

# The Combination of Confucian Political Thought and Democracy

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## ABSTRACT

In the 20th century, scholars began to try to discuss the relationship between Confucianism and democracy. In the 21st century, with the development of the democratic system, the connection between Confucian political thought and democracy has increasingly become an important academic topic. The combination of Confucian political thought and democracy mainly focuses on democratic values and the practice of a democratic system. But the unity of these two aspects seems to have been neglected. This article will review some articles about the combination of Confucian political thought and democracy. This article searched Google Scholar for articles from nearly 2000 to the present on the topic of Confucianism and Democracy. The results found that Confucian political thought is highly compatible with democracy (including democratic values and democratic political institutions). Moreover, through research, this paper finds that Confucian political thought not only complements the shortcomings of the lack of moral standards in democratic systems but also completes the neglect of moral obligations in democratic values. It is very meaningful to show that Confucian political thought can be very useful to the development of modern democracy.

**Keywords:** *Confucian political thought, Democracy, Human rights, Freedom*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the 20th century, Chinese intellectuals began to realize the drawbacks of the feudal monarchy and tried to establish a new regime to combine Confucianism and democracy [1]. After entering the 21st century, with the development and gradual improvement of the democratic system, more and more scholars began to study the possibility of the integration of Confucian political thought and modern democratic values and discuss how to take this idea into practice. In short, the modern significance of Confucianism is increasingly valued. Within this research field, many scholars have made contributions. These contributions can be roughly summarized into three categories. Some scholars try to find some opinions and elements from the Confucian classics which can combine with democratic values. For example, traditional Confucian concepts such as benevolence (ren), loyalty (Zhong), and righteousness (Yi) have many connections with democratic values [2]. The purpose is to prove Confucian political thought itself has similar or even the same theoretical basis as democratic values and denies the view of some scholars that Confucianism is the product of an authoritarian society. Some scholars tend to identify that Confucianism's emphasis on personal morality and duty can supplement the drawbacks of individualism in democratic thought and make Confucianism and democracy are not inherently contradictory which can also promote the development of democratic thinking [3]. Some scholars support that the development of

Confucian political thought requires not only discussing its relationship to democratic values but also making Confucian thought more pragmatic [4]. There are three schools of thought on the practice of Confucian democracy: Confucian Meritocratic Democracy, Participatory Democracy, and Realist Confucian Democracy. They try to create a new political system that under the premise of absorbing the principles of elections, parties, civic participation, and law-making in the democratic system, it is also necessary to inherit the core of Confucian political thought, including benevolent government, meritocracy, and leader education. Nevertheless, Most scholars either focus on the innovation of democratic institutions or combine democratic values (human rights, freedom) with Confucian political positions. Few scholars have unified theory and practice to form a complete system of Confucian democracy. Most scholars either focus on the innovation of democratic institutions or combine democratic values with Confucian political positions. Few scholars have unified theory and practice to form a complete system of Confucian democracy.

This article will summarize the internal connection between Confucian political thought and democratic values (human rights, freedom) and summarize the innovative political system after the combination of Confucian political thought and the democratic system. This article will be divided into three parts to summarize the combination between Confucian Political Thought and democracy: The democratic system, human rights, and personal freedom. This article first identifies the

relevant concepts in Confucian political thought, then discusses how this concept is combined with these three points, and finally discusses the complement of Confucian political thought to democratic values or institutions. The research significance of this paper is: through the review of the research results in recent years, the paper further discovers the possibility of combining Confucian political thought with democracy and explains how Confucian thought can make up for the deficiencies of democracy. It shows that Confucian political thought can well complement modern democracy, make democratic values more perfect, and make the democratic system more complete. This article uses "Confucianism, Democracy", "Confucianism, Human Rights", "Confucianism, Freedom" as the keywords, and searches Google Scholar for articles from almost 2000 to the present. After screening, a total of 17 articles are included in the analysis scope of this article.

**2. THE ANALYSIS OF CONFUCIAN POLITICAL THOUGHT AND DEMOCRACY**

Democracy includes democratic values and democratic politics. Political values are the ideological or theoretical foundations on which the relevant polity is built. A convincing political theory requires relatively high practical possibilities. Similarly, the operation and implementation of the political system (including the electoral system, voting system, rights distribution, etc.) are the direct application of political theory and also require theoretical guidance. Democratic values, including human rights and freedom, are not inherently incompatible with Confucian political thought. The advantages of democratic systems are also reflected in Confucian theories. At the same time, Confucian political views can supplement and improve the deficiencies of democracy to a certain extent.

This article divides democracy into three dimensions to illustrate the combination of Confucian political thought and democracy: the democratic system, Human Rights, and personal freedom. The first part discusses the combination of Confucian political thought and the democratic system, and the second and third parts analyze the internal connection between democratic values (including human rights and freedom) and Confucian political thought.

**Table 1.** Analysis of 17 papers of the modern significance of Confucian political thought

No. of papers	Democratic dimension	Reference
7	The democratic system	[5], [6], [7], [8], [9], [10], [11]
6	Human Rights	[12], [13], [14], [15], [16], [17]
4	Personal freedom	[18], [19], [20], [21]

**2.1. Perfection Of The Democratic System**

With the economic development of East Asian countries, political systems also need innovation and democracy is a political system based on the development of capitalism. But the direct introduction of democracy would create a crisis for East Asian societies, so the democracy with Confucianism style is an alternative way for East Asia to replace western democracy [5]. This idea works in practice, for example, people-oriented thought (min-ben) is an idea in Confucianism that encourages people to support the democratic institution. The special social class called local gentry can establish a local self-government system that could expand local autonomy and ensure the implementation of local democracy [6]. This idea is feasible in theory too, there are three theoretical foundations in Confucianism that make it possible to combine it with democracy: Ren, Human nature, and social criticism and development of leaders. Ren is a core concept of Confucianism that requires political institutions need to respect anyone's potential ability. Confucianism scholars believe that human nature is good which is related to the avoidance of institutional discrimination. Confucian political thought allows dissident individuals or groups to make proposals, which undoubtedly allows social discourse to influence government decision-making [7]. In fact, Confucian political thought is a good complement to the modern democratic system. For Confucian Meritocratic Democracy, it is important to recognize that only the virtuous can overcome the potential moral crisis of democratic politics. Secondly, it is necessary to understand comprehensively the traditional significance of "meritocracy" in Confucianism. Confucian meritocracy not only emphasizes "rule by virtue" based on virtue but also "rule by rites" based on the institutional guarantee [8]. At present, some scholars have begun to enhance the practicality of this theory from the perspective of the political system [9]. But the different theory is called Participatory Democracy which highlights that Confucianism already has many elements that can be combined with modern democracy, for example, Zhu Xi's moral egalitarianism can provide the fundamental of democracy whereas, the Meritocratic Democracy inevitably goes into elitism and violates the premise of democracy [10]. Another new way is Realist Confucian Democracy which tries to keep a balance between Meritocratic Democracy and Participatory Democracy and attempt to resolve the contradiction between elitism and egalitarianism [11]. These three new political theories are undoubtedly a complement and development for western democracy.

**2.2. Protection Of Human Rights**

There is a complete system of human development in Confucian thought. A person should deal with the

relationship between self and other groups around him or her including family, community, society, nation, world, and cosmos. This requirement makes people's horizons gradually expand from the individual to the collective. The ultimate ideal is the unity of Heaven and Human (tianrenheyi). This way of human development enables people to respect and understand those around them while focusing on their interests. This kind of human development is the core idea of Confucian humanism and the basis for Confucian political thought to protect human rights and respect others [12]. The Confucian view of human rights can complement the individual-centered human rights theories of the West. The basic ethical concept of Chinese socio-political relations is the fulfillment of obligations to neighbours, rather than the emphasis on rights. The idea of mutual obligations is seen as a fundamental teaching of Confucianism [13]. This obligatory relationship avoids individual selfishness. When all human beings have equal moral values and respect each other, the world will be more harmonious. This also finds the element of cosmopolitanism in Confucianism [14]. What human rights does Confucianism protect? Examples are the protection of freedom of speech, protection of the rights of the elderly [15]. Protecting human rights is the main responsibility of the United Nation. Many statements and examples in the Confucian classics are consistent with the UN Sustainable Development Goals [16]. In the form of human rights, the Confucian view of graded love does not violate the universality of human rights. On the contrary, it dissolves the binary opposition between universality and particularity. This Confucian view of graded love will promote the inclusiveness of human rights [17]. Confucianism's protection and tolerance of human rights make it find the point of combining with cosmopolitanism. The emphasis on personal obligations in Confucian political thought leads people to respect the dignity of others while protecting their own human rights, which makes society more connected

### ***2.3. The Acquisition Of Personal Freedom***

Some scholars present that although there is no clear definition of freedom in the Confucian classics, some other ideas have already mentioned the importance of personal freedom. The concept in Confucianism is everyone has the freedom to choose the good (Ze Shan) But we need to have the moral sense to be good, so this freedom is based on individual ability. This view of freedom gives citizens a lot of freedom space. So, it can be said that Confucianism gives the people moral autonomy, and this is a basic element of personal freedom. Choosing the good (Ze Shan) is a basic of Confucianism freedom [18]. The interpretation of freedom in Confucianism is autonomous and moral which means that the reason for choosing well is from the personal identification with good [19]. However, Will Confucian paternalism affect individual choice?

Paternalism can have a certain impact on the freedom of children or individuals. Patriarchal authoritarianism is a contradiction of traditional Confucianism and freedom. This family model comes from filial piety. Therefore, a reinterpretation of filial piety (Xiao) is currently required [20]. But for the right distribution in Confucianism family is equal. In fact, both parties have the right to veto decisions made by individuals or parents, which means that not only parents can deny personal decisions, but individuals also have the right to oppose parental decisions. This freedom is harmonious and mutual [21]. Therefore, some aspects of the Confucian view of freedom reconcile the contradiction between the dualism of Western individualism and collectivism and pay more attention to the inner freedom of individuals rather than the guarantee of freedom by external factors.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

This article analyses the combination of Confucian political thought and democracy according to three dimensions. The first part explains that there are many types of Confucian democracy, and these new regimes reveal to some extent the neglect of morality in traditional democracy and try to supplement it. The second part discusses that Confucianism attaches great importance to the relationship between people and also pays attention to personal moral obligations. These views will respect the dignity of others while safeguarding their own human rights. The third part proves that Confucian freedom is a kind of freedom with high autonomy, and everyone has the freedom to become a good person.

Through literature review, this paper has two main conclusions: First, the Confucian political system and democratic values have an inherent logical connection. Second, the possibility of combining Confucian political thought with democratic institutions. Through research, this paper finds that Confucian political thought not only complements the shortcomings of the lack of moral standards in democratic systems but also complements the individualistic loopholes in democratic values and promotes social harmony. Confucian political thought is of great reference value for the improvement of democracy. At the same time, the content and conclusions of this paper can provide a reference for scholars in related fields, especially those who study Confucian politics and Western democracy.

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