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Author(s)	Li, Chenyang
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Equality and Inequality in Confucianism

Chenyang Li

Abstract This essay studies equality and inequality in Confucianism. By studying Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi, and other classic thinkers, I argue that Confucian equality is manifested in two forms. Numerical equality is founded in the Mencian belief that every person is born with the same moral potential and the Xunzian notion that all people have the same *xing* and the same potential for moral cultivation. It is also manifested in the form of role-based equality. Proportional equality, however, is the main notion of equality in Confucian philosophy. Proportional equality is realized in moral, economic, and political realms. On the basis of these notions of Confucian equality, I propose two Confucian political principles for contemporary society. The first is the inclusive principle of general election by citizenry, and the second is the exclusive principle of qualification for public offices.

Keywords Confucianism. Equality. Inequality. Justice . Political principle

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While various dimensions of Confucian philosophy have been discussed extensively in recent times, the notion of equality has yet to receive adequate attention. In this essay, I examine the Confucian view on equality and inequality in economic, moral, and political dimensions. I argue that, for the most part, the Confucian notion can be characterized as proportional equality, which encompasses both equality and inequality. Toward the end of this essay, I will also explore implications of this notion for modern society.

Few people today question the value and validity of equality, a cornerstone of modern civilization. Disagreements, however, exist with respect to various related issues. Does equality have intrinsic value or mere instrumental value? For example, contrary to many people's belief, Harry Frankfurt has argued, in ways that I think consistent with the Confucian view, that equality is not intrinsically valuable

Chenyang Li (*)

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, HSS 06-11, Nanyang Technological University,
14 Nanyang Drive, Nanyang, Singapore 639620

[e-mail: cyl@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:cyl@ntu.edu.sg)

(Frankfurt 1997). There is also considerable disagreement regarding specific terms of equality. There is the notion of moral equality, i.e., equal respect, equal worth, and equal dignity of all human beings. There is the notion of political equality, i.e., all people having the same civil and political rights. And there is the notion of economic equality, i.e., people being entitled to equal distribution of social wealth. Of distributive equality, we can also talk about equality of opportunity, equality of resources, and equality of welfare. I will not delve into these issues here as there is already a vast literature. The point I would like to make in order to set the context for my essay is that, no matter what kind of equality one embraces, it cannot be realized without producing some form or forms of inequality. For instance, promoting equality of resources will result in inequality of welfare; people who start with equal resources usually end up with different levels of welfare, due to various reasons. Promoting equality of opportunity will inevitably end up with inequality in outcome as people are naturally endowed in varied ways. In this sense, “equal opportunity” is a license for inequality in outcome and probably welfare. While inequality does not necessarily produce equality, any form of equality inevitably comes with inequality of other forms, because there is a necessary incompatibility between applying different concepts of equality in the same dimension, such as numerical equality versus proportional equality, as will be elaborated in this essay. As A.T. Nuyen has elegantly put, “no matter what X is, in order to maintain the equality of X, the chips will have to fall unevenly, or unequally, elsewhere” (Nuyen 2001: 67). Without inequality, no equality can be achieved. Therefore, inequality is the currency of equality; it is either the price we pay or the reward we reap in pursuing equality.

In addition to accepting that any form of equality always comes with some form(s) of inequality, we must also realize that certain forms of inequality are not only morally legitimate but also play an important positive role in a good society. As Davis and Moore argued a long time ago, there is a “universal necessity” which calls forth stratification in any social system, and that inequality (“stratification”) serves a purpose by motivating people into performing needed, but otherwise undesirable, jobs (Davis and Moore 1944). I would quickly add that it also gives people incentives to do better than others even on desirable jobs. Certain forms of inequality among citizens can be necessary for a healthy and well-functioning society. For instance, inequality in wealth gives people incentives to strive for the better in economic status, not only better than others, but also in the sense of overcoming oneself. Inequality in reward to people of varied desert is required by a common sense of justice. While equality can be a good thing to pursue, inequality of certain kinds is necessary, legitimate, and beneficial to society at large. Therefore, inequality should not be taken as an inherent evil in society, even though we probably should not promote inequality for the sake of inequality. For those advocating equality, it is important to consider not only what equality of any single dimension (be it of opportunity, or of resources, or something else) to promote, but also how to balance different demands of equality and consequences of inequality in order to build a good society. In other words, it is a matter of harmonizing various values for a good society.

In discussing Confucian equality, I follow Aristotle in differentiating numerical equality from proportional equality (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1130b–1132b; Aristotle 1962: 116–123). Numerical equality means treating people indiscriminately without consideration to individual circumstances. For example, on a national census, each

person counts as exactly one. On a long-distance bus, each person is given exactly one seat, regardless of the person's age, gender, size, or social status. Proportional equality means treating all relevant persons in relation to their due in relevant aspects. In Aristotle, this is the principle "to each according to his desert" (Aristotle 1962: 118). For instance, in a factory where workers are paid according to their productivity, each worker is paid by the amount and quality of his or her products. Person *x* is paid twice as much as Person *y* when *x* has produced twice as much as *y*. Proportional equality as understood in this essay, however, extends beyond a simple "contribution-reward" model. A person's due is what he deserves or is appropriately accorded to him; it is not based solely on what he has contributed or earned. We may say, for example, that in a good society a physically disabled person is to be duly provided with special facilities even though he may have not done anything to earn it. Understood this way, proportional equality demands that society provide special facilities to the disabled, but not to people who are not disabled. This apparently unequal treatment is nevertheless equality in the proportional sense. From the sole perspective of numerical equality, proportional equality is a form of inequality, because it allows varied treatments and often varied allocations of resources. Conceptually, however, we should not confuse proportional equality with inequality. Proportional equality aims to achieve a form of equality, rather than inequality, while it brings about inequality as a by-product, whereas some inequalities (e.g., arbitrary discrimination against people) are just inequality, not by-products of proportional equality.

Let me note without ambivalence that Confucianism embraces both numerical and proportional equality, but in different dimensions of society. Numerical equality in Confucianism can be found mainly in two areas. The first is that all human beings are endowed with the same capacity for moral cultivation, as has been widely discussed. Mencius famously argued that all human beings possess the four beginnings of the moral qualities of *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* (*Mencius* 2A6). Because of these natural endowments, he endorsed the statement that "everyone has the capacity to become a Yao or a Shun (sage)" (*Mencius* 6B22). Mencius's view should not be over-interpreted, however. For one thing, he was talking about people's capacity to become morally good, not about technical talents in arts or sports or even working skills. In teaching about the Way of Yao and Shun, Mencius was discussing such moral virtues as "*xiao* (filial piety)" and "*ti* (respectfulness towards the older)" (Lau: 172). He held that people have the same potential to become morally good. Furthermore, equal moral endowment does not mean that every person actually becomes equally good. Moral potential is not realized moral quality. In Mencius's words, "seek and you will find it; let go and you will lose it" (Lau: 163). These four potential qualities are inborn, even though one could "lose" them if they are not cultivated, just as a plant withers without proper nurturing. Finally, even with the same endowment, people of various circumstances may need different kinds of effort for moral refinement. Potential equality does not necessarily translate into actual equality. In real life, people are not cultivated equally in morality.

Though often taken to be Mencius's opposite on theories of human nature (*xing*),¹ Xunzi also endorsed numerical equality in this regard. In the *Xing E* Chapter of the

¹ "*Xing*" is subject to different interpretations. I use "human nature" mainly for the sake of simplicity.

Xunzi, Xunzi not only maintained that all people, sages explicitly included, share the same *xing* but also that every one has the same potential to become morally cultivated like the ancient sage Yu. Confucius did not talk much about human nature (*xing*).² He, however, did say that *xing* is similar across individuals and that it is social practice that takes them to different routes (*Analects* 17.2; TTC: 2524). “*Xing*” in this context points primarily to the moral potential of humanity.

This notion of equality in Confucianism is not a value to be pursued. It is rather a postulate or an “ontological commitment” to serve as the grounding of Confucian moral metaphysics.³ Donald Munro has called this kind of equality “natural” equality—“the common attributes or characteristics with which all men [sic.] are born”—and it is descriptive in nature (Munro 1969: 2). Today, equality in moral potential can serve as a foundation for a basic level of human dignity.⁴ Obviously, if every person has the potential to become a moral being, and if being moral is a positive human value, then, *prima facie*, every person deserves a certain level of respect.

Again, this belief in equal moral potential implies neither that all people will become equally moral nor that all people have the same technical talents to be cultivated. Confucians are not naïve and they do not assume every person is born with equal potential in technical talents. Confucian education, however, contains both moral education and education for technical skills such as writing, archery, and arithmetic. How can Confucians justify a philosophy of “education regardless of classes” as Confucius has advocated? One possible explanation is this. Even though people are uneven in talent—Confucius recognized that “only the very wise and very stupid never change” (*Analects* 17.3; TTC, 2524)—before people are given an opportunity to try, no one knows who has what and how much. Therefore, “education regardless of classes” should be understood as a philosophy of equal opportunity for education. It holds that everyone should have the opportunity, not that everyone should be equally educated.

For this reason, the Confucian philosophy of education has helped promote the equality of opportunity for education in history. According to the *Wangzhi* Chapter of the *Book of Rites*, in ancient China the selection of scholar-officials began at the level of local district (*xiang*). Top scholars at that level were awarded the title of “Excellent Scholar” (*xin shi* 秀士). When they were selected at an upper level, they were given the title of “Select Scholar” (*xuan shi* 選士) and had the responsibility of teaching others. Those who excelled as “Select Scholars” were further educated to become “Outstanding Scholars” (*jun shi* 俊士). The highest achievers were “Accomplished Scholars” (*zao shi* 造士). Both “Outstanding Scholars” and “Accomplished Scholars” were given the privilege of exemption from draft to labor for the state (TTC: 1342). The text also promotes equal opportunity in selecting governmental officials. It says that for all good talents to serve in government, applicants should be discussed (*lun* 論) and examined (*bian* 辨) before employed for such posts. If they prove themselves on the job, they should be given appropriate titles and compensated accordingly (TTC: 1327). Even though the process

² In the *Analects* 5.13, his disciple Zigong said that they did not hear Confucius talking about human nature (TTC, 2474).

³ On the basis of the four beginnings, Mencius insists that humans must cultivate themselves to become moral. He does not deal with the “is-ought” problem in his argument.

⁴ In her fine article, Ranjoo Herr has called this notion “the Confucian idea of equality” (Herr 2010: 266; italics original). The Confucian conception of equality I develop here is much broader.

was open to everyone,⁵ it is obvious that in reality the very poor could not possibly have had a fair chance. This shows that the efficacy of the Confucian philosophy of equal opportunity for education is dependent on the success of another philosophy in Confucianism, namely “enriching the people (*fumin* 富民).” As far as Confucian philosophy is concerned, however, everyone had the same opportunity to move up the social ladder if they excelled at learning and work.

In addition to equality in moral potential, the second aspect of numerical equality in Confucianism is found in people’s roles in society. This is not to say that all people have the same role; rather it is that the same roles, such as father or husband, are given the same kind of responsibilities and entitlements. We may call such equality “role-based numerical equality.” For example, Confucius promoted his ideal of “rectification of names” by insisting that “the ruler should behave as a ruler, the minister minister, the father father, and the son son” (*Analects* 12.11; TTC: 2503–2504). In Confucianism, people’s roles are defined specifically with respective obligations. For instance, Mencius insisted that there should be affection between father and son, rightness between ruler and subject, functional distinctions between husband and wife, precedence between the old and the young, and trustworthiness between friends (*Mencius* 3A4; TTC, 2705).

In two ways, this “role-based numerical equality” differs from the first area of Confucian numerical equality. First, it is universal but not generalized, in that it applies to people in the same role universally without requiring people in other roles to be obliged the same way. The responsibility for each role is the same regardless of the person’s other social roles. All fathers have the responsibility to raise, educate, and care for their children; all children have the responsibility of respecting and honoring their parents. These requirements do not change for people who occupy special positions in society, although they discharge these duties in varied ways according to circumstances. In the same social role, everyone is equal in entitlement and responsibility. Second, “role-based numerical equality” is a stipulation in social ethics. It has a value component and serves a normative function. That is to say, it implies that all people in the same role should fulfill the same kind of responsibilities. Unlike the potential to become morally cultivated, which people are born with equally, people are not actually performing their respective duties equally. Moral code must be enforced. In comparison with proportional equality, however, numerical equality plays only a minor role in Confucianism. Proportional equality, or “equality relative to people’s due,” is a fundamental principle in Confucianism. It is the cornerstone for economic, moral, and social equality in Confucian philosophy. Now, we turn to Confucian proportional equality.⁶

Confucian proportional equality rests on the belief that an orderly and functional society must be one with effective divisions of labor, and that with divisions of labor comes social stratification. Divisions of labor, however, are not arbitrary; they should be based on people’s abilities. While Confucius advocated the principle of “education regardless of classes,” he also realized that people have different natural endowments

⁵ The text does not specify that candidates must be male. In ancient times, “male-only” was an unspoken assumption, and therefore there is gender inequality. Today, however, it is no longer an issue, as women are widely accepted.

⁶ A.T. Nuyen has attempted to develop a similar conception of equality in Confucianism, which he calls “vertical equality” (see Nuyen 2001).

and exert varied levels of dedication in cultivation. Consequently, there are always variations in the levels of people's cultivation, and there are always upper and lower classes in society. Social stratification is a constant reality in human society.

This is not to say that people belong to different social stations by birth, or there is no need to educate everyone. Confucius emphasized personal effort. The *Zhongyong* records Confucius stating, "If other people can get things done by one portion of effort, we exert one hundred portions of effort. If other people can get things done by one hundred portions of effort, we exert one thousand portions of effort. If we really can do this, we become enlightened even if we are born stupid" (TTC: 1632). A person born with natural talents who exerts no serious effort will not succeed; a person without a particular natural talent who does exert serious effort may still get ahead. That does not preclude the fact that people end up in varied levels of achievements, however. We must recognize the reality that when people race toward a destination, there are always some who are ahead and some who lag behind. The causes are many; varied natural endowments are only one of them. Those who are successful should be rewarded, not only as a form of incentive but also as a form of due recognition.

Of all classic Confucian philosophers, Xunzi presented the most elaborate argument for the linkage between good society and social stratification. He regarded human beings as social beings (Wang 1988: 164). He also took it a necessity for society to have divisions of labor in order to function effectively. In his view, proper social stratification was initially established by ancient sage-kings for the sake of a functional society. Xunzi wrote,

Ancient Kings devised to discriminate people by making ritual and moral principles, so that there are different statuses between the noble and humble, disparities between the senior and junior, classes between the intelligent and able on the one hand, and the stupid and incapable on the other. Thus, the Ancient Kings enabled people to carry on their respective work and consequently received their due. (Wang 1988: 70; Cf. Knoblock 1988: 195)

"The noble" and "the humble" indicate people's achieved social statuses. The disparities between the senior and junior depend on age in the natural course of life. The division between the intelligent and able on the one hand and the stupid and unable on the other is based on people's abilities. Xunzi took these distinctions to be the fundamental characteristics of a good, orderly, and efficacious society.

While tracing social inequality to the rise of civilization, Xunzi's account and evaluation of social inequality differ from that of Rousseau in important ways. In *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau ascribed the origin of inequality to human psychology, to people's desire to be superior to others. He distinguished two human sentiments, "self-love" (*amour de soi*) and "vanity" (*amour-propre*). "Self-love" is for self-preservation. It enables people to take care of their material wellbeing. In "vanity" people seek others' recognition of their own superiority (Rousseau 1986: 226). For Rousseau, the origin of inequality is people's desire to outdo others. Such desires cause competition, and competition results in inequality. For Xunzi, human desires are also the ultimate cause for social inequality, but in a different way. Xunzi held that desires lead to competition for resources. Without proper social

organization, competition leads to chaos and poverty. While proper social organization prevents chaos and poverty, it also necessitates social hierarchy and hence inequality. Thus, in Xunzi inequality as an ingredient of social organization is a mechanism to funnel human desires effectively in a productive way. It is necessary for a functional society. Only a society with appropriately established social stratification can be a good and orderly society. Only such a society can be harmonious. He concluded, this is “the way to make the whole populace live together in harmony and unity” (Knoblock 1988: 195).

Xunzi described his ideal society as follows:

When a humane man [person of *ren*] occupies the highest position, farmers labor with all their energy to exhaust the potential of their fields, merchants scrutinize with keen eyes to get the utmost from their goods, the various artisans use their skills to the fullest in making utensils and wares, and the officials, from the knights and grand officers up to the feudal lords, all execute fully the functions of their offices with humanity, generosity, wisdom, and ability (Knoblock 1988: 195).

When society has proper division of labor on the basis of people's realized abilities, and when people dutifully perform their respective roles, they should be rewarded accordingly. This is proportional equality. Xunzi called such an ideal society one of “*zhi ping* 至平.” *Zhi* means “the fullest” or “the utmost.” *Ping* mean “equal” and “fair.” In the context in which Xunzi used the term, “*zhi ping*” means utmost equality. In support of his own view, Xunzi quoted from the *Book of History* the notion of “*wei qi fei qi* 維齊非齊” (Wang 1988: 152), which John Knoblock has translated as: “There is equality only insofar as they are not equal” (Knoblock 1990: 96). Another possible interpretation of this phrase is that “pure equality is not equality.”⁷ Pure equality or absolute equality, as treating people as numerical equals in divisions of labor and distribution of rewards regardless of their varied abilities and contributions, is not real equality in Xunzi's sense of fairness and justice. As discussed in the beginning of this essay, any form of equality always comes with some form of inequality. Conversely, only when there are inequalities in some ways can there be equality in another way. Xunzi recognized this inevitability.

2

In Confucianism, proportional equality applies mainly to three dimensions in society, namely economic, moral, and political. First, in the Confucian view, proportional equality is realized in economic rewards to people in accordance with their due. As Xunzi said, in such a system people are “unequal yet equivalent, bent yet obedient, not the same yet uniform” (Knoblock 1988: 195). Equality is implied in a form of inequality. Parity is

⁷ I thank P.J. Ivanhoe for bringing this interpretation to my attention. While the meanings of these interpretations are consistent, the phrase itself is ambiguous, as it is in the *Book of History*. I prefer Ivanhoe's interpretation because it parallels two preceding statements in the same paragraph. Xunzi said, “*shi qi ze bu yi, zhong qi ze bu shi* 執齊則不壹,眾齊則不使,” namely “when all social positions are equalized, society has no unity; when all people are equal, no one can command another.” Here “*bu*” is a negation term as “*fei*” in “*wei qi fei qi*.”

achieved through apparent disparities. Although some people would rather have it another way (e.g., get more with less contribution), they are funneled (“bent”) into a well-established system and would follow the arrangement. “Not the same yet uniform” is Knoblock’s translation of “*bu tong er yi* 不同而一” (Wang, 1988: 71). “*Yi*,” literally “one” or “same,” here also implies equality. A more appropriate translation of this phrase in this context is “uneven but equal.” For Xunzi, such a system is the most reasonable social system. He said, “So though one may have as his emolument the whole world, he need not consider it excessive, and though one be only a gatekeeper, receptionist, guard, or nightwatchman, he need never think his salary too meager” (Knoblock 1988: 195). If people perform different tasks in society on the basis of abilities and thereby make varied contributions, they should be rewarded accordingly. This recognition of differentiation in economic distribution is consistent with the principle of proportional equality. Xunzi’s proportional distribution system is supplemented by a social welfare policy that the government would provide accommodations for orphans and the childless elderly and would subsidize the poor and needy (Wang, 1988: 152). As far as distribution policy is concerned, Xunzi strictly promoted a principle of proportional equality based on contribution.

For all we know, Confucius did not say much about economic equality. The *Analects* states that he rarely talked about *li* 利 (*Analects* 9.1; TTC, 2489), namely “benefit” or “profit.” When he did talk about distribution, he showed an egalitarian preference. Confucius said,

It is not a problem when people are poor, but it is a problem when wealth is unevenly distributed. There is no problem with under-population, but it is a problem when people are not peaceful. Generally speaking, there is no problem of poverty when wealth is evenly distributed (*jun*), there is no problem of under-population when people are harmonious, and there is no problem of failing when there is peace. (*Analects* 16.1; TTC, 2520)

Literally, *jun* means “even” or “even distribution.” The question here is whether this passage indicates that Confucius held an egalitarian view of economic distribution, and whether Confucius’s view on economic distribution is one of numerical equality (on the family unit if not on individual persons) or proportional equality.

On the face of it, this passage does suggest that Confucius was egalitarian in economic distribution. If so, he would hold a stance different from Xunzi in this regard. But “even” is a relative term. How much *jun* can be considered *jun* enough is context-dependent. The prominent Chinese scholar HSIAO Kung-ch’uan has characterized Confucius’s view as “relatively egalitarian (*xiang dui pingjun* 相對平均)” (Hsiao, 1998: 61). An argument can be made that, even though Confucius leaned more toward an egalitarian position than Xunzi with regard to economic rewards, Confucius was not an egalitarian, and it would not be appropriate to interpret Confucius as advocating absolute egalitarian distribution of wealth in society. Confucius advocated a policy of “enriching the people.” He believed that when people become well-to-do, they could and should be educated. The *Analects* records,

Confucius arrived in the state of Wei with the company of Ranyou. Confucius commented, “there are so many people here.” Ranyou asked, “when population has increased, what should be done with the people?” Confucius said, “make them rich.” Ranyou asked again, “when people

become rich, what else should be done?” Confucius said, “educate them.”
(*Analects* 13.9; TTC: 2507)

In the Warring States period, states were troubled with under-population. Having a large population was already an achievement. Confucius obviously was concerned with people’s livelihood and moral refinement. He did not hold that it is acceptable for people to live in poverty.⁸

While Confucius promoted a philosophy of making people rich, he also understood that things are not equal. The *Book of Rites* records Confucius promoting a policy to ensure that “rich people are not pretentious and poor people are not in poverty” (TTC: 1618). In his classic commentary ZHENG Xuan remarked that “this implies that there are different kinds of land for farmers and different posts for scholar-officials” (TTC: 1618). Just as there are officials at various posts, farmers are better or worse off due to different levels of productivity in their fields. Confucius recognized that in society there are (relatively) rich people and poor people, due to a variety of reasons, such as farmers possessing fertile or barren land. The *Book of Rites* also records Confucius saying that rich local lords should not have wealth worth more than the value of one hundred military wagons (TTC: 1618). That amount was of course very large; the vast majority of people at that time were not remotely close to that kind of wealth. This may not mean that Confucius held that some people should have that kind of wealth. It does, however, suggest that Confucius recognized uneven wealth and that he was not an egalitarian.

Taking all this into consideration, we should interpret the passage about “even distribution” as opposing a big gap between the poor and the rich in society, rather than advocating egalitarianism. Subsequent Confucian thinkers have followed a reading of Confucius’s idea of *jun* in ways consistent with proportional equality. For instance, the Han Confucian DONG Zhongshu interpreted Confucius’s saying to mean “Let the rich be rich enough to show their wealth yet not pretentious; let the poor have enough to take care of their lives without becoming worried. This is the standard for being even (*jun*). When there is no shortage of wealth and when society is stable from top to bottom, society becomes orderly with ease” (TTM: 785). The Song Confucian ZHU Xi went further to interpret *jun* directly as “each getting its due” (Zhu, 1985: 70) in the spirit of proportional equality. With the evidence presented here, it would be appropriate to conclude that Confucius’s view on economic inequality is to allow it while preventing huge gaps between the rich and the poor.

The second area of Confucian proportional equality is moral equality. Moral equality concerns two issues. The first is whether every person deserves the same respect; the second is whether we owe every person the same moral consideration. Respect is a major Confucian moral value, as reflected in the concept of *jing* 敬. “*Jing*” has a range of meanings broader than “respect.” It can mean reverence (toward ancestors and parents) as well as respect toward people in general. The *Analects* records that, when Confucius’s disciple Zilu failed to demonstrate superior music skills, other disciples did not *jing* him (*Analects* 11.15; TTC: 2499). Revering Zilu at that time was simply out of the question. The statement means that others did not respect Zilu. Also in

⁸ *Confucius’s Family Teachings* also records that Confucius promoted the ideal of enriching people (*Kongzi Jiayu*: 108).

this sense, the *Book of Rites* records that Confucius advised people to *jing* their wives and children. He held that love and *jing* are the foundation of good government. He also said that the most important element in practicing ritual propriety (*li*) is *jing*. Confucius maintained that the morally cultivated persons *jing* everyone, people in superior as well as inferior positions. In all these instances, “*jing*” conveys the meaning of respect (TTC: 1611–1612).

The principle of equal respect for all human beings is now accepted as a minimum standard throughout mainstream Western culture. It is, however, indisputable that in reality we do not respect people equally. Stephen Darwall distinguishes two kinds of respect: recognition respect and appraisal respect. Recognition respect consists in giving appropriate consideration to some feature of its object, and it is due to every person equally, whereas appraisal respect consists in a positive appraisal of a person or his qualities and admits of degrees (Darwall 1977: 38–39).⁹ In some way, Darwall’s view approximates the Confucian view of respect. As far as moral respect is concerned, Confucians endorse a basic level of respect for everyone. All human beings possess the potential to become morally cultivated, and in this regard we are categorically different from animals. Therefore, all human beings deserve at least a basic level of respect. However, the Confucian principle of differentiated statuses between the morally cultivated and petty persons entails that people do not deserve the *same* level of respect. Morally cultivated people deserve our additional respect; people of varied moral achievements should receive appropriately differentiated respect. In one sense, we can say that these are two kinds of respect: respect on the basis of inborn moral potential and respect on the basis of moral achievement. We can call them Heavenly-endowed, unearned respect, on the one hand, and earned respect on the other.

From the Confucian perspective, Darwall’s categorization is problematic, however, because recognition already involves appraisal and recognition-based respect also admits degrees. Mencius said that three things in the world command our respect: rank, age, and virtue (*Mencius* 2b8; TTC: 2694). Respect for virtue is moral respect in a narrow sense. Respect from social rank and age is based on social relationships (understood broadly) and moral relationships, as will be discussed shortly. We show respect to people of rank out of recognition of their social stations, regardless of their personal qualities. This form of respect, however, is not without appraisal and is accorded in accordance with proportional equality. A country’s president on a state visit is duly received with a level of respect that is not accorded to a mid-ranked official from the foreign affairs department. This kind of differentiation is not independent of appraisal. In the Confucian culture, the same goes with age (as described vividly by LIN Yutang [Lin 1937: 192–193]) and virtue (as a form of moral achievement).

In the Confucian view, respect is a particular form of valuation.¹⁰ To recognize someone (or something) as respectable is to deem her worthy of respect, to accord a form of value to her. In this sense, respect is inescapably a value judgment. To respect

⁹ My thanks go to Ranjoo Herr and P.J. Ivanhoe for bringing this reference to my attention and discussing the issue with me.

¹⁰ I thank P.J. Ivanhoe for suggesting this line of framing the argument here.

a person is to recognize human value in the person. Human value exists in the form of potential or realized moral quality. A person's human value increases as he becomes morally advanced and cultivated in virtue. It also can diminish when he loses his moral potential and thus becomes a "beast" (*per* Mencius).¹¹ Assessing whether someone has lost his moral potential cannot be carried out without considering his performance in moral cultivation. Therefore, respect for persons, no matter which kind, admits of degrees.

Confucianism promotes worthiness (*xian* 賢, the virtuous and talented) in society. A *xian* person is a learned person with superb moral achievement. Such a person deserves high respect in society. In the Confucian view, insisting on *equal* respect without considering people's moral worth achieved by cultivation is to neglect proportional equality in the moral realm and hence treat people *unequally*. A society where the *xian* and un-*xian* are respected equally is a disorderly society. Such society is neither fair nor conducive to generating the *xian*. Therefore, the appropriate approach should be letting people earn their respect above and beyond the basic level.

One may wonder how we can determine that someone has achieved more moral attainment and hence deserves more respect than others. If this cannot be determined, the Confucian notion of differentiated respect becomes vacuous. However, this question is not as difficult to answer as it may appear. Just look at people around us in everyday life. Don't we know who are more trustworthy, more dedicated, and more virtuous? Don't these qualities indicate moral refinement? Reflecting on this fact, don't we know who deserve more respect? I think the answer is clearly affirmative, at least for the most part. Admittedly, we may make mistakes in judgment, as in anything else. That does not, however, invalidate the philosophy in question.

The other issue of moral equality is whether a competent moral agent should give every person the same consideration. In Confucian literature, this refers to the issue of whether we should care about all human beings equally or care with distinction. Confucianism promotes "love with distinction (*ai you cha deng* 爱有差等)." A person should love his own family and people in close relationships first and more than he loves others. In terms of moral consideration, this means that people in different relationships exert unequal pull on us. This, of course, does not mean that people further away from us are not good people, nor that people close to us are necessarily more morally cultivated. Confucians regard human beings as essentially social beings whose existence and identity are rooted in social relationships. These relationships constitute a large part of our identity and are the "home base" of our existence. Therefore, people close to us command more of our moral obligation. In this sense, all people are not morally equal to us.

I now include this issue in moral equality because the notion of "moral" in Confucianism is broader than that in Kantian ethics. The English word "moral" here translates "*daode* 道德)" and "*lunli* 伦理)," roughly "*Dao* and virtue" and "relationship-based reasonable order." In this understanding, Confucian "*lunli*" necessarily includes maintaining appropriate relationships. In the Confucian sense, a person's obligations

¹¹ When someone becomes a beast, he still has the potential to *regain* his humanity by recovering his "lost heart" (*per* Mencius), and therefore still warrants a basic level of respect. Even if a person lost his humanity for good, we can still accord him certain respect, as with a death row inmate, with what I call residual effect. A residual effect occurs when we accord respect to the corpse of a person out of consideration that it had been (a part of) a human.

toward his parents are unequivocally *moral* obligations. One may argue that there is a distinction between moral obligation narrowly defined (as in the Kantian sense) and moral obligation broadly defined (as in “*Junli*”), and that all people are morally equal in the narrow sense but not in the broad sense. Confucianism as a virtue ethics, however, does not draw a line between these conceptions. From the Confucian perspective, “moral” in the Kantian sense cannot be exercised independently of “*daode*” and “*Junli*.” When a person assesses her moral obligation to her parents and to strangers, she does not tally one kind of obligation first and then add another kind. From each moral patient the pull comes to her as one, not two, forces.

This discussion of special moral obligations based on relationships brings us to respect based on relationships. A person’s moral obligation toward his parents, for example, entails obligation to respect his parents. Such respect is in addition to Heavenly-endowed respect on the basis of people’s inborn moral potential. And it is not based on moral attainment. While such kind of respect is independent of either, it is to be practiced in their mix. It provides a third consideration as to how much we owe respect to a person. In Confucianism, respect based on relationship does not have to be strictly *personal*. In a broad sense, there is also a relationship between, say, a subject and the king, which warrants differentiated respect. On the Mencian philosophy of extending good treatment of our own parents to other, my respect to my father can be extended to general respect to the elderly. This kind of respect is nevertheless relationship-based. In this way, we can make sense of Mencius’s claim that a person’s age is a source of respect.

The third area of equality is political equality. Political equality, to borrow Sidney Verba’s phrase, refers to “the extent to which citizens have an equal voice over governmental decisions” (Verba 2011). This implies that every citizen has equal access to political decision-making processes and to participation in government, including equal opportunity in selecting government officials, in making laws and policies, and in serving in the government. Confucianism does not endorse such philosophy. Confucians see social and personal reasons for proportional equality in the political realm. As in other realms of society, proportional equality in the political realm comes with inevitable inequalities.

Political administration and management requires knowledge, ethics, experience, and skills. Obviously not everyone is equipped equally with these qualities. People are endowed with varied levels of talent and exert uneven effort in self-cultivation. Even Confucius, who advocated education for all people regardless of class status, once lamented that some people are like rotten wood incapable of being carved into anything useful (*Analects* 5.10; TTC: 2474). For these reasons, Mencius insisted that appropriate division of labor is a general principle in the world (*Mencius* 3a4; TTC: 2705). This principle includes political division of labor. Mencius said, “people either work with their minds or with their physical labor. Those working with minds govern others. Those working with physical labor are being governed” (*Mencius* 3a4; TTC: 2705). Some people engage in work that relies primarily on mental power, such as political offices in administration and management, whereas others engage in manual labor. Even though today’s division of labor has become more complex, the general rationale remains intact. No matter how a society is organized, it always has people in different social stations, doing varied tasks, and engaging in uneven participation in political processes. Confucians are realistic and honest about this.

Sidney Verba says, “True political equality, where all ordinary citizens (i.e., those not in governmental decision making positions) have equal influence, would be impossible to attain and probably very bad” (Verba 2011). It would probably be very bad, Confucians say, because the ignorant and even the crooked would influence the direction of politics in wrong ways. In *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies*, Bryan Caplan shows how average voters in the United States make misinformed, irrational choices at the voting booth (Caplan 2007). His research shows that, out of ignorance and biases, voters constantly make stupid choices on economic policy issues. If average voters make bad choices on economic policies, their performance can only be worse on noneconomic issues, such as education and foreign policy, which are further from people’s concern with their wallet. Caplan’s research also shows that there is a positive correlation between voters’ education levels and their ability to make rational choices, and suggests a more meritocratic approach (Caplan, 2006), which Confucians can endorse.

In the Confucian view, the real question is not whether to have political inequality—which exists no matter what—but what kind of political inequality. In an orderly society, division of political labor is not only inevitable, but also can be justified. The Confucian philosophy on the division of political labor is to have talented and suitable people working in government and leading society toward prosperity.¹² These people are considered *junzi* (morally cultivated persons) and *xianren* (the virtuous and talented). It does not mean, of course, that only people who work in the government are *junzi* and *xianren*. Undoubtedly, there are many virtuous and talented people working outside government. When asked why he did not work in government, Confucius replied that practicing filial piety and brotherly love is working for the government because it promotes good family life (*Analects* 2.21; TTC: 2463). Therefore, working for the government does not have to be working in the government. The point, nevertheless, is that only virtuous and talented people should work in governing roles and only such people should have the power to make decisions for society.

The Confucian ideal of getting the virtuous and talented to serve in government traces to ancient times. The *Book of History* promotes the ideal of “leaving no virtuous and talented people outside government” (TTC: 123). The belief is that when these people all work in government, society will be well-managed and all states are in peace (TTC: 123). Such a society is described as “there are many *junzi* working in government and no *xianren* are left outside” (Yao 1986: 2118). In today’s view, such a goal is not only idealistic but also flawed, for while society needs virtuous and talented people in government, it also needs them outside government. A society in which all virtuous and talented people work in government is probably not a good one. Conversely, a government infested with ignorant and even crooked people cannot be good. Confucians hold that government policies must be made intelligently and be beneficial to the overall good of society. For that purpose, ignorance and moral incompetence have no place in the making of governmental policies.

¹² Here we are concerned with important governmental positions. It does not mean office clerks or other supporting functions.

Confucian proportional equality in politics on the basis of talents and virtue comes with political inequalities. Confucians are not in favor of extending political inequality for the sake of inequality. Some inequalities are appropriate, however, because they are not only inevitable in achieving proportional equality, but they are also grounded on the reality of human limitations and justified on the overall good of society. Other inequalities are inappropriate because they are based on factors irrelevant to these considerations. In the Confucian view, political inequalities that allow the educated, virtuous, and talented to make governmental decisions, and consequently make wise decisions for the common good, are justified. Otherwise, they are unjustified. In the meantime, Confucianism can accommodate limited universal political participation (see below). The Confucian pursuit of equality in political arenas is to be realized mainly in creating opportunities for people to get educated, to become virtuous, and to develop talents, so they come to be equipped to serve in government and to participate in government decision-making in meaningful ways.

From the above investigation and analysis, it should be clear that Confucianism embraces both numerical and proportional equality, in different dimensions, as well as inequalities necessitated by proportional equality. As TAN Sor-hoon has aptly stated, a Confucian society “distributes respect, power, goods and services, and so on *proportional* to the degree that each individual meets the criteria ethically relevant to what is to be distributed” (Tan 2003: 100). Believing in the inevitability of variations in individual moral refinement as well as potential and realized talents, and therefore the necessity and efficacy of division of labor, Confucians promote proportional equality, economically, morally, and politically, as a key notion in building a good society. Nowhere did classic Confucians promote equality for the sake of equality. A reasonable explanation for this, I think, is that they did not see equality as intrinsically valuable. Their justification for equality, mainly in terms of proportional equality, is social harmony and the overall good of the society. The value of equality, either numerical or proportional, as well as inequality, is grounded in its function in building a good society.

3

Now, what implications can we draw from Confucian equality for contemporary society? Economically, Confucians would accept inequality under two conditions. First, people acquire wealth through legitimate means. Some people get richer than others because they work harder or are more fortunate. Confucianism encourages personal effort; it also recognizes that personal luck may play a role in people's lives. Second, there should not be huge gaps between rich and poor, even when the rich get rich through legitimate means. While economic inequalities are accepted and tolerated, the main thrust in Confucianism is to avoid and reduce large economic inequalities. Suppose farmer A plants crop *a* and farmer B plants crop *b* in the same year. Suppose it has turned out that weather is extremely favorable toward *a* and extremely harsh toward *b*. Consequently, A gets richer than B. Suppose the situation continues for several years. A's business expands considerably and becomes extremely rich, whereas B becomes extremely poor. In this

situation, Confucians would support heavier taxes on A so the state can provide additional financial assistance to B.¹³ In contrast with liberals who are more concerned with individual rights, Confucians are more concerned with social harmony. On Confucian philosophy, harmony is the most important goal. Huge gaps between rich and poor are detrimental to social harmony, and therefore should be limited.

As far as moral equality is concerned, Confucians would accept a basic level of universal respect for humanity. They would maintain, however, that some people deserve more respect than others and would promote social programs to implement such differential respect into social practice. For instance, those who achieve and demonstrate special virtues will be given particular respect. Highly valuing education, Confucians emphasize that teachers should be moral role models for students and thus would require higher moral attainment. They would make special effort to make education a profession more respectable than some other professions. Confucians would establish "Teacher's Day" to honor teachers and to give them the kind of respect they deserve. This is in contrast to treatment of teachers in the United States, where teachers do not receive special respect, sometimes not even basic respect. They are usually paid poorly and subject to various financial cuts when there is a budget crunch. They must fight for benefits, occasionally going on strike, making themselves even less respected in the eyes of students and parents. Confucians would hold teachers to a higher moral standard, accord them special respect, and provide them with economic security that they deserve. Confucians would¹⁴ also accord the elderly more respect. Practices such as "Respect for the Aged Day" would be promoted.

In neither case does it imply that all teachers or all elderly are necessarily morally cultivated more than others in society. Being a teacher or an old person comes with additional expectations and these people should act accordingly. When this Confucian ideal prevails, teachers and the elderly are good role models and should be respected accordingly. A better way to justify this kind of additional respect, however, is on the notion of relationship-based respect. In the Confucian view, a person's relationship with his teachers is of particular significance in his life, as a person needs to become (more fully) human through learning. For this reason, he owes his teachers special respect. Because teachers are always teachers of some people, teachers as a group should be respected as such. The same can be said about the elderly. Confucians promote the ideal that a person should extend respect for his own parents to parents of other people (*Mencius* 1a7). People of old age are usually parents or grandparents. Out of the Confucian value of filial piety and the ideal of extending such deference and respect from one's own parents and grandparents to those of other people, society should give elderly people more respect. From the Confucian perspective, such respect is not only consistent with but also crucial to the goal of harmonious society.

On the political front, Confucians believe that government should be staffed by virtuous, knowledgeable, and talented people, and that only people with such qualities are qualified to produce legislation. Therefore, political processes should be

¹³ This is of course on the premise that people do their share of work. It does not mean, however, lazy people can live off others.

¹⁴ Such a national holiday already exists in Japan (敬老の日).

designed to enable the virtuous, knowledgeable, and talented to make legislation and to serve in governmental posts. This is not to say, however, that the ignorant, the un-virtuous, and the untalented should have no voice in society. To the contrary, their voices should be heard as they reflect reality in society and therefore should be taken into account in governmental decision-making processes and in governmental operation. Even though the ignorant, the un-virtuous, and the untalented are likely not to make wise decisions, their needs are still legitimate and should be considered as political decisions are made.

On the basis of the Confucian view on political equality, I propose two Confucian principles for political operation. The first is *general participation principle*. This is an inclusion principle. State leaders and legislators at all levels should be elected through general election. All citizens should have the opportunity to participate in general elections. Obviously, this principle cannot be found in classic Confucianism, not even in neo-Confucianism. Joseph Chan has argued, convincingly in my view, that Confucians today can accept democracy as the second-best choice (Chan 2007). This should include general elections. The general participation principle can be supported on the ground of basic respect for humanity. To be sure, such a justification is not grounded in logical necessity. It is not the case that a basic level of respect for humanity provides a corollary for the principle of general participation. Rather, such a principle coheres with the concept of basic respect for humanity, and thus can be grounded on such a Confucian concept. Furthermore, this principle can be justified politically. State leaders and legislators not only make political decisions but also represent citizens; the represented should have a say on who represent them. Finally, this principle can also be justified on pragmatic grounds. Even if we do not consider the representation role of these political offices, Confucians do not have any other way that is both more reliable and feasible in generating political leaders (see Li 2012). The second principle is *qualification principle*. All candidates for public offices must meet respective qualifications before they can be elected. Unlike the first principle, this principle is an exclusion principle. It sets standards to prevent people without adequate qualifications from occupying public offices. By this principle, candidates must pass screening for their qualifications with regard to knowledge, skills, and moral character.

To be sure, “knowledgeable,” “virtuous,” and “talented” refer to relative qualities. Whether people are or are not as such depends on others in society with whom they compare. It is also true that each society at a particular time has its own standards for measuring such qualities. The lack of fixed criteria, however, should not invalidate the Confucian pursuit in seeking knowledgeable, virtuous, and talented people for political offices. A society can come up with its own criteria in selecting suitable people. In practical operation, candidates for lawmakers and governmental officials must demonstrate an adequate level of knowledge and have a track record of trustworthiness. A non-partisan qualification committee may be in charge of the screening process. A candidate can be judged on the basis of his or her level of education, years of experience, and track records of success or the lack thereof, as well as moral character. Tests can be set up to prove candidates’ knowledge and experience, as has been done in China since antiquity (however imperfectly by today’s standards).

Proving a person's moral character is more difficult. This is perhaps the most challenging issue for Confucian political philosophy today. But it is not impossible. The key, I believe, lies with building healthy community. Mencius once said that the foundation of an orderly world lies with the state, the foundation of the state lies with the *jia*, the foundation of the *jia* lies with the person (*Mencius* 4A5; TTC: 2718). As commentators have noted, "*jia*" here refers to the estate of local lords (*qing da fu* 卿大夫), an enlarged family (TTC: 2718). As the intermediate point between the state and family proper, it is roughly the ancient counterpart of today's community. From early on, Confucian society has always relied heavily on a strong intermediate link between the individual and the state, whether in the form of enlarged *jia*, the kin, or the village. In modern times, the "last Confucian" LIANG Shuming dedicated a large part of his life in the 1930s to building Confucian rural community. Following Mencius's logic, we can say that a healthy society today rests on efficacious communities. In an important sense, the viability of Confucian virtuous leadership is predicated on the viability of Confucian community.

Contemporary thinkers have argued that a key element of contemporary Confucian society is building efficacious community. Borrowing from John Dewey's notion of communicating community, David Hall and Roger Ames have argued that, for Dewey, the idea of democracy "is the idea of community life itself" (Hall and Ames 1999: 124), and for Confucians today, "the question is how one might secure the dominance of moral suasion as the primary means of securing harmonious community life" (ibid.: 214). TAN Sor-hoon also takes community as a critical link in building Confucian democracy (Tan 2003: Ch. 3). Confucian virtuous leadership depends on efficacious communities. In ancient times, a person known to locals as a filial son was considered more virtuous than people without such a reputation. Such measurement is too narrow and simplistic in today's view. Alternative methods must be explored and established. One possibility is to require candidates provide "local testimonials for moral character," in which each candidate must solicit a minimum number of character testimonials from people who have worked with the candidate. Such a requirement would screen out people who are not deeply rooted in a community or people without a good "monument by the mouth" (*kou bei* 口碑). These testimonials can serve as partial basis for voters from afar to judge the candidate's character. Whether such measures can succeed depends on many conditions. One of them is civility in society. Confucians have always promoted the virtues of being "courteous, good, respectful, restrained, and deferential" (*Analects* 1.10; TTC: 2458). Without civility there cannot be good democracy. While I have much praise for Taiwan's democracy, its legislators' violent physical fights in the legislation chamber are definitely not a shining point. With my second principle, such "physical fighters" would not pass the non-partisan qualification committee in the first place, or at least they would be disqualified for the next election.

To be sure, any proposal at this point is preliminary and subject to questions and challenges. One may wonder, how can this ever work in a polarized partisan society? It would not work in a society where people have lost civility and sense of community. Democracy does not work well toward building a good society when the social fabric is severely ripped. The Confucian goal, however, is precisely to prevent society from slipping into such a deplorable state by building efficacious community.

My “two-principle” proposal is different from Daniel Bell’s bicameral parliament system (Bell 2006: 165–179). In Bell’s system, the legislature consists of a democratically elected lower house and a “Confucian” upper house called “Xianshiyuan.” While the lower house represents the wishes of the people, “Xianshiyuan” represents the Confucian ideal of “rule by the wise.” In comparison, my proposal is more Confucian on two accounts. First, it places a stricter measure on who can serve in government through the exclusion principle, enforcing the Confucian meritocratic philosophy. Second, it insists on moral character as a key requirement for legislators and other government officials, upholding a central Confucian teaching of the imperative of moral governance. My proposal is both more democratic and less democratic than Bell’s, in different ways. Members of Bell’s “Xianshiyuan” are not elected. I do not leave such exceptions. Candidates for Bell’s lower house do not have to undergo rigorous “Confucian” moral screening; mine requires so.¹⁵ I hope my proposal adds to the on-going discussion that has been energized by Bell’s work.

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