social lives on an everyday basis, including our relations with loved ones. That's the claim we'd like to defend in this book. Our target is the view that all social relations should be equal."²³

Although social hierarchy is not the main focus of Bai's *Against Political Equality: The Confucian Case*, he seems to agree with Bell and Wang that from a Confucian perspective, social hierarchies are justified if they contribute to the material and moral well-being of people, especially those with inferior social status. However, unlike Bell and Wang, Bai defends hierarchical relations only at the political level, both within and among states.²⁴ "Confucianism embraces a form of hierarchy" that is based on mobility.²⁵ The ruling class "is not a class by birth, and although it refers to social and political status, one has to 'earn' this status by the service offered to the people."²⁶ In Bai's view, merit-based social hierarchies are instrumental to the moral cultivation of those who are treated as inferior. A Confucian mobility-based hierarchy "encourages people to move up, and the hierarchy is not perceived to be bad and may have a positive effect on the well-being of the people."²⁷ Giving meritorious people a higher social status not only allows them to exercise their superior social and political power and skills for making the right decisions on behalf of those with inferior status but also fulfills a moral-education purpose. It creates a social distinction between superior and inferior that is instrumental for those with inferior status. If those at the top of the hierarchy have superior qualities, those at lower rungs will be inspired to emulate them and cultivate themselves more.

One can argue that contemporary hierarchical Confucian theorists' justifications for social hierarchies are not representative of the majority of interpretations of the Confucian classics. For instance, both Eirik Lang Harris and Eric Hutton maintain that social hierarchy has an instrumental and a noninstrumental value for Xunzi.²⁸ The present article aims to assess Confucian claims in support of hierarchical social relations for modern societies (such

²²Ibid., 109–10.

²³Ibid., 14.

²⁴Bai's political project is also more ambitious than Bell and Wang's because it aspires to apply universally, not only to China or East Asia.

²⁵Tongdong Bai, *Against Political Equality*, 87.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., 87–88.

²⁸Eirik Harris, "Xunzi's Political Philosophy," in *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Xunzi*, ed. Erik Hutton (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016), 95–138; Erik Hutton, "Ethics in the Xunzi," in *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Xunzi*, 67–94.

as China). Its focus is the hierarchical interpretations that have been the subject of discussions in political theory and used to formulate a political claim for contemporary societies. Admittedly, Loubna El Amine's interpretation of ancient Confucian texts has become a topic of discussion among political theorists.²⁹ She agrees with Bai that the early Confucians supported a merit-based sociopolitical hierarchy. A merit-based hierarchical distribution of power would bring about efficient decision-making and be instrumental to the legitimacy of the state.³⁰ However, it would be inaccurate to treat El Amine's theory as belonging to the same category as Bai's and Bell and Wang's hierarchical views of Confucianism. The latter aim to develop a normative model for contemporary China, whereas El Amine states clearly that "how Confucianism can be tailored to the modern world is not otherwise the concern of this book."³¹ Thus, since the purview of this article is the views of Confucian scholars who recommend social hierarchies in contemporary societies, El Amine's theory will not be discussed.

To summarize, contemporary hierarchical Confucians have advanced three main reasons in support of their political claim. In their view, Confucianism justifies social hierarchies if they are instrumental to people's material well-being, their ethical development, and both domestic and international political order. Contemporary hierarchical Confucians thus value social hierarchies based on what they can accomplish and not in themselves. Thus, whether Confucianism should justify social hierarchies depends on contingent matters, namely, the ability of social hierarchies to bring about a certain state of affairs in a given social context. This suggests a new way to assess the compatibility of Confucianism with social hierarchy. Instead of challenging hierarchical Confucians' interpretations of classical Confucianism, one can assess whether social hierarchical relations are the best social framework to fulfill fundamental Confucian goals in contemporary societies. If it turns out that they are not, and that nonhierarchical social relations are more suitable to achieve these goals, contemporary Confucians will have compelling reasons to oppose social hierarchies. They will have to convey that a reconstruction of Confucian political philosophy for the modern world opposes social hierarchies.

If successful, my approach will complement the antihierarchical reconstructions of Confucianism forged by Herr, Li, and Tan. Their works challenge the hierarchical Confucians' interpretations of the early Confucian texts by "reconstructing Confucian philosophy based on ideas in the texts that arguably are supportive of the value of equality despite the absence of explicit

²⁹Loubna El Amine, *Classical Confucian Thought: A New Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). See the reviews of this book by Doh Chull Shin in *Review of Politics* 79, no. 1 (2017): 154–56 and Russell Arben Fox in *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 3 (2016): 856–57.

³⁰El Amine, *Classical Confucian Thought*, 120.

³¹*Ibid.*, 9.

valuing of equality for itself.”³² I question the implications of hierarchical interpretations of Confucianism in Confucian political theory and show that even if we accept the hierarchical Confucians’ interpretations of the main aims for a Confucian society (namely, people’s material well-being and ethical development and domestic and international political order), we should still question the ability of social hierarchies to achieve these aims. This new approach is developed in the next three sections, where each section assesses the truth of each claim to hierarchical Confucianism.

Social Hierarchy and Material Well-Being

This section discusses the first claim, that social hierarchies are justifiable from a Confucian standpoint if they contribute to the material well-being of the people, especially those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Material well-being includes factors such as clothing, shelter, sanitation, education, and food, but also the possibility of living in a safe and comfortable environment and access to economic resources. I focus on the relation between social hierarchies and one of the most fundamental factors of material well-being: health.

Several studies have indicated that social hierarchies have considerable negative consequences on the health of the people at the bottom. Persistent social-class differences in health emerged in the Whitehall I Study, a seven-and-a-half-year study that began in 1967 to assess the cause of heart disease and chronic illness in 17,530 male English civil servants. Similar results were found in a successive study, the Whitehall II Study, which also included women civil servants (6,900 men and 3,414 women) in a 3-year analysis. Analyzing the data of the Whitehall Studies I and II, Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson conclude that social hierarchies are inherently problematic.³³ “Our psychological wellbeing has a direct impact on our health, and we’re less likely to feel in control, happy, optimistic, etc. if our social status is low.”³⁴ Being situated at the bottom of a social hierarchy ultimately affects our psychological health which, in turn, causes health conditions and disorders. “Of all the factors that the Whitehall researchers have studied over the years, job stress and people’s sense of control over their work seem to make the most difference.”³⁵

A similar claim is supported by *Social Determinants of Health: The Solid Fact*, a report published by the WHO Center for Urban Health and International

³²Tan, “Why Equality and Which Inequalities?,” 489.

³³Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, *The Spirit Level: Why Great Equality Makes Societies Stronger* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009).

³⁴*Ibid.*, 76.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 75–76.

Care for Health and Society and University College London.³⁶ According to the report, a lack of control over home and work life has a strong effect on individuals' health. "The lower people are in the social hierarchy of industrialized countries, the more common these problems become."³⁷ Panayotes Demakakos, James Nazroo, Elizabeth Breeze, and Michael Marmot show that the causal relation between socioeconomic status and health depends on a person's "subjective social status," her perception of her own social standing.³⁸ One's subjective social status, in turn, relates to health conditions in a way that can only partially be accounted for by sociodemographic characteristics.³⁹ This conclusion is corroborated by Archana Singh-Manoux, Michael Marmot, and Nancy Adler, who claim that subjective social status is even a better predictor of health status and decline in health status than factors of objective social status, like education and income.⁴⁰

One might object that the empirical effects of inequalities of social status are difficult to establish. After all, social hierarchies do not happen in isolation. In an ordinary sociopolitical context, hierarchical relations are just one of the many factors that influence people's well-being. However, the correlation between lower subjective social status and several health indicators has been established in other empirical studies.⁴¹ Hierarchical Confucians who are interested in developing normative models for the real world would find this evidence of particular relevance.

³⁶Richard Wilkinson and Michael Marmot, *Social Determinants of Health: The Solid Facts* (Copenhagen: World Health Organization Library Cataloguing, 2006).

³⁷*Ibid.*, 12.

³⁸Panayotes Demakakos, James Nazroo, Elizabeth Breeze, and Michael Marmot, "Socioeconomic Status and Health: The Role of Subjective Social Status," *Social Science & Medicine* 67 (2008): 330–40.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 334.

⁴⁰Archana Singh-Manoux, Michael Marmot, and Nancy Adler, "Does Subjective Social Status Predict Health and Change in Health Status Better than Objective Status?," *Psychosomatic Medicine* 6 (2005): 855–61.

⁴¹Don Operario, Nancy Adler, and David Williams, "Subjective Social Status: Reliability and Predictive Utility for Global Health," *Psychology & Health* 19, no. 2 (2004): 237–46; Ha Yeongmi, Choi Eunsook, Seo Yeongmi, and Kim Tae-gu, "Relationships among Subjective Social Status, Weight Perception, Weight Control Behaviors, and Weight Status in Adolescents: Findings from the 2009 Korea Youth Risk Behaviors Web-Based Survey," *Journal of School Health* 83 (2013): 273–80; Noreen Goldman, Jennifer Cornman, and Chang Ming-Chang, "Measuring Subjective Social Status: A Case Study of Older Taiwanese," *Journal Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 21 (2006): 71–89; Bonnie Chen, Kenneth Covinsky, Irena Stijacic Cenzer, Nancy Adler, and Brie Williams, "Subjective Social Status and Functional Decline in Older Adults," *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 27 (2012): 693–99; Joan Ostrove, Nancy Adler, Miriam Kuppermann, and Eugene Washington, "Objective and Subjective Assessments of Socioeconomic Status and Their Relationship to Self-Rated Health in an Ethnically Diverse Sample of Pregnant Women," *Health Psychology* 19 (2000): 613–18.

Most importantly, many of the studies mentioned above have been carried out on non-Western populations. Don Operario, Nancy Adler, and David Williams's study focusing on a 1294-individual multiethnic national sample (76% White, 10% African American, 7% non-White Hispanic, and 7% others) confirms that subjective social status is a predictor of health. Furthermore, in an assessment of data from 67,185 South Korean students aged 12–18 years, Ha Yeongmi, Choi Eunsook, Seo Yeongmi, and Kim Tae-gu conclude that adolescents with a low subjective social status are more likely to be overweight and have poor self-rated health, this inverse relationship being particularly significant in girls. Noreen Goldman, Jennifer Cornman, and Chang Ming-Chang tested the reliability of the MacArthur Scale, a specific method to reveal the subjective social status of people, on a sample of middle-aged and older adults in Taiwan. Their findings in Taiwan corroborate the hypothesis that Bonnie Chen, Kenneth Covinsky, Irena Stijacic Cenzer, Nancy Adler, and Brie Williams tested in the United States, namely, that the subjective social status of older adults is a significant predictor of their health and well-being.

Since Bell and Wang's claim concerns only the Chinese context, empirical studies on Chinese populations would have been an important tool to assess hierarchical Confucianism. However, to my knowledge, no such study has been carried out. The absence of data on Chinese populations is equally problematic for those who support the instrumental value of social relations in the Chinese context. However, under these conditions, data on South Korean and Taiwanese populations is the most reliable evidence we have to draw any conclusion in the Chinese context. This weakens the first claim for hierarchical Confucianism.

Hierarchical Confucians may reply that they oppose social hierarchies that do not benefit those at the bottom. Just hierarchies must "serve morally desirable purposes."⁴² Accordingly, they are against social hierarchies like the ones examined in the Whitehall Studies I and II. But the evidence discussed above casts doubt precisely on the instrumental value of social hierarchies for Confucianism. There is a vast amount of evidence on the correlation between social status and ill-health. *The Social Determinants of Health: The Solid Facts* includes the contributions of thirteen experts from UK universities. Insisting on the relevance of social hierarchies for the material well-being of the public might be completely inappropriate and out of touch with how social hierarchies work in reality. This seems to be a failing in the practical application of the hierarchical Confucian ideal.

Social Hierarchies and Ethical Cultivation

The second claim concerns the relationship between social hierarchies and the moral cultivation of members of society. As we have seen, many Confucians

⁴²Bell and Wang, *Just Hierarchy*, 14.

maintain that providing people with the conditions for ethical development is the ultimate goal of a Confucian government. While some Confucian scholars argue that democratic participation is essential for the moral cultivation of the citizens,⁴³ hierarchical Confucians claim that hierarchical relations in some spheres of individuals' lives can be instrumental to the moral cultivation of those at the bottom. There are two reasons for this. First, a merit-based social hierarchy can allow people at the top to make the right decisions for the moral well-being of morally inferior persons. Second, it is necessary for establishing social distinctions that are instrumental for the moral cultivation of the people at the bottom.

As discussed in the previous section, material conditions are a precondition for ethical development. If being situated in a hierarchical order compromises a person's health, it may also hinder the ability to develop morally. Furthermore, other studies suggest that inequalities of status can compromise moral development in different ways. Being situated at the bottom of a social hierarchical structure can hinder self-esteem and instill a feeling of shame, which in turn undermines moral cultivation.

The causal relationship between social status and self-esteem is well established in psychology studies. Classical theories, dominant theory, and even hierometer theory claim that social status affects self-esteem; those having lower status feel less respected and thus have lower self-esteem, while "being respected and admired—enjoying social status—leads individuals to like themselves more, to have higher self-esteem, or even narcissism."⁴⁴ Investigating social hierarchical relations among teenagers, Marc Fournier discovered that low social rank predicts low self-esteem and high depression in adolescents.⁴⁵ Interestingly, Huo Yuen, Binning Kevin, and Molina Ludwin found that a person's perceived social status contributes to self-esteem and self-reports of psychological well-being, independently of the degree of social inclusion.⁴⁶ The same results were confirmed by Nikhila Mahadevan, Aiden Gregg, Constantine Sedikides, and Wendy de Waal-Andrews, who maintain that social status positively correlates with self-esteem.⁴⁷ While

⁴³Sor-hoon Tan, *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003); Stephen Angle, *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy: Toward Progressive Confucianism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

⁴⁴Aiden Gregg, Adam Pegler, and Constantine Sedikides, "Self-Esteem and Social Status: Dominance Theory and Hierometer Theory," in *Encyclopedia of Evolutionary Psychological Science*, ed. Todd Shackelford and Viviana Weekes-Shackelford (Cham: Springer, 2018), 4, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-16999-6_1450-1,

⁴⁵Marc Fournier, "Adolescent Hierarchy Formation and the Social Competition Theory of Depression," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 28 (2009): 1144–72.

⁴⁶Huo Yuen, Kevin Binning, Ludwin Molina, "Testing an Integrative Model of Respect: Implications for Social Engagement and Well-Being," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 36, no. 2 (2010): 200–212.

⁴⁷Nikhila Mahadevan, Aiden Gregg, Constantine Sedikides, and Wendy de Waal-Andrews, "Winners, Losers, Insiders, and Outsiders: Comparing Hierometer and Sociometer Theories of Self-Regard," *Frontiers in Psychology* 7 (2016): 334.

the causal relationship between self-esteem and moral cultivation has yet to be established, several studies indicate the negative effects of low self-esteem. The latter is correlated with unhappiness and depression,⁴⁸ anxiety,⁴⁹ apathy,⁵⁰ and the tendency to disparage or denigrate others.⁵¹

If that is correct, it seems reasonable to believe that Confucians should be concerned that poor self-esteem can undermine a person's ethical cultivation even if self-esteem is not a central topic in the ancient Confucian texts. As Herr maintains, "Self-cultivation is a very strenuous life-long process of 'self-education' to reach the highest stage of moral perfection, often involving pain and suffering, which stops 'only with death'."⁵² Thus, it is difficult to understand why a person would undertake such an arduous journey unless she thinks of herself as worthy of such an endeavor in the first place. Moreover, from a Mencian perspective, it is difficult to believe that a person can cultivate compassion, and thus be able to develop the virtue of humanity (*ren*, 仁), if she is overwhelmed by apathy and the tendency to denigrate others. It also seems reasonable to think that depression may hinder the cultivation of a person's sense of right and wrong, which is required to develop the virtue of wisdom (*zhi*, 智).

These reasons should make hierarchical Confucians reconsider the possibility for social hierarchies to discourage those who are considered and treated as socially inferior to cultivate themselves. Self-esteem may be a precondition for undertaking the path towards moral cultivation because such a choice requires time, energy, and perseverance. A social hierarchy may have exactly the opposite effect to the one suggested by Bai. Being treated as and considered to be of inferior social status may affect one's perception of self-worth. It may instill a strong feeling of disregard for oneself such that that person lacks the will to invest in her own self-cultivation.

Besides the lack of self-esteem, the instilling of a feeling of shame in those at the bottom of the hierarchy is another reason to question the ethical power of social hierarchies. According to Roger Giner-Sorolla, social hierarchy is correlated with shame. The feeling of shame among those at the bottom is instrumental to the preservation of social hierarchical relations because it fosters the relative worth of those at the top at the individual's own expense. "In this light, internalized, self-lowering shame doesn't work to help the individual

⁴⁸Roy Baumeister, Jennifer Campbell, Joachim Krueger, and Kathleen Vohs, "Does High Self-Esteem Cause Better Performance, Interpersonal Success, Happiness, or Healthier Lifestyles?," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 4, no. 1 (2003): 1–44.

⁴⁹Zuzana Veselska, Andrea Geckova, Beata Gajdosova, "Socio-Economic Differences in Self-Esteem of Adolescents Influenced by Personality, Mental Health and Social Support," *European Journal of Public Health* 20, no. 6 (2009): 647–52.

⁵⁰Morris Rosenberg, "Self-Esteem and Concern with Public Affairs," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (1962): 201–11.

⁵¹Betty Keller and Ronald Bishop, "Self-Esteem as a Source of Raters' Bias in Peer Evaluation," *Psychological Reports* 56 (1985): 995–1000.

⁵²Herr, "Confucian Democracy and Equality," 267.

cope, but to help the whole hierarchical system cope.”⁵³ The feeling of shame may inhibit the ethical cultivation of those at the bottom because, similarly to low self-esteem, the feeling of shame can have a self-paralyzing effect. When such a feeling becomes overwhelming, it raises self-defensive responses and can hinder behavioral improvement.⁵⁴ For example, such a feeling in victims of ongoing inequalities or historical wrongs often lead to inhibition rather than action; it can induce the victim to accept her lower social status.⁵⁵

These considerations are not necessarily at odds with the value that many Confucians attribute to the feeling of shame for moral cultivation. The empirical studies mentioned above focus on “conventional shame” and its correlation with social hierarchies, while Confucian moral psychology is concerned with “ethical shame.”⁵⁶ Conventional shame is felt when one believes that those whose views matter think or treat her as unimportant or not worthy of equal respect. This form of shame can have a paralyzing effect and can be detrimental to moral cultivation. Being considered not worthy of equal respect by those at the top of the hierarchy may lead someone to believe that because of the social gap between her and those at the top, she is incapable of change and moral growth. In contrast, ethical shame denotes the feeling we have when we or those with whom we identify have significant character flaws.⁵⁷ An example of ethical shame is *xiu wu* (羞惡), the feeling of shame that is considered the “germ” of the cardinal virtue of righteousness (*yi*, 義) according to Mencius’s theory of the four beginnings (*siduan*, 四端).⁵⁸ *Xiu wu* is usually translated into English as “shame,” but it is a disposition or “emotional attitudes” that can motivate individuals to consider what a person can change about herself or her surroundings.⁵⁹ *Xiu wu* does not refer to the conventional shame that can be produced by social hierarchies in those at the bottom and hinder their motivation to engage with moral cultivation. Thus, rejecting the ethical power of social hierarchies is consistent with Mencius’s theory of the four beginnings.

These considerations, together with the empirical evidence discussed in the previous section, seem to support a nonhierarchical understanding of

⁵³Roger Giner-Sorolla, *Judging Passions: Moral Emotions in Persons and Groups* (London: Psychology, 2012), 107.

⁵⁴Naomi Ellemers, Joanneke van der Toorn, Yavor Paunov, and Thed van Leeuwen, “The Psychology of Morality: A Review and Analysis of Empirical Studies Published from 1940 through 2017,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 4, no. 23 (2019): 335.

⁵⁵Giner-Sorolla, *Judging Passions*, 117, 123.

⁵⁶For this distinction, I am indebted to Bryan Van Norden, “The Emotion of Shame and the Virtue of Righteousness in Mencius,” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 1 (2002): 45–77.

⁵⁷Van Norden, “The Emotion of Shame and the Virtue of Righteousness in Mencius,” 60–61.

⁵⁸Bloom and Ivanhoe, *Mencius*, 2a6, 35–36.

⁵⁹Van Norden, “The Emotion of Shame and the Virtue of Righteousness in Mencius,” 67.

Confucianism, calling into question the compatibility of Confucianism with social hierarchies. They suggest that being situated in a social hierarchy can be detrimental to people's ethical development. This supports the view that social hierarchies in the real world are not instrumental to the fundamental goals of a Confucian community.

Social Hierarchies and Political Order

This section discusses the third and last claim, that social hierarchies are justified by virtue of their ability to call attention to the desirable egalitarian distribution of decisional power and responsibility. Most of the time, the argument goes, a hierarchical structure is instrumental to order because the difference in status often implies an effective unequal distribution of power or authority.

One main problem with this view is that accepting an effective unequal distribution of responsibility and decisional power does not necessarily imply the acceptance of hierarchical social relations. Blaug calls this fallacy of equivocation between hierarchy and social organization the Simple Equation.⁶⁰ This equivocation is committed when someone argues that since the organization is required for the community's survival, the imposition of a hierarchical order is necessary to create such an organization. "The problem with the Simple Equation lies not so much in its dubious reliance on material necessity, as in its claim to the exclusivity of hierarchy's ability to coordinate."⁶¹

When it comes to organization and unequal distribution of decisional powers, egalitarian social relations constitute an important alternative to social hierarchy. Some desirable unequal distributions of decisional power and responsibility do not undermine the equal dignity of the persons affected by the distribution because these unequal distributions of decisional power and responsibility imply a functional difference, not a social difference. A representative notion of democracy assumes that a democratic order is compatible with inequalities of political power and authority. Through elections, a vast segment of democratic societies provisionally delegate (not surrender) part of their political power to a selected group of political leaders, who are called on to exercise superior political authority on behalf of their constituency. Democratic decision-making is also influenced by the inputs of experts in the form of relevant advisors or independent agencies. From this perspective, democracy appears to be a complex decision-making system that develops across different stages and involves different political actors.

Thus representative democracy is not reducible to citizens' equal opportunity for power, but the citizens' exercise of equal political power remains crucial in the democratic decision-making process. Through this egalitarian

⁶⁰Blaug, "Why Is There Hierarchy?," 92.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 94.

procedure, an unequal distribution of political power takes place and is legitimized. From a proceduralist perspective, such unequal distribution of power is not disrespectful of social equality because it stems from the citizens' exercise of their political power, which is attached to their equal social positions. Although theories of representative democracy acknowledge that the representatives' ability to define and interpret the interests of the many is crucial for democratic representative institutions to function well,⁶² they also maintain that political representatives are not substitutes "for an absent sovereign."⁶³

This suggests that, under certain circumstances, it is possible to support the distribution of decisional power according to individuals' expertise, something that Confucian meritocrats agree with; however, there are two main differences between the Confucian meritocratic view and the one defended here.⁶⁴ First, there is the issue of whether the "experts" deserve a superior social status in virtue of their ability to formulate right decisions. Bai is in favor of granting righteous politicians a superior status, while democrats do not think that social status should track unequal political abilities. Valuing equality as a fundamental principle for a fair and equal society does not mean defending equality in all aspects of societal life. So, an inegalitarian distribution of decision power and responsibility among social equals is possible and also justifiable from an egalitarian standpoint if such distribution can produce more desirable outcomes than an egalitarian decision-making procedure and is exercised respectfully.

The second difference concerns the limitations of experts' and politicians' abilities. Confucian democrats do not deny the need for expert and virtuous politicians, rather they doubt that a group of experts and virtuous politicians alone can make better decisions in contemporary politics than politicians in a democratic process. Democratic participation is instrumentally valuable for good government: on the one hand, it can pull together different inputs and knowledge that are dispersed in society to define and solve complex problems of public interest, and on the other, it makes the political leadership more accountable to the public.⁶⁵

Having established the compatibility of some inegalitarian distribution of decisional power and responsibility with egalitarian social relations, the question for hierarchical Confucians is whether supposedly positive unequal distributions of decisional power and responsibility can be realized without the

⁶²Sofia Alonso, John Keane, and Wolfgang Merkel, *The Future of Representative Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 6–7.

⁶³Nadia Urbinati, *Representative Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 20.

⁶⁴I am grateful to Loubna El Amine for helping me to see this point.

⁶⁵Elena Ziliotti, "An Epistemic Case for Confucian Democracy," *Critical International Review of Social and Political Philosophy*, published online Oct. 23, 2020, p. 9, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13698230.2020.1838736>.

establishment of social hierarchical relations. Remember that the Confucian justification of social hierarchies is instrumental; it depends on the effects of hierarchies. There are reasons to believe that egalitarian social relations may be required for unequal distributions of authority to function well. One crucial problem of unequal distributions of power and authority is that often these inequalities lead to ossification. Reflecting on social relations in the workplace, Blaug maintains that unequal distribution of labor can become culturally entrenched immobile hierarchies.⁶⁶ Those with superior power and authority are often tempted to abuse their position to retain their authority and use it for their own interests. This can lead to the ossification of the decisional structure.

Hierarchical Confucians may rebut that this problem can be avoided by an education that promotes modesty and a sense of social responsibility in those who exercise superior power and responsibility. But the obvious problem is that its effectiveness is limited since some people are likely to be tempted to abuse their position anyway. For this reason, egalitarian social relations may be better mechanisms than social hierarchies to keep de facto or desirable inequalities of power and authority in check. At a minimum, this calls for an effective legal system that defends and promotes the equal rights of members of the organization and for a social culture that emphasizes the equal dignity of all members of the organization and their social relevance to the organization and does not put leaders on a pedestal. Abuses of power may be easier to uncover or to prevent when people are not only free to speak up but also feel equally entitled to do so. These conditions may be harder to achieve in a social culture that recognizes some members of society as socially inferior to others.

The idea of provisional delegation of one's own decisional power can help us to understand the injustices of some existing hierarchies. For Ryan Mitchell, Bell and Wang's claim for just social hierarchies fails to address the forms of abusive subordination and disempowerment that are caused by real global economic and political hierarchies.⁶⁷ The latter allow "neither genuine consent nor robust opportunities for supervision by those they subordinate."⁶⁸ The idea of provisional delegation of one's decisional power suggests that part of the problem with real economic and political inequalities is that they are not the effects of a delegation of power among equals. This would demand giving those at the bottom sufficient political opportunities to keep those at the top accountable.

Of course, the extent to which current electoral mechanisms reflect this democratic egalitarian ideal is a contentious issue in democratic

⁶⁶Blaug, "Why Is There Hierarchy?," 91.

⁶⁷Ryan Mitchell, review of *Just Hierarchy: Why Social Hierarchies Matter in China and the Rest of the World* by Daniel A. Bell and Wang Pei, *Review of Politics* 83, no. 3 (2021): 443–46.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 445.

theory.⁶⁹ It is also reasonable to believe that democratic decision-making is not sufficient to control social inequalities at the local and international political levels. But the above considerations suggest that such a decisional process may be part of the answer. These considerations undermine the last claim of hierarchical Confucians, which affirms that social hierarchical relations are the most suitable social setting for political order.

Just Social Distinctions among Social Equals

What justifies equality of status, we have suggested, is that egalitarian social relations can have a more positive effect on health, ethical development, and political order than social hierarchical relations. Yet Confucian democrats and hierarchical Confucians agree that Confucianism promotes some forms of social distinctions. Except for the relation among friends, all Confucian fundamental social relations (*wulun*, 五伦) are among unequals, in some sense. Even an advocate of democracy such as Tan maintains that Confucians “accept that there are inequalities among people, especially in their abilities and ethical achievements, which should be regarded as significant for one’s treatment of them.”⁷⁰ However, these inequalities are compatible with equality of status. “Accepting another as superior in these respects when this is truly so is no reason to wallow in the kind of ‘sense of inferiority’ that damages self-esteem and inhibits one’s ethical growth. On the contrary, appropriate admiration, respect, and deference toward such superiors *should spur self-examination and inspire learning that will contribute to ethical growth.*”⁷¹

It remains to be seen whether Confucian democrats have the conceptual apparatus to support social distinctions while supporting social equality. It is unclear what kind of respect we should have for highly ethical persons and how this respect can or should be distinguished from the respect we have for other people. Stephen Darwall’s distinction between “appraisal respect” and “recognition respect” can be used to address this question. According to Darwall, “appraisal respect” is the attitude that we have when we positively appraise a person because of some personal characteristics that are perceived as valuable.⁷² Appraisal respect allows for distinction because it does not apply to everyone unconditionally: “one’s appraisal of a person, considered as a person, may be higher than of

⁶⁹See, for instance, debates on democratic franchise. Francis Schrag, “Children and Democracy: Theory and Policy,” *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 3, no. 1 (2004): 365–79; Lachlan Umbers, “Enfranchising the Youth,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 23, no. 6 (2020): 732–55; Philippe Van Parijs, “The Disenfranchisement of the Elderly, and Other Attempts to Secure Intergenerational Justice,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 27, no. 4 (1998): 292–333.

⁷⁰Tan, “Why Equality and Which Inequalities?,” 497.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 498, emphasis added.

⁷²Stephen Darwall, “Two Kinds of Respect,” *Ethics* 88, no. 1 (1997): 45.

someone else.”⁷³ We can have appraisal respect for a devoted teacher for her commitment and contribution to the education and moral formation of the young, but no appraisal respect for a teacher that shows little care for her students.

Praise and social esteem—two key elements of the social distinctions mentioned by Tan—are often means for expressing appraisal respect. They are ascribed to individuals who excel in fields viewed as valuable, and, to this end, representatives of different communities or associations express their social esteem by praising people that have contributed to the life of their societies in some positive manner. Although appraisal respect is often expressed through praise, it is not reducible to it. When we appraise highly ethical persons, like Nelson Mandela, we also believe that these persons set a moral example that must inspire moral emulation in others.

Unequal distributions of appraisal respect are compatible with equality of social status. Appraisal respect is not necessarily relational, although it can be used to rank people according to how much they are praised and esteemed. A person deserves appraisal respect in virtue of her actions and qualities, not her relations to the appraisal respect that is given to others. Positively appraising one person’s excellence does not “degrade” the other members of society nor does it affect their social status. Social equality is linked to the value a person has in herself as a person, not her value in terms of contribution to her community. To this end, social equality requires “not that all men should be classified alike, but that they should not be differently valued by reference to their roles, titles or positions as distinct from their persons.”⁷⁴ This suggests that the respect people are entitled to as persons differs from appraisal respect. Darwall contrasts appraisal respect with the notion of “recognition respect.” The latter is a form of respect at the basis of social equality and the one that we unconditionally attribute to persons in virtue of being persons and regardless of their personal characteristics.⁷⁵

My point is not that Confucian democrats must adopt Darwall’s distinction between recognition respect and appraisal respect; Darwall’s individualistic notion of recognition respect may be problematic from a Confucian perspective. Furthermore, as Sin Yee Chan points out, the intentional state of *jing* (respect, 敬) that regulates the rules of Confucian rituals has some similarities to Darwall’s idea of recognition respect but also important differences.⁷⁶ Chan maintains that Darwall’s idea of recognition respect requires us to be willing to constrain our behavior in some way. However, *jing* entails a duty to

⁷³Ibid., 46.

⁷⁴Walter Runciman, “Social Equality,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 17, no. 68 (1967): 226.

⁷⁵Darwall, “Two Kinds of Respect,” 45.

⁷⁶Sin Yee Chan, “The Confucian Notion of Jing (Respect),” *Philosophy East and West* 56, no. 2 (2006): 229–52.

manifest a certain degree of care and attention for the qualities that make people entitled to equal worth, such as the potential for ethical development.⁷⁷

However, Confucian democrats can adopt a similar distinction to clarify the place for social distinctions in a Confucian democratic society and reformulate Tan's point. It can be argued that the inequalities of esteem that must be encouraged from a Confucian standpoint are expressions of inequalities of appraisal respect and in a Confucian society such respect must be attributed first and foremost to the most morally cultivated members of the community. If the ultimate goal in life is self-cultivation (*xiushen*, 修身), those who achieved this stage must be praised and esteemed in virtue of their own achievements, regardless of whether others have achieved the same goal.

Like Darwall's concept of appraisal respect, a Confucian notion of respect would not necessarily be relational. This does not deny the centrality of the distinction between *xiao ren* (petty persons, 小人) and *junzi* (gentleman, 君子) in the Confucian tradition. Rather it suggests that Confucian reverence for the morally cultivated persons is not intrinsically comparative. Of course, part of the reason why representatives of different communities sometimes publicly praise virtuous members of the community is because it is believed that their achievements can be set as an example to their fellow members. And Confucians would encourage these practices. But, from a Confucian perspective, the ultimate aim of publicly praising someone is not to mark a social difference between individuals but to "inspire learning that will contribute to ethical growth."⁷⁸

A radical democrat may argue that shifting the meaning of Confucian social distinctions to appraisal respect does not solve the problem. Like inequalities of power, expressions of unequal praise might be subject to misinterpretation or abuse by those who receive praise, so that they become expressions of unequal respect. From this perspective, the idea of accepting ethically based social distinctions in a democratic society appears to be inherently flawed: in practice, when desirable ethical distinctions gain social recognition, they can turn into static status hierarchies. As for inequalities of power in real life, the problem raised by the radical democrat suggests that an egalitarian context, in which legal and social practices emphasize the equal social status of citizens, may be instrumental to ensure that inequalities of praise do not turn into inequalities of status. The former can be moderated and authorized by egalitarian relations at the legal and political levels. Another way to control inequalities of praise is to integrate them into a wider network of social practices, where some of these practices publicly affirm the equal social status of the citizens.

⁷⁷Ibid., 244.

⁷⁸Tan, "Why Equality and Which Inequalities?," 498.

From this perspective, the power of social distinctions depends on the fact that they are not the only social norms that inform a Confucian society. In a Confucian democracy, social distinctions would interact with and be limited by political practices, like the citizens' participation in the decision-making via national and local elections, but also less institutionalized practices like the participation of citizens in public political debates together with experts and professional politicians. Authorizing inequality of appraisal respect from a standpoint of equality can help to ensure that these inequalities do not turn into inequalities of respect.

Conclusion

Disagreements on the compatibility of social hierarchies and Confucianism remain attached to the future of East Asia, in particular. Jiang Qing indirectly expresses this view when he says that "the way ahead for China's political development is the Way of the Humane Authority and not democracy."⁷⁹ Similarly, in their recent defense of social hierarchies, Bell and Wang clarify that they "write *for* China."⁸⁰ So, when it comes to Confucianism and hierarchy, the connection between theory and practice is not that subtle: if social hierarchies are incompatible with the democratic value of social equality, disagreeing on the hierarchical nature of Confucianism implies disagreeing on what sociopolitical form Confucians must support for contemporary societies.

Confucians do not need to agree on the same reconstruction of the early Confucian texts to oppose social hierarchies. Drawing on empirical evidence on the social effects of hierarchies and contemporary Western philosophical resources, I have argued that there are good reasons to believe that social hierarchies have detrimental effects on the ability of a society to achieve some of the most fundamental Confucian political goals. More research needs to be carried out to assess the empirical ground of hierarchical Confucianism. For example, most of the empirical studies surveyed in this article focus on health since this is one of the main factors for material well-being, but further studies should assess the impact of social hierarchies on other factors of material well-being. Furthermore, given the interest of hierarchical Confucians in the Chinese context, an empirical study on the effects of social hierarchies in Chinese populations would be key for the discussion.

Nevertheless, this article is the first attempt to assess the instrumental claim for hierarchical Confucianism and there are good reasons to believe that social hierarchies are detrimental to people's health and they can hinder ethical development. Furthermore, the article has revealed that social hierarchies

⁷⁹Jiang, Qing, *A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China's Ancient Past Can Shape Its Political Future* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 27.

⁸⁰Bell and Wang, *Just Hierarchy*, 25, emphasis original.

can be suboptimal when compared with egalitarian social relations. Representative democratic institutions appear to provide a more appropriate framework to moderate and control unavoidable political inequalities in complex modern societies. This is not to argue that democratic representative mechanisms are the only condition that needs to be in place for achieving a well-organized Confucian society. But they appear to be part of the solution. Finally, the article contributes to methodological discussions in Confucian political theory. An exclusive normative-theory-building method is inadequate to generate guidance for real societies, and Confucian political theorists must support their empirical claims with evidence when this is available. To this end, this article suggests that a new way forward for Confucian political theory is to balance normative political models with empirical results from other disciplines, like political science and psychology. This will contribute to ensuring both the soundness of these theories and their relevance to the politics of East Asia.