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Confucianism and Meritocracy: *Perspectives on Exams and Fairness*

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Abstract

This paper examines the complex relationship between Confucianism and meritocracy, with a particular focus on contemporary South Korean debates about fairness and equal opportunity. While Confucianism emphasizes selecting wise and capable leaders, its historical implementations and tenets differ significantly from modern meritocratic ideals. This is particularly relevant in South Korea, where standardized exams like *suneung* are seen as key to meritocracy, yet controversies reveal underlying inequalities. This paper contrasts Confucian principles—especially as articulated by Mencius and Zhu Xi—with the modern focus on individual achievement, competition, and procedural fairness, using the South Korean context as a case study. Scholars like Daniel Bell and Tongdong Bai have proposed exam-based systems as a Confucian alternative to liberal democracy, grounded in ethical merit. However, it argues that even if the South Korean emphasis on exams has roots in Confucian culture, this does not equate Confucianism with modern meritocracy, challenging these claims about the viability of a Confucian meritocratic model and suggesting the need for a more nuanced account of moral responsibility over competitive success.

Keywords: Confucianism, meritocracy, fairness, moral desert, examination system, *keju*.

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I. Introduction

In recent years, the role of exams has drawn considerable attention—both in South Korea's public discourse and within academic debates about political legitimacy. In Korean society, this attention was reignited by a series of high-profile political scandals involving the misuse of educational privilege. Most notably, the controversy surrounding Jung Yoora, daughter of a powerful presidential confidante, and the later scandal involving the child of former Justice Minister Cho Kuk, exposed how elite families were able to circumvent standardized admissions processes through favoritism, forged credentials, and backdoor influence. These events intensified a desire to return to a system where one's academic future, and by extension, one's social position, depended solely on exam performance. The national college entrance exam (*suneung*) and the abolished bar exam were nostalgically reimagined as symbols of fairness and moral equality, where all citizens could compete under the same rules.

This renewed emphasis on exams has found intellectual resonance in academic circles as well. Scholars such as Daniel Bell (2009) and Tongdong Bai (2021) have proposed reinterpreting the traditional Chinese civil service examination as a model for a new kind of political meritocracy, grounded in Confucian ideals. According to their vision, a modified system of exam-based selection could offer a morally superior alternative, or at least a necessary supplement, to the liberal democratic institutions of the West. Bell, for instance, argues that while liberal democracies empower the average citizen, they also suffer from populism, short-termism, and a lack of expertise. The Confucian tradition, by contrast, promises to elevate the wise and the virtuous into political authority through layered forms of examination and public service evaluation.

Underlying this view is the assumption that Confucianism provides a cultural and philosophical foundation for institutionalized meritocracy—and that the exam-centered systems in East Asia today, including South Korea's, are natural modern expressions of this tradition. However, this paper argues that such interpretations rest on a misunderstanding of the Confucian conception of "merit." While it

is true that the exam system, in both its historical and contemporary forms, has played a powerful role in shaping East Asian political culture, it does not follow that Confucianism endorses a meritocracy defined by competitive performance or procedural fairness. Rather, I will show that in the Confucian tradition, especially as articulated by Mencius and later thinkers such as Zhu Xi, true worth is measured not by ability alone but by moral character. In this view, leadership roles are considered public calling not personal achievement.

To clarify the stakes of this debate, this paper proceeds in two main parts. First, it traces the historical roots of meritocratic thinking in early China and examine how Confucianism defined the concept of merit in explicitly ethical terms and, drawing on critiques by Zhu Xi, revealed deep ambivalence toward exams as virtue measures. Second, it derives normative implications by showing how this ethical conception of worth undermines the assumption that exams can meaningfully measure Confucian virtue. I return to the South Korean context to demonstrate that while contemporary reliance on exams may have historical roots in Confucian culture, it fundamentally distorts the Confucian vision of moral responsibility, reducing public office from a calling into a reward for competitive success. This discrepancy calls into question the philosophical legitimacy of recent attempts to revive Confucian meritocracy as a viable alternative to liberal democracy.

II. Defining "Merit": Virtue as the Confucian Criterion

While recent academic defenders of Confucian meritocracy often invoke the civil service examination system as a paradigmatic expression of East Asian political culture, the philosophical foundations of meritocratic thought are rooted in a broader Warring States discourse on the practice of "elevating the worthy" (*shang xian*, 尚賢), an idea that emerged in reaction to the declining legitimacy of hereditary aristocracy and the pressing need for capable governance during a period of social and political upheaval (Pines 2013). This discourse took many forms, but it was commonly framed through a recurring cultural ideal: that rulers should seek out and entrust political authority to individuals of

proven worth, regardless of birth. The most iconic example of this ideal is found in the mythical succession story of the sage-kings Yao 堯, Shun 舜, and Yu 禹.[1] Rather than passing rulership to their own sons, these legendary figures are said to have transferred power to morally superior individuals based on character and competence.

This discourse of "elevating the worthy," however, was by no means a uniquely Confucian doctrine. Excavated texts from recent decades have revealed a wide array of versions of the Yao–Shun–Yu succession narrative, many of which depart significantly from the ethical ideals emphasized by the Confucians (Pines 2009; Allan 2015). More significantly, as Yuri Pines has pointed out, the earliest known reference to this model of non-hereditary political transfer might be *Mozi* (Pines 2005), which should not come as a surprise given that "elevating the worthy" was one of the Mohist school's ten core doctrines.

But could the ideals of "merit" for the Mohists ever be the same as those of the Confucians? As is well known, the Mohist school stood in opposition to the Confucians on nearly every fundamental aspect of their doctrine, including the very definition of what it means to be a humane or virtuous person. For the Mohists, to be *ren* (仁), if the term even holds in the same sense, was to bring about benefit to the people (Johnston 2010, 136–37, 146–47). In this utilitarian framework, the worthy would be those who can produce tangible outcomes for society regardless of their motivations or inner cultivation.

Not to mention that the Confucians had a very different definition of what it means to be "humane" (a point to which I will return shortly), but even more fundamentally, there was no single, coherent standard of what it meant to be "capable" or "worthy." This ambiguity is perhaps best illustrated by the well-known anecdote of Lord Mengchang 孟嘗君, recorded in the *Grand Historian's Record*. In the story, Lord Mengchang's life is saved by a retainer whose only talent was mimicking the morning crow of a rooster, an ability that, in that moment, proves decisive.[2] While the narrative may have been crafted

1 The most significant reference to this myth in the Confucian canon is found in Mencius, particularly in the chapter 5A.

2 This anecdote is recorded in the biography of Lord Menchang (Book 75) (Sima 1963, 7:2354–55).

to illustrate the pragmatic virtue of recognizing all forms of talent, however modest, the very inclusion of such a tale betrays the plurality, and at times absurdity, of what could count as "worth." This ambiguity surrounding what counted as "worthiness" did not go uncontested. Daoist thinkers, in particular, mocked the arbitrariness of such claims and rejected the idea that political order could rest on any stable notion of merit.[3]

Still, for the Confucians, there was a clear standard for who ought to hold public responsibility: the morally cultivated person. Though ridiculed by Daoists all the same,[4] Confucian texts consistently emphasize that true worth lies in virtue. It is not cleverness or usefulness, but ethical character that justifies authority. This emphasis on moral character as the foundation of political legitimacy is consistently reinforced throughout the Confucian canon. In *Analects* 12.7, Confucius identifies three essentials of good government—sufficient food, sufficient arms, and trust in the ruler—but asserts that trust is the most crucial of the three. Even if arms and food must be sacrificed, trust cannot be.[5] Mencius also emphasizes the moral charisma as the source of authority. In one striking passage (*Mencius* 3B.5), he recounts how the people of a suffering state longed to be conquered by King Tang, saying, "Why does he make us last?"[6] Elsewhere (2A.3), Mencius points out that the sage-kings of the past governed effectively even with minimal material resources, claiming that "Tang [became a true

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[3] Laozi, for instance, explicitly criticizes the elevation of the "worthy" (賢), warning that naming and raising up the virtuous only breeds competition and hypocrisy: "Do not exalt the worthy, and the people will not contend" 不尚賢, 使民不爭 (Laozi 3; Lou 2008, 8). Zhuangzi also famously ridicules conventional standards of usefulness through stories such as the crooked tree that is spared precisely because it is of no use to carpenters (Guo 1985, 36-39), or the uselessness of a giant gourd that becomes an asset when its value is reimagined (Guo 1985, 170–75). These anecdotes question not only what counts as "merit" but whether such judgments have any objective grounding at all.

[4] This is particularly visible in the received Laozi, in which it is declared that "[The talks about] humanity and righteousness appeared only after the Great Way have declined" 大道廢, 有仁義 (Laozi 18; Lou 2008, 43). For a comparison with other versions regarding Laozi's attitude toward Confucians, see Goldin (2020, 126–28).

[5] 「論語·顏淵」7: 子貢問政. 子曰:「足食. 足兵. 民信之矣.」子貢曰: 必不得已而去, 於斯三者何先?」曰:「去兵.」子貢曰:「必不得已而去, 於斯二者何先?」曰:「去食. 自古皆有死, 民無信不立」(Zhu 1983, 134–35).

[6] 「孟子·滕文公下」5:『湯始征, 自葛載』, 十一征而無敵於天下. 東面而征, 西夷怨; 南面而征, 北狄怨, 曰:『奚為後我?』民之望之, 若大旱之望雨也 (Zhu 1983, 268).

king] with only seventy *li*, and King Wen with only one hundred *li*."[7] In Mencius's view, what enabled their success was not their wealth or institutional advantage, but their personal virtue. In Confucian thought, being "worthy" of high office is not about accomplishing more with more—it is about cultivating moral character regardless of circumstance. This ethical criterion stands in sharp contrast to any model that treats merit as a matter of demonstrated performance or quantifiable success.

III. Confucian Learning and the Problem of Examinations in the Song

Despite the Confucian tradition's emphasis on moral worth as the foundation of political responsibility, the civil service examination system became the dominant institutional channel for recruitment to officialdom during the Song dynasty. This was not a straightforward extension of Confucian ethical ideals but rather the result of multiple structural developments. Although the *keju* system had earlier origins, it was in the Song period that it expanded rapidly and took on the cultural authority it would retain for centuries. A range of factors contributed to this transformation: the decline of the hereditary aristocracy, increased literacy due to the spread of print culture, the proliferation of local academies, and the state's need for administrative personnel during ongoing political instability (O 2010; Bol 2010). These shifts enabled the rise of the scholar-official class (*shidafu*), many of whom entered government through the exam system rather than inherited privilege.

The *keju* system thus gained a reputation—both in its own time and retrospectively—as a mechanism for recognizing individual ability and offering opportunities for upward mobility. In contrast to systems based on aristocratic birth or patronage, it appeared to reward effort, learning, and discipline (Ho 1962; Elman 2013). This perception has

[7] 「孟子·公孫丑上」 3: 孟子曰: 「以力假仁者霸, 霸必有大國, 以德行仁者王, 王不待大. 湯以七十里, 文王以百里」 (Zhu 1983, 235).

had a lasting afterlife. In modern South Korea, the legacy of the examination system continues in the form of the *suneung* and bar exam, which are often portrayed as morally legitimate avenues for advancement within a highly competitive society. Especially in times of public disillusionment over inequality and privilege, the exam system is frequently held up as a neutral and fair basis for social mobility (Yeo 2015; Cioffi and Park 2023).

But this surface resemblance to Confucian meritocracy, grounded in the shared use of classical texts, can be misleading. The presence of Confucian materials in the exam curriculum does not necessarily mean that the exam system embodied Confucian ethical values. While the *keju* drew heavily on canonical Confucian writings and ritual forms, the motivations that drove most candidates to participate—career advancement, family obligation, personal ambition—were rarely aligned with the Confucian conception of public office as a form of moral responsibility. Nor did the state necessarily adopt Confucian texts out of fidelity to Confucian thought. More often than not, the state turned to Confucianism not out of allegiance to its ethical ideals, but because it served administrative needs. Confucianism provided a stable textual canon, emphasized social hierarchy, and promoted public order. Compared to Buddhism and Daoism, it was well suited to the ideological demands of governance. Its emphasis on moral cultivation and political responsibility could be appropriated without committing to its deeper ethical vision. That vision, when articulated by figures such as Zhu Xi, was often unwelcome in court. When Zhu briefly served as imperial tutor, Emperor Ningzong reportedly dismissed him from the post with the comment: “Zhu Xi’s words are mostly useless” (Bak 1996). The remark, preserved in the *Songshi quanwen* 宋史全文 (The Complete Text of the History of Song), reveals just how far removed the moral concerns of Confucian thinkers were from the political priorities of the state—even as their texts remained at the center of the exam system.

But it was not merely that the state misunderstood Confucianism; rather, the institutional pressures of the exam system reshaped how people read, studied, and lived Confucian learning itself. This was the deeper concern for Zhu Xi—not that the texts had been adopted, but that their adoption had hollowed them out. The question was no longer

whether students read the Confucian classics, but whether they did so in a spirit of ethical cultivation or in pursuit of recognition.

This shift had consequences not only for students but for the entire bureaucratic apparatus. The state no longer appointed officials out of a desire to select the virtuous, but to satisfy bureaucratic necessity. Examiners often lacked both the knowledge and moral authority to recognize genuine ability, and those appointed through the system had little preparation for real administrative duties. The structure of the exams only reinforced the problem. To enhance selectivity, examiners introduced increasingly esoteric questions (Zhu 1986, 7:2694 [109.14]). Examinees, in turn, crafted their responses to flatter the evaluators with novelty and polish (Zhu 1986, 1:175 [10.97]). The result was a system that rewarded cleverness over character and served as a gateway to elite status rather than a path to moral development. "Humaneness, righteousness, ritual, and wisdom," he wrote, "could not be found from head to toe."[8]

To be sure, Zhu Xi acknowledged that many scholars had little choice but to sit for the exams, often to fulfill filial obligations or secure basic livelihood. Yet for those who gave themselves fully to the pursuit of exam success, the cost was profound: they risked losing sight of the very purpose of study. Zhu once remarked that if one devotes seventy percent of one's effort to reading and thirty percent to exam preparation, one may still preserve something of moral learning. But if the ratio were reversed, and especially if one's heart was wholly inclined toward exam success, then even a lifetime of study would produce no meaningful cultivation. This, Zhu insisted, was not "learning for the self," the kind of study praised by the sages, but a hollow performance aimed at others.[9] He drew on a long-standing Confucian distinction, originally articulated by Confucius himself, between "learning for the sake of self-[cultivation]" (*weiji zhi xue*, 爲己之學) and "learning to [impress] others" (*weiren zhi xue*, 爲人之學). The former, he maintained, is the foundation of sagely learning *shengxue* 聖學;

8 "仁義禮智, 從頭不識到尾?" (Zhu 1986, 7:2693 [109.10]).

9 "士人先要分別科擧與讀書兩件孰輕孰重. 若讀書上有七分志, 科擧上有三分, 猶自可; 若科擧七分, 讀書三分, 將來必被他勝卻. 況此志全是科擧! 所以到老全使不著, 蓋不關爲己也. 聖人敎人, 只是爲己" (Zhu 1986, 1:243 [13.241]).

the latter had degenerated into little more than the study of the examination.

Zhu Xi's frustration is palpable. "The principle of righteousness," he wrote, "is something the human heart universally recognizes. If one genuinely seeks it, it is not difficult to achieve. The examination path, by contrast, lies outside of this—it is actually the harder task. How unfortunate it is that the pursuit of exams has ruined so many."[10] He lamented how many lives had been ruined by their slavish pursuit of exam success. Even the ethical language of the Confucian tradition had been hollowed out. Candidates spoke elegantly of shame and righteousness, but in practice these terms were detached from any lived commitment.[11]

Zhu Xi also proposed concrete reforms to the examination system.[12] Yet even as he elaborated them, Zhu's deeper attitude toward exams remained skeptical. For all its possible improvements, the exam system, he believed, was ultimately incapable of distinguishing those who merely performed virtue from those who truly embodied it. "Can a few personnel officers in the Ministry of Appointments really be expected to assess all the officials in the realm?" he asked. "Certainly not."[13] Instead, Zhu favored a recommendation system where a local official could evaluate the candidate's ability and virtue. What mattered was not how well someone could simulate ethical seriousness on paper, but whether they had demonstrated a reliable sense of judgment, propriety, and responsibility—what he called *yi-li* (義理).

Zhu's sympathy for recommendation also helps explain his otherwise surprising admiration for elements of the feudal past. While

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10 "義理人心之所同然, 人去講求, 卻易爲力. 舉業乃分外事, 倒是難做. 可惜舉業壞了多少人!" (Zhu 1986, 1:243 [13.140]).

11 "專做時文底人, 他說底都是聖賢說話. 且如說廉, 他且會說得好; 說義, 他也會說得好. 待他身做處, 只自不廉, 只自不義, 緣他將許多話只是就紙上說. 廉是題目上合說廉; 義是題目上合說義, 都不關自家身己些子事" (Zhu 1986, 1:244 [13.143]).

12 See his *Xuexiao gongju siyi* [Private Reflections on the Schools and Civil Appointments] 學校貢舉私議 (Zhu 1996, 6:3632–43). There, Zhu offered suggestions such as establishing character-based selection, eliminating stylistic literary criteria, and structuring exams around core Confucian texts, policy issues, and classical interpretation. These proposals were meant to address the most visible dysfunctions of the system.

13 "今來欲教吏部與二三郎官盡識得天下官之賢否, 定是了不得這事?" (Zhu 1986, 7:2692 [109.4]).

he readily admitted that the feudal order was no longer viable, he nonetheless valued it for cultivating lasting bonds between ruler and subject—bonds that enabled long-term moral accountability. In contrast to the rotation-based bureaucracy of later dynasties, where officials were frequently reassigned and treated as interchangeable, the feudal model allowed relationships to develop over time (Zhu 1986, 7:2679 [108.13]). For Zhu, such relationships were not just administratively convenient but morally meaningful.

Zhu's attitude here resembles the one Mencius attributes to the people when hereditary succession was first introduced. Upon the ascension of Yu's son, the people said simply, "He is the son of our ruler 吾君之子也" (5A.6)—a statement that reflected not blind submission to bloodline but the trust built through time. Zhu likewise believed that political stability depended on this kind of trust. This emphasis on trust echoes Confucius's view in the *Analects* 12.7, where the sage declares that trust is more essential to sustaining a government than either food or military force.

Still, Zhu was under no illusion that trust could be secured through inherited status alone. In his view, moral trust had to be cultivated through education, not lineage. This is why the proper subjects of recommendation were not the sons of noble families, but members of the morally trained *shidafu* (士大夫) class. What made the *shidafu* superior to the old hereditary elite was not their success in the civil service exams, but their moral formation—specifically, their grasp of *yi-li*.

> Yet the sons and grandsons of today's high ministers are also unusable—not because of any innate defect, but because they were never properly educated. Thus, the descendants of the nobility are without exception arrogant, extravagant, and debauched. We are left with no choice but to appoint men newly risen from the fields and thatched huts, elevating them to the rank of high ministers, simply because they seem better than those others. But what gives them the advantage is that they understand principle and righteousness (*yili*), and it is for that reason alone that they surpass the others.[14]

14 "古者公卿世及, 君臣恩意交結素深, 與國家共休戚, 故患難相爲如此. 後世相遇如塗人, 及有患難, 則渙然離散而已. 然今之公卿子孫, 亦不可用者, 只是不曾教得, 故公卿之子孫莫不驕奢淫佚. 不得已而用草茅新進之士, 擧而加之公卿之位, 以爲苟勝於彼而已. 然所恃者, 以其知義理, 故勝之耳" (Zhu 1986, 7:2691 [109.2]).

Zhu's defense of recommendation over examination, then, was not a rejection of merit but a deeper inquiry into what truly counts as merit—and how it should be recognized. He believed that the exam system, by rewarding surface-level performance, encouraged the appearance of virtue without its substance. In response, he advocated for a system grounded in personal judgment and moral familiarity—a network of trust formed through education and lived conduct. Yet even this morally ambitious vision was not without danger. Without standardized procedures or transparent evaluation, such a model risked falling prey to corruption, favoritism, and nepotism. For all their moral limitations, exams had the structural advantage of impartiality: they offered a process that, at least in principle, treated individuals without regard to family background. This may help explain why, even in contemporary Korea, many continue to see exams as a necessary check on privilege. But this only sharpens the question: how did Confucian thinkers themselves grapple with the tension between moral cultivation and procedural neutrality?

IV. Confucian Dilemmas of Privilege and Moral Cultivation

In recent years, South Korea has seen a wave of public outrage over cases of so-called "daddy chance"—instances in which the children of elites appear to benefit unfairly from their parents' status, influence, or networks. These scandals strike a nerve not only because they expose systemic inequality, but because they erode a deeper cultural expectation: that advancement should be tied to individual effort, not inherited position. Ironically, this frustration has often led to renewed sympathy for the exam system, which—despite its limitations—at least promises procedural blindness, a sentiment shared even from the academia. Daniel Bell describes the Chinese college entrance exam as "perhaps the least corrupt political institution in China" (2015, 87) while Tongdong Bai similarly characterizes the system as a "relatively fair and uncontroversial process" (2013, 71).

Yet the institutional logic behind the systems they praise is importantly different from the settings that concerned classical Confucian thinkers. The traditional civil service examinations and recommendation procedures were designed to identify officials for public office and justify political authority, whereas contemporary college entrance exams primarily sort students for access to scarce educational and career opportunities; the former were framed in terms of public responsibility, the latter in terms of individual advancement.

And long before the rise of modern meritocracy, Confucian thinkers had already wrestled with the moral risks of inherited privilege and the tension between personal loyalty and public responsibility Their responses, captured not in abstract policy but in how they treated their own sons, reveal a tradition grappling with how to protect trust without relying on impersonal rules.

A well-known passage from the *Analects* illustrates Confucius's ethical sensitivity to this problem. One of his disciples, Chen Gang, once asked Confucius's son Bo Yu whether he had received any special teachings from his father. Bo Yu answered plainly: no. The only guidance he recalled was when Confucius, encountering him in the courtyard, asked if he had studied poetry and ritual. When Bo Yu said he had not, Confucius simply told him, "If you don't study poetry, you won't be able to speak well; if you don't study ritual, you won't be able to act properly." Bo Yu later studied both. Hearing this story, Chen Gang was delighted—not because of the content of the lesson, but because it revealed something deeper. "I asked one thing, and I've learned three," he said. "I've learned the importance of poetry, the importance of ritual—and that a gentleman keeps his own son at a distance."[15] The implication is unmistakable: Confucius's moral authority derived in part from his refusal to grant special advantage to his own child. Whether or not the story is historically accurate, it reflects an ethical intuition within early Confucian thought: that public trust depends not on institutional safeguards but on self-restraint and

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15 「子亦有異聞乎?」對曰:「未也. 嘗獨立, 鯉趨而過庭. 曰:『學詩乎?』對曰:『未也.』『不學詩, 無以言.』鯉退而學詩. 他日又獨立, 鯉趨而過庭. 曰:『學禮乎?』對曰:『未也.』『不學禮, 無以立.』鯉退而學禮. 聞斯二者.」陳亢退而喜曰:「問一得三, 聞詩, 聞禮, 又聞君子之遠其子也」(Zhu 1983, 173–74 [16.13]).

exemplary conduct.

Zhu Xi's own approach to fatherhood, though rooted in the same tradition, is more ambivalent. In one letter to his young son, written as the boy prepared to travel alone for the first time, Zhu offered detailed instructions—not only about practical matters like budgeting and eating, but about which elders to visit and how to present himself when meeting high-ranking officials.[16] The letter reads less like an act of favoritism than one of anxious guidance. Still, the underlying tension is hard to miss. Was Zhu trying to help his son grow into virtue, or was he also trying to position him for future success? It is difficult to say. But the letter suggests that even the most committed Confucian scholars found it difficult to disentangle parental care from strategic advantage completely. Acts of guidance could be read as expressions of moral concern or as subtle efforts to position one's child for future success.

Theoretically speaking, however, these differences were not a source of major concern for Confucians. They readily acknowledged that people differ in natural ability, temperament, and background, but unlike modern thinkers such as Michael Sandel or Michael Young, who worry that such differences distort distributions of reward or undermine just desert, Confucians were not concerned with allocation or entitlement. Their focus was not on what people deserve, but on how they respond to their conditions. What mattered was not the fairness of one's starting point, but the commitment to cultivate oneself through effort and reflection. In this view, disparity is not something to correct, but something to overcome.

This perspective is reflected clearly in the *Analects*, where Confucius offers a fourfold classification of how people come to understand the Way: "Those who are born knowing it are the highest. Those who learn it are next. Those who struggle to learn it follow. And

[16] This letter, titled "Xuezi tie qiando jiunian" [Letter of Instruction to the son, ninth year of Qiandao reign] 訓子帖乾道九年, was written in the ninth year of the Qiandao reign (1173), when Zhu Xi was 44 years old. Although it is unclear which son this letter was addressed to, it is certain that it was not his third son, who was born when Zhu Xi was 40. Since the first and second sons were born when he was 24 and 25, respectively, the son in question would have been around 20 years old at the time (Zhu 1996, 9:5622–25).

those who do not learn, even though they struggle, are the lowest."[17] The distinction recognizes real differences in natural ability and responsiveness, but it does not treat them as morally decisive. Confucius offers no praise for those born knowing nor blame for those who must struggle. His criticism is reserved only for those who do not try. What matters is not where one begins but whether one commits to learning. Moral worth lies not in talent, but in effort.

The same principle appears in the *Doctrine of Mean*, where the text acknowledges that people come to moral understanding in different ways: some with ease, others through practice, and others only through difficulty. Yet, it insists, "in the end, they are the same."[18] Even if one must try a hundred or a thousand times where others succeed in ten, the standard remains: all are equally obligated to know and act rightly. Here, inborn differences are not denied, but they do not justify resignation or resentment. What unites people is not their capacity, but their responsibility.

Mencius anchors this ethical universalism in both human nature and Heaven's decree. "Benevolence is simply being human,"[19] he writes, affirming that the capacity for virtue is intrinsic to all people. This capacity is not reserved for the gifted or fortunate; it belongs to everyone by virtue of being human. To cultivate it is not to chase superiority, but to fulfill what one is already called to become. For Mencius, this moral labor is a response to *ming* (命), Heaven's command.[20] The *Doctrine of Mean* echoes this view: "What Heaven has decreed is called nature."[21] Here, *ming* does not mean fate or status, but a universal calling to realize one's ethical nature. Later Neo-Confucians, especially Zhu Xi, elaborate this idea by distinguishing between *qi-zhi* (氣質), one's temperament and psychological makeup,

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[17] 孔子曰:「生而知之者, 上也; 學而知之者, 次也; 困而學之, 又其次也; 困而不學, 民斯為下矣」(Zhu 1983, 172–73 [16.9]).

[18] 或生而知之, 或學而知之, 或困而知之, 及其知之, 一也; 或安而行之, 或利而行之, 或勉強而行之, 及其成功, 一也 (Zhu 1983, 172–73 [16.9]).

[19] 孟子曰:「仁也者, 人也」(Zhu 1983, 367 [7B.16]).

[20] This idea is most succinctly captured in his remark in 7A2 (孟子·盡心上2): "Dying in fulfillment of one's way is the correct ming; [but] dying in shackles is not the correct *ming*. 盡其道而死者, 正命也. 桎梏死者, 非正命也" (Zhu 1983, 350 [7A.2]).

[21] 「中庸」1: 天命之謂性 (Zhu 1983, 17 [1]).

and *li* (理), the universal moral principle. While *qi-zhi* may differ, *li* is shared by all. As Zhu Xi puts it, "Each person possesses one *taiji*"—each carries within themselves the full potential of the moral cosmos.[22] In this vision, natural difference may affect the shape of the path, but not the responsibility to walk it.

Confucius's description of archery provides a vivid image of this ideal. "The gentleman does not compete," he says, "but if he must, it is in archery."[23] In this ritualized contest, participants bow to each other before and after, and the one who loses drinks in good cheer. The point is not to defeat the opponent, but to maintain dignity, decorum, and self-awareness. Most tellingly, Confucius adds: "We do not judge by whether the arrow pierces the target, for each person has different strength. This is the ancient way."[24] The goal is not uniform achievement but sincere effort, measured according to one's own capacities. If one fails, the proper response is not complaint, but self-examination. The standard, in the end, is not victory over others, but the fulfillment of one's moral calling. In this spirit, the Confucian path does not eliminate difference—it honors it, while demanding that every person strive, reflect, and cultivate themselves in accordance with the nature they have received.

V. Between Calling and Share: Confucian Ideals in a Competitive World

So far, we have traced how Confucian thought approaches the questions often raised in modern meritocratic discourse: the selection of capable officers and the problem of inborn differences. For thinkers like Mencius and Zhu Xi, political office and social rank were not personal rewards to be claimed but moral responsibilities to be fulfilled, the enactment of one's moral calling (*ming*). They paid little attention to whether the playing field was level or whether rewards were fairly

[22] This phrase, *ge ju yi tai ji* 各據一太極 appears in, among others: *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類 18.77, 67.24, 94.60 (Zhu 1986).

[23] 子曰:「君子無所爭, 必也射乎! 揖讓而升, 下而飲, 其爭也君子」(Zhu 1983, 63 [3.7]).

[24] 射不主皮, 為力不同科, 古之道也 (Zhu 1983, 65 [3.16]).

distributed. What mattered was that each person cultivated virtue within their given role. If there was competition, it was not a contest against others for limited resources but an inner struggle to realize one's ethical potential.

This is where the contrast between *ming* (calling) and moral desert becomes essential. In meritocratic societies, the moral desert refers to the entitlements one earns—status, wealth, position. For Confucians, *ming* refers to the moral task one is obligated to pursue for the sake of a good life and a better society. The former culminates in the individual self; the latter points toward others and the shared world. Hence, the Confucian concern was not what one deserves, but how one contributes. What counted as "ability" was strictly defined by its capacity to serve the public good. The desire to surpass others, by contrast, was seen as a private ambition incompatible with that goal.

Yet this vision of public contribution stands in sharp contrast to today's meritocratic ideals, which treat fairness as a matter of rules—procedural equality applied equally to all. In school admissions, job hiring, and public evaluation, fairness often means that everyone competes under the same rules, regardless of how just or communal the outcomes may be. As a result, the system tolerates, sometimes even justifies, extreme inequalities, so long as the competition was "fair." This is precisely the sort of individualistic logic Confucianism resists. Its goal is not to maximize performance, but to sustain a social fabric where responsibility, reciprocity, and shared purpose can flourish.

This does not mean Confucians were uninterested in material well-being. Mencius's vision of the *well-field* system (3A.3), in which land was equitably distributed to guarantee subsistence for all, reflects a concrete concern with just provision. Zhu Xi's proposal to enforce boundaries on land accumulation shows that he too recognized the dangers of unchecked inequality (Song 2015). The famous vision of a *great unity* (*datong*) in the *Record of Rites* describes a world in which no one lives only for their own family, and the vulnerable—orphans, widows, the poor—are protected by the collective (Shisan jing zhushu zhengli weiyuan hui 2000, 769). Rather than rejecting material concerns, Confucianism asks that benefit (*li*) be guided by consideration for others—not banishing self-interest, but questioning whose interests are

served and to what end. For Confucians, desert always pointed toward the common—it was never simply about securing one's own position.

Still, a problem remains: while Confucian ideals speak powerfully to a vision of shared life, they have little to say to those who experience the world as a site of relentless competition—those who ask not for virtue, but for basic fairness in the struggle for survival. For many in today's society, the language of "calling" may feel noble, but distant—unrealistic amid the pressures of exams, hiring, and scarcity. At most, success on standardized examinations may signal certain traits often treated as virtues—diligence, perseverance, or conscientiousness—but performance on such tests is heavily shaped by background resources, coaching, and other morally irrelevant advantages, so that any link to moral character is tenuous and unreliable. These exams may function reasonably well as instruments for assessing domain-specific competence—knowledge of law, economics, or public administration—but this is a technocratic justification continuous with modern civil-service practices, not a distinctively Confucian account of moral merit.

So is Confucianism merely an inspiring but outdated ideal? Perhaps, but that may be the nature of all ideals. They are not descriptions of the world as it is but demands that we see beyond what is. Like the first article of the Korean Constitution, which declares that the Republic of Korea is a democratic republic, an aspiration, not an achievement, Confucian ideals ask us to hold onto the possibility of a moral order even in the face of individual desire and structural inequality. Confucianism, too, recognized human selfishness and ambition. But it held that overcoming these was the beginning of moral life, not a reason to abandon it. A good life, in this vision, is not measured by what one has earned, but by what one has shared. In this sense, by insisting that learning is for self-cultivation rather than display, and that positions of rank are justified only as forms of service to others, Confucianism invites us to ask not only whether selection procedures are fair, but whether the purposes of education and competition themselves are oriented toward a shared life worth striving for.

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