

Theorizing Confucian Virtue Politics

Surprisingly little is known about what ancient Confucian thinkers struggled with in their own social and political contexts and how these struggles contributed to the establishment and further development of classical Confucian political theory. Leading scholar of comparative political theory Sungmoon Kim offers a systematic philosophical account of the political theories of Mencius and Xunzi, investigating both their agreements and disagreements as the champions of the Confucian Way against the backdrop of the prevailing realpolitik of the late Warring States period. Together, they contributed to the formation of Confucian virtue politics, in which concerns about political order and stability and concerns about moral character and moral enhancement are deeply intertwined. By presenting their political philosophies in terms of constitutionalism, Kim shows how they each developed a way to authorize the ruler's legitimate use of power in domestic and interstate politics in ways consistent with their distinctive accounts of human nature.

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The Political Philosophy of Mencius and Xunzi

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For Sejin

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Preface

This book has a long and complicated origin. After graduating from college, I attended the Academy of Korean Studies, a national research center for humanities and social sciences in South Korea, in order to further my studies in Confucian philosophy and political thought, while improving my classical Chinese. Although my original goal at the Academy was to study the modern implications of Confucianism in relation to liberalism and democracy, I was instantly drawn to the rich history of Korean Neo-Confucian political thought during the Chosŏn 朝鮮 dynasty (1392–1910) and in the end decided to write my MA thesis on the political conflict between two towering Korean Neo-Confucian scholars in the sixteenth century – Yi Hwang 李滉 (1502–1571), better known by his pen name T'oegye 退溪, and Cho Sik 曹植 (1501–1572), also known as Nammyŏng 南冥. While writing my thesis (entitled “The Politics of the Neo-Confucian Literati and the Confucian Scholars’ Charisma during the Chosŏn Period”), which in part aimed to investigate the enormous moral power held by the Korean Neo-Confucian scholars vis-à-vis the king from the perspective of “moral charisma,” I realized that Korean Neo-Confucians had been profoundly inspired by Mencius, especially his ideas of the “Great Man” (*da zhangfu* 大丈夫) and “outstanding person” (*haojie zhi shi* 豪傑之士), and this realization impelled me to develop my theoretical framework in reference to Mencius’s moral and political thought (as well as Max Weber’s theory of charisma). Shortly after, when I became a PhD student at the University of Maryland at College Park (UMD), I took a course on Nietzsche and Freud and decided to write for the term paper about Mencius’s political thought, more precisely his view of a Confucian scholar’s moral charisma as a source of political liberty, against the backdrop of the political psychology of *Realpolitik* drawn from Nietzsche and Freud’s political and psychological insights. After several years of revision, this paper was published by the journal *History of Political Thought* and Chapter 4 of this book, though thoroughly revised and

substantially expanded, is based on this paper dating back to my second year of graduate school at UMD.

Upon finding a full-time faculty position, however, my most pressing concern was to develop a political theory of Confucian democracy, my long-time passion, and this preoccupation with contemporary Confucian political theory prevented me from developing a book-length research project on early Confucian political thought, though I continued to read, write, and publish on Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, the three giants of classical Confucianism, virtually without any contact with scholars in Chinese philosophy and sinology. It was only after I joined the City University of Hong Kong in 2009 and became acquainted with scholars such as Philip J. Ivanhoe, Eric Hutton, Eirik Harris, Bryan Van Norden, and David Wong, among others, that I was introduced to the recent “analytical turn” of Chinese philosophy as well as the virtue-ethical and moral-psychological interpretation of Confucianism. Frankly, my initial interaction with analytic Chinese philosophers was not always productive. We scholars tend to welcome cross-/multi-disciplinary studies that challenge the traditional academic disciplines but we are rarely told how difficult it is to have a full-fledged and meaningful conversation or understanding across existing disciplinary boundaries and how frustrating it can be to have one’s position understood, let alone accepted, by those outside his or her immediate academic discipline. As a political theorist trained in political science from the beginning of college life, it is not always easy to communicate with, learn from, and (for better or worse) influence scholars trained in ethics, moral psychology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and logic, even when we all deal with the same classical Chinese texts. Oftentimes, as I have learned, our different background disciplinary trainings critically determine the concepts that guide our research and the different types of literature to which we aim to contribute casually lead us to rely on vastly different points of reference. For example, where political theorists are interested in subjects such as power, leadership, regulation, sanction, political order, and interstate relations, philosophers are drawn to questions concerning desire, mind, human nature, moral sentiment, moral motivation, moral judgment, and moral character. Where political theorists believe it is important to consider the political context in which the conversation between A and B is taking place in figuring out the purpose of their conversation and its practical consequences relative to the interlocutors’ political positions, philosophers tend to pay (far more) attention to the mode of moral reasoning in which A and B are engaged and how moral judgment or moral education is attained by undergoing a certain psychological process.

The “good” thing about the field of Chinese philosophy, which is commonly considered to include the history of Chinese political thought, is that this multi-/cross-disciplinary demand is not a mere option but a must. Put differently, unless one develops a certain level of philological skill sufficient for accessing the classical texts, understands and is capable of employing philosophical languages, and becomes reasonably familiar with the historical and sociological

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facts about ancient China, it is technically impossible to produce a work that can appeal to the students of Chinese philosophy. In this regard, I am not fully confident that this book is of the quality that can satisfy both political scientists who want to learn about classical Confucian political thought and the experts in classical Chinese texts and philosophers who deem ethical and moral psychological questions far more important than questions concerning governance and its undergirding institutional structures. All I can say is that this book is the outcome of a years-long engagement of a political theorist with philosophers, philologists, and sinologists, and I hope that it presents something not only acceptable but also appealing to them and worthy of serious engagement.

In writing this book, I have incurred numerous debts. As was the case with my earlier books, I benefited immensely from my daily, intermittent conversations with my colleagues at the Center for East Asian and Comparative Philosophy and the Department of Public Policy of the City University of Hong Kong (CityU). Although many of them have recently left CityU, I would like to express my deep gratitude to Youngsun Back, Ruiping Fan, Eirik Harris, P. J. Ivanhoe, Richard Kim, and Hsin-wen Lee. The following scholars have discussed with me some seminal ideas developed in this book and I am grateful for their comments and friendship: Steve Angle, Elton Chan, Joseph Chan, Mark Csikszentmihalyi, Fred Dallmayr, Loubna El Amine, Owen Flanagan, Eric Hutton, Michael Ing, Chenyang Li, Hui-Chieh Loy, Susan Shim, Kwong-loi Shun, Sor-hoon Tan, Justin Tiwald, Bryan Van Norden, and David Wong. Special thanks are due to my two Korean PhD students, Kyung Rok Kwon and Subin Lee, who read the early draft of the manuscript and offered me some critical comments. I am also grateful to my teachers at the Academy of Korean Studies who introduced me to Confucian philosophy and the history of Korean political thought, including Hyongjo Han, Jin-deok Choi, Byoung-ryon Park, and the late Hyong-hyo Kim, as well as Jim Glass at UMD, for whose class the first draft of Chapter 4 was originally written. Finally, I would like to thank Robert Dreesen, my editor at Cambridge University Press, for his encouragement and support.

All six main chapters have been extensively revised and substantially expanded from my earlier publications. It is important to note, however, that this book is not a mere collection of previously published essays as I have both revamped many of my earlier arguments, often based on my new interpretation of the classical texts, and added more materials in critical engagement with Chinese philosophers, ethicists, and philologists. Therefore, this book supersedes my arguments expressed in my previous publications. Chapter 1 has been substantively revised and expanded from “Politics and Interest in Early Confucianism,” *Philosophy East and West* 64:2 (2014), pp. 425–448 and I am grateful to the University of Hawai’i Press for permission to reprint the essay here. An earlier and much shorter version of Chapter 2 was previously published as “Confucian Constitutionalism: Mencius and Xunzi on Virtue,

Ritual, and Royal Transmission,” *Review of Politics* 73:3 (2011), pp. 371–399 and I am grateful to the University of Notre Dame (via Cambridge University Press) for permission to reproduce this essay. Though Chapter 3 is newly written, substantive portions have been reproduced from “Before and after Ritual: Two Accounts of *Li* as Virtue in Early Confucianism,” *Sophia: International Journal for Philosophy of Religion, Metaphysical Theology and Ethics* 51:2 (2012), pp. 195–210 and I am grateful to Springer Nature for permission to reprint the relevant portion from the essay. An earlier version of Chapter 4 was published as “The Origin of Political Liberty in Confucianism: A Nietzschean Interpretation,” *History of Political Thought* 29:3 (2008), pp. 393–415 and I am grateful to Imprint Academic for permission to reproduce this essay. Chapter 5 has been thoroughly revised and substantially expanded from “Between Good and Evil: Xunzi’s Reinterpretation of the Hegemonic Rule as Decent Governance,” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 12:1 (2013), pp. 73–92 and I am grateful to Springer Nature for permission to reuse the essay here. Finally, some portions of Chapter 6 have been drawn from “Confucian Humanitarian Intervention? Toward Democratic Theory,” *Review of Politics* 79:2 (2017), pp. 187–213 and I am grateful to the University of Notre Dame (via Cambridge University Press) for permission to reprint the relevant part from this essay.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my wife Sejin for her love and support. Without her understanding and encouragement, I would not have been able to finish this book, which has been in the making for a long time since the year we got married. I dedicate this book to her.

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Conventions

Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of the *Lunyu* 論語 (*The Analects of Confucius*) have been adapted from *The Analects*, trans. D. C. Lau (New York: Penguin, 1979). I have also consulted *Confucius: Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2003) and *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, trans. Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998). For the *Mengzi* 孟子, I have quoted, unless otherwise noted, from *Mencius*, trans. D. C. Lau (New York: Penguin, 1970) and consulted *Mencius*, trans. Irene Bloom and ed. Philip J. Ivanhoe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) as well as *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Bryan W. Van Norden (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2008). For the *Xunzi* 荀子, I have quoted, unless otherwise noted, from *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, trans. Eric L. Hutton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014) and consulted *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, 3 vols., trans. John Knoblock (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988, 1990, 1994). Chapter and section numbers follow Knoblock for the sake of consistency with my previous publications.

For the occurrence of important terms of art or phrases, I have provided a translation followed by the Pinyin Romanization and the original Chinese character(s) in parenthesis – for example, “virtue” (*de* 德) or “revering the king and expelling the barbarians” (*zun wang rang yi* 尊王攘夷). In some special cases involving terms whose English translations do not effectively convey their original meanings, I have generally used their Pinyin Romanization alone, even though I follow the aforementioned convention in their first occurrences and wherever necessary in the given context. Such special terms include *ren* (benevolent/human-hearted), *yi* (righteous/social norms), *li* (ritual/ritual propriety), *zhi* (wisdom), *ba* (hegemon), and *badao* (hegemonic rule).

Chinese characters 禮 (ritual), 利 (profit), and 理 (good order or principle) are all transliterated as *li* following the Pinyin system but I distinguished them by adding * for 利 (i.e., *li**) and ** for 理 (i.e., *li***). Thus, unless otherwise indicated, throughout this book, *li* refers to 禮.

Following Bloom, I transliterated the name of the last king of the Shang dynasty 紂 as Zhòu and distinguished it from the name of one of the ancient Chinese dynasties, 周, by rendering it as Zhou.