

Zhu Xi and Confucian Democracy (Abstract)

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In recent years, Confucianism has re-emerged as a prominent political ideology in China, as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) increasingly turns to China's traditional cultures to shore up its legitimacy. This recent political revival of Confucianism corresponds to the scholarly trend that began in the mid-1990s. From the late-90s until the present, the dominant anglophone voices in Confucian political theory are in favor of replacing liberal democratic values with Confucian communitarian ideals. More recently, however, some Confucian political theorists, who are liberally minded, have sought to reconcile Confucianism with liberal democratic values. For these Confucian synthesizers, liberal democracy has much to teach Confucianism and can help the two-and-half-millennium-old tradition adapt to our late-modern time.

Situated in these political and intellectual contexts, this dissertation explores the following question: how should political power be arranged in the service of Confucian ideals? As suggested by the brief overview above, many Confucian political theorists have addressed this question. This project differs from those previous investigations because its source of inspiration is an important but often overlooked Confucian figure, Zhu Xi (1130–1200). As my dissertation shall demonstrate, Zhu Xi's philosophy can help us lay a firmer moral foundation for Confucian democracy and construct stronger justifications for integrating egalitarian elements of Western political thought into the Confucian tradition.

My main thesis is that Confucian ethics—defined by Zhu Xi as the universal exhortation for all human beings to pursue moral perfection, i.e., sagehood, by self-cultivation—is best supported by a participatory democracy that encourages all citizens to be politically active (Chap. 1). This participatory kind of Confucian democracy requires Confucian political leaders to teach the people how to participate in politics (Chap. 2). It also encourages citizens both to assert their legitimate individual interests by claiming their human rights (Chap. 3) and to embrace non-Confucian traditions as inherently valuable sources of learning (Chap. 4).

If this dissertation's arguments are persuasive and its participatory vision of Confucian democracy compelling, it can both contribute to Confucian political philosophy, a field that is currently dominated by communitarians and liberals, and serve as a democratic

counterpoint to the CCP's authoritarian propaganda. In short, I strive to illustrate the possibility that democratic ideals, despite their Western provenance, can flourish in Confucian soil.