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Trends in Political Science Research: Theoretical Insights into Confucianism

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been an increase in research on Confucian political thought and its influence on East Asia. Recent contributions have explored fundamental philosophies and ethical principles, highlighting their enduring influence on socio-political thought and raising critical perspectives and questions. Is it possible to create a Confucian democracy? How can a country wage war if Confucianism ultimately advocates peace and harmony due to its moralistic governance? Furthermore, what exactly does an international perspective of the world through a Confucian lens entail? This article aims to clarify the role of Confucianism in contemporary thought and its persistent impact on modern ethical structures and models of governance. It reviews contemporary ideas related to Confucian principles and encourages further research on their adaptation to address the moral and social challenges of today's globalised world.

Keywords: Chinese political theory; Political philosophy; Confucianism; Confucian democracy; Confucian meritocracy

Introduction

Throughout much of imperial history, Confucianism provided the ideological basis for governance and bureaucratic legitimacy across East Asia. However, in recent decades, we have witnessed the reinterpretation and mobilisation of this philosophy in different branches of political theory. Contemporary theorists, particularly in China, have revived Confucian arguments in favour of government by the virtuous and capable, challenging liberal democratic norms by advocating political meritocracy as a model of governance that underpins a perfectionist political philosophy, in which the state has the task of promoting the good life through the cultivation of virtue, rather than simply protecting individual rights. (Chan, 2007; Jiang, 2018)

Although classical Confucianism did not articulate democratic ideals, modern interpretations engage with liberal democratic theory, examining the possibilities of Confucian values to support or coexist with democratic institutions. (Chan, 2007) In contemporary China and other East Asian contexts, this means that Confucianism is often invoked by political elites as a source of legitimacy and social cohesion, either to counterbalance Western liberalism or to reinforce state authority. (Y. Kim et al., 2019) Advocates argue that Confucianism offers a beneficial paradigm for ethical governance and is valuable for democratic practices, particularly through its emphasis on civic responsibility and virtuous leadership. However, this integration is not without resistance as some critics question the extent to which Confucianism can accommodate institutional experiences that embrace democracy, political meritocracy, and individual rights, and whether it is genuinely compatible with modern political, moral, and global standards. (Bell, 2010)

In the case of China, modern Chinese leaders, starting with Deng and continuing through Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping, have emphasized Confucian values. According to Zhang and Xu (2022), Xi's concept of the 'Chinese dream' has made Confucianism and other traditional cultures central elements for maintaining Chinese national identity, linking these values to the perpetuation of the nation's history of "struggle and humiliation", while at the same time intensifying the ideological basis of Marxism and Maoism at all levels. (Zhang & Xu, 2022, p. 181) An example of this application can be seen in Xi Jinping's support for *Ruzang*, a huge compilation of Confucian texts, which symbolises the state's commitment to Confucian learning as the basis for political legitimacy and governance. (Liang, 2024) Along with the CCP's ongoing campaign for 'self-revolution' and strict internal party governance, it is based on the Confucian teaching that a ruler must correct himself before correcting others, with leaders expected to exemplify virtue in order to gain the support and obedience of the people, which is often cited in official rhetoric. (Xu et al., 2022)

Other East Asian societies are also substantially influenced by Confucianism: in South Korea, ethical governance emphasised the moral duty of leaders to promote social cohesion, with traces of Confucian kinship[1] evident in civil law, such as restrictions on marriage between people with the same surname until 2005[2]. (Śleziak, 2013; García & Arturo, 2025) In Japan, political discourse often draws on values of moral education, virtuous government, and civic duty when shaping debates about national identity and modernisation. (Rayhan, 2023; Larsson, 2022) An example is the 2018 civic education reform in Japan, which focuses on the "communal" perspective, and strives to create positive "social views and ideas" among young people, focusing on the "public" perspective, instead of over-emphasizing individualism. In this way, the entire population can be nurtured as active participants in

[1] In Confucian thought, the family name signified shared ancestry and patrilineal descent. People with the same surname were presumed to descend from a common male ancestor, no matter how remote. As such, marrying someone with the same surname was traditionally considered incestuous, regardless of the genetic distance.

[2] In March 31, 2005, the law was revised so that only marriages between individuals within eight degrees of consaguinity or six degrees by marriage were prohibited, regardless of surname or clan origin. However, cultural remnants such as strong parental involvement in marriage decisions remains visible, reflecting the legacy of confucian family hierarchies.

a peaceful and democratic nation and society and be actively integrated into the globalized international community.[3] (Zhang and Xi, 2022)

The remainder of this review examines the main theoretical flaws and applications of contemporary Confucian thought. First, it contrasts arguments in favour of Confucian meritocracy with Confucian democracy, highlighting competing views about legitimate governance. It then explores how debates over democratic participation and epistemic justification challenge or reinforce Confucian political theory. The discussion then turns to Confucian concepts of harmony and "just war", analysing their implications for both domestic order and ethical considerations in conflict. Finally, the article investigates Confucian approaches to international relations, focusing on the relevance of doctrines such as *zhongyong* (the Doctrine of the Mean) and *tianxia* ("all under heaven") to China's evolving view of the world order.

Confucian meritocracy vs. Confucian democracy

There is intense debate surrounding the limits of Confucianism's openness to institutional experiences that incorporate new values such as democracy, political meritocracy, and individual rights. He (2020) illustrates this in his review of the works of Sungmoon Kim (2018) and Shaun O'Dwyer (2019) on pragmatic Confucian democracy and the perspectives of Confucianism. (He, 2020) On the one hand, there are Confucian democrats, who aim to integrate Confucian principles with democratic values in governance and who embrace democratic ideals such as popular sovereignty, political equality, and the right to political participation. They emphasise the importance of an ideal community where harmonious individuals and society grow synergistically through continuous moral self-improvement, with political participation playing a central role. (He, 2020) On the other hand, Confucian meritocrats prioritise selecting leaders and civil servants based on virtue, morality, character, and merit; they attempt to dissociate democratic practices from the moral principles of democracy and instead value the potential contributions of rituals to constructing social identity and alleviating economic inequality, which threatens social harmony. (He, 2020).

In light of these debates, Kim (2018) proposes a response that he refers to as pragmatic Confucian democracy. (He, 2020) This new theory aims to enable a better identification of the normative basis for the interaction between Confucian democrats and Confucian meritocrats, which underpins their practical disagreement on institutional design and political leadership, offering not only a cultural and community alternative to liberal democracy but also a morally appealing model of democracy in the circumstances of modern politics, marked by disagreements over values and moral conflicts. (He, 2020) The author further asserts that the Confucian model of democracy has instrumental value, but that it was slowly institutionalised and internalised as having non-instrumental value when democracy was in a phase of democratic transition and consolidation[4] (He, 2020, p. 3), becoming more fundamental and increasingly adopted over the years as a principle of the political system rather than a means to an end.

In contrast, O'Dwyer (2019) and He (2020) reject Confucian democracy by questioning the relevance of Confucian philosophy to contemporary East Asia, arguing that the region is undergoing a fundamental change characterised by a pluralism of values and a definitive range of diverse values, identities, and political ideologies. This raises the question of whether Confucianism can serve as a viable and meaningful guiding political ideology to promote democratisation. (He, 2020) The author responds by stating that the political landscape of the region is too complex for Confucian teachings to continue to provide a meaningful description or guidance for political development. This complexity

[3] The reform's focus on fostering positive "social views and ideas," and nurturing citizens as active, cooperative members of a peaceful, democratic society, directly echoes Confucian ideals that stress the importance of community over individual interests and the cultivation of virtuous citizens who contribute to societal order and the common good.

[4] Process by which countries in the region transition from authoritarian or hybrid regimes to stable and enduring democracies and where democratic norms, institutions, and practices become deeply ingrained in the political and social fabric.

arises from the growing regional diversity in cultural or philosophical orientation, with modern nations characterised by a multiplicity of values, beliefs, and ideologies, many of which are not rooted in Confucian traditions. This pluralism of values means that society cannot be clearly organised or guided by a single unified philosophical doctrine. (Song, 2020)

Furthermore, this institutional diversity creates an environment in which teachings originally rooted in notions of hierarchical order, paternalism, and moral leadership fail to offer effective or universally accepted solutions to contemporary governance issues. (Gossal, 2025; Song, 2020) With this in mind, the application of Confucian perfectionism in a modern context imposes, according to the author, paternalism and elitism, which often contradict the participatory and egalitarian ideals of contemporary democratic societies. In highly pluralistic contexts, this perfectionism risks marginalising alternative perspectives and failing to accommodate the full range of social interests and aspirations. (Song, 2020)

Democratic Participation, Epistemic Justification, and Confucian Political Theory

While He (2020) and O'Dwyer (2019) emphasise the diminishing role of Confucianism amid growing pluralism in East Asia, Zilliotti (2023) offers another perspective by stating that, although for epistemic democrats forms of democratic participation are necessary to reach the right decisions and ensure that political representatives take the interests of the public seriously, political participation can facilitate the impact of decision-making on the diverse epistemic contributions of citizens, with active involvement in the political process through voting or public argumentation providing citizens with a means of expressing their opinions on acceptable political conditions. Ultimately, this feeds into the decision-making process, granting access to a more comprehensive range of knowledge and perspectives than those available to restricted elites alone. (Zilliotti, 2023)

However, as Confucian political thought evolved in response to historical changes, such as the collapse of the Chinese imperial system, the emergence of new governments, and the spread of Western values, new issues arose: the conditions of freedom of expression and hierarchy.

According to Elstein (2016), most contemporary Confucian political theorists accept the right to political freedom of expression, which is in line with democratic principles and modern political values. However, this is difficult to reconcile with traditional Confucian sources, which often prioritise collective well-being over individual freedoms; in these sources, there is no explicit articulation of the right to freedom of expression. Nevertheless, it is possible to examine arguments around practices that suggest that expression should be regulated to maintain social harmony and respect for authorities and morality. (Elstein, 2016)

Nevertheless, freedom of expression deserves further analysis, as many contemporary Confucians seem to take this right for granted, risking its treatment as merely a tool for supporting democratic discussion instead of as a value grounded in Confucian thought itself, which may diminish its instrumental value in countries where the government is suspicious of democratic deliberation, such as China. (Elstein, 2016) For Zillioti (2022), in Confucian political thought, social hierarchies and class inequalities are justified on the basis that, ultimately, they promote the material well-being and moral development of individuals. This perspective maintains that Confucianism legitimises social hierarchies only when they serve to improve people's material well-being, promote moral development, and satisfy domestic and international needs. Thus, whether Confucianism should justify social hierarchies depends on contingent issues, that is, on the ability of social hierarchies to create specific situations in each social context. (Zillioti, 2022)

However, Ying (2018) argues that Confucianism, while compatible with democracy, fundamentally contradicts political hierarchy. He cites the example of China and asserts that, although many political theorists do not necessarily support the CCP's methods for revitalising Confucianism, they completely reject the concept of a Confucian democracy, as none of them can imagine how the

tradition can significantly benefit from the ideal of political equality. (Ying, 2018) To this, Zhang and Meng (2018) add that Confucian values, together with the doctrine of the CCP, have promoted an alternative conception of democracy in China, which has significantly shaped the country's democratic progress. They explain that while democracy in the West is commonly understood through freedom of speech and free elections, democracy in countries such as China is often associated with what the authors describe as "paternalistic guardianship" (Zhang & Meng, 2018, p. 646), where qualified officials are chosen to govern on behalf of the people.

Therefore, rather than adopting concepts directly from advanced democracies, Chinese deliberative democracy is based on the country's own political traditions. This foundation shapes the CCP's political legacy, emphasising that officials must listen carefully to the needs of the people and serve the public through compassionate and effective policies.

Harmony and "Just War"

The idea that a political system should be judged by its benevolent policies is questioned, particularly when it comes to China, which, despite promoting a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries and being against war as a primary resource, played an active role in the Vietnam War and the Korean War. The authors analysed in this section can help to understand China's position in these situations, using the concepts of harmony, Confucian peace, and "just war"[5].

Mahiet (2019) asserts that China employs the notion of harmony to project a peaceful, balanced, and unified image of itself to the world during its diplomatic efforts. (Mahiet, 2019) While Callahan (2004) and Nordin (2016) warn that the appeal to harmony can sometimes be used as a justification for ethnocentrism and imperialist policies. (Callahan, 2004; Nordin, 2016) From this perspective, harmony can be invoked to rationalise the hierarchization of cultures, in which one is considered superior to others, and to justify the conduct of nations that impose their will on others in the name of peace or world unity.

However, Keohane (1984) offers a different perspective on harmony, considering it a perfect state, separate from active collaboration. If people live in a world of genuine harmony, he argues, they will not need cooperation; the separate goals of different actors will simply align, allowing them to achieve what they all desire without the need for effort or coordination. (Keohane, 1984) From this perspective, we can understand harmony as distinct from hegemony and cooperation, capable of operating in mutual ignorance, where agreement occurs without intention or effort. This definition lines up with the Confucian view that harmony, rather than mere cooperation or domination, should be the goal of society and governance. For Von Elbe (1939), punishment and the extent of damage are determined by the objective of a "just war"; its goal is not primarily victory, but the establishment of peace, that is, a state of "*tranquillitas ordinis*" or orderly harmony, where all things have their designated place. (Von Elbe, 1939) This thesis resonates with the Confucian idea that any use of force should serve not self-interest or conquest, but the restoration of legitimate order and peace. Just action, whether in governance or conflict, is only justified if it ultimately brings about lasting harmony, where all things have their designated place. For Confucians, this means that both rulers and the people act in accordance with their roles and moral obligations, resulting in a peaceful and prosperous society.

If the Confucian worldview is one of peace and harmony, then pacification is unnecessary. How, then, can it be argued that traditional China, mainly through its tribute system, incorporated the Confucian principles of peace and pacification? Hui (2023) argues that China had no desire to use its

[5] for Mencius and Xunzi, a "just war" is essentially a war conducted by the *tianli* (the officer appointed by heaven), represented at the time by the Zhou king as the Son of Heaven or his delegate, against the feudal lords who operated a tyrannical government, seized power illegitimately, or challenged authority through direct aggression toward the King or the feudal states.

superior military and economic capabilities to seek territorial aggression against its Sinicised neighbours. Neighbours voluntarily submitted to China's hegemonic status because they admired and imitated the Confucian civilisation, an interaction that was facilitated by a common culture and language. (Hui, 2023) However, this narrative is contested by other scholars like Zhang (2014) who argues that while the tribute system had an ideological and economic foundation, for "barbarian" states, pragmatic trade and protection motives prevailed, and the system's working depended on China's military strength as much as her cultural prestige. (Zhang, 2014)

Confucian approach to international relations: Zhongyong and Tianxia

In China, political leaders are increasingly using historical narratives and traditional philosophical heritage to revise party ideology and support their foreign policy ambitions and infrastructure investments, as can be seen in leadership speeches involving the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and territorial claims in the South China Sea. Dadparvar and Azizi (2019) observe that a state's soft power primarily stems from its culture. In China's case, its ancient traditions, symbols, and literary history are openly framed by the leadership as an integral part of national soft power. (Dadparvar & Azizi, 2019) Although China's emphasis on soft power is nothing new, its necessity became more evident during Hu Jintao's administration, when the concept of a "harmonious world" centred on peace, respect, and cooperation was introduced as the guiding vision for Chinese foreign policy.

Through Hu's speeches and policy statements, the framework of the 'harmonious world' would help establish and incorporate the perspective of 'peaceful development of China' as a fundamental concept in the development of China's foreign policy strategies in the years to come. An example of this is the plenary session held by the 17th Chinese Communist Party Congress on October 2011, focused exclusively on the theme of culture, which emphasised the goal of transforming China into a 'socialist cultural superpower' — a national goal that would serve as a compass for the country's soft power strategy (Dadparvar & Azizi, 2019).

This session became significant because of the way it addressed culture as a fundamental component of China's soft power. Chinese leaders understood that cultural diplomacy, based on the country's rich historical and cultural heritage, could help reinforce China's economic and political aspirations, and they transformed this vision of cultural soft power into a central element of Chinese foreign policy, with the aim of creating an image of the Chinese nation that would align world opinion in favour of the country's appeal. (Dadparvar & Azizi, 2019)

As a result, new efforts have been made to develop a theory characteristic of Chinese international relations. A prominent example is the concept of *zhongyong* developed by Chinese thinker Qin Yaqing, being proposed as the foundation for a new theory of international relations that justifies China's emphasis on relational diplomacy, relational positioning, and ethics-based leadership, prioritising them over power dynamics. In Confucianism, *zhongyong* is a fundamental concept that advocates balance, moderation, and the harmonious integration of differences in social and political life. By basing his approach on *zhongyong*, Qin emphasises the Confucian belief that social and political order is best achieved through relational ethics, virtue, and a dynamic balance between competing interests.

Furthermore, this principle advocates a prudent foreign policy that avoids both extreme aggression and undue conciliation, leaning instead towards compromise and peaceful coexistence. (Qin, 2019) It further deepens a moral principle of international relations, contrasting with the focus on individualistic rationality and competitive advantage observed in much of the West. (Ling, 2020) However, *zhongyong* is one concept within a broader movement in China to develop a native theory of international relations, with another important concept being *tianxia.*

According to Sihan (2021), *tianxia* serves as an alternative framework for international governance. Unlike the Westphalian system, this system is conceived as being organised under the authority of the highest global institution, with the aim of creating a harmonious global order,

proposing a standard in which smaller states should be homogeneous and considered as a single sub-state entity. (Sihan, 2021) This entity should then abide by the rules of the world's supreme institution in a universal covenant-type of order, much resembling the ancient Chinese tributary order. The author, however, raises the question, who has the power to run this world order? While *tianxia* seems to promote a world government where shared values are a precondition for world governance, if the world lacks shared values, *tianxia* could lead to a world operating under the auspices of a single hegemon (Sihan, 2021).

Shih (2022) further clarifies that, despite claims of epistemological equality among states, *tianxia*'s mutual roles frequently reproduce hierarchical and asymmetric relations, where weaker parties must skilfully affirm commonality with the stronger to gain influence without overturning the basic imbalance. In practice, China aims to build mutually beneficial "win-win" relationships through reciprocal economic ties and infrastructural investment, as seen in the BRI. Eisenman (2023) explains this perspective by stating that as two states deepen cooperation through trade and investment, their "relational power" grows. However, if these relationships break down due to political conflict or economic rifts, this power quickly erodes, leaving weaker states especially vulnerable. (Eisenman, 2023)

To counteract this vulnerability, Chia (2021) argues that one way for the weaker states to safeguard themselves would be to consider their background knowledge and social positioning. (Chia, 2021) These concepts offer strategies for smaller or less powerful states to hold their ground in global politics despite being at a disadvantage. Background knowledge can be understood as a group of norms and ideas that define how countries interact with each other at an international level. These norms and ideas are then shaped and reinforced by symbolic power, which consists of the ability to influence how things are perceived and whose ideas carry more weight in the system. As such, understanding how symbolic power works may help weaker states find ways to challenge and adapt to global rules to suit their needs. Meanwhile, social positioning is the meaningful action that draws on background knowledge to enact specific relations between actors and between the actor and others collectively. It is through social positioning that agents express their identity and demand recognition of their unique contributions from others.

Conclusion

This review showed that there continues to be a heated discussion about importing traditional Confucian values into contemporary frameworks of democracy and international relations. Supporters of a confucian democracy believe that Confucianism and liberal democracy are not inherently opposed and that the Confucian emphasis on moral leadership and harmony can be adapted to support democratic practices like equal rights and active citizen involvement in government. Critics, however, doubt the relevance of Confucian values in the context of East Asia's contemporary diversity and political pluralism.

Despite this, some authors defend that adapting Confucian democratic ideas to paternalistic guardianship is one way to govern that encourages moral leadership and a strong concern for the needs of the public, while still supporting a meritocratic vision that stresses social hierarchy, the strengthening of rituals, and the promotion of social harmony. To preserve this social harmony globally, *zhongyong* and *tianxia* are proposed as tools for entering the delicate idea of balanced interactions that are ideology-orientated toward social relationships. In addition, a "mutualistic" rhetoric is often used to strengthen relational power, but it can also increase the vulnerability of weaker partners if these relationships break down, highlighting the importance for such states to rely on background knowledge and symbolic power to better protect their security.

Two fundamental questions remain unresolved regarding Confucianism's relationship with modernity: Is Confucianism adaptable enough to allow for institutional innovations that incorporate the values of democracy, political meritocracy, and individual rights? And can Confucianism be harmonised with contemporary political, ethical, and international systems? Additionally, the search

continues for how to connect scholarly theories and practical applications and what would constitute a secure and innovative adaptation of Confucian traditions in today's world.

Future studies would benefit from bridging the gaps in existing theories and offering a more nuanced synthesis of where Confucianism appears in local contexts. This includes studying its evolution, its place in national discourse, and its internal meaning. In addition, it would be fruitful to carry out a more extensive investigation of how Confucian democracy can be applied to modern affairs, such as digital governance and participatory decision-making, as well as how Confucian relational power might influence future forms of international relations.

Finally, due to Confucianism's emphasis on harmony, there is considerable space for further exploration of its role in dispute resolution and peacemaking in international relations. Future research might consider investigating practical applications of Confucian notions of moral leadership and benevolent governance in contemporary peace processes, military conflict, displacement, and diplomatic interventions. Through the exploration of these dimensions of Confucianism, new valuable insights could be provided about its potential to address modern challenges and contribute meaningfully to both local and global governance in an increasingly interconnected world.

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