Sublating Humanism: The Relation between the Individual and Society in Confucian Ethics

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Abstract

Chinese humanism developed distinctly from European humanist discourses, reflecting unique cultural and philosophical traditions. Analysing these differences can enhance our understanding of both the specific characteristics of Chinese humanism and the diverse potentialities within contemporary global humanist thought. This comparative perspective, enhanced by employing the method of sublation, underscores the planetary relevance of humanism. It demonstrates how diverse cultural perspectives enrich and broaden the scope of global discourse, leading to a more inclusive understanding of humanism worldwide. In this paper I will give a brief historical overview of the origins and development of the formation of ideas which, in China, placed the human being at the centre of culture and the cosmos. But in order to better understand the differences that demarcate Chinese views of humans and their position in the world from European ones, we will first look at how the relationship between people and the communities in which they live is structured in the Chinese tradition. We will then examine the political and philosophical currents shaping Confucian discourse and take a look on the way in which each of them contributes to the Chinese model of humanism. By applying the method of sublation, we intend to investigate how these two systems could complement and enhance each other, thereby helping to establish a foundational framework for a newly proposed transcultural planetary ethics.

Keywords: Chinese humanism, planetary ethics, Confucian relationism, political Confucianism, philosophical Confucianism

Sublacija humanizma: odnos med individuumom in družbo v konfucijanski etiki

Izvleček

Kitajski humanizem se je razvil ločeno od evropskih humanističnih diskurzov ter je odražal posebnosti kitajske kulturne in filozofske tradicije. Analiza teh razlik lahko izboljša naše razumevanje tako specifičnih značilnosti kitajskega humanizma kot tudi raznovrstnih potencialov znotraj sodobnega globalnega humanističnega mišljenja.

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Primerjalna perspektiva, ki jo bomo v pričujočem prispevku pridobili z metodo sublacije, poudarja planetarno pomembnost humanizma. Ta perspektiva nam nazorno prikaže, kako lahko različni kulturni vidiki bogatijo in širijo obseg globalnega diskurza, kar vodi v bolj vključujoče razumevanje humanizma širom sveta. V prispevku bom najprej podala kratek zgodovinski pregled izvora in razvoja idej, ki so v kitajski tradiciji postavile človeka v središče kulture in kozmosa. Toda za boljše razumevanje razlik, ki opredeljujejo kitajske poglede na človeka in njegov položaj v svetu v primerjavi z evropskimi, si bomo v nadaljevanju ogledali, kako je v kitajski tradiciji strukturiran odnos med ljudmi in skupnostmi, v katerih živijo. Nato bomo proučili politične in filozofske tokove, ki so oblikovali konfucijanski diskurz, ter si ogledali, na kakšen način je vsak od njih prispeval h konsolidaciji specifično kitajskega modela humanizma. Z metodo sublacije nameravamo raziskati, kako bi se ta dva sistema lahko dopolnjevala in drug drugega izboljšala, s čimer bi pomagala vzpostaviti temeljni okvir za vizijo nove transkulturne in planetarne etike, kakršno si predstavlja avtorica.

Ključne besede: kitajski humanizem, planetarna etika, konfucijanski relacionizem, politični konfucianizem, filozofsko konfucijanstvo

The Individual and Society: Varied Conceptual Perspectives

The core dynamics of institutional structures in Chinese and Western civilizations have evolved distinctly. In China, the concept known as "All under Heaven" (*Tian Xia* 天下) encapsulates this framework. This model has been extensively detailed in Zhao Tingyang's renowned work (see Zhao 2021), which is also titled "All under Heaven", and further explored by various experts in Chinese intellectual and institutional history such as Bai Tongdong, who explained:

> To address the issues of how to bond a large state of strangers together, and of how to deal with state–state relations, early Confucians developed a *Tian Xia* model, while the Westerners developed the nation-state model and later, in response to its problems, the cosmopolitan model. According to the Confucian model, state identity is based on culture (rather than race) and is also based on a Confucian conception of universal but unequal compassion. Among states, a key distinction is between the civilized and the barbaric, and civilized states should form an alliance to protect the civilized way of life against the barbarian threat. A general principle of the Confucian world order is that it recognizes the sovereignty and the primacy of one's own state's interests, but limits both with humane or benevolent duties. (Bai Tongdong 2020, 969).

But the later rise of global civilizations and the process of globalization were predominantly shaped by the Western model of development, which is closely tied to

modernization concepts originating in Europe. Here, modernity revolved around the idea of the individual as an independent and proactive entity.

This individual-centric view is rooted in individualism—a political and social philosophy that values the independence and autonomy of the individual, positing them as society's core unit. Individualism upholds personal liberties and responsibilities, advocating for self-guided actions and minimal external intervention in personal pursuits. This ideology has profoundly influenced contemporary political and social frameworks, moulding public attitudes towards democracy, personal freedom, and social justice.

Furthermore, individualism has evolved into a doctrine that emphasizes personal interests, roles, and rights within societal contexts. Central to the humanist democracy seen in Western liberal societies is a notion of justice that balances individual rights with those of others, underpinning a fundamental equality among all people. This egalitarianism, advocated in both European and American contexts, draws from Christian doctrinal beliefs that all humans are equal before God— and in death—without exception.

However, this form of equality, often highlighted in Western political thought (see for instance Arendt 1998, 235), differs significantly from the equality discussed in collectivist ideologies, which we will explore further a bit later. True equality, beyond being a Western ideal, is also a crucial aspect of Confucian ethics, where it transcends mere theoretical equivalence and involves a more complex understanding of individual diversity within society.

In societies that prioritize individualism, the rights of individuals are often more protected (at least theoretically) than collective rights due to the social structure where individual interests supersede those of the group.

While this framework offers considerable benefits such as enhanced protection, autonomy, and freedom (particularly for men), it also presents numerous challenges. These include reduced cooperation skills, increased self-centredness, diminished communal solidarity, heightened social isolation, excessive value relativism, and loneliness, among others. Despite these issues, individualistic systems continue to be supported by several prominent modern liberal theorists, including John Rawls in his work *A Theory of Justice* (Rošker 2021, 58).

Individualistic ideologies continue to dominate not only social theories, but also the lives of Westerners. At the same time, the misunderstanding still exists in the West that East Asian societies—in contrast to Euro-American ones—are collectivistic (see for instance Han 2020a; 2020b; Komatsu, Rappleye and Silova 2019, 3; Schwartz 1990, 140, among others).

The misconception that collectivism does not value the individual is widespread yet baseless. Collectivism, like individualism, is fundamentally a social structure emerging from the concept of the individual. Both ideologies originate from the same principle of individuality and theoretically cherish the notion of individual freedom.

In practice, while liberal individualism primarily safeguards the material freedoms and property rights of individuals, Marxist collectivism aims to achieve individual freedom through the establishment of socialist collectives. In these collectives, individuals strive to resolve the alienation produced by capitalist structures by engaging in work and both public and private interactions, thereby fulfilling their personal potential.

However, when discussed by contemporary liberal theorists—who are more dominant in this discourse than Marxists—collectivism is often portrayed as a mechanistic system focused solely on efficiency and utilitarian outcomes. In such critiques, individuals are depicted as mere components of a larger machine, valued only for their contributions to collective goals rather than their personal attributes or relationships. This perspective suggests that in collectivist systems, human connections are not shaped by personal identities but by functional roles, reducing individuals to indistinguishable parts of a homogeneous mass.

Yet this very notion of individuals as interchangeable and uniform is also what underlies the principle of equality before the law, universal human rights, and the pursuit of equal opportunities for everyone. However, this idea of sameness, upon closer examination, often simplifies complex individual differences, falling short of true pluralistic equality where diverse values are equitably recognized. As David Hall and Roger Ames (1998, 25) have highlighted, and as I have previously discussed, this approach to equality can be problematic:

> Such a Self belongs to the domain of the one-dimensional, empirical Self, or, in Chinese terminology, to the domain of the "external ruler" (*wai wang* 外王). But Hall and Ames also point to the fact that the notion of the individual or individuality can also be linked to ideas of uniqueness and non-repeatability that are not related to belonging or membership of a particular species or class. This is not, therefore, a question of the principle of equality, but rather of the principle of equivalence/sameness. Hall and Ames point out that it is precisely this understanding of the individual that is crucial to a better understanding of the Confucian concept of personhood. (Rošker 2021, 65)

While individualism and Western liberal ideologies of collectivism might be familiar concepts in Western societies, they are relatively foreign within the Chinese philosophical context, although traces of both can be seen in Confucianism (see Rossi 2020, 1109–13). However, China's intellectual tradition has developed a distinct social framework. Here, the interactions between individuals and society are not predicated on mutual agreements among equals, but rather on a hierarchy within various societal roles.

This unique interaction has shaped not only individual identities and the multiple facets and roles of the Self, which will be explored further in this text, but also the core ethical principles of the Confucian tradition. Known as the ethics of relationality or relationism, these principles have been central to ethical discussions and practices throughout Chinese history. This relational ethic, along with other ethical frameworks from Chinese and East Asian humanism, will also be detailed later.

Moreover, another key difference in how individuals and communities interact across cultures involves the criteria used to manage personal relationships. This distinction between individualistic and relational systems will be highlighted as we compare European and Chinese approaches.

> While in the European, Hellenistic-Christian tradition this relationship is regulated by agreement, convention and law, in East Asia the idea that justice and harmony between people can be achieved by means of codified, normative and universally accepted rules that are valid in all situations never seems to have taken hold. This becomes clear if we look, for example, at the concept of individual rights, which is as alien to the Sinitic tradition of ideas as the unconditional observance of collective considerations and duties. (Rošker 2021, 57)

The concept of universal human rights predominantly focuses on individual rather than collective rights, overlooking the elements previously discussed. However, it is important to clarify that this critique does not justify the actions of autocratic governments that disregard human rights and systematically oppress and abuse their citizens, especially marginalized communities, without any constraints.

The Evolution of Chinese Humanist Ethics

During the Axial Age, as noted by Jaspers (2003), China transitioned from a culture dominated by basic, largely naturalistic religions to one characterized by the internalization of humanistic ethics.

Initially, in the Shang dynasty, popular beliefs in a supreme deity (*Shang di* 上帝) or Heaven (*tian* 天) lacked ethical dimensions. However, during the Zhou dynasty these beliefs began to incorporate moral principles. Previously, the notion of *tian*, or heaven, was central to religious life, gradually taking on more sacred and eventually divine attributes. By the 10th century BCE, *tian* was revered almost as an anthropomorphic god, acting not only as creator but also as the ultimate moral arbiter, rewarding or punishing human actions based on their morality.

This religious framework persisted into the early Zhou period, where *tian* was recognized as the supreme deity. However, by the transition from the Western to the Eastern Zhou dynasty (eighth century BCE), the credibility of this religious system began to decline. According to Yang Zebo (2007, 3), this decline was likely due to the corruption and inefficiency of the elite. This growing disillusionment is reflected in the Confucian classic, *The Book of Poetry* (*Shi jing* 詩經), where there are indications of increasing resentment and scepticism towards Heaven (*yuantian*, *yitian* 怨天, 疑天), signalling a shift in public perception and the beginning of a challenge to the established divine authority.

> As Xu Fuguan has shown, the authority of the Mandate of Heaven (*tian ming*) had already been completely eroded by the time of the ruler You of the Zhou dynasty. It can therefore be argued that the traditional religious concepts rooted in the early Zhou dynasty had almost completely disintegrated. This was an extremely important turning point, indicating that Chinese society in this period had already entered what Karl Jaspers calls the 'Axial Age'. However, we should be mindful of the fact that, unlike other civilizations, China did not develop theology during this Axial Period, but rather turned away from it. (Yang Zebo 2007, 3)

Under Jasper's theory of the Axial Period, China emerges as a distinct outlier among the great civilizations of that era. According to Jasper, the eighth to fourth centuries BCE saw a widespread questioning of natural deities across all advanced cultures, linked to developments in production technology and tools. In most cases, these "primitive religions" evolved into more sophisticated, often monotheistic, theological systems.

However, in what is now China this scepticism led not to the evolution of new religious doctrines but rather to the breakdown of structured religion altogether. This absence of deities meant that individuals could not externalize their fears and anxieties onto higher powers. According to Xu Fuguan (1987, 231), this situation fostered a "concerned consciousness (*youhuan yishi* 憂患意識)", prompting a painful yet profound self-awareness and a deep sense of personal moral re-

sponsibility. Xu contrasts this development with the rise of European philosophy, which he attributes to a sense of wonder or curiosity. These differing origins of philosophical thought have significantly shaped how knowledge is perceived and valued in Chinese and Western cultures.

> The Greeks saw rationality as the typical or defining characteristic of human beings, and the love of wisdom as the source of happiness. Knowledge and the acquisition of knowledge were regarded as a leisure activity, to be pursued for its own sake. This characteristic of ancient Greek culture led to the search for objective knowledge and, in particular, to the development of metaphysics and science, and modern Western thinkers have inherited this tradition. But whereas the Greeks took 'knowledge' as a kind of education, modern Western thinkers have transformed knowledge into something that represents a constant and persistent quest for power and authority through the conquest, possession and control of the external material world, as expressed in Francis Bacon's famous dictum that 'knowledge is power'. (Ni 2002, 283)

During the Axial Age, as noted by theorists like Chen Lai (1996), the questioning in China was not about human limitations leading to a search for transcendent, infinite presences or a monotheistic focus; rather, it was the perceived limitations of the deities themselves that catalysed a shift away from seeking a transcendent realm. Instead, attention turned towards earthly realities—governance, societal organization, and interpersonal relationships—marking a "breakthrough to the humanities" rather than a transcendental breakthrough.

This pivot from celestial to civic concerns can be traced back to an earlier religious crisis in China before the Axial Age began, during which the credibility of Heaven as a moral and supreme authority waned. With the moral foundations of early Western Zhou's Heavenly religion eroded, scepticism flourished among the masses, precluding a return to theologically driven monotheism. Instead, a rational understanding of the universe emerged, and the concept of "Heaven" (*tian* 天) evolved into a more secular "nature".

> In the West, misconceptions about ancient Chinese spirituality persist, often simplifying Confucius's role to that of a proponent of an outdated heavenly religion (Lee 2001). Contrary to these views, Confucius lived during a time of intense societal transformation—the end of the Spring and Autumn period and the beginning of the Warring States period—a time described in historical texts as an era of collapsing social mores and traditions. (Ibid.)

Confucianism arose amidst these upheavals, reshaping the traditional values of ritual (*li* 禮) and music (*yue* 樂) to forge a new ethical framework centred on humaneness (*ren* 仁). This concept, symbolized by the Chinese character combining elements representing the human and duality, emphasizes the intrinsic connection and equality among people. Confucius envisioned *ren* as empathy towards others, a vital trait for fostering moral integrity and societal harmony.

He posited that true morality stems not from external norms but through the internalization of these values, deeply integrating social rituals with the principle of humaneness to enhance moral consciousness in society. This profound integration allows for the cultivation of a communal ethic that not only respects but nurtures interpersonal relationships, laying the groundwork for a more empathetic and cohesive community:

> 子曰:"人而不仁, 如禮何?人而不仁, 如樂何?"

> The Master said, 'How can a man who does not possess humaneness perform the rites? How can such a person enjoy music?' (*Lunyu* n.d., "Ba Yi," 3)

In this context, it was not only important to limit and control human behaviour through external rituals, for all this is not really possible (at least in the long run) unless one gains insight into the question of why it matters—even to oneself. The meaning of social morality can only be seen or understood by human beings if the virtue of humaneness is internalized. Only on the condition that we perform rituals and enjoy music on the basis of this kind of inner awareness can we actually develop a moral subject within ourselves that is both immanent and transcendent. But this, as Mencius, one of the two most influential successors of Confucius, points out, can only be done consciously by the individual alone. This is evident in many parts of his seminal book *Mengzi*, such as the quote below:

> 仁義禮智, 非由外鑠我也, 我固有之也.

> Humaneness, propriety, respectability, and wisdom are not brought into me from outside, but are inherent in myself. (*Mengzi* n.d., "Gaozi I," 6)

In Mencius's philosophy, virtues are envisioned as four inherent predispositions, which he terms the "four sprouts" (*si duan* 四段, see *Mengzi* n.d. "Gongsun Chou I," 6). These are foundational to the moral development of an individual, serving as prerequisites for achieving true humanity. This cultivation of humanity, according to Mencius, necessitates a comprehensive educational process that encompasses axiological training.

Moreover, within this framework of Confucian moral cultivation, a specific virtue among these four Mencian sprouts stands out as a moral guideline helping individuals discern right from wrong. This virtue is *yi* 義, which many scholars (e.g., Chen Yunquan 2015, 51) interpret as justice, defined by contextually appropriate actions.

To encapsulate, Confucius advocated that the regulation or moderation of natural impulses could be achieved through the practices of ritual and music. Rituals served as the outward expression and structuring behaviour of virtue, while music connected deeply with the inner emotional and sensory experiences of individuals. These practices were instrumental in channelling emotions into socially acceptable behaviours, guided by the principle of humaneness (*ren* 仁). This approach played a crucial role in shaping the cultural ethos of the Eastern Zhou dynasty, giving rise to a distinct form of Chinese humanism known as *renwen* 人文, interpreted as human order or culture.

Confucianism, deeply entrenched in this humanistic culture, offered a naturalistic view of human existence, aligning human life with cosmic principles and underscoring the inseparability of humans from the natural world.[1] This philosophical stance asserts that human culture and the natural universe are fundamentally interconnected[2] (Luque-Moya 2023).

Another key element of Chinese humanism is the principle of *minben* 民本, which translates to "the people as the foundation" or "the people as the root". This concept is frequently discussed as highlighting the proto-democratic aspects inherent in early Confucian thought. In the oldest extant compilation of historical texts, the *Shang shu*, there is a notable passage that underscores the pivotal role of the people in society, thereby affirming the fundamental importance of human-centric governance:

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[1]   When considering Cheng Chung-Ying's distinction between exclusive and inclusive humanism, it is important to clarify that we are referring to the inclusive type. (For a detailed comparison of these humanisms, see Cabural 2023.) Additionally, scholars such as Hans Georg Moeller critically examine the Confucian belief in human supremacy, which is also a fundamental aspect of traditional Confucian perspectives on humanity's role in the cosmos (see Moeller 2023)

[2]   Actually, this also includes a corresponding view to the relation between humanism and history. In order to understand the social, political and cultural background of Confucian humanism, it is by no means sufficient to analyse it merely through the lens of the Aristotelian concept of *homo politicus*, nor exclusively through the optics of the modern (Western) concept of *homo economicus*. In this context, many Chinese scholars emphasize the fact that humans both shape and are shaped by history; thus, in understanding and interpreting traditional functions of Confucianism, the concept of *homo historicus* also plays an important role (Sernelj 2014, 197).

民惟邦本, 本固邦寧.

> It is only people who are the basis of a country. If the base is stable, peace will reign in the country. (*Shang shu* n.d., "Xia shu, Wu zizhi ge," 2)

During this pivotal period in Chinese thought, a significant concept related to the essential nature of humans, termed "humanness" (*ren xing* 人性), came to the fore. This idea is defined in the Confucian *Analects* as what is universally common among all people (*Lunyu* n.d., "Yang huo," 2). However, Confucius' two most prominent disciples had sharply contrasting interpretations of this notion. Mencius believed that this intrinsic quality of humans is inherently good, while Xunzi argued that it is fundamentally selfish and that any apparent goodness is actually a result of external influences like education and socialization.

Given the central role of education and socialization in Confucianism, both scholars emphasized these aspects strongly, albeit for different reasons. Mencius, who viewed human nature as fundamentally good, nonetheless acknowledged that it was imperfect at birth and required nurturing through education to fully develop its positive potential. Xunzi, on the other hand, saw socialization as essential to temper the basic selfishness of human nature.

Sublating Political and Philosophical Confucianism

This focus on the transformative power of culture and education highlights a core principle of Confucian thought: culture not only enhances the human condition but is also crucial in completing the individual, elevating them to a central and profoundly respected position within the cosmos.

In this context, it is important to recognize that Confucianism is not a monolithic philosophy. Throughout history, the foundational ethical principles of Confucianism have been subject to change and have diverged in different ways. As such, a clear distinction must be made between the original teachings of Confucian philosophy and the later state doctrine of Confucianism that was officially adopted and became institutionalized.

The foundational period of Confucian philosophical ethics lasted until the beginning of the Qin dynasty (221 – 206 BCE), under Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi. This era saw figures like Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi emerge as major proponents.

The evolution of Confucianism entered a significant new phase around 100 BCE during the Han dynasty. This period was characterized by the formulation of a comprehensive worldview that integrated concepts of body and spirit, matter

and thought, and merged the natural with the social, political, and moral spheres. Crucially, it was also during this time that Confucianism began to crystallize into the official state ideology, further solidified by the state examination system established to control access to governmental positions. This system, which persisted until 1903, became a central structure supporting Confucian doctrine.

Dong Zhongshu was a pivotal figure in this phase, interpreting Confucian teachings largely through the lens of Xunzi, who is often viewed as a transitional figure between Confucianism and Legalism. This period marked a significant transformation of Confucian philosophy, incorporating more autocratic Legalist elements, thus morphing the originally progressive and somewhat democratic nature of Confucian thought into a more rigid and hierarchical ideology.

This interpretation, heavily influenced by the *Guliang Zhuan* 穀梁傳 tradition articulated by Guliang Chi, stressed the values of filial piety, loyalty, and respect for authority, and portrayed Confucianism as fundamentally concerned with social order and hierarchy. While influential at the institutional level and within official ideologies, the *Guliang Zhuan* was not as dominant in philosophical circles compared to the *Gongyang zhuan* 公羊傳 interpretation, which linked back to Mencius and was foundational for the Neo-Confucianism of the Song dynasty around 1200 CE.

Neo-Confucianism during this time integrated elements from Daoism and Buddhism, significantly shaping societal values for over seven centuries through the philosophical framework developed by Zhu Xi and others. This movement interpreted classical Confucian ideas primarily through Mencius's more idealistic perspectives, contrasting sharply with the earlier, more rationalist interpretations. This later stage of Confucian thought continues to influence modern iterations of the philosophy, known as New Confucianism (*Xin ruxue* 新儒学).

Therefore, it is important to distinguish between the two main interpretations of the original Confucian doctrines. One is articulated in the *Guliang* commentaries on Confucius's *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and the other is represented in the *Gongyang* interpretation and, more extensively, in the works of Mencius.[3] Additionally, it is essential to recognize the distinct political and social orientations of these interpretative streams, as both have continued to exert their influence across the Sinophone world to this day. The first interpretation underpins not only the

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3   Confucian thought has evolved through three distinct phases, yet it is primarily split into two main interpretations: one stemming from the *Guliang* commentary (or Xunzi's teachings) and the other from the *Gongyang* commentary (or Mencius's perspectives). These two interpretations form the foundational branches of the original Confucianism, which constitutes the initial stage of Confucian philosophical development.

institutionalized Confucian state doctrine but also a rigid normative ethical system characterized by a strict hierarchical structure, gerontocracy, discrimination against marginalized groups (including women), social uniformity, and the suppression of individual autonomy. In contrast, the second stream fosters a dynamic and flexible approach, continually reevaluating philosophical issues, valuing social diversity, and rejecting dogmatism and autocratic dictates.

This dichotomy highlights the complex nature of Confucianism, which intertwines elements of autocracy and freedom, rigidity and adaptability, dogmatism and openness. Such complexity suggests that Confucianism is not a uniform or static ideology but rather a diverse discourse encompassing varying, and sometimes conflicting, paradigms. These have manifested as either a philosophy of vibrant and varied relationships and a celebration of diversity, or as a more traditional state doctrine emphasizing uniform ethical norms.

Understanding these differing foundations is crucial, as viewing Confucianism as a homogeneous ideological structure can obscure the nuanced traits of Chinese humanism and the intrinsic diversity within Confucian thought. These two major currents stem from distinct classical interpretations, each shaping the ideology in unique ways.

Despite the state doctrine's bureaucratic, hierarchical, and formalistic nature, it still partly adopted the original Confucian philosophy, albeit often distorting or manipulating it for ideological ends. Consequently, the Confucian brand of humanism has become the leading discourse within all forms of humanist thought that emerged within the Chinese tradition. However, it is worth noting that this "cultural" humanism isn't the only humanistic strand within this tradition.

On this basis, our exploration can set out to achieve a thorough dialectical sublation of philosophical and political Confucianism, aiming to reveal a "meta-Confucian pattern" that is both historically coherent and conceptually integrated. The methodology of sublation can be outlined through eight progressive phases, initially examining the roles and responsibilities of individuals within society as influenced by different Confucian schools. This investigation serves to distinguish the cultural and historical underpinnings of philosophical Confucianism, which prioritizes personal moral development, from those of state doctrine Confucianism, which is often co-opted to support autocratic governance.

Following this, we can identify key themes common to both strands: the emphasis on social harmony and the vital role of hierarchical relationships in maintaining societal order. Despite their shared objectives, these forms of Confucianism approach harmony and hierarchy differently. Philosophical Confucianism, as es-

poused by figures like Mengzi, advocates for a harmony that respects diversity and individual morality, whereas political Confucianism, following Xunzi, promotes a more uniform and collectively disciplined approach.

The nuances in their views on hierarchy are equally distinct. Philosophical Confucianism sees societal roles as fluid, with ethics defined by reciprocal virtues and situational appropriateness, reflecting Mengzi's teachings. In contrast, political Confucianism, rooted in Xunzi's thought, supports a fixed and vertical order that stresses the importance of rigid social roles to maintain control.

Moreover, the way virtues are conceptualized within these frameworks varies significantly. In philosophical Confucianism, virtues are inherent human qualities that can be cultivated through education and self-reflection, emphasizing compassion and empathy as natural human traits. Conversely, political Confucianism views virtues as qualities to be inculcated through strict adherence to societal norms and rituals, portraying them as mechanisms to enforce conformity and uphold the social hierarchy.

In the next step, we try to connect each form of Confucianism to its fundamental philosophical underpinnings. In this it quickly becomes clear that philosophical Confucianism is tied to deontological ethics, focusing on personal integrity and moral duties within interpersonal relationships. State doctrine Confucianism, on the other hand, aligns with paradigms of power dynamics and social control, utilizing ethical principles strategically to maintain order and authority within the governance structure.

These insights can be critically assessed to pinpoint potential shortcomings in each approach. Philosophical Confucianism might be criticized for its limited engagement with political dynamics and societal injustices, focusing overly on individual morality at the expense of broader social concerns. On the other hand, political Confucianism could be seen as stifling individual autonomy and legitimizing authoritarian rule under the pretext of societal stability.

Such a comprehensive and thorough approach to investigating Confucianism and Confucian humanism can help us resolve many challenges that mark our contemporary globalized world. In this sense, this ancient philosophy can serve, for instance, as a meaningful partner for humanizing the functioning of artificial intelligence (D'Ambrosio 2023). The revival of Confucian philosophy can also help us to improve numerous corresponding issues in education, legislation and politics (Ambrogio 2017, 113). But in this regard, we shall also take into account the dangers linked to different attempts to establish Confucianism as a convenient ideological cover for authoritarian rule (Sigurðsson 2014, 21).

Conclusion

The methodology of sublation has helped us to integrate the ethical insights of philosophical Confucianism with the governance strategies of political Confucianism. In this way, we can propose a balanced leadership model that incorporates moral integrity and pragmatic effectiveness. This model advocates for a governance style that is both ethically informed and practically viable, aiming to create a harmonious societal structure that values individual moral growth as essential to communal well-being.

Undoubtedly, such a concept of a meritocratic system has already found its footing within a broad spectrum of Chinese ideologies, propaganda, and political theories, spanning both historical and contemporary dialogues. A meritocratic system's alignment with Chinese ideologies, spanning historical to contemporary dialogues, is evident. However, the sublation process brought forth an innovative notion, distinguishing two subjects through this dialectic. This is akin to the Confucian thought streams mirroring the binary of the empirical and the transcendental subject (*neisheng waiwang* 内聖外王). This parallel sets the stage for reevaluating theories using this duality to harmonize civil society and governance components.[4]

Finally, this dialectical method culminates in a novel perspective on Confucianism, potentially transforming current understandings and applications of Confucian ethics in governance. The emergence of the traditional *neisheng waiwang* category from a dialectic of contrastive analysis represents more than serendipity. It underscores the urgent need to incorporate "the voices of the affected" in examining meta-civilizational patterns, advocating for primary reliance on indigenous sources, concepts and categories. In the Chinese context, understanding the nuanced "Confucian combination of hierarchy and mobility" remains elusive without prioritizing native scholarly work over a predominantly Western-centric view. This shift is critical not just for the substance of the studies but crucially for their theoretical underpinnings. Additionally, this perspective enriches the civilizational discourse revival debate, underscoring the imperative of embedding a comprehensive cultural context in our examinations of social progress.

By merging the philosophical depth of Confucian moral thought with the practical necessities of state management, this new model seeks to offer a dynamic and

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4   This binary category, initially introduced by *Zhuangzi* (n.d., "Tian xia," 1), found later much resonance and adoption among Confucian thinkers. Its significance extended beyond the classical era into Neo-Confucianism during the Song and Ming dynasties. Later, this concept was revitalized within the framework of Modern New Confucianism, assuming a pivotal role in the theoretical discussions concerning subjectivity and political philosophy.

integrated approach to leadership and societal organization. This novel synthesis allows for an enriched understanding of how a modernized Confucianism might navigate the moral imperatives and pragmatic needs of contemporary governance, contributing to discussions and offering a holistic approach to ethical leadership within the emerging context of a planetary ethics.

Acknowledgements

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