

More than good executives: The teaching mission of Confucian political leaders

Philosophy and Social Criticism

1–16

© The Author(s) 2020

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0191453720948414

journals.sagepub.com/home/psc**Jingcai Ying** 

University of Virginia, USA

Abstract

Emboldened by the rise of China, a meritocratic trend has surged in recent Confucian political theory. Confucian meritocracy is upheld as an equally viable alternative, if not a superior one, to democracy because many think that the latter's populist vices do not exist in the former's hierarchical, managerial political structure. This article addresses this seemingly dichotomous relationship between democracy and Confucian meritocracy by drawing on Zhu Xi (1130–1200 AD). I demonstrate those overlooked egalitarian qualities inherent in Confucian meritocracy, which can render it *naturally compatible* with democracy. Thus, an accurate understanding of Confucian meritocracy requires us not to see it as an opposite of democracy. Rather, Confucian meritocracy actually fosters moral growth in the populace by encouraging them to participate in politics under the instruction of their political leaders, who are to be guided by two egalitarian pedagogical principles, that is, universal inclusion and student participation.

Keywords

Confucian democracy, meritocracy, political leadership, virtue, Zhu Xi

Introduction

Emboldened by the rise of China on the world stage, a meritocratic trend has surged in recent Confucian political theory. It seizes on Confucianism's traditional emphasis on talent and virtue as the key argument for a hierarchical meritocracy. For these critics of democracy, popular sovereignty means little more than the tyranny of an incompetent majority, which is selfish, short-sighted, ignorant or some mixture of all these vices.

Corresponding author:

Jingcai Ying, Department of Politics, University of Virginia, 1540 Jefferson Park Ave (JPA), S183 Gibson Hall, Charlottesville, VA 22903, USA.

Email: jy2xz@virginia.edu

Meritocrats laud the Confucian tradition as a superior, or at least an equally viable, alternative to democracy because they think that populist vices, which have occurred too frequently in recent times, tend not to exist in Confucian meritocracy.

This article questions this prevalent viewpoint that deems Confucian meritocracy dichotomous to democracy. My arguments here do not reach the strong conclusion that Confucians should embrace democracy, which I have done elsewhere (Ying 2018). Rather, my primary intent is to highlight those egalitarian qualities *inherent* in Confucian meritocracy. I contend that these egalitarian qualities are not secondary or peripheral but *necessary* to Confucian meritocracy. Given the primacy of these egalitarian qualities, I submit that the managerial, hierarchical conception of Confucian meritocracy, which is the mainstream view, is one-sided and overlooks those essential qualities that make Confucian meritocracy egalitarian and thus compatible with democracy.

The arguments for my thesis draw on the thought of Zhu Xi (1130–1200 AD), one of the most influential Confucian thinkers. According to Zhu Xi, the virtuous and talented political leaders in Confucian meritocracy should be more than good executives. They ought to be the people's teachers and *foster moral growth in the people by encouraging them to participate in politics*. This educational mission is to be carried out in accordance with two egalitarian pedagogical principles, that is, universal inclusion and student participation. As we shall see, these egalitarian principles make Confucian meritocracy resonate more with democracy than with the managerial, hierarchical conception of meritocracy upheld by many Confucian scholars.

The following is divided into four sections. The first section specifies this article's contributions to Confucian political philosophy. The second explicates Zhu Xi's principle of universal inclusion – that is, the meritorious political leaders must teach all interested students, regardless of their existing talents or moral achievements, and conceal no knowledge from anyone. The third section illustrates the importance of student participation in Zhu Xi's pedagogy, which obliges Confucian teachers to personalize the learning programs for different students to maximize student participation. The fourth section explains why the two egalitarian pedagogical principles are applicable to politics in Confucian meritocracy.

Re-imagining Confucian meritocracy

Within the camp of Confucian meritocracy, there are two conceptions of merit. The first group simply conceives merit as the talents and virtues necessary for effective governance without defining merit strictly according to a Confucian scheme (Bai 2013; Bell 2016; Chan 2014). These scholars believe that meritocracy is better than democracy because it can produce more effective public policies (Bai 2013: 64; Bell 2016: 19; Chan 2014: 100–101). This kind of meritocratic arguments may be inspired by Confucianism, but it 'does not presuppose the social dominance of a "Confucian" culture...and this regime design is meant to be universal...' (Bai 2013: 65).

The second group of Confucian meritocrats is more nationalistic. They conceptualize merit based on Confucian ethics to distinguish a Confucian polity from other forms of meritocracy (Fan 2013; Jiang 2013). As Fan Ruiping puts it, the scholars from the first camp 'attempt to build a Confucian meritocracy without relying on a genuine Confucian

understanding of merit' (Fan 2013: 108). For nationalists like Fan, a genuine Confucian meritocracy must integrate 'the substantive Confucian view of human well-being (especially its familist way of life) into the constitution as well as implement it through appropriate governmental institutions' (Fan 2013: 109). Despite their differences, the universalists and nationalists are united in their rejection of political equality. They are all concerned with the potential problems arising from popular participation in politics, which they think will produce bad policy decisions and deprive a Confucian regime of its own political advantages over Western democracies.

Contrary to Confucian meritocrats, some Confucian scholars consider popular participation a necessity for Confucian perfectionism, which leads them to infuse popular participation with Confucian values. Such infusion takes different forms. Following Mou Zongsan (1909–1995), a towering figure in contemporary Confucian philosophy, Stephen Angle thinks that the Confucian meritorious should exercise their moral influence through a set of formal institutions, which requires some limited degree of popular participation in politics (Angle 2012: chaps. 2–3). For Sor-hoon Tan, popular participation should be encouraged in politics, provided that the meritorious are given the power to make those political decisions that are necessary for prompting the populace's moral progress (Tan 2016: 491, 504).

If Angle and Tan want the meritorious to guide popular participation in politics to perfectionist ends, Sungmoon Kim conceives the value of popular participation in politics apart from Confucian ethics. Sympathetic to Angle's and Tan's perfectionist arguments, which was an approach Kim once embraced himself (Kim 2016: chap. 6), Kim is concerned that 'whether moral growth, achieved through active political participation, is directly tantamount to Confucian moral development of the kind pursued by traditional Confucians' (Kim 2018: 36). In other words, Kim thinks that a strong bridge has not yet been built between traditional Confucian ethics and political participation. A more promising route, according to Kim, is to separate the value of Confucian democracy from 'the moral doctrines formulated by any version of traditional Confucianism' and assess it 'by how it contributes, instrumentally and noninstrumentally, to the citizenry's collective self-government, a value unrecognized by both classical and neo-Confucians' (Kim 2018: 73).¹ To be sure, Kim does not reject the important roles that the meritorious political leaders can play in promulgating Confucian values. He only subjects these roles to 'democratic procedures that embody such core democratic values as popular sovereignty, political equality, and the right to political participation' (Kim 2018: 71). Despite his instrumental justification of Confucian democracy, Kim welcomes Confucian meritocrats' contributions to a democratic life (Kim 2018: 76–77).

What is missing in the current debate concerning Confucian meritocracy is that scholars have not yet closely examined the teacher–student relationship between Confucian political leaders and the people. A closer look at this educational relationship will reveal the egalitarian dimensions of Confucian meritocracy, that is, inclusivity and participatory learning. Through an analysis of Zhu Xi's conception of Confucian meritocracy, this article will demonstrate that Confucian political leaders are obliged to be dedicated political teachers who promote the moral growth of the populace by teaching all how to participate in politics. Put differently, I argue that Zhu Xi's conception of Confucian meritocracy bridges the gap between political participation and moral growth,

which enables Confucian democrats to *embrace both democracy and Confucian meritocracy simultaneously*.

Situated between Confucian meritocrats and Confucian democrats, this article contributes to Confucian political philosophy in two ways. First, my argument shows that the current understanding of Confucian meritocracy is inadequate because it overemphasizes the managerial role of political leaders at the expense of their educational role. Although Confucian meritocrats like Fan, Bai and Chan emphasize the importance of (moral) education in their work, they usually recommend it as a matter of public policy without discussing how political leaders should *personally* play the role of a sagely teacher. This omission leaves the reader a distorted impression of Confucian meritocracy that is nearly indistinguishable from technocracy or corporate management.

Second, my argument draws attention to the inherent compatibility between Confucian meritocracy (properly understood) and democracy. To be sure, my argument does *not* prescribe that Confucian practitioners should support democracy. It only describes why democracy and Confucian meritocracy are naturally compatible with each other. I think that it is entirely plausible to endorse a participatory version of hierarchy that rejects political equality. Hence, this article's main contribution to Confucian democratic theory is that it enables Confucian democrats to envision new egalitarian practices without worrying about meritocratic counterarguments. The natural harmony between democracy and Confucian meritocracy strengthens Confucian democrats' call for wider political participation by incorporating the Confucian teacher–student relationship into the civic life of a Confucian society. By exploring not what political leaders can do *for* the people but what they can do *with* the people, this article draws attention to the inclusive and participatory dimensions of Confucian meritocracy, which can be easily integrated into a variety of Confucian democratic theories.

Universal inclusion

Like most Confucians of his time, Zhu Xi believes that all individuals can and should pursue sagehood by self-cultivation. For him, this ethical pursuit is never meant to be a solitary journey. It needs the guidance of a meritorious mentor. Commenting on the opening passage of *The Analects*, where Confucius exhorts learners to study diligently, Zhu Xi writes: ‘The nature of all human beings is good, but some are quicker than others to become awake to such goodness. Those who are slow in awakening must emulate the actions of those who are quick so that these slow learners can also illuminate their own [innate] goodness and return to their inborn [perfection]’ (SS, 6: 67).² Zhu Xi's commentary is a paraphrase of *Mencius* 5A: 7, where Mencius quotes Yi Yin to argue that ‘heaven, in producing the people, has given to those who first attain understanding *the duty* of awakening those who are slow to understand; and those who are the first to awaken the duty of awakening those who are slow to awaken’ (emphasis added; Lau 2003: 108). Citing Cheng Hao (1032–1085 AD), Zhu Xi explains that ‘to help others attain awakening does not mean that I give a portion of my possession to them. Rather, they already have such coherence [in them by nature] and I only help them become awake to it’ (SS, 6: 378). Zhu Xi's commentary makes it clear that there is no inherent moral inequality between the advanced learners and those who are lagging behind. They

are different merely because the timing of their moral awakening is different. It is the advanced learners' duty to help others see their own goodness. It is the responsibility of those slow learners to model themselves after the advanced learners.

Given the moral obligation that an advanced Confucian learner should help others, Zhu Xi thinks that Confucian political leaders, who are expected to be advanced learners in Confucian meritocracy, should follow two pedagogical principles: universal inclusion and student participation. Let us start with the principle of universal inclusion. For Zhu Xi, the Confucian commitment to teaching is universal and incompatible with the egalitarian assumption that the common people are too stupid to be taught. This egalitarian belief requires Confucian political leaders to see all people as potential students. Confucius, for example, never refuses to teach anyone who has given him 'so much as a bundle of fried meat as a present' (*Analects* 7: 7; Lau 1979: 86). In his in-text commentary, Zhu Xi explains that this gift-giving act is an inexpensive ritual that expresses the student's reverence for the teacher:

In ancient times, when people met each other for the first time, they would always present a gift as to be ritually respectful. Among gift choices, a bundle of fried meat is the cheapest option. *Since every living person has coherence in common, the sage's way of treating people is to desire everyone to enter goodness.* However, if the person does not know to approach the sage for learning, then it is ritually inappropriate for the sage to go teach him. Therefore, for anyone who approaches the sage with ritual propriety, the sage will always teach him without exception. (emphasis added; SS, 6: 122)

Zhu Xi's comments depict Confucius as a welcoming and an unimposing teacher. The sage desires to help all attain moral perfection, but he is not despotic in his pedagogy. He patiently awaits others' initiatives and then teaches them the way of self-cultivation. Once others decide to follow the Confucian way, the sage discriminates against no one and shares his knowledge with all who approach him.

The sage not only teaches all interested students but also differentiates his teaching style according to different students' needs. Although each student's moral learning grows at different paces, their uneven moral progress is no excuse for the teacher to reject anyone. As Confucius puts it, 'in education there is no separation into categories' (*Analects* 15: 39; Lau 1979: 137). Zhu Xi's in-text commentary states that 'human nature is good in all instances. The differences of good and evil among individuals result from [different configurations of] material force [*qi* 氣] and [social] habituation. For this reason, with the instruction of the superior person [*junzi* 君子], all individuals can return to their original goodness, and never again will there be the need to speak of the evil kind among human beings' (SS, 6: 210, 863; Gardner 2003: 50). In other words, despite Zhu Xi's awareness that many people fall short of moral perfection, he is optimistic that, with the proper guidance of a virtuous teacher, all individuals can regain their innate moral goodness. Uneven moral progress among individuals is no ground for the teacher to reject a request for guidance.

In fact, Zhu Xi's commitment to universal education runs so deep that he even reads Confucius's and Mencius's refusals to teach someone as teaching moments. Mencius states that 'there is more than one way of instructing others. My disdain to instruct a man

is itself one way of instructing him' (Mencius 6B: 16; Lau 2003: 144). As Zhu Xi reads it, Mencius is suggesting that 'if the experience of rejection stimulated the person to withdraw himself [from worldly cares] and engage in reflection and cultivation, then such rejection would also be a form of instruction for that person' (SS, 6: 423). Zhu Xi applies this teaching method as an exegetical clue to explain why Confucius sometimes turns away students. According to *Analects* 17: 20, 'Ru Bei [who studied with Confucius how to mourn properly for a deceased official] wanted to see Confucius. Confucius declined to see him on the ground of illness. As soon as the servant conveying the message [of rejection] had stepped out of the door, Confucius took his lute and sang, ensuring that [Ru Bei] would hear it' (Lau 1979: 146–47). In his in-text commentary, Zhu Xi cites Cheng Hao to indicate that this story is an instance of teaching by rejection. As Zhu Xi puts it, 'Ru Bei must have done something offensive to Confucius at that time. Therefore, Confucius refused to see him on the ground of illness. However, Confucius also let Ru Bei know that he was not ill, which was to ensure that Ru Bei would understand his rejection as an act of admonishment' (SS, 6: 224). Based on Zhu Xi's reading, Confucius was not actually turning the student away but merely wanted to motivate the student to examine his actions more carefully, so that he could rectify his own errors.

Similarly, Mencius also once turned away Cao Jiao, a person who was seeking the Confucian way. Explaining Mencius's underlying intention, Zhu Xi states that since Cao Jiao 'did not serve his superiors with ritual propriety and lacked a determined heart-mind to seek the way, Mencius merely instructed Cao Jiao to be filial and brotherly but did not allow him to study with him...This was also [an instance of] instruction by rejection' (SS, 6: 413). For Zhu Xi, Mencius's refusal was to motivate Cao Jiao to reflect on his ethical failings before he could receive further instructions. This drastic gesture expresses Mencius's demand that the student masters the basics of Confucian rites and shows more initiative in Confucian learning. In short, Zhu Xi's exegesis on Confucius's and Mencius's teaching examples indicates that he finds no one unteachable. Even if a Confucian teacher sometimes has to turn down a student's request for instruction, she must do so with the sole purpose of enhancing the student's desire for further education.

For Zhu Xi, the Confucian principle of universal inclusion entails not only welcoming all interested students but also rejecting esotericism in education. The Confucian teacher must not conceal any knowledge from any students, just as Confucius never hides anything from any inquirers. The sage once said of himself: 'Do I possess knowledge? No, I do not. A rustic put a question to me. It was like a complete blank. I kept hammering at the two sides of the question until I got everything out of it' (*Analects* 9: 8; Lau 1979: 97). In his commentary, Zhu Xi considers Confucius's self-professed ignorance a sign of the sage's humility (SS, 6: 141). He takes 'a complete blank' to be a description of the rustic's ignorance, not Confucius's (SS, 6: 771). Citing Cheng Yi, Zhu Xi states that self-deprecation is Confucius's teaching method to prevent the less advanced students from being alienated by his sagely majesty. Citing Yin Tun (1071–1142 AD), Zhu Xi asserts that Confucius gives no esoteric teaching:

The words of the sage contain both the lofty and the basic. *It is so accessible that everyone can be taught such knowledge.* It is so perfect that even a sage cannot make it better. This is

what it means by ‘two sides.’ Take for example [Confucius’s] answers to Fan Chi’s questions on benevolence and wisdom. The answers are exhaustive on both sides [i.e., accessible and perfect] without any remnants.... (emphasis added; SS, 6: 141)³

For Zhu Xi, the pedagogical principle of universal inclusion means that the entire Confucian learning, despite its profundity, is completely accessible to the common people. The Confucian teacher should follow Confucius’s example, always ensuring that their instructions are both exhaustive and understandable to all. Esoterism has no place in Zhu Xi’s vision of Confucian meritocracy. Rather, the leaders of a true Confucian meritocracy should teach all people and reveal to them the entirety of Confucian learning.

Student participation

In addition to universal inclusion, Zhu Xi’s pedagogical philosophy requires the Confucian teacher to respect students’ agency and foster participatory learning. For Zhu Xi, the ethical ideal of sagehood is attainable *only* by self-cultivation (*xiushen* 修身). Here the term ‘self/*shen*’ has two meanings. First, it means that ethical perfection requires the individual’s personal engagement. Second, it means that Confucian ethics centres on the perfection of the individual self.

Let me start with the first point. *Analects* 9: 19 records Confucius’s emphasis on the learner’s initiative: ‘As in the case of making a mound, if before the very last basketful, I stop, then I shall have stopped. As in the case of leveling the ground, if, though tipping only one basketful, I am going forward, then I shall be making progress’ (Lau 1979: 98–99). Zhu Xi comments:

[What Confucius] says is that, if the mound is near completion but misses only one basketful, [the project is] stopped because I have stopped myself (*wu zizhi er* 吾自止耳). If there has been only one basketful tipped on the ground that needs leveling, [the project] is moved forward because I have made progress myself (*wu ziwang er* 吾自往耳). [The lesson here is that,] if the learner never ceases to strengthen himself (*zhiqiang buxi* 自彊不息), then small accumulations will lead to large quantities. If [the learners] stops in the middle of the journey, then all he has accomplished will be lost. *Whether to stop or to make progress is wholly up to the learner, not to others.* (emphasis added; SS, 6: 144–45)

Aside from the last sentence that accentuates the need for the learner’s personal engagement, Zhu Xi repeats the same word (*zi* 自) for personal agency three times in the same passage. For Zhu Xi, self-cultivation is a personal undertaking and depends on the learner’s continuous and sustained commitment. His commentary echoes two other instances where Confucius reproved two of his disciples, Zaiwo and Ranqiu, for their lack of initiative and commitment in self-cultivation (*Analects* 5: 9, 6: 12; SS, 6: 102, 113). Although Zhu Xi never advocates that the individual should be given unfettered freedom, he does think that the individual should be given a large autonomous space in which he can make free decisions regarding self-cultivation.

Indeed, for Zhu Xi, Confucian learning cannot be effective without the learner's own active agency. In *Analects* 7: 8, Confucius states his way of engaging the student: 'I never enlighten anyone who has not been driven to distraction by trying to understand a difficulty or who has not got into a frenzy trying to put his ideas into words. When I have pointed out one corner of a square to anyone and he does not come back with the other three, I will not point it out to him a second time' (Lau 1979: 86). Here Zhu Xi invokes the Cheng brothers' commentaries as the authoritative interpretations. He first cites Cheng Yi's (1033–1107 AD) commentary that Confucius enlightens only those whose 'sincere intentions are already apparent in their facial expressions and words. [Confucius] gives advice only after [the student] has become truly sincere [in trying to learn]. Once [Confucius] has given the advice, he always waits until the student has understood the lesson *by himself* before he will give new advice' (emphasis added; SS, 6: 122). By citing these words, Zhu Xi makes it clear that a Confucian teacher should not help those students who lack initiative because the teacher's guidance cannot make up for the student's own engagement. The Confucian teacher should always let students digest new knowledge by themselves and allow them to run into problems before he instructs them again. Zhu Xi cites Cheng Hao (1032–1085 AD) to point out that unless the student has either become obsessed with trying to understand a difficult problem or gone frenetic in trying to put his ideas into words, 'he will be unable to gain secure and solid knowledge' (SS, 6: 122). According to Zhu Xi, Confucian self-cultivation requires individuals to demonstrate their own engagement in learning first.

Even with a meritorious teacher, students would not have progressed much if they were slacking off in personal efforts. On education, Mencius says: 'A carpenter or a carriage-maker can pass on to a student the rules of his craft, but the teacher cannot make the student skillful' (7B: 5; Lau 2003: 158). In his in-text commentary, Zhu Xi cites Yin Tun to reaffirm the necessity of student participation: 'The rules of the craft are the measuring laws that can be taught. Skillfulness, on the other hand, depends on the learner. Even a great craftsman cannot help with it because the basics can be passed on through words, but to reach the lofty requires the awaking enlightenment of the learner's own heart-mind...' (SS, 6: 445). Put differently, the Confucian teacher may be able to point out the right path towards sagehood, but the student must take the moral journey by herself.

The second reason that Zhu Xi respects the learner's agency is that the very aim of Confucian self-cultivation is the perfection of the self. *Analects* 14: 24 records a famous teaching from Confucius that appears frequently in Zhu Xi's instructions to his own students. It says: 'Men of antiquity studied to improve themselves (*weiji* 爲己); men today study to impress others' (Lau 1979: 128). In his in-text commentary, Zhu Xi follows Cheng Yi's interpretation: 'To improve oneself means the desire to obtain truth for oneself. To impress others means the desire to become known by others' (SS, 6: 194; also see SS, 6: 67 for a similar point). In other words, the individual must seek truth for his own well-being, not for chasing any external benefits such as fame. To Cheng Yi's commentary, Zhu Xi adds his own exegesis: 'The sages and the worthy have discussed much about the gains and losses of different learning attitudes that the learner can adopt. However, *they have never said anything as incisive and essential as this teaching*. If the learner understands this teaching [i.e., *Analects* 14:24] clearly and reflects on it daily, he

has not been very ignorant of [the Confucian way] he is following' (emphasis added; SS, 6: 194). As Zhu Xi tells his disciples, this individual choice between learning for oneself or studying for others should not be taken lightly because 'it concerns a matter of life and death' (YL, 18: 3758).⁴ In other words, the most important question facing Confucian learners is why they want to learn because it determines whether or not one is on the right ethical track towards genuine self-care. Confucians should constantly examine their motives for learning daily to ensure that they are always studying for the right reason, that is, to perfect themselves. Naturally, for an ethical project that centres on perfecting one's own self, the student's own agency must be respected and encouraged.

Zhu Xi repeats the same emphasis on student participation in his conversations with his own students. He says that 'studying the basics and reaching the lofty are not two separate undertakings. *No one can reach the lofty by being told so.* [We] must wait for the student to arrive there by himself' (emphasis added; YL, 15: 1151). When explaining to his students the *Mencius* passage 7A: 5 – where Mencius states that 'many people never understand their own practices, comprehend their own habits, or recognize the path they follow during their entire life' (Lau 2003: 146) – Zhu Xi tells his students that the exegetical keys here are 'practices' and 'habits', not 'understanding' or 'comprehending' because people today are eager about comprehending the Confucian way but not earnest in adopting any beneficial practices or habits (YL, 16: 1952). To perfect oneself, a Confucian student must actively turn her learning into action.

Since students should personally engage in learning but learn at different paces, the Confucian teacher should design personalized programs for individual students. Zhu Xi knows that different students have different starting points when entering Confucian learning. As Confucius tells us, 'you can tell the lofty to those who are above average but not to those who are below average' (*Analects* 6: 21; Lau 1979: 84). In his exegesis, Zhu Xi turns this inegalitarian doctrine into an egalitarian one. He cites Zhang Shi (1133–1180 AD) as the authoritative interpretation of the passage. According to Zhang Shi,

Although the sage's Dao contains no dichotomy between what is refined and what is coarse, his pedagogy surely focuses on teaching everyone according to their own natural abilities. The reason is that if those whose inborn constitution is below average were suddenly told about what is too lofty, they would not only fail to enter [Confucian learning] but also arrogantly overstep their levels and suffer from the defect of neglecting what is truly urgent for their self-cultivation. As such, they would only end up at the bottom level. Therefore, telling students only what they could reach at their own levels is how they could be encouraged to ask urgent questions and reflect on things at hand. Consequently, they can gradually progress to the lofty and far. (SS, 6: 115)

Citing Zhang Shi's commentary, Zhu Xi suggests that Confucius does not set limits to what the average person or those below average can achieve ultimately. All individuals can reach the lofty height of sagehood, though some start at lower levels than others (SS, 6: 194). Therefore, the Confucian teacher should personalize their teaching for different students, enabling all individuals to pursue sagehood at their own pace. To be hasty in teaching or in learning is a recipe for regression. As Zhu Xi puts it, 'those who teach

others should instruct their students based on the latter's own progress, which is to ensure that the instructions are easy for the students to follow without the drawbacks of overstepping their own levels' (SS, 6: 115; also see SS, 6: 236). In other words, to have a personalized curriculum for each student is meant to *optimize student participation and to enhance his or her agency* in learning.

Political learning

Having argued for two egalitarian principles in Zhu Xi's pedagogical philosophy, we will need to see if they are applicable to politics. As many Confucian scholars have observed, Confucian democrats must first establish the link that *political participation contributes to a Confucian practitioner's moral growth*. Otherwise, no egalitarian argument based on Confucian ethics is sufficient for justifying political equality. In fact, Confucian meritocrats would have no problem with our principles of universal inclusion and student participation *if* they were applied only to moral education. They just want to exclude these pedagogical principles from politics. Responding to this challenge, the rest of the section will demonstrate that politics is an integral part of Zhu Xi's ethics. His integration of ethics and politics makes political engagement an *essential* activity for moral growth. Therefore, the egalitarian principles of universal inclusion and student participation are indeed applicable to politics, opening up the bridge between political equality and Confucian democracy.

For Zhu Xi, self-cultivation is inherently political because communal well-being depends on the individual's moral virtue. By collating his own edition of *Great Learning*, Zhu Xi creates the famous eight-step program that starts with the individual and then branches out to the community:

The ancients who wished to illuminate the luminous virtue throughout the world put the governance of the country first; wishing to govern their countries well, they first regulated their households; wishing to regulate their households, they first cultivated themselves; wishing to cultivate themselves, they first set their hearts upright; wishing to set their hearts upright, they first ensured the sincerity of their intentions; wishing to ensure the sincerity of their intentions, they first extended their knowledge to the utmost; and the extension of knowledge lies in the investigation of things.... (SS, 6: 19; Gardner 1986: 91)

Note that the structure of this procession starts with political goals and ends with personal cultivation as the means to them. In other words, *the ultimate goal of Confucian ethics is politics*. Ethics is not insulated from but contributes to politics. As Zhu Xi writes in his in-text commentary, 'to illuminate the luminous virtue throughout the world means to enable all throughout the world to illuminate their inborn luminous virtue' (SS, 6: 19). Confucian self-cultivation starts with the perfection of one's self but reaches out to renew others. No one can be exempt from this task. As *Great Learning* teaches, 'from the Son of Heaven on down to the commoners, all without exception should regard self-cultivation as the root' (SS, 6: 17; Gardner 1986: 94). The emperor, governmental officials and commoners all have the duty to foster moral growth in others as well as cultivating themselves. The political foundation of a Confucian meritocracy is a group of

well-cultivated individuals who take upon themselves to be the people's teachers (SS, 6: 513).⁵

However, making renewing others a political duty for both the Son of Heaven and commoners raises the typical objection in a hierarchal society. Shouldn't politics be reserved only for the ruling elites?⁶ Isn't Zhu Xi's exegesis a misreading of *Great Learning* that would mislead people to overstep their social roles by participating in politics (SS, 6: 513)? Zhu Xi has a ready-made response to this challenge. Responding to the question why politics should be an integral part of 'the learning program that aims at self-perfection' (*weiji zhixue* 爲己之學; SS, 6: 513), Zhu Xi reminds us of humanity's common cosmological origin, the justificatory source of Confucian egalitarianism:

Heaven's illuminating command is what all living beings receive in common, not just my private possession. Therefore, the heart-mind of the superior person (*junzi*) is open and impartial. When we see all under heaven from this perspective, there is nothing that my heart-mind should not love and no affair that does not fall under *the responsibilities of my office* (*zhi* 職). Even though one's positioning (*shi* 勢) is *the humble background of a common man*, one's duty does not preclude those matters that can turn one's ruler into Yao and Shun [i.e., two sage kings] and one's people into those of Yao and Shun. (emphasis added; SS, 6: 513)

For Zhu Xi, what matters to politics is not one's social positioning but one's moral mindset.⁷ If the individual intends to improve himself through self-cultivation and has adopted the heart-mind of *junzi*, he has *a duty, not just a choice*, to participate in politics. A person cannot be considered cultivated unless he helps his state govern in the sagely way. As Zhu Xi puts it, 'if the learner sees the affairs of all under heaven and execute them as his own affairs according to the principles of self-improvement (*weiji* 爲己), then military equipment, taxes, sacrificial vessel, and bureaucracy can all improve the self' (SS, 6: 514; also see SS, 6: 508). Political participation is an essential contributing factor to moral growth. Politics is not a restricted area that only those possessing talents and virtues can enter but a moral activity that everyone should undertake to cultivate their talents and virtues (Tan 2016, 506). Therefore, the egalitarian principles of universal inclusion and student participation are applicable to politics. Moral equality entails political equality.

Given his moral egalitarianism, Zhu Xi even interprets an apparently meritocratic *Analects* passage in a non-meritocratic way. Confucius (in)famously teaches that 'the common people can be made to follow a path but not to understand it' (*Analects* 8: 9; Lau 1979: 93). Following Cheng Yi, however, Zhu Xi rejects the interpretation that Confucius approves of obscurantist policies. Rather, Zhu Xi thinks that

when a sage establishes the mission of education, it is not that he does not desire all families and households to recognize and apprehend his teaching. Rather, he is *incapable* of making the people understand the path but only capable of making them follow it. If [we say that] the sage did not make the people understand the path, then it would be no different from later generations' deceptive practices. How could it be the heart-mind of a sage? (emphasis added, SS, 6: 134; also see YL, 15: 1303)

For both Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, the sage does not simply want the populace to be well-governed, which could justify political deceptions as necessary instruments to achieve good governance. Rather, the sage intends to make the populace understand the coherent rationales undergirding all his public policies. But why is he incapable of making the populace understand his policy rationales? Answering a student's question, Zhu Xi clarifies the reason: 'The sage can only make the populace fully filial to their parents and respectful of their elder brothers. Yet he has *no means to go door to door explaining to them* why one should be filial and why one should be respectful of their elder brothers' (YL, 15: 1303). According to Zhu Xi, therefore, the sage cannot help everyone understand his political reasoning not because he wants to conceal it from them but because he is unable to engage with the populace one by one. For Zhu Xi, the populace's lack of political understanding indicates not any inborn deficiency in the populace but a practical shortcoming in the sage. Zhu Xi does not think that this practical difficulty should obscure the central ideal that the sage desires *everyone* to understand politics as a key part of their moral growth.

To overcome the practical limit of a sage's teaching capacity, Zhu Xi suggests that Confucians should build a teaching network for the people to access. As Zhu Xi reminds us, studying with the sage personally is not the only way to receive proper guidance. Otherwise, Zhu Xi would not have regarded Mencius, who never studied with Confucius and was not revered as a sage, as the authoritative transmitter of the Confucian way (SS, 6: 242–4).⁸ For Zhu Xi, the sage's inability to teach all students should not prevent the populace from obtaining Confucian learning because there are other ways to receive sagely wisdom. As Mencius points out,

a superior person [*junzi*] teaches in five ways. The first is by a transformative influence like that of timely rain. The second is by helping the student realize his virtue to the full. The third is by helping him develop his talent. The fourth is by answering his questions. And the fifth is by setting an example for those not in contact with him to emulate. These five are the ways in which a superior person teaches. (7A: 40; Lau 2003: 155)

The first four methods require personal contact with the sages, but the last one does not. As Zhu Xi further explains in his in-text commentary, the last one is how Mencius and others acquired Confucian learning:

A person may be unable to be taught directly (*jimen shouye* 及門受業) by a superior person. However, he hears the superior person's Dao from others and takes it as the good way to cultivate himself in private. This is also the reach of the superior person's teaching, just like how Confucius taught Chen Kang and Mencius taught Yi Zhi. Mencius also said that 'I did not get to be a disciple of Confucius's. I have learned indirectly from him through others'. (emphasis added, SS, 6: 439–40; also see YL, 16: 1969)

Chen Kang and Yi Zhi were educated by Confucius and Mencius, respectively (*Analects* 16: 13; *Mencius* 3A: 5). Neither, however, did so through any personal communication. Chen Kang obtained his lessons from Confucius's son, Boyu, and Yi Zhi from Mencius's disciple, Xu Pi. The practical limit of a sagely teacher is overcome by a

social network of Confucian teachers. Although no meritorious person can teach everyone by himself, her disciples can help promulgate the same Confucian ideas and thus extend his pedagogical reach. Through this teaching network, many people do not have to study with the sage to receive the same valuable lessons in a personalized way. Zhu Xi's idea of a teaching network makes Confucian learning accessible to more people, which strengthens the applicability of his egalitarian pedagogical principles, that is, universal inclusion and student participation.

Indeed, as a local official, Zhu Xi tried to build a robust network of Confucian educators. In his depiction of the Confucian golden age when the sages were the rulers, sagely governance relied on the public accessibility of Confucian learning: 'Amidst the glory of the tree dynasties, regulations were gradually perfected, and thereafter schools were found everywhere, from the Imperial Palace and the state capitals on down to the villages.... This is why in the heyday of antiquity good government flourished above and excellent customs prevailed below – it was a period never equaled by later generations' (SS, 6: 13–14; Gardner 1986: 79–82). As a political leader, Zhu Xi was committed to re-enacting such sagely governance by restoring or founding many local academies whose aim was to encourage students to focus less on the civil service examinations but more on self-cultivation. He also frequently taught at these academies (De Bary 1989, 1991). Although Zhu Xi operated these academies with state resources (e.g. government funds and land) and applied for imperial recognition, he did not want the state to take complete control over these local academies. As the eminent Song historian Peter Bol points out, 'what Zhu Xi had in mind was...an alternative [to the state schools] that would be controlled by Neo-Confucian teachers [like himself] and supported by local elites but able to tap the state's resources without becoming responsible for preparing students for the examinations' (Bol 2008: 232). Perhaps what Confucian meritocrats can learn from Zhu Xi today is to construct a broad network of local academies by their own initiatives (e.g. building schools through crowdsourcing websites) and then ask the state to certify them. These schools can serve as Confucian civic centres that teach the people how to participate in politics and become Confucian citizens. This network does not have to replace any public education system but can supplement it with ethical and civic programs that turn political participation into a morally edifying undertaking. In short, if good governance requires the meritorious to educate people in Confucian ethics and Confucian ethics regards political participation as moral growth, Confucian meritocracy should be helping *more* people participate in politics. One way of attaining this goal is establishing a teaching network.

Conclusion

Although Confucians do not have to espouse political equality, I argue that democracy and Confucian meritocracy are naturally compatible. Zhu Xi's two egalitarian pedagogical principles, that is, universal inclusion and student participation, give us a more accurate picture of Confucian meritocracy where the common people's agency and moral potential are respected and realized through political participation. Zhu Xi's egalitarian pedagogical philosophy helps us build a bridge between political participation and moral growth from a Confucian perspective. It also discourages us from

conceiving Confucian meritocracy as an equivalent of a traditional Chinese bureaucracy or a contemporary technocracy. Confucian political leaders should assume the role of a sagely teacher who includes all interested students and fosters their participation in politics as an integral part of their Confucian learning.

Therefore, our vision of a Confucian meritocracy would be very different from the conventional, managerial conception upheld by many Confucian meritocrats. Within the framework of Zhu Xi's ethics, Confucian politics is not merely about imposing a moral order on the society or producing material prosperity for the populace. Rather, the Confucian process of political decision-making itself should be an educational arena in which the people are instructed by their political leaders not just to follow orders but, much more importantly, to learn how to govern according to the Confucian way. Put differently, my depiction of Confucian meritocracy emphasizes the virtuous political leaders' teaching mission, which centres upon universal inclusion and student participation in politics. Consequently, this article cautions us not to see the relationship between democracy and Confucian meritocracy as a dichotomy. Rather, both political structures can be configured in a way that promotes Confucian learning for all.

ORCID iD

Jingcai Ying  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0181-0243>

Notes

1. Specifically, Kim supports democracy in today's pluralistic East Asia because 'democracy has demonstrated both theoretical and comparative practical advantages in addressing social conflict far more effectively and legitimately (especially in avoiding the use of violence) than any other regime type under modern pluralist societal circumstances' (Kim 2018: 40). Put differently, Kim sees democracy as the regime type that can best coordinate social actions in a pluralistic political environment (Kim 2018: 45).
2. All citations of Zhu Xi's writings follow *The Complete Works of Master Zhu* 朱子全書 published by Shanghai Guji Press 上海古籍出版社 in 2010. For citation abbreviations, YL = *The Categorized Conversations of Master Zhu* 朱子語類; SS = *Expositions and Collected Commentaries on the Four Books; Questions on the Four Books* 四書章句集註; 四書或問. For instance, the notation '(SS, 6: 67)' means that the source is from *Expositions and Collected Commentaries on the Four Books* and is found on the page 67 of Volume 6 in *The Complete Works of Master Zhu*. For other less frequently cited books, I will use their full titles such as *Reflections on Things at Hand* 近思錄.
3. Fan Chi, a disciple of Confucius's, is not known for his mental acuity. Whenever Fan Chi asks Confucius anything, the sage always exhausts his knowledge in answering his questions (e.g. *Analecets* 12: 21–22, 13: 4; SS, 6: 175–76, 180).
4. Throughout his conversations with students, Zhu Xi frequently uses the phrase 'studying for oneself' to indicate the essence of Confucian learning. Any glance of *Master Zhu's Categorized Conversations* can reveal that the phrase pervades Zhu Xi's instructions to students. Zhu Xi was deeply disturbed by his time during which many pursued Confucian studies only to gain fame and profits.

5. See Yu for a historical argument supporting this reading (Yu 2004: 422–23). Elsewhere, I have provided more textual evidence to support my argument that Zhu Xi’s ethics encompasses politics (Ying 2018).
6. Chan develops an argument for a Confucian conception of moral autonomy based on the Confucian need to pursue the ethical good (Chan 2014: 154). However, his reading of Classical Confucians suggests that moral autonomy is reserved only for the elites (Chan 2014: 145), while my interpretation, which follows Zhu Xi, is egalitarian.
7. Based solely on the text of *Mencius*, the main source of Zhu Xi’s thought, Kim makes a similar point that political offices should be equally accessible to everyone who has moral merits (Kim 2016: 209).
8. Mencius studied under Confucius’s grandson Zisi.

References

- Angle, Stephen C. 2012. *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy*. New York: Polity.
- Bai, Tongdong. 2013. “A Confucian Version of Hybrid Regime: How Does It Work, and Why Is It Superior?” In *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Daniel A. Bell and Chenyang Li, 55–87. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bell, Daniel A. 2016. *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Paperback). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bol, Peter K. 2008. *Neo-Confucianism in History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Chan, Joseph. 2014. *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- De Bary, and Wm Theodore. 1989. “Chu Hsi’s Aim as an Educator.” In *Neo-Confucian Education: The Formative Stage*, edited by Wm Theodore De Bary and John W. Chaffee, 186–218. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- De Bary, and Wm Theodore. 1991. *Learning for One’s Self: Essays on the Individual in Neo-Confucian Thought*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fan, Ruiping. 2013. “Confucian Meritocracy for Contemporary China.” In *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Daniel A. Bell and Chenyang Li, 89–115. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gardner, Daniel K. 1986. *Chu Hsi and the Ta-Hsueh: Neo-Confucian Reflection on the Confucian Canon*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gardner, Daniel K. 2003. *Zhu Xi’s Reading of the Analects: Canon, Commentary, and the Classical Tradition*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Jiang, Qing. 2013. *A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China’s Ancient Past Can Shape Its Political Future*. Edited by Daniel A. Bell and Ruiping Fan. Translated by Edmund Ryden. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kim, Sungmoon. 2016. *Public Reason Confucianism: Democratic Perfectionism and Constitutionalism in East Asia*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kim, Sungmoon. 2018. *Democracy after Virtue: Toward Pragmatic Confucian Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lau, D. C., trans. 1979. *The Analects*. New York: Penguin Classics.
- Lau, D. C., trans. 2003. *Mencius*. Revised Edition. New York: Penguin Classics.

- Tan, Sor-hoon. 2016. "Why Equality and Which Inequalities? A Modern Confucian Approach to Democracy." *Philosophy East and West* 66, no 2: 488–514.
- Ying, Jingcai. 2018. "Political Participation as Self-Cultivation: Towards a Participatory Theory of Confucian Democracy." *European Journal of Political Theory* (Online First). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885117751763>.
- Yu, Ying-shih (余英时) 2004. *The Historical World of Zhu Xi (朱熹的历史世界)*. 2 vols. Shanghai: Sanlian Shudian (三联书店).
- Zhu, Xi. 2010. *The Complete Works of Master Zhu 朱子全書*. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe.