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# Confucianism: Contemporary Expressions

Stephen C. Angle, *Wesleyan University*



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# Confucianism: Contemporary Expressions

Stephen C. Angle

Confucianism is one of the world's great moral, philosophical, and spiritual traditions. It has been a central part of the religious lives of people throughout East Asia for more than two millennia. The last century has been a particularly challenging period for Confucian thinking and practice, however. As such, it makes sense for us to begin this consideration of contemporary Confucian perspectives on social justice with some background on Confucianism itself. On that basis, we can then move on to the main topic, which we will examine in two stages: first, the range of ways in which Confucianism figured in discussions of social justice in the twentieth century, and second, specific discussion of current Confucian thinkers and their views on social justice. In the conclusion, we briefly reflect on the ways in which the contemporary views we have examined are justified. This last topic is important because while we will see some significant areas of agreement — virtually all authors agree that Confucian social justice is intimately related to the idea of “harmony,” for instance — there are also important disagreements, and assessing the disagreements requires thinking about the structure of Confucian justification.

## Background to Contemporary Confucianism

The twentieth century started badly for Confucianism. In 1905, a last-ditch effort to reform a floundering empire led to the abandonment of the ubiquitous civil-service examination system based on Confucian classics, around which higher education in

China had been organized for centuries. This was followed, in 1911, with the collapse of the last dynasty itself. In 1915 Chinese intellectuals inaugurated a “New Culture Movement” that sought fundamental changes to Chinese values, practices, and even the Chinese language. In many ways this movement was a more pervasive “cultural revolution” than the later Maoist movement of that name. The values of “modern civilization” were on the rise and older traditions like Confucianism were roundly criticized. Confucianism did not die, but after the first decades of the twentieth century, it would need to find new ways to be relevant in Chinese society.

After this unpromising start, the twentieth century continued to pose obstacles to any revival of Confucianism. Some political leaders tried to manipulate it as a shallow ideology of loyalty to power, while others tried to wipe it completely from the hearts of China’s citizens (most notably during the 1973-1974 “Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius” campaign). There were some exceptions; philosophers and educators like Liang Shuming (1893-1988) and Mou Zongsan (1909-1995) developed Confucian ideas for the new century and sought to teach its ideals both within the People’s Republic, to the limited degree that was possible, and in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and even further afield. We will hear more about Liang and Mou below, as well as about other political and social thinkers who were significantly influenced by Confucianism even if they did not consider themselves to be “Confucian.” There have, in addition, been efforts to establish Confucianism as a state-sponsored religion — notwithstanding the arguments by other intellectuals that Confucianism was valuable to modern Chinese precisely because it was not (in their view) a “religion” in the Western sense. This debate was especially fierce in the early twentieth-century, when the utopian Confucian thinker Kang Youwei (1858-

1927) and his associates sought (and failed) to have Confucianism recognized in the constitution of the emerging republic.

The precise nature of the relationship between “Confucianism,” in all its historical complexity, and the category of “religion” is not our central concern here. For our purposes, what is significant is the relation of “Confucian” values to “Confucian” texts and practices. Many influential voices within the tradition have treated neither its texts as sacred nor their authors as infallible. The tradition’s founders had deep insight and sagely wisdom, to be sure, but they were no more than human beings — and often were quite insistent in their texts about their own fallibility. This fallibilist attitude helps to ensure a diverse tradition with shifting emphases over the centuries, in part responding to broad changes in social and intellectual trends, not only in China but also in Korea, Japan, and elsewhere. When we look for Confucian views of social justice in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we will see that these interactions with other sources of value and meaning continue to be important as various thinkers struggle to define the place of Confucianism in a new and dynamic environment.

## Confucianism and Social Justice in the Twentieth Century

### *Kang Youwei (1858-1927)*

In 1902, Kang Youwei completed — but did not publish — his *Book of the Great Community (Da Tong Shu)*, which he had first begun writing in 1884 (Thompson, 1958). The utopian vision presented in this text is a good place to begin the complicated story of Confucianism and social justice in the twentieth century, for three reasons. First, Kang’s striking views are probably the most radical ideas on social justice we will see in the

entire century. Second, Kang's relationship to Confucianism is itself vexed, and will allow us to reflect more deeply on the possibilities enabled by the Confucian tradition in the modern world, and on their limits. Third, although the *Da Tong Shu* itself was not immediately influential, many of Kang's ideas and specific Confucian sources were well-known and had a significant impact. At the heart of Kang's vision is a unified human world, the name of which ("Great Community" or Da Tong) and some of the content of which he gets from the early Confucian text known as the "Li Yun Pian." Kang repeatedly invokes key ideas from this ancient text, although he radicalizes them. For example, "Li Yun" contrasts the era of "Small Tranquility," in which people are concerned only for their own families and states, with the "Great Community," in which people do not confine their affection to their own parents and children. Still, "Li Yun" emphasizes the role of ritual (this is the "li" in the text's title) and clearly envisions a society in which it is precisely the fulfillment of distinct, complementary, role-based responsibilities that leads to general flourishing. Kang shares the goal but transforms the means, seeking to do away with any ritualized distinctions:

Now to have states, families, and selves is to allow each individual to maintain a sphere of selfishness. This contradicts utterly the universal principles (gongli) and impedes progress..... Therefore, not only should states be abolished, so that there will be no more struggle between the strong and the weak; families should also be done away with, so that there will no longer be inequality of love and affection [among people]; and, finally, selfishness itself should be banished, so that goods and services would not be used for private ends.... The only [true way] is sharing the world in common by all (*tianxia wei gong*). (trans. from Hsiao, 1975: 499)

Kang argues in the various chapters of his *Book of the Great Community* for an ideal that abolishes distinctions between nations, classes, races, genders, families, and occupations,

as well as the distinction between ruler and ruled. It is a radically egalitarian vision, motivated in part by Kang's great concern for the suffering in world around him. For much of his public career Kang works toward concrete reforms that he hopes might eventually help to move both his own society and the world in the direction of his social ideal.

Readers of this volume's chapter on early Confucian conceptions of social justice will immediately note that these ideas are much more extreme than the overall view found in the classical Confucian texts. This raises a question: even if phrases like "great community (*da tong*)" and "sharing the world in common by all (*tianxia wei gong*)" come from a text that has long been accepted as Confucian, can Kang's social-justice ideal itself be called "Confucian"? One astute commentator on this matter notes that the question of whether a thinker or idea or practice counts as Confucian can be interpreted in several different ways (Hsiao, 1975: 42). Certainly Kang's ideas are dramatic departures from the "Confucian" values and practices of his day, even if his more practical proposals were presented as gradual reforms to present institutions. However, on other grounds it seems appropriate to see Kang as Confucian. He certainly took himself to be a Confucian and was taken by some (like his important student Liang Qichao) to be developing Confucian ideas (Hsiao, 1975: 436). He argued that his ideas represented the true Confucian teachings, and offered (highly controversial) arguments aimed at removing various long-standing misunderstandings of the true Confucianism. At the same time, he was quite open about the degree to which he also drew on western sources and claimed to be articulating ideals that were objective and universal — not distinctive of or limited to China. To this day, Kang's status as a Confucian remains

contested. When we come to various claims for and against the “Confucian” pedigree of social justice ideas in the contemporary world, we will have occasion to return to Kang’s example.

*Sun Yatsen (1866-1925) and Zhang Junmai (1887-1969)*

The third reason why Kang offers us a good point of departure is that ideas he highlighted such as “great community (*da tong*)” and “sharing the world in common by all (*tianxia wei gong*)” come to be widely discussed and widely endorsed, even by many who do not consider themselves to be Confucians at all, and even though these ideas took on different meanings in different contexts. Take, for example, Sun Yatsen, the first president of the Republic of China. Sun regarded Kang’s efforts to legitimize reform through a reinterpretation of Confucianism as a scholastic and pointless exercise, but nonetheless was influenced by Kang’s version of Confucianism (Bergère, 1998: 78 and 392). Sun famously articulated his ideology as “Three Principles of the People”; the third principle, “People’s Livelihood,” bore the marks both of western socialism and of Kang’s more Confucian language. Sun argues that “Livelihood” is a more all-encompassing ideal than western writings on socialism — however connected it is to various socialist ideals — and concludes one of his lectures with the words, “When the people share everything in the state, then we will truly reach the goal of the People’s Livelihood principle, which is Confucius’s hope of a ‘great community’ (Sun, 1928: 184).” Another example of the ways in which Confucianism and ideas of social democracy were interlinked in the mid-twentieth century is presented by Zhang Junmai. Zhang was sincerely interested in Confucianism — he was a signatory of the 1958 New Confucian “Manifesto,” which we

will discuss below — but his political thinking was consciously pluralistic. At one point Zhang described his democratic socialist thought as a blend of German philosophy, English politics, and Confucianism (Fung, 2005: 327). His social and economic views were not as radical or utopian as those of Kang Youwei; he actively sought to create what he saw as a Chinese social democracy, a middle path between Anglo-American liberal capitalism and Soviet revolutionary socialism (Feng, 2005: 339). Still, his goal was “Chinese” in two senses: it was designed for Chinese circumstances, and it was based in part on Chinese (that is, Confucian) social ideals. Like his co-signatories to the Manifesto, Zhang recognized that a contemporary Confucianism would need to be different from traditional Confucianism in significant ways, but felt that the core insights of the tradition represented important human values that needed to be preserved and developed.

#### *Liang Shuming (1893-1988)*

Zhang Junmai was both a scholar and a politician, and it was primarily in the latter role that he pursued his concern for social justice. An alternative model is offered by Liang Shuming. Liang was a philosopher, an academic, and an activist. While he ultimately seems to have understood his personal convictions as more Buddhist than anything else, in his writing, teaching, and public activities he strongly identifies with Confucianism. Liang’s most famous book is his 1921 *Eastern and Western Cultures and their Philosophies*, which helped to usher in a renewed attention to Confucian and Buddhist thinking. For our purposes, though, his most significant contribution lies in his efforts to theorize social justice and then to put it into practice, all of which went under



the heading of “rural reconstruction.” He sought to offer the “start of a new life for humanity” that would avoid the faults of the “abnormal, money-based, distorted,” overly-industrialized, overly-urbanized civilization of the West, wherein humanity “has lost its control over matter (quoted in Alitto 1979: 192).” He sought a balance between collectivized, technologically developed agriculture — which carried with it both economic and moral benefits — and industry; his goals were both material improvement and the moral improvement that lies at the center of Confucianism; he designed his political, social, and economic institutions to aim at these twin objectives. He saw China’s (and the world’s) problems as in the first instance cultural, rather than political, and felt that the institutions he advocated would have a crucial transformative effect on people’s values and cultural presuppositions. One other element of his vision will be important for us to keep in mind as we go forward: on the one hand, he advocated “vigorous participation in the life of group organizations” and saw “self-rule” as vital, but on the other hand also embraced the Confucian commitment to moral meritocracy. His proposed solution was one-party rule, with the party both responsive to the masses and focused on cultivating the quality of its cadres (Alitto, 1979: 203). Issues of political organization go beyond our specific scope, but as we will see below, it is impossible to keep political (in)equality completely distinct from questions of social hierarchy. At any rate, while Liang’s concrete efforts in Shandong province ultimately were overshadowed by larger social and political forces, he anticipates some contemporary thinkers in his connection between the pursuit of individual Confucian virtues and broad societal reforms aimed at securing social justice for all.

*Mou Zongsan (1909-1995)*

Turn now to Mou Zongsan, arguably the most influential Confucian philosopher of the twentieth century. Mou left mainland China in 1949 and spent the rest of his life in Hong Kong and Taiwan; there is no question that his political and social views were shaped by his anti-communism. He is one of the main authors and signatories of the 1958 Manifesto to the World's People On Behalf of Chinese Culture, which argues both that people of the world must respect and learn from Chinese cultures (and especially Confucianism), and that Confucianism itself needs to reconstruct itself by coming to embrace democracy and science. Mou has a celebrated argument (discussed in Angle 2009: ch. 10) showing why Confucian commitments themselves require embracing a strong form of rule of law and constitutionalism, but he has much less to say on the specific topic of social justice. In one comparatively early work he argues for an abstract connection between Confucianism and socialism. In later writings, though, while he acknowledges some defects in capitalism and therefore embraces certain protections for people's welfare, his fundamental commitment seems to be to the individual right to private property. He says: "private property is the defense line of the human individual and protects the dignity of the human being" (Mou, 1983:183). Mou's position here is consistent with his idea that individual moral claims to authority must "negate themselves" — that is, be limited by independent human rights — in order to avoid tyrannical impositions by self-proclaimed sages. While Mou certainly does pay some attention to the social and economic realities of his day, it is true (just as later critics will claim) that he focuses much more on the metaphysics and epistemology of moral reality than he does on issues of practical, social justice.

## An east Asian Development Model?

Our final topic in this section is the series of claims and counter-claims made in the 1980s and 1990s concerning Confucianism's relation to capitalism and economic development. As East Asian economies flourished in the 1980s, some social scientists began to reevaluate Max Weber's well-known claims concerning Confucianism's inability to promote economic development. In Peter Berger's phrase, was there an "East Asian development model," based in part in Confucianism, that could be an alternative to, or even preferable to, the development experience of the "West" (Berger, 1988)? Many voices chimed into these conversations, some supportive and some skeptical of the link between Confucianism and economic growth. A particularly important participant has been long-time Harvard professor Tu Wei-ming, who has been both cognizant of Confucianism's historical shortcomings, and yet enthusiastic about its potential to contribute to world civilization. In one of the most thorough and yet critical discussions, though, historian Arif Dirlik concluded:

What the Confucian discussions produced was not a critique of capitalism, or of Orientalism, but their affirmations.... Tu Wei-ming has been most prominent for articulating Confucianism as a global ideology of modernization, enhancing its hegemony. Confucianism could indeed contribute to a critique of modernity, but in defining the "core values" of Confucianism, Tu and others have refrained from any thoroughgoing critique of capitalism, portraying it instead as a remedy for the ailments of capitalism, which translates into a rendering of Confucianism as a instrument of "social engineering" to guarantee more cooperative (and docile) citizens for corporations and patriarchal families. (Dirlik, 1995: 272)

Tu would certainly not accept this characterization, and one can find some references in his work to the idea that Confucianism might help alleviate the excesses of Western societies in the area of distributive justice. Still it is fair to say that in comparison with some of the earlier Confucian-influenced thinkers whom we have canvassed in this section, Tu is relatively less engaged with the issue of social justice — like the New Confucians (such as Mou) on whose work he sees himself as building.

### Contemporary Views

It has become commonplace among observers of China to talk about a revival of Confucianism in twenty-first century China, as well as a growing interest in Confucianism abroad. Writing at the end of the century's first decade, I cannot say with any confidence in what direction these trends will develop. Perhaps in another 30 or 40 years, Confucianism will be relegated more thoroughly to the museum than it ever was in the twentieth century. There are many other possibilities, though, from Confucianism as one part of a pluralistic national (or global) moral-political discourse, to some form of Confucianism once again serving as a leading national ideology and/or religion. In this section we will canvass several different views on Confucianism and social justice, and along the way see some different visions of the place Confucianism might have in our future.

### *Jiang Qing's Political Confucianism*

In 2003, Jiang Qing (1953- ) published *Political Confucianism: The Changing Direction, Particularities, and Development of Contemporary Confucianism* (Jiang, 2003). While not his first book, *Political Confucianism* was a significant departure from his earlier scholarship on the Confucian classics and represents an importantly different approach to contemporary Confucianism from the work of the “New Confucians” like Mou Zongsan and their students. When coupled with his efforts to revive traditional Confucian educational practices by leaving his university post and founding a private academy, Jiang’s writings have garnered him considerable attention as a public intellectual. Like Kang Youwei from the early twentieth century, Jiang believes that Confucianism must be institutionalized as a formally organized religion, though Jiang has a considerably more particularist or cultural nationalist view than Kang: Jiang sees Confucianism as intimately tied to Chinese history, culture, and popular practice; for him, any talk of global values or justice is problematically utopian. Still, Jiang’s faith in the truth of Confucian teachings and — strikingly — in the reality of Tian (or “Heaven”) as a kind of deity seem to be deeply held, and he views Confucian institutions as eventually able to have a positive impact on the rest of the world (Jiang, 2010: 14). His confidence that Confucianism must be the source of Chinese values has led him to outline a dramatically different set of political institutions from those currently in place in China (Jiang 2010). This new political structure would have a place for the democratic expression of people’s views, but the upper two houses of its tricameral legislature would be designed to give voice to learned Confucians with special insight into moral reality, on the one hand, and to experienced representatives of Chinese cultural and social

institutions, on the other. This is one indication that Jiang views a contemporary Confucian social order as significantly nonegalitarian.

Before looking further at the antiegalitarian aspects of Jiang's position, it makes sense to focus first on what he says about the core issues of economic justice. This is a much less developed side of Jiang's thinking than the political, but his views are clear enough and, in light of what we have seen from Confucianism in the twentieth century, quite interesting. He sets aside Kang Youwei's idea of a "great community" as an ideal in which Confucianism "believes" but with little immediate practical relevance (Jiang, 2010: 256). Following one of the trends discussed above, Jiang insists that Confucianism instills practical virtues that lead to economic development, just as Weber claims that Protestantism does. In a few brief sentences, furthermore, Jiang asserts that Confucianism is consistent with modern market economics because it has always supported freedom of economic exchange and opposed all forms of monopolization (Jiang, 2003: 364). At the same time, however, Jiang is conscious of the problems engendered by markets and is worried about the alienation that a dominance of economic values can engender. He is concerned both about the alienation of people from themselves — because as mere economic instruments, they cannot attend to or realize their full human natures — and about the alienation of people from nature, which becomes a mere means to the realization of economic value and no longer a sacred existence in which we share mutual affection and reverence (Jiang, 2003: 365-6). Without offering many details, Jiang argues that Confucian values like harmony, concern for others (*youhuan yishi*), and opposition to economic inequity (*bujun*) can enable us to avoid market failures and alienation, if these values are primary and the pursuit of profit — which is perfectly legitimate, in

moderation — is secondary. Essentially, his argument is that markets, contractual relations, and profit are fine, so long as the institutions of moral education are functioning properly throughout the society (Jiang, 2003: 314-20).

The basic meaning of “harmony” is complementary differences, and it is important to note that Jiang definitely does not advocate egalitarianism. In his view, many status and identity distinctions have deep bases in the nature of the cosmos. Without the complementary differences between male and female, for example, life would be impossible. Following certain classical Confucian sources, he takes this to be a metaphysical and value-laden point, rather than merely an issue of biology (Jiang, 2003: 215). Marriages not founded on the idea of “difference” between men and women lose their sacred significance and, he suggests, as a result are collapsing in the modern world (Jiang, 2003: 227). This is one specific instance of a broader theme, namely the importance of rituals (*li*) and the status/rank distinctions they underwrite (Jiang, 2003: 291-294). Jiang’s vision of society, like his outline of Confucian politics, is markedly hierarchical. He does not explicitly address the degree to which economic inequality can be allowed to track these other forms of inequality; his talk of harmony is certainly meant to suggest that economic differences should not be stark enough to impact on people’s flourishing, but the concrete implications of such references to “harmony” are unclear. Jiang’s emphasis on “ritual” is an important side of his overall project to revive what he calls “political” Confucianism: he argues that the institutional aspects of the Confucian tradition were too quickly abandoned by even the advocates of Confucianism in the twentieth century. He also argues that Confucian rituals are unlike class or other status distinctions that one sees in the West: because rituals are suffused with personal human

feeling (rather than being based, for example, in an impersonal, external legal code), they lead to status differences that are less oppositional and harsh (Jiang, 2003: 322).

According to Jiang, ritual- and harmony-based status distinctions can actually contribute to social justice.

### *Kang Xiaoguang's humane government*

The next two thinkers whom we will consider are both influenced by Jiang Qing, though in the realm of social justice they go in somewhat different directions. We will first consider Kang Xiaoguang. Born in 1963 and initially trained in physics, Kang is a social scientist and public intellectual who has become persuaded that China must replace its communist ideology with a soft authoritarianism based on Confucianism. His writings are passionate and incisive, sparkling with insight and argumentation that draw on many sources. Kang's main Confucian sources include the classical canon (especially Mencius), some Han dynasty developments, Kang Youwei, and Jiang Qing. Kang does not have a pedigree as scholar of Confucianism, and it can sometimes seem that he has seized on Confucianism as a means to his ends, rather than visualizing his ends from the perspective of Confucianism in the first place. This fact hardly makes him irrelevant to our topic, though: as we saw in the section above on the twentieth century, Confucianism can figure in people's thinking about social justice in a variety of complex ways.

Kang occupies an intriguing position in the contemporary Chinese political scene. On the one hand, he is deeply unhappy with failings of the current regime in the area of social justice and is concerned that China's present political system lacks legitimacy. Kang writes of an alliance of political, intellectual, and economic elites that is leading to



increased corruption, inequality, a rise in the power of organized crime, and other social maladies; he sums it up by saying that these elites are robbing the masses (Kang, 2005: xiv). He (quite rightly) sees that such a system cannot possibly be legitimate in any type of Marxist framework. On the other hand, Kang does not see liberal democracy as the cure for these ills. He accepts and seeks to justify authoritarian, one-party rule. His goal, therefore, is to show how a version of authoritarianism can both deal effectively with the social justice problems he has identified, and simultaneously be legitimate in its own terms. His basic idea is to show that a certain type of authoritarian, “cooperativist,” welfare state can be justified through a commitment to Confucianism.

Following Mencius, Kang calls his recommended solution to China’s ills “humane government (renzheng).” He asks: can humane government both preserve China’s current strengths (relatively efficient economic growth, political stability, and national unity) while remedying its shortcomings (social injustice and lack of legitimacy)? Kang’s answer is affirmative. For instance, he says that Confucianism can happily accept many roles for economic markets, and offers the well-known “theory of Confucian capitalism” — discussed earlier in the context of Tu Wei-ming’s support for this idea — as evidence for such a compatibility. Humane government will tackle the social justice problems from two directions: at the level of values, it prioritizes humane concern for others, and at the level of institutions, it builds in a variety of structures that limit inhumanity and injustice (Kang, 2005: xliii). One side of this is a unification of moral, religious, and political values, which, Kang says, enabled traditional Chinese society to be so stable for so long. Other aspects are distinctly modern but supported, according to Kang, by Confucian values. It is not hard to see why the institutions of a welfare state, for

example, are consistent with the classical Confucian commitment to the wellbeing of the masses. Kang also emphasizes the idea of corporatism, according to which different “classes” in society will have a significant degree of internal democracy and “self-rule (*zizhi*),” even though the broader political system will be strictly hierarchical, ruled by a moral-intellectual Confucian elite (Kang, 2005: 99). The result of all this is supposed to be a “blended” and “balanced” polity that promotes growth while protecting the interests of all classes in society. It is Confucian because its basic values (e.g., “humaneness”) and thus legitimacy derive from a Confucian framework.

#### Fan Ruiping’s reconstructionist Confucianism

Fan Ruiping’s *Reconstructionist Confucianism: Rethinking Morality after the West* (Fan, 2010) shares with Jiang Qing and to some degree with Kang Xiaoguang an enthusiasm for Confucian ritual and other fairly specific forms of life. Like Jiang, Fan sets his version of Confucianism up against the “New Confucianism” of Mou Zongsan and others. Fan identifies his “reconstructionist Confucianism” with the “project of reclaiming and articulating moral resources from the Confucian tradition so as to meet contemporary moral and public policy challenges” (Fan, 2010: xi). According to Fan, philosophers like Mou advocate greater changes than Fan himself; in fact, they strive to “recast the Confucian heritage in light of modern Western values.” As a result, Fan alleges that the “Confucian heritage is in great measure colonized by modern Western notions” as the New Confucians engage in “naïve presentism” in order to “read social democratic concepts into Confucianism” (Fan, 2010: 106 n2, 108 n8). This is a strong critique, though not — in my view — a justified one. I have argued elsewhere (Angle,

2009) that Mou does not simply read contemporary Western concerns into Confucianism, but rather presents an argument that Confucianism for its own deep reasons must develop the resources of law and rights in a way that the tradition had previously never fully realized. Just like Fan, in fact, Mou argues for a change to the tradition. He claims to give us good Confucian reasons for the change.

Let us look, then, at key elements of Fan's view of social justice. At the center of Fan's understanding of Confucianism is the family. Family interests are more important than individual interests; shared family decision-making is the model for exercising judgment; and roles within the family are the models for all human relationships. Indeed, Fan says that the main Confucian social ideal is to treat all people as relatives (Fan, 2010: 29). Within the family, some relationships and responsibilities are stronger than others, and these inequalities undergird the broader antiegalitarianism for which Fan argues. He sees the individual development of love and virtues as critical, but these are constituted via roles and relationships with close family members. Many of these same themes have been developed by other scholars in recent years. What is striking and controversial are the subtle normative conclusions that Fan seems to draw from them. For instance, he argues in various places that the "natural" and "normal" type of family is heterosexual. The Confucian notion of the family, he says, "supports a web of sex- and age-specific orders of authority and obligation" (Fan, 2010:, 100; see also 32). It is worth noting, though, that nothing about gender distinctions or roles actually follows from the general picture of families as meaning- and identity-constituting institutions. Only if we add that the specific external forms in which families were traditionally arranged in China continue to have normative priority, can we conclude that a reconstructed Confucianism

should be heteronormative and patriarchal. In his extensive treatment of ritual (*li*), Fan does in fact argue for considerable stability of ritual forms, as well as emphasizing that “Confucian rituals provide the specific content to Confucian ethics. Without attending to the Confucian rituals, Confucian ethics would be too abstract to stand clearly” (Fan, 2010: 171). It is thus possible to read him as arguing that the traditional gender roles must remain constant. Fan’s detailed discussion of when and how ritual forms can change is valuable and deserves more attention than I can give it here. I worry, though, that Fan has tied the values of reconstructionist Confucianism so closely to the practices of traditional Chinese society that he risks contemporary irrelevance. Furthermore, he risks endorsing forms of discrimination that are increasingly rejected around the world and that have no deep justification in Confucian values (as Sin-ye Chan and others have shown; see Chan 2000).

It is impossible to read very many pages of Fan’s book without noting his strong endorsement of private property and capitalism. Part of the context, quite explicitly, is his critique of socialist China, but what makes Fan’s position unusual is that he tries to ground arguments against even modest welfare-state policies in an alleged Confucian support for free-market capitalism. In pursuit of this ambitious goal, Fan makes some points that are well-taken; certainly the often-heard claim that Confucianism is flatly opposed to commercial activity and profit is mistaken. But in trying to read support for a modern, private-property economy back into the Confucian classics, he stretches the texts beyond recognition. For example, consider Mencius’s famous statement that common people without *hengchan* — typically translated as constant livelihood — will not have *hengxin*, or constant heartminds. (In contrast, virtuous people will have constant

heartminds even in straightened circumstances, a sentiment that is confirmed elsewhere in the text.) Fan proposes to read *hengchan* instead as “private property,” which then allows him to conclude that Mencius believes that a publically owned economic system will lead to “more immoral or even tragic outcomes” (Fan, 2010: 65-6), since those without private property will stop at nothing. The problems with this reading, however, are numerous. Most basically, “heng” simply does not mean “private.” Second, Fan acknowledges that even in Mencius’s idealized “well-field” system, the land that commoners cultivated for themselves could not be bought or sold: it belonged to the ruler. Finally, reading “hengchan” as “private property” renders the reasoning of the rest of the passage and the meaning of “hengxin” otiose. I think that we must conclude that Fan has overreached. Free-market capitalism — and modern socialism or welfare-state capitalism, for that matter — are simply too different from the socio-economic arrangements considered in the ancient Confucian texts. It is quite plausible to say that some form of capitalism is *consistent* with the Confucian tradition, though many of the views we have already examined here argue that there is considerably more concern for a welfare-state-like “safety net” than Fan is willing to acknowledge. In any event, Fan’s stronger claim that Confucianism *requires* free-market capitalism is simply unconvincing.

#### Sor-hoon Tan’s Synthesis of Dewey and Confucius

The contemporary views we have examined so far all share a significant anti-egalitarianism, but not all contemporary Confucian thinkers downplay the value of equality. A nice example of this comes in the work of Singaporean philosopher Sor-hoon

Tan. In *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction* (Tan, 2004) and in more recent essays, Tan has endeavored

to offer East Asians who are increasingly open to diverse global cultural influences a way out of the false dilemma of having to choose between their Confucian heritage and a democratic way of life. Confucian democracy modernizes Confucianism with democratic values and modifies democracy with Confucian concerns. (Tan, 2009: 1)

Tan's approach depends on finding a version of democratic thinking which is both attractive and comparatively resonant with Confucian concerns, and also ensuring that the resulting dialogue between democracy and Confucianism is genuinely open and creative, rather than simply reading the values of one onto the other. She suggests that John Dewey's understanding of democracy, which is an ethical and social ideal constituted by values of community, equality, and liberty, serves much better as a partner with Confucianism than other, more institution-driven definitions of democracy. It is the constitutive role of equality in this picture that makes her work so interesting from the perspective of social justice.

Two things need to be clarified before going further. First, one who does not find the ideal of democracy at least somewhat attractive will not be drawn into Tan's approach. To be sure, much of what she says about Confucianism could stand independently as an interpretation of the Confucian texts, but a key premise of her argument is that Confucianism is not sealed off from other value systems, nor does commitment to Confucianism seal one off from viewing and valuing things from other vantage points. Even in classical China, people were not confined to a single view, as the cross-pollination among putatively "Daoist," "Confucian," "Mohist," and "Legalist" texts makes clear. To the extent that one sees the idea that "we Chinese are and must be

only Confucians” in the background of the writings of Fan Ruiping or Jiang Qing, Tan challenges it on both factual and methodological grounds. Second, to say that equality is a constitutive value of democracy is not to say that democracy demands the kind of extreme egalitarianism that eliminates all inequalities. Tan writes that “The debate about equality as a value is over which inequalities are justifiable and which are to be ignored, avoided, or eliminated” (Tan, 2009: 13). Why is significant equality important to democracy? Tan says:

.without equality, members of a community could not participate meaningfully in governing themselves, and whatever negative liberty is permitted would be available in reality only to the rich and powerful. (Tan, 2009: 19)

Furthermore, since Deweyan democracy is committed to the moral growth of individuals and the flourishing of community, it is relevant that too much inequality would stifle such possibilities.

With these points in mind, we can now turn to Tan’s specific arguments concerning equality. One important thread of her argument is summarizing the concerns with significantly unequal distribution that one can find in the classical Confucian corpus. Following Joseph Chan’s analysis (on which see the previous chapter of this volume), she begins by noting the roles played by a principle of sufficiency (the masses must have sufficient means to provide for themselves and their families) and a principle of priority to the worst off (Tan, 2009: 16). She goes beyond Chan, though, to argue that at least according to one key *Analects* passage (6:4), need rather merit is prioritized in the distribution of resources. Tan also finds evidence in other early Confucian sources that inequalities of virtue and merit are not supposed to be translated directly into equivalent inequalities of distribution. She adds:

A person with the Confucian virtue of ren would certainly share what she has earned with her abilities and merits with those who are worse off than herself, even when they do not fall below “sufficiency” level, and spend it on various projects aimed at improving people’s lives (and not just in material terms). This will lead to a more egalitarian social outcome than a straightforward meritocracy, or even one tempered only by the sufficiency principle and priority for the badly off. (Tan, 2009: 18)

In short, the classical sources offer various reasons to resist wide disparities between the haves and the have-nots.

The other side of Tan’s argument is to critique rigid notions of meritocracy — both in theory and in Chinese practice — and to suggest an alternative understanding of the Confucian social ideal. She highlights some of the well-known problems with meritocracy. For example, it is difficult to see how examinations can be fair, given the often unjustified differences in resources and education that underlie candidates’ preparations; similarly, rewarding those who are more capable will tend toward increasing inequality and increasing unfairness of the system, with respect to opportunities to improve for those individuals coming from families that have been less successful in the past. Tan emphasizes that these are not just marginal problems with the practice of meritocracy, but fundamental challenges to the very idea of meritocracy, since great material inequality would mean that even talented have-nots will fail to successfully compete with mediocre elites, thus leading meritocracy to defeat itself (Tan, 2009: 14). What can be done about this? Tan’s answer is that the Confucian social ideal should not be understood as demanding a rigid social hierarchy. Rather,

The social roles in ideal Confucian societies are unequal only to the extent required by functional differentiation. Inequalities are domain-specific and there can be no single roster presenting a totalistic ranking from superior to inferior.... An individual’s abilities



and accomplishments vis-à-vis others also change as she goes through different stages of her life, during which she learns, catches up with and even overtakes others in her expertise, and in turn will one day be overtaken by others. The complex crisscrossing and overlaying of diverse and changing inequalities prevent a society from becoming stratified. (Tan, 2009: 16)

This notion of distinct and dynamic inequalities bears some comparison to Michael Walzer's idea of "complex equality," according to which inequalities in one realm are not unjust so long as they do not translate into inequalities in other realms (Walzer 1983). Tan's claim, remember, is not that Confucians did or should endorse complete egalitarianism. Their valuing of equality can be seen in their rejection of some kinds or degrees of inequality. To the extent that Confucians value equality, they can readily embrace a Deweyan kind of social democracy, with its constitutive value of equality. We can also view this from the other direction: to the extent that one is committed to the development of democracy (which depends on a degree of equality), one has an incentive to develop Confucianism along the lines that Tan has emphasized.

#### Daniel Bell and "Left Confucianism"

My final case in this section is what the Canadian political theorist Daniel Bell has started calling "left Confucianism." Bell says that "Left Confucianism attempts to combine the socialist with the Confucian tradition in a way that allows Confucianism to enrich and change socialism" (Bell, 2010: 93). We saw in the previous section considerable interest, earlier in the twentieth century, for the idea that Confucianism and socialism might be mutually supportive. In recent decades in the People's Republic of China, both academics and public intellectuals have discussed the possibility of

reconciling socialism and Confucianism, though the reflections have tended to either be very abstract or somewhat superficial. It makes sense, then, to take Bell's suggestions seriously.

Before looking at their substance, though, it will first be helpful to clarify the nature of "left Confucianism." Bell himself seems a bit conflicted. In some places, he explicitly refers to it as an "interpretation" of Confucianism — an interpretation that was advocated both by historical Confucians (such as the seventeenth-century scholar Huang Zongxi; see (Bell, 2008: xv)) and by contemporary figures (here he references Jiang Qing). In other places, he says things like this:

To the extent that Confucianism will be appropriate for the modern world, it needs to be reconciled with left-egalitarian values.... The future lies in some sort of 'left Confucianism' that combines Confucian and socialist values (Bell, 2008: 178).

In this context, "Confucian leftism" might be at least as appropriate as "left Confucianism." Indeed, the key tenets that Bell puts forward are left-egalitarian ideas that have been inflected by Confucianism, rather than the other way around.

Bell lists six characteristics (not meant to be exhaustive) of left Confucianism, all of them "traditional socialist values" (Bell, 2010: 93). The ones most relevant to our concerns are "concern for the disadvantaged," "concern for basic material well-being," "solidarity with strangers," and "global justice." We have already seen that the first two of these have regularly been taken to be central to the Confucian conception of justice. Bell adds some significant observations. For example, he says that according to Confucians, "being disadvantaged is not just about lacking money. Equally serious is the absence of family members and friends" (Bell, 2010: 94). More importantly,

Confucians are realists in the sense that they take for granted that power

relationships and social hierarchies will exist in all large-scale societies. They worry less than Western liberals do about these relationships and hierarchies, particularly when they are based on age and achievement. If a choice must be made between social and economic equality, then Confucians would choose economic equality and make social inequality work to support it. (Bell, 2010: 95)

As was the case with Tan, when Bell speaks of economic equality, he is not referring to complete equality, but to the idea that inequalities must be moderate and justified. Similar to Jiang Qing, he holds that the Confucian idea of shared ritual is key to enabling social inequality to support (relative) economic equality:

“By participating in common rituals, those with more status develop feelings of care for the others and thus become more willing to do things in their economic interest” (Bell, 2010; see also Bell, 2008: ch. 3).

“Solidarity with strangers” and “global justice” are central socialist values; many leftist movements have in fact insisted on very strong versions of these ideas. One contribution that Confucianism can make would be to moderate what might otherwise be an overly radical objective. For instance, Confucians do not aim at a universal solidarity in which everyone is treated equally, but rather a “graded love” in which strangers are treated well, but not with the degree of love shared among family members. Confucian attention on the family informs global justice, too: Bell says that left Confucians would insist that the interests of ancestors and descendants be considered, rather than narrowly focusing on the interests of the current generation. This could potentially have benefits for complex issues like climate change and historic preservation (Bell, 2010: 96-7). Of course, there are real questions about how either of these ideas is to be implemented; one of the persistent complaints about Confucianism in the last century is that it does a poor job of adequately motivating solidarity with and concern for strangers. Some have

charged that Confucianism is directly responsible for contemporary China's on-going struggle with corruption, though exponents of Confucianism reply that only a superficial or perverted form of Confucianism would could be employed to justify corruption (e.g., Guo, 2007; Liu, 2007). In any event, and no matter whether we think of Bell's topic as Left Confucianism or Confucian Leftism, it seems clear that the project of bringing Confucianism and socialism into dialogue has the potential to bear significant fruit.

## Conclusion

The figures we have just canvassed do not exhaust Confucian-inspired thinking about social justice in the contemporary world. Another important thinker is Joseph Chan, author of the previous chapter in this volume, who has begun to limn his own contemporary Confucian views of social justice in recent essays (Chan 2003; Chan 2008). Still, the theories we have examined here provide the general outlines of contemporary Confucian thinking about social justice. The central trope is harmony: differences among individuals are accepted (and even embraced), so long as these differences contribute to both individual and social flourishing, and as long as the differences are not too great. Confucian social justice thus can coexist with different sorts of hierarchies, so long as the hierarchies are open, flexible, and dynamic.

Why is it important that any social inequalities have this limited character? Tan puts a stress on the constitutive role of equality in democracy, but even though this is correct, it is not a *Confucian* reason, and thus one might wonder whether Confucians really are obligated to limit inequality in the way just described. An alternative argument would stress the fundamental Confucian commitment to each individual's moral

transformation. Each person can, in principle, become a sage; all of us should strive to better ourselves. Excessive inequalities — whether social, political, or economic — would stand in the way of individual moral improvement. This is not to say that the downtrodden can never reach great moral heights, but it is certainly the case that systematic oppression limits opportunities for moral growth (arguably, for the oppressors as well as for the oppressed) (Tessman 2005). Confucianism must therefore oppose oppression. Historically, Confucianism has tended to stress individual moral education and be less attuned to systematic problems. We see this also in several of the authors just discussed: Jiang Qing, for example, seems to think of moral education as the main contribution of Confucianism to avoiding alienation and market failures. Confucians need to step back from the particular and notice — and then attend to — challenges to the realization of their ideals that are rooted in broad social, economic, and political institutions. This critical attitude must encompass the “ritual” realm. Most Confucians correctly see the recognition of ritual’s importance as one of the great insight of the tradition, but ritual is also vulnerable to rigidity and oppression. Only by embracing an activist, social-critical role, can Confucians today adequately justify their stance on social justice — both to themselves as Confucians and to whatever other dialogue partners they engage with in our dynamic, pluralistic social world.

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