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CONFUCIANISM EMBODIED: AN "INTERDISCIPLINARY" APPROACH TO COMPARATIVE POLITICAL THEORY

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ABSTRACT: *This article articulates and defends an "interdisciplinary" approach to Confucian political theory and presents Confucianism as a living, dynamic entity rather than merely a reservoir of ideas contained within a set of texts. It argues for a methodology that transcends traditional textual analysis, advocating for an intersectional approach that melds normative, emancipatory, and practical dimensions. This approach seeks to capture the evolving essence of Confucianism as influenced by cultural, institutional, and individual interactions. It also promotes a "distant reading" to examine not only texts and historical debates but also institutional changes, power dynamics, and guiding principles within Confucianized societies. The study highlights the need to recognize how Confucian ideals are manifested in real history and politics and emphasizes the importance of studying the social embodiment of the political ideas in comparative political theory.*

Keywords: *Confucianism, Comparative political theory, interdisciplinary approach, philosophical methodology, political constructivism, social and political manifestations*

1. INTRODUCTION

With the rise of states with Confucian experience to increasingly important positions of political power and civilization – China, most notably, but also nations such as South Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam – greater attention has been paid to Confucianism among comparative political theorists. Confucianism is seen as a possible source for alternative insights into Western political thought or, conversely, as offering an alternative to the Western model for China and other non-Western countries.[1] However, in generating Confucian political theories, scholars have paid relatively little attention to the methodological question of how political theorists should interpret Confucianism. This question is important because different approaches to

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[1] Examples include Tan (2003), Jiang (2005), Angle (2009; 2012; 2022), Fan (2013), Chan (2014), Kim (2018; 2023), Bell (2015), El Amine (2015), Bai (2019), etc.

However, in generating Confucian political theories, scholars have paid relatively little attention to the methodological question of how political theorists should interpret Confucianism. This question is important because different approaches to interpretation can result in radically different Confucian political theories, each with its own theoretical and practical implications.

In this article, I construct and defend an "interdisciplinary" approach to better understand and construct a Confucian political philosophy. I perceive Confucianism as a dynamic entity; it is not simply a static or pre-defined philosophy of ideas, but one of practice that extends beyond the Western notion of philosophy as a branch of knowledge. This view encompasses an evolving mix of ideas, practices, and perceptions born from the interplay of culture, institutions, and actors. As such, Confucianism, having permeated Confucianized societies over time, is only partly captured in canonical texts and books. Contrary to views that confine Confucian political theory to mere textual interpretation, I propose an intersectional approach that integrates normative, emancipatory, and practical elements. Political theory, in this light, should reconcile various aspects: normativity and factuality, theory and praxis, and the balance between community and individual claims, blending the general with the particular, and aligning freedom with authority, as well as historicity with universality. Given Confucianism's dual nature as both a state ideology and a philosophy, along with the intrinsic demands of political theory/philosophy (such as robust intersectionality and unity, interpreters of the whole, and a strong emancipatory orientation), an "interdisciplinary" approach becomes necessary. This approach should include some elements of genealogy, phenomenological hermeneutics, and a robust normative and transformative ethos. While Leigh Jenco's approach to Confucianism shares some similarities with this method, it falls short in recognizing Confucianism as an ever-evolving being that permeates all layers of society and, instead, often adheres to traditional paradigms of intellectual history centered on historical intellectual debates. My approach, in contrast, advocates for a "distant reading" to analyze the basic structure and public political culture of Confucian societies. This involves not only examining textual data and key historical debates but also considering significant mechanisms, institutional changes, shifts in power structures and governance, and the evolution of Chinese mentalities and principles. Understanding Confucianism as an evolving phenomenon requires studying how its values and ideas are embodied and manifested in real history and politics. Moreover, I emphasize that the reception of Confucianism goes beyond elite circles, involving the collective persona in assimilating and transmitting Confucian ideals. This more holistic approach, therefore, is instrumental in gaining insights into aspects like the Chinese conception of sovereignty – a "bridge concept" (Stalnaker 2006, 33) through which we would be better enabled to explore some core shapes and unique features of Confucianized

societies and civilizations, which also have been shaped by Confucianism and have served as a key organizing principle in Chinese society for millennia.[2]

2. CONFUCIAN POLITICAL THEORIES

Historically, Confucianism—or "Confucianisms", considering the variations in its development (Angle 2012, 1)—has been a major cultural tradition, or "religion" in a broader and more inclusive sense (Angle 2022), of Chinese civilization for over two millennia. Since the Han dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD), Confucianism has been used to legitimize the major political institutions, regulate the behaviors of ruling elites, and shape the broader culture, as well as the shared values and beliefs of the common people. Yi-hua Jiang (2018, 156) is correct to observe that premodern China was a Confucian state wherein certain Confucian principles guided the "governmental structure, recruitment of civil servants, and mechanisms of accountability to the [people]". Although Confucianism lost some degree of its influence with the end of China's last dynasty and establishment of republican China in 1912 and during the later Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Confucianism has been resurgent in China and is thought by some commentators to have contributed to the economic development of many "Confucian states" in East Asia (e.g., Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam) over the past two decades (Jiang 2018).

A distinction between *premodern* and *modern* Confucianism traces back to The First Opium War (1839 - 1842), which arguably marks the start of modernity in China. While premodern Confucianism grappled intensely with integrating insights and confronting challenges posed by philosophies such as Legalism, Daoism, and Buddhism, it adroitly evolved and weathered these external existential threats, ensuring its continuance. The First Opium War, however, saw the predominant status of Confucianism begin to collapse and be replaced by liberalism (as translated through Japanese thinkers) and, later, Communism. Additional challenges to Confucianism were presented by a revival of Legalist thought and the continued introduction of other Western ideas. The New Cultural Movement (1910s - 1920s) and the Cultural Revolution further destroyed the dominance of Confucianism by undermining its theoretical and socio-political foundations. Despite these challenges, the development of Confucianism continues today, albeit without its former predominance. I concur with Angle's (2012, 2) assessment that "We will see that while Confucianism today is certainly not only a philosophy, philosophy is an important element of contemporary Confucianism: among other things, it is the most international aspect of Confucianism." Modern Confucianism encompasses at least two dimensions: its remaining ideological and institutional aspects, and the scholarly evolution of Confucian philosophy.

[2] Sovereignty – since its inception in the throes of European civil conflicts during the 17th and 18th centuries – has been a locus of profound contention. Through this focused lens, I envisage a deeper comprehension of the pivotal features that characterize Chinese politics and civilization.

Premodern Confucianism can be further divided into what I shall call *Confucian philosophy* and *imperial Confucianism*. Confucian philosophy in this essay refers to the evolving moral and political ideas and practices that not only predate but also evolve beyond the Han Dynasty's (134 BC) official adoption of Confucianism as the "state ideology". This evolution includes, for instance, the flourishing and reinterpretations of Confucian thought during the Song-Ming period (960-1644). Confucian philosophy was more independent and harbored more sources of insight and tensions within itself, making it more authentic than its imperial counterpart. Through its later association with the Chinese state (which, at the time, was heavily influenced by Legalistic principles), imperial Confucianism became more rigid and, to some degree, anti-emancipatory. Nonetheless, I do not contend here that there existed a singular school or tradition within Confucianism. However, it can be argued that imperial Confucianism has been more influential in shaping the Chinese ethos, mindset, and political landscape. And it was often the case that Confucian philosophy and imperial Confucianism are deeply intertwined. Both Confucian philosophy and imperial Confucianism, in this article, belong to a unified conception of Confucianism.

In this article, I view Confucianism as a living entity comprising an evolving set of ideas, practices, and perceptions that have arisen from the interplay between culture and actors. Over time, it has moved through and permeated Confucianized societies and is, therefore, only partially reflected and defended in the canonical texts and books. Drawing on the interdisciplinary institutionalist perspective advanced by John Meyer (1977), I define culture as a complex of values, interests, and ideologies that overlay ontological assumptions, collective purposes, and claims to knowledge. Institutions, as part of culture, are both ceremonial and structural, and help to shape action. Actors are constructed within the broader framework provided by culture which, in turn, affects the identities, purposes, meanings, and behaviors of organizations and individuals. Through institutionalization, individuals within a culture share definitions, theories, and explanations, allowing systems to exist across time and space (Meyer 1977). Culture and actors exist in a dialectic relation with one another, so each can both change and be changed by one another.[3] Therefore, to better understand the broader range of Confucian ideas, including its more fundamental and enduring aspects, we should pay more attention to the interplay between Confucian culture and actors which are inseparable from and complementary to the interpretation of Confucian books.

To investigate a suitable method for political theorists to interpret Confucianism or derive an adequate normative Confucian political philosophy, it is necessary to first examine some recent, prevailing interpretations of Confucian political philosophy and assess their adequacy. I have identified four approaches: (1). The *historical-interpretative approach* to Confucian texts, exemplified by scholars such as Loubna El Amine (2015), employs a reading strategy that is comparable to the method used by

[3] For example, changes in power disparities or new ideas about how to organize society may lead to shifts in actors' beliefs about how a specific rule should be interpreted, thereby creating changes in institutions and cultures (Farrell 2018). These are, of course, also open to influence from external factors such as other schools of thought, economic and technological developments, and historical events.

current political theorists in analyzing the history of Western political thought.[4] The objective is to identify the interpretive genesis and historical development of particular core concepts and topics within Confucian traditions. (2). The *philosophical-prescriptive approach*, as demonstrated by Confucian philosophers such as Stephen Angle (2009; 2012; 2022), places a greater emphasis on philosophical arguments and core concepts. It often gives precedence to representative philosophers and canonical texts within Confucian traditions, aiming to embody and expand upon the ethos of Confucius and other Confucian masters. While these arguments do draw upon historical evidence and textual analysis, their essence is more prescriptive than descriptive. They look towards the future with contemporary relevance, asking, "What are the core tradition's most insightful, valuable, and resilient ideas?" (Angle 2012, 1). This approach fosters the creative and contemporary evolution of Confucianism, with Angle's "Progressive Confucianism" serving as a prominent example. Centering on contemporary philosophical scholarship, for instance, Angle (2012) makes a compelling case for the alignment between democracy and Confucian moral goals. He suggests that a customized version of democracy, rooted in Confucian principles, is feasible and emphasizes the importance of incorporating some of liberal democracy's institutions to translate Confucian moral values from theoretical concepts into practical social norms. (3).The *revivalist approach* (borrowing Angle's term), as demonstrated by political or institutional Confucians such as Jiang Qing (2005), focuses on a particular school of Confucianism and a set of specific texts to develop a new political theory based on the ethos and tendencies of that tradition.[5] This approach involves a major overhaul of Confucian political philosophy and seeks to construct a socio-political system that is radically different from the current societies with Confucian experience. (4). The *reconstructive approach* seeks to modernize certain concepts and institutional values from Confucian traditions to depict a political system with Confucian characteristics. For example, Daniel A. Bell (2015) advocates for political meritocracy as an idealized version of China's current political system, presenting it as an alternative to liberal democracy based on one person, one vote. Joseph Chan's (2014) "Confucian perfectionism" and Tongdong Bai's (2019) advocacy for a domestic governance influenced by Confucianism that is both democratic and meritocratic are other well-known examples of this approach. Unlike the revivalist approach, the reconstructive approach does not aim to radically depart from the political status quo of Confucian societies to create a radically new, idealized Confucian state. Instead, it aims to modernize certain Confucian values or concepts, pondering how ancient

[4] El Amine argues that Confucian political philosophy is driven by the difficulty of reconciling politics with the demands of order. To uncover a distinct pattern underlying Confucian political thought, she focuses on early Confucian texts and closely interprets their political discussions. She takes the discussions in the Classical Confucian texts as her starting point, rather than assuming that Confucianism both prioritizes morality over politics and that moral standards are also political standards (El Amine 2015, 9-11).

[5] Jiang, for example, relies primarily on the classic text called *Gongyang Zhuan* to argue for a transformation of China into a "republic under a symbolic monarchy", with a tricameral constitutional structure consisting of the direct descendant of Confucius, the Academy of Confucian scholars, and a democratically elected government (Jiang 2005).

Confucian masters might respond to modern issues. This makes reconstructive thinkers more normative than historical-interpretive writers, more "political" than prescriptive thinkers, but less radical than revivalists. While the categorizations I present may seem somewhat arbitrary and are by no means exhaustive, failing to capture the full breadth of theoretical and methodological nuances, they reflect the diverse methodological approaches that Confucian theorists often adopt, which resist easy categorization. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this article, I endeavor to outline the most prominent approaches for deriving Confucian political philosophy, thereby making a methodological contribution of my own. I respect the rigor and productive nature of the scholars and scholarship categorized here, which propels the political theoretical examination of Confucianism and related traditions within East Asian political thought. It is also pertinent to note that numerous facets of my methodology have been influenced by their academic approaches.

To assess the above four approaches and develop an adequate Confucian political philosophy, it is also essential to understand the role of political theory as an academic and practical enterprise. Political philosophy, as I perceive it, requires robust intersectionality and unity, echoing Wendy Brown's understanding that the political is intricately tied to cultural, economic, and technological spheres (Brown 2002, 569-571). This notion promotes an interdisciplinary approach, a broad examination of non-political aspects, cultures, and histories, and assembling these insights into a coherent whole. This approach resonates with Jürgen Habermas's view of philosophers as interpreters and with Joshua Dienstag's argument regarding the central position of political theory in various branches of knowledge (Habermas 1987; Dienstag 2016, 5). The fundamental challenge lies in fusing theory and praxis, balancing the theoretical and practical as advocated by John Rawls and John Stuart Mill, and confronting injustice in praxis as suggested by Ben Laurence (Stears 2005; Laurence 2021). Political philosophers must, therefore, consciously aim for social change and acknowledge their social role, understanding theorizing as a strategic social practice. For example, some scholars tend to reduce Confucianism to meritocracy, a moral philosophy about virtues, or a theory about political order, each of which fail to comprehend Confucianism as a comprehensive whole. Others view Confucianism as a set of principles that can be extracted from specific texts, while neglecting both its institutional, interdisciplinary, and phenomenological aspects. However, with the blurring of boundaries between the political and other domains and the growing complexity of political theory, a satisfactory interpretation of Confucian political philosophy must also consider how Confucian values and power structures respond to modern iterations of ideas such as capitalism, globalization, new technologies, and the media. I thus reject the view that reduces the role of political theory to mere interpretation of certain texts, and instead defend the idea that political theory is an intersectional subfield that should incorporate normative, emancipatory, and practical elements. Political theorists in their philosophizing should seek to grasp the "whole" while being mindful of the parts, reconciling normativity and factuality, theory and praxis, the claims of the community and those of individuals, the general and the

particular, as well as historicity and universality. As Confucian political theory is a branch of political theory, it must also develop these features.[6]

Sungmoon Kim's *Democracy After Virtue*, for instance, offers a nuanced balance between theory and praxis, embedding Confucianism within contemporary "Confucian societies". Kim (2018) argues for a pragmatic Confucian democracy, which he views as the most suitable form of democracy in the East Asian context, where societal culture remains "intelligibly Confucian". Adopting a citizen's perspective, Kim broadens the conception of Confucianism beyond fixed principles and texts, considering it within the context of ongoing rituals and mindsets in modern Confucian societies.

However, while Kim's work is a significant contribution to Confucian political theory, it lacks a comprehensive engagement with the state-centered dimension of Confucianism. His account is limited by an ethics-centered approach that does not fully explore the institutional role of Confucianism as a state ideology in East Asia. Historically, Confucianism has evolved through interactions with other philosophies, such as Legalism, thereby contributing to the stability and prosperity of East Asian states over millennia. Viewing Confucianism as a dynamic and evolving entity highlights its role in establishing a moral and ordered state, not just in guiding individual moral growth. Confucianism's long tenure as a state ideology reflects its broader focus on achieving political order and harmony, which is essential for understanding its potential contribution to a "Confucian democracy".

3. READING SOCIETY, CULTURE, AND TEXTS: AN "INTERDISCIPLINARY" APPROACH

Andrew March's (2009) conception of Comparative Political Theory (CPT) is anchored on three pillars: transformative political ethos, rigorous comparative analysis, and a civilizational perspective in text selection. March's pursuit of an "engaged" political theory surpasses mere integration of non-Western contexts into political theory literature, striving instead to unearth cultural similarities, thereby rehabilitating non-Western perspectives and universalizing political theory itself. Contrastingly, Farah Godrej (2011) prioritizes cross-cultural comprehension of non-Western thought. She champions the preservation of texts or ideas' holistic nature when imported across cultural borders. This task, she suggests, requires "self-dislocation" and existential submergence into a traditional adherent's practices and life-worlds, thus, fostering rich textual interpretation and cross-cultural conversation. Notwithstanding their divergent

[6] Scholars such as Jiang Qing (2005), for example, tend to narrow their focus to a specific range of texts, such as pre-Qin, early Confucian thinkers, the *Gongyang Zhuan*, or the history of Confucian philosophy. However, as Confucianism evolved to become the official ideology of the centralized Chinese state and with the development of economics, a fuller understanding of Confucianism requires consideration of its broader historical and cultural context. This fuller understanding could work to take account of contemporary institutions, practices, collective meanings and purposes, major historical events, interactions between people and elites, and the impact of historical conditions on each of these. The ideas of Confucius and Mencius, for example, are significant, but not sufficient to uncover the fundamental and enduring elements of Confucianism.

methodologies, March and Godrej coalesce on the critical role of genealogy in CPT. Aligning with this consensus, and drawing on Quentin Skinner's (2002) ideas and Michel Foucault's emphasis on institutional evolution, I argue for political thought's historical recovery and contextualization, underscoring the necessity of understanding a given state's ideology and the development of its political tradition.

Building upon Godrej's "phenomenological hermeneutics" - informed by, for instance, Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1977) philosophical hermeneutics - grasping Confucianism necessitates immersion into its genealogical development through lived experiences within Confucian societies. However, I argue for a more comprehensive method that not only accounts for phenomenological hermeneutics but also scrutinizes the lived experiences and personal meanings attributed to Confucianism. By examining the embodiment of Confucian ideas within Chinese and other Confucian societies, this approach uncovers the broader cultural and social contexts that influence these experiences, thereby leading to a more exhaustive understanding of Confucianism.

A desirable Confucian political philosophy should also prioritize a strong "normative" – as opposed to merely descriptive and interpretive - potential and ethos, transcending mere interpretation and understanding. While acknowledging the importance of history and genealogy as emphasized by March and Godrej in CPT, their methodologies seem overly reliant on textual interpretation and, even when combined with Foucault's focus on social practices, lack a robust emphasis on political change, practicability, and normativity. This is crucial because Confucianism, historically both a state ideology and a transformative instrument, requires an approach capable of effecting real change in order to evolve itself into a more adequate Confucian political philosophy. This concept echoes Karl Marx's emphasis on the importance of changing the world rather than merely interpreting it (Marx 1978, 143). In this context, the methodologies of John Rawls and Axel Honneth, with their focus on normativity and social-philosophical analysis, are instructive. Rawls's "political constructivism" probes into liberal societies to uncover shared ideas in public political culture and basic societal structures (Rawls 1993, 11-12), Rawls views liberalism not just as a philosophical doctrine but as a collection of ideas embedded in societal structures and practices, thereby linking a generic theory with the practical, lived experience of individuals within a society. This perspective is vital for Confucian political philosophy, as it underscores the need for theoretical ideas to be grounded in and responsive to the realities of social structures and cultural norms. Honneth's method of normative reconstruction in *Freedom's Right* reveals the normative values within social institutions (Honneth 2014, 4-10). His method of normative reconstruction is a critical theory approach that uncovers the ethical values to which people have implicitly consented within their societal structures. This approach is not just an academic exercise; it has a transformative potential as it enables the *critique of social institutions* from the perspective of the ethical principles they embody. It is the ability for the "interdisciplinary" approach to *critique* that creates space for analysis that goes beyond mere description. It allows Confucianism to turn back onto itself, learn from the past and present, and move towards the future in a more positivistic manner. Honneth's emphasis on the immanent critique and the practical nature of normative reconstruction

is particularly relevant for Confucian political philosophy. It suggests that a comprehensive understanding of Confucian values and principles requires an analysis that is deeply embedded within the social and institutional contexts in which these values operate; To incorporate the normative ethos of Rawls and Honneth into an interdisciplinary approach to Confucian political philosophy, we need a dual focus: on the one hand, a deep understanding of Confucian texts and traditions and, on the other, a critical analysis of how these teachings are embodied in and influence contemporary social institutions and practices. By doing so, Confucian political philosophy can move beyond theoretical discourse to become a dynamic, transformative force capable of addressing the challenges and complexities of modern society. However, these approaches alone do not fully capture the nuances of Confucianism as a dynamic ideology and philosophy. A more integrated approach, combining these methods with genealogical study, could offer a more nuanced understanding and critique of Confucian societies. This synthesis aims to identify core values and institutions that embody them, thereby crafting a Confucian political theory that is oriented to both transformation and normativity.

I hence suggest a more "interdisciplinary" approach that sees Confucianism as a living entity, investigating the dynamic relationship between culture, institutions, and actors. Confucianism's role, as I posit, extends beyond a state ideology - it is a cognizant, living philosophy capable of implementing social change. Therefore, to articulate a coherent Confucian political philosophy, we must embark on a critical examination of Confucian societies so as to identify elements ripe for critique and transformation. This, therefore, implicitly necessitates a holistic consideration and creates space for transformative and normative assertions. The pursuit of this approach shall involve an examination of the historical evolution of Confucian concepts, practices, and institutions inspired by or defended in these texts. This method encourages Confucian theorists to immerse themselves in the tradition's practices and life-worlds, exploring phenomenological experiences, symbols, feelings, and internalizations of Confucian writers.[7] The approach aims to critique and resolve internal tensions within these societies so as to facilitate a more practical Confucian political philosophy, responsive to contemporary concerns and more likely to find acceptance amongst leaders and citizens alike.

Notably, the approach to Confucianism by Leigh Jenco bears a resemblance to my "interdisciplinary" method – a marked deviation from the prevailing paradigms that scrutinize culture through the prism of culturally embedded writers or texts. Instead, as Jenco compellingly argues, culture emerges as a socially constructed phenomenon, delineated by learned practices (Jenco 2014; 2015). The foundation of this conception lies in viewing historical elements as the "social phenomenon" within their historical backdrop, an amalgamation of debates and events (Jenco 2015). Thus, her examination of instances such as the Yangwu reform movement and Tan Sitong's political thought

[7] Through the study of their writings, poems, popular sayings, songs, behaviors, and common expressions, the approach intends to unmask the very fabric of Confucian semantics. Moreover, this approach encompasses literature, history, and interdisciplinary studies of both elites and ordinary citizens within Confucian societies to understand their mentalities, ethos, ideals, and values.

should be perceived as encapsulating the practice of recontextualizing historical knowledge to preserve its contemporary significance. Jenco's investigations predominantly adopt a methodological lens that dissects intellectual debates from Chinese history. Her work, for instance, thoroughly examines the transition of knowledge production from Chinese to Western paradigms and unveils alternative methodologies for cross-cultural engagement through notable instances like the "China-origins thesis", thereby illuminating fresh perspectives on the global issue of coexistence and learning from cultural "others". Of note for our purposes here, her scrutiny of Confucianism (2017) critiques recent attempts at modernizing the tradition. She argues that many such endeavors, far from enhancing Confucianism's appeal, merely accentuate its irrelevance and constrain its scholarly potential by affixing the identity of Confucianism to a static historical context that is divorced from the present, thus crafting a "spirit" or "essence" of Confucianism adapted to contemporary norms and institutions without adequately engaging with the wealth of knowledge from Confucian precedents that continue to inform contemporary inquiry – a historical "rapture" (Jenco 2017).[8] While the "inauthenticity" of these reconstructions is an issue for Jenco, she finds that their major shortcomings lie instead with their having overlooked Confucianism's historical relationships. This fault, she argues, inadvertently narrows one's engagement with Confucianism, ensuring not its rejuvenation, but its demise in the modern era (Jenco 2017, 451).

While I applaud the insightful methodology proposed by Jenco for interpreting Confucianism —emphasizing historically-situated intellectual engagement with Confucian texts[9] — her approach diverges from my perspective. Jenco's interpretation foregrounds Confucianism as a collection of "marginalized bodies of historically situated thought and action" (Jenco 2017, 452). She still primarily views Confucianism as "past Chinese thought and practice" or "Non-Western philosophy" (2017, 451). While her methodology does bear semblance to the traditional examination of Chinese political thought and intellectual history, it fails to envision Confucianism as a dynamic and evolving philosophy that permeates all strata of society.

To contrast, my "interdisciplinary" approach presents a more unified and holistic perspective, setting Confucianism against its broader social, cultural, and historical

[8] "In styling their Confucianism as adapted 'for the modern world'", Jenco argues, "many of these attempts rehearse problematic relationships to the past that – far from broadening Confucianism's appeal beyond its typical borders – end up enforcing its irrelevance and dramatically narrow its scope as a source of scholarly knowledge" (Jenco 2017, 451).

[9] I concur with her refusal to confer upon Confucianism an ahistorical, transcendent influence that has surreptitiously shaped China's destiny. Instead, she propounds precision in academic discourse on Confucianism, representing it not as a static repository of teachings but as an evolving treasury of cultural and philosophical discourses – a rich compendium of wisdom perennially refreshed through continuous conversations and debates among generations of Confucian thinkers and commentators. This knowledge base manifests through ingrained rituals, standards, and values that together constitute a distinctive mode of "knowledge production". The "interdisciplinary" approach offered here likewise rejects the tendency to perceive Confucianism as a timeless, analytical phenomenon, or as presuming the existence of a static, universal "essence" that can be unveiled through abstraction, distillation, and interpretation of core Confucian tenets.

contexts while also including its intellectual history. Here, Confucianism presents itself as an evolving entity, dynamically interacting with the very fabric of society. Its impacts, borrowing Rawls's terminology, become discernible in the "basic structure" of institutions and the tenor of "public political culture". Confucianism, in this view, surpasses the mere shaping of mentalities and collective personalities. Drawing on Hegelian concepts, I argue that it molds the very "spirit" and ethos of the Confucian or Confucianized peoples and guides the trajectories of the Confucian or Confucianized states.

By extension, understanding Confucianism in its entirety demands a methodology that ventures beyond narrowly-defined historical debates and textual analyses. My "interdisciplinary" approach involves, for instance, a "distant reading" – as opposed to Jenco's approach, which relies on (close) case studies of historical debates – of Confucianism, incorporating not only textual data and key historical debates, but also significant mechanism and institutional changes in Chinese societies and states, shifts in power structures and governance, and the evolution of Chinese mentalities and principles. This approach also factors in the interplay between Confucianism and other doctrines and practices. Confucianism here, I believe, emerges as a pervasive, all-encompassing entity. This expanded methodological lens allows us to perceive Confucianism as an evolving phenomenon that *must* be grasped as a whole if we are to fully understand its parts.

In this light, one may argue, for example, that venturing into more "interdisciplinary" material and institutional aspects of "real" politics may lead theorists and philosophers away from their primary roles as "political philosophers" or "historians of political thought". The risk here is that their work might begin to overlap with that traditionally associated with empirical social scientists, thereby prompting an existential crisis within the contemporary academic distribution of labor. I would suggest that this apprehension may be allayed by acknowledging that the study of Confucian political theory should strive to encapsulate the "whole". It ought to explore innovative and theoretical spaces within the boundaries of various social sciences and humanities subjects. The identity of a Confucian political theorist need not hinge solely upon their prowess in interpreting classic texts or deciphering the intricate dialogues embedded in Chinese history. Instead, we should endeavor to comprehend what we deem pertinent and crucial to our conception of the "political", even if such relevance requires delving into the more empirical and "interdisciplinary" aspects of Confucianism and other political thoughts. Indeed, the endeavor need not be limited to contributing to theoretical discoveries and innovations solely by engaging with theories embedded in written texts. A broader engagement with a wide range of research and sources can provide a more comprehensive understanding of societies influenced by a Confucian past. By considering not only the classic texts and the conversations surrounding them but also adopting a more holistic perspective, theorists may gain deeper insights into the moral and political foundations and values of Confucianism.

To fully grasp the pervasive and influential nature of Confucianism, it is important to consider how Chinese (and other Confucian) dynasties, societies, and individuals receive, understand, embody, and utilize these Confucian ideas. While the

philosophical doctrines found in ancient texts and intellectual historical case studies are undoubtedly valuable, I believe that studying the reception and embodiment of Confucianism offers equally significant insights. This broader approach can enhance our understanding of Confucianism as an ideology, culture, and philosophical tradition. However, this is not to suggest that one method is superior to another. Rather, the distinction in political theory or philosophy—Confucian political philosophy, in this case—lies in our "purpose" rather than in a singular "method". The methodology of political theory need not be confined to textual interpretation and historical analysis alone. Instead, it should also strive to contribute to the understanding and practice of politics, enriching it with theoretical insights and perspectives. In doing so, the methodologies employed should serve the broader purpose of political theory, without becoming a point of contention.

Echoing Alasdair MacIntyre's (1984) link between the values of specific traditions and their embodiments in shared practices, histories, and institutions, I underscore the importance of reception, affirming that these abstract values cannot be separated from the specific social orders or cultural phenomena from which they emerge without losing their intelligibility. Simultaneously, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics posits that we grasp new ideas by referencing our pre-existing knowledge, thereby recognizing the inevitability of distortions in interpretation. This concept of distortion bears considerable relevance to the reception of Confucian teachings by successive generations, from political elites to more passive recipients. It prompts a re-evaluation of the disparity between the original intent of Confucian thinkers and the interpretations of subsequent practitioners. Consequently, I recognize the existence of "transmission gaps" between the original texts and their later interpretations, shaped by evolving historical conditions, individual creativity, and the influence of other political thoughts such as Chinese Legalism and Daoism.

Particularly within the context of Confucianism, Michael de Certeau's (1984) concept of reading reverberates strongly. His delineation of "tactics"—the powers of the powerless used to transform a top-down culture into a personal playground—applies to an individual's navigation of Confucian texts. Reading thus becomes a space for "poaching", a mechanism of cultural resistance, wherein readers actively participate in shaping meaning from their own perspectives. Moreover, de Certeau challenges the notion of reading as passive absorption. He envisages the reader as an active interpreter, dynamically transforming the text's meaning in accordance with personal perceptions and experiences. He introduces the concept of reading as a dynamic act, an active, interpretive process that culminates in the creation of meaning by the reader rather than the author or the text. Furthermore, his contemplation of social and epistemic justice emphasizes the validity of different interpretations, especially those marginalized by privileged readings legitimized by social institutions. Hence, an exhaustive study of Confucian texts would undoubtedly benefit from considering the reception and interpretation of Confucian ideas from a diverse range of audiences.

Case studies of specific historical events and debates, while essential, represent only one aspect of the reception and embodiment of Confucianism. Relying solely on these case studies may risk overlooking broader influences. A pertinent question is

whether the trajectories of Chinese states and societies have been primarily shaped by elite figures or whether the "collective persona of Confucian transmissions"—a term I use to describe the broader population's role in assimilating and transmitting Confucian ideals—has played a more significant role. The act of engaging with Confucianism—encompassing its dissemination and reception—goes beyond passive absorption; it is an active process that stimulates dialogue, inspiration, and insight. Through this dynamic act of interpretation and reflection, individuals connect with the world, past experiences, and imaginative possibilities.

This reading process invariably teems with "distortions" and "transmission gaps", giving rise to an enhanced sense of "subjectivity". This subjectivity itself, with its accompanying "partiality" and emotional elements, leads to perceptions of the reading process as "imperfect" and "unstable". This apparent imperfection, I argue, is paradoxically what makes human beings – and our political, theoretical studies of human beings – meaningful; this seeming flaw enriches the tapestry of human interaction with texts. The divergence from neutrality, underpinned by this partiality and subjectivity, underscores the human capacity for varied interpretations. It is precisely these diverse subjective receptions of Confucianism that herald the call for a more "interdisciplinary" investigation—an analysis that examines a "big data pool" of "subjective" and "distorted" receptions of Confucianism. It moves beyond Jenco's favored method of scrutinizing certain historical cases and events as "social phenomena", broadening the understanding of Confucian political philosophy.

To better understand the intricacies of Confucianism and its widespread influence, I propose a tripartite strategy: first, to identify its general trajectory and shape; second, to recognize its evolving features; and third, to explore its various layers of embodiment and transmission. While traditional methodologies that focus on interpreting Confucian canons or selectively identifying core values have provided valuable insights, they may not fully capture the complexity of Confucianism's temporal and societal trajectory. Of course, the appropriateness of any methodology depends on the specific purpose and focus of the academic project at hand. However, by broadening our approach to include both the original Confucian texts and their reception and embodiment across different societal strata and historical periods, we can potentially achieve a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of Confucianism, particularly when such a holistic perspective aligns with the research goals.

Liang Qichao, a notable thinker from the early twentieth century, briefly mentioned Confucianism in a way that supports the methodologies I propose. In his "Six Lectures on Confucianism", Liang argued that Confucian teachings, due to their widespread influence, shape the psychological customs and habits of the people. He emphasized the importance of studying not just the writings and theories of scholars, but also the impact of Confucianism on politics and society, highlighting the need for attention to both its influence on societal politics and the reciprocal effects of politics and society on Confucianism. Liang also noted the unique characteristics of Chinese intellectual traditions, pointing out that Chinese scholarship is more about practice than mere knowledge, especially in the context of Confucianism. He elaborated that Confucian notions of governance ("external kingship") encompass fields like sociology, political

science, and economics, while its ideas about personal virtue ("internal sanctity") include pedagogy, anthropology, and psychology.

However, Liang did not develop a specific methodology for studying Confucian political theory, and his conception of Confucianism diverges from mine. His comments primarily address the differences between Chinese and Western philosophical, cultural, and intellectual traditions. I use his insights to reinforce the idea that a comprehensive, holistic approach to studying Confucianism is essential. While Liang's work is inspirational, my project is distinct: it does not complement his approach - because he does not present any systematic approach - but builds on contemporary literature in political theory, philosophy, sociology, and Confucian political philosophy. My contribution is unique in that it only takes Liang's intuition about Confucianism as a starting point to establish a contemporary interdisciplinary approach. Liang and other scholars serve more as historical inspiration for my project than a methodological foundation.

Using Bo Mou's (2020) methodological frameworks, I aim to articulate the similarities and differences between my interdisciplinary approach and other methods in Confucian social-political philosophy, exploring how my approach might offer distinct contributions to the field. Mou (2020) emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between three key dimensions in the study of philosophical objects: "Methodological perspectives" refer to the angles from which an object of study is examined. These can range from perspective-simplexes, which focus on a single facet of the object, to more complex perspectives that integrate multiple facets. A perspective is considered "eligible" if it effectively addresses a genuine aspect of the object under study (Mou 2020, 15-16). "Methodological instruments" are the tools used to apply these perspectives—such as close readings, comparative studies, or hermeneutical approaches—whose effectiveness depends on their suitability to the chosen perspective. "Methodological guiding principles" manage the application of these perspectives, setting the standards for their selection and use. An adequate guiding principle appropriately coordinates and integrates eligible perspectives, ensuring they contribute meaningfully to a comprehensive understanding of the study object (Mou 2020, 371-380).

Mou does not suggest that a more comprehensive or interdisciplinary approach is inherently "more adequate" than a perspective-simplex approach. Instead, the adequacy of a guiding principle is determined by its ability to effectively manage the relationship between various eligible perspectives. In this case, adequacy is context-dependent, linked to how well the guiding principle facilitates a holistic understanding of the object of study (Mou 2020, 15-16). Given this, my interdisciplinary approach should not be viewed as inherently superior to non-interdisciplinary approaches. Its value lies in its alignment with the specific purpose and focus of the study. For example, my approach is particularly suited for contexts where a broader, more integrated understanding of Confucianism—encompassing both its textual and sociopolitical embodiments—is the goal. However, in other contexts, such as a focused philosophical analysis of specific Confucian concepts, a perspective-simplex approach might be more appropriate and equally adequate.

My critique of certain non-interdisciplinary approaches in Confucian studies is not aimed at their "perspective" dimensions per se but rather suggests that their "guiding-principle" dimensions could benefit from a broader recognition of the complementary value of additional eligible perspectives. Given the context and the dual nature of Confucianism as both a philosophical and sociopolitical tradition, it would be advantageous if these guiding principles more explicitly acknowledged the importance of incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives. While an eligible perspective retains its philosophical validity even when applied under a guiding principle that does not fully integrate other perspectives, the guiding principle itself is crucial. It shapes how perspectives are selected, integrated, and related to one another, which in turn influences the overall completeness and coherence of the study's findings (Mou 2020, 15-16).

I thus advocate for a *cooperative* and *complementary* use of different methodological perspectives and instruments to better approach our study object—Confucianism. This cooperation and complementarity fulfill the requirement for a contextually adequate "methodological guiding principle", which can help construct a more comprehensive understanding of Confucian political theory. By integrating diverse perspectives, my approach aims to contribute to a richer, more nuanced interpretation of Confucianism as both a philosophical and sociopolitical tradition. This approach does not dismiss the importance of traditional text-centered methodologies. Instead, it suggests that a more comprehensive grasp of Confucian political theory can be achieved by *also* considering how Confucian ideas have been embodied in social and political institutions. This broader perspective recognizes the value of complementarity, where different methodologies are not seen as competing but as offering complementary insights that, together, provide a more complete understanding of Confucianism.

What is common between my approach and others in understanding Confucian political theories is our collective aim to better understand Confucianism and articulate it in ways that might be relevant to contemporary and future-looking political theories and politics. What differentiates my approach from others is the emphasis on the importance of considering the social aspects and embodiments of Confucian ideas and principles, understanding Confucianism not just as a scholarly doctrine contained within philosophical texts but as a "whole" - incorporating more methodological perspectives and their corresponding instruments (which are equally partial and necessary) will likely lead to a more adequate grasp of the object of study, methodologically superior. However, Confucian political theorists must be judicious and sensitive in choosing and combining the best methodological instruments and perspectives to better grasp Confucianism as a dynamic object of study - special attention should be paid to the social aspect in periods where Confucianism was predominant and manifested in sociopolitical institutions, and to textual analysis and argument distillation in contexts where Confucianism is no longer predominant and becomes more of a scholarly idea without much institutional root.

4. A CASE STUDY: EXPLORING THE CONFUCIAN CONCEPTION OF SOVEREIGNTY THROUGH AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

In this section, I shall apply my "interdisciplinary" approach to a Confucian conception of sovereignty, focusing on the Chinese Republican era. My method, although grounded in traditional Confucian texts,[10] also engages with other doctrines, specifically Legalism and Daoism. In light of this, my selection of texts is not limited to those traditionally labelled as Confucian; instead, I envisage Confucianism as a dynamic entity in constant dialogue with other prominent Chinese philosophical schools, absorbing and repurposing their insights and concepts. Classic Legalist works, such as *Shang Jun Shu* and *Han Feizi*, and Daoist texts like *Dao De Jing*, find themselves in this analytical purview, interwoven with the central theme of Confucian thought.[11] Primary writings from thinkers such as Liang Qichao and Sun Yat-sen shall form part of my heretofore envisaged investigative schema. In doing so, I shall juxtapose these works with classic sovereignty literature, such as Jean Bodin's *On Sovereignty*. Further, I endeavor to transcend a contextual understanding of these writers, texts, and debates. I aim to discern the shape, form, trajectory, and embodiment of sovereignty through the lens of historical patterns and empirical institutional changes. These are the elements through which I aim to understand the allocation and flow of supreme power and authority within Chinese states and societies. My exploration draws from a broad range of fields - primarily History, Sociology, and empirical Political Science - in addition to focusing on the reception of foreign notions of sovereignty. In support of this exploration, I incorporate empirical studies and historiographical approaches from diverse sources.[12]

In the pre-Republican era of China, an "interdisciplinary" perspective can indeed represent a novel approach to deriving the Confucian concept of sovereignty. Confucian moral teachings, from this perspective, marked by a profound intellectual and moral supremacy of the ruler, perpetuated a hierarchical and bureaucratic political structure that was sustained by Confucian elites. Underpinning the political order, Confucianism was a moral compass that envisaged an orderly society rising from chaos, contingent on a stringent hierarchy and respect for superiors. El Amine (2015), for example, has proposed a political interpretation of Confucianism which suggests

[10] E.g., the *Analects*, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, the *Great Learning*, and the *Shangshu*.

[11] Indeed, a concept of Dao, perhaps the quintessential illustration, has been assimilated and repurposed within Confucianism, acting as a bridge between these three doctrines. Similarly, the institution of Keju— while its philosophical lineage might be contested between Confucianism and Legalism— shall be treated here as an embodiment of an expansive, living concept of Confucianism.

[12] Chinese historian Qin Hui's *Stepping out of Imperial Rule* (2015), the interdisciplinary perspective from Zhao Dingxin's *The Confucian-Legalist State* (2015), and Chinese political scientist Wang Yuhua's recent work *The Rise and Fall of Imperial China* (2022), each offer unique insights. Furthermore, the economic historical lens provided by Bin Wong in *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (1997), and *Before and Beyond Divergence: The Politics of Economic Change in China and Europe* (2011) in the California School's work on Chinese economic history shall lend an economic dimension to this exploration of sovereignty.

that its political dimensions are not straightforward derivatives of its ethical components. This argument underscores the necessity of extending our gaze beyond Confucian ethics to its sociopolitical dimensions. By amalgamating the insights of Confucian teachings, we might circumvent the reductionist trap of homogenizing its political and practical concerns into a single, coherent system. Hence, it is necessary to consider Confucian ethics and politics in a dialectical relationship if we hope to encapsulate its sociopolitical dimensions fully.

Adopting a more "interdisciplinary" viewpoint, the Confucian inclination towards a stable political and socioeconomic system, combined with a moral approach, tends to result in a hierarchic, authoritarian power structure. This arrangement is in harmony with Confucian political and moral principles, especially the emphasis on social harmony through a well-defined socio-moral hierarchy. As a result, it reveals an underlying skepticism among Confucians regarding the public's political competence and a tendency to favor a paternalistic style of governance. In Imperial China, a paternalistic, moralized politics was clearly evident, and this Confucian conception of sovereignty permeated the political fabric. However, this in no way implies that China evolved into a purely Confucian state. The Chinese historian Qin Hui (2019) and sociologist Zhao Dingxin (2015), for instance, have argued that Legalism had a more influential role in shaping China's state construction and alluded to the symbiotic existence of Legalism and Confucianism. This dialectical relationship between Confucianism and Legalism remains central to understanding the trajectory of China's political and social development. Building upon their empirical insights, Chinese sovereignty emerges as a system expressed through the omnipotent Legalist sovereignty yet bound by the moral constraints of Confucian ideology. This combination establishes a more omnipotent sovereign that is institutionally empowered and morally authorized to steer an intrusive government. Thus, in Chinese dynasties, sovereignty transcends all social classes and dictates almost every aspect of society – including law, policy, the economy, and even morality. Despite this conceptual framework, however, as the American historian Philip Kuhn (2003) observes, the actual governance in China frequently diverges from its theorized Confucian-Legalist model. The discrepancy between the ambitions of the state and its capacities resulted in society outgrowing the political system that sought to govern it (Kuhn 2003, 21). Therefore, while Confucian and Legalist principles formed the idealized Confucian conception of sovereignty, its pragmatic implementation has been marked by historical and sociopolitical complexities.

The Western incursion into the Qing dynasty (1644 - 1911) catalyzed a transformative intellectual period among China's elites, leading to an embrace of foreign political ideas for new statecraft models and sovereignty concepts. Qin (2015) outlines two phases of this "Enlightenment" period. The first phase, from the First Opium War to The Hundred Days' Reform (1839-1898), although less documented, set the ideological groundwork for later political changes, with Confucian scholars increasingly valuing Western liberal democracy. This era was marked by significant translations of traditionally Western terms like "sovereignty" into *Zhu Quan*, reflecting a growing interest in Western political thought. The second phase, the New Culture

Movement, emerged from events like the First Sino-Japanese War, focusing on Western concepts of individual freedom and a new populism in China. This led to the recognition that traditional officials were inadequate for representing state interests, necessitating a new political leadership model.

The revolutions and "Enlightenment" movements aimed at dismantling the old absolute monarchy and weakening Confucian-supported communities, paving the way for a new concept of sovereignty. This concept blended elements of Legalism, statism, and populism. In the aftermath of the second "Enlightenment" phase, Chinese political thought evolved to prioritize state interests and regard the populace as the legitimizing force in politics. This blend led to a modernized version of sovereignty in China that was capable of asserting complete political authority. The transition from a traditional Legalist-Confucian view of sovereignty to this unified, modernized form marks a significant shift in Chinese political thought. The modernized sovereign, deriving authority from the people, claims to represent their collective interests and will, echoing the absolute power of a Legalist monarchy.

To truly grasp the nuances of Chinese sovereignty, integrating empirical insights from contemporary social science literature is not merely desirable but necessary. Indeed, the complex interplay of socio-political dynamics that characterizes Chinese sovereignty can be more profoundly understood through this interdisciplinary approach. At the heart of this discourse lies Jiang's (2018) exposition on the patron-client dynamic inherent in the Chinese sovereign bureaucracy. This dynamic is an exemplification of the "Principal–Agent" conundrum, wherein the sovereign—devoid of comprehensive insights—delegates tasks to agents, inevitably encountering the treacherous terrain of misaligned interests. Such a dynamic is particularly resonant when examining the mechanisms driving the ascension of Chinese officials—principally through endorsements from superiors. Herein lies Jiang's argument: this very system of patronage engenders an unprecedented accountability, setting it apart from the well-trodden paths of electoral democracies. Within this matrix, the formidable authority vested in patrons, twinned with their capacity for oversight, operates as a bulwark against potential misdemeanors of lower-tier officials, ensuring their unwavering fidelity to public service (Jiang 2018, 984-986). Yet, this rosy perspective is not without its critiques. Pan and Chen (2016) and Hou et al. (2016), for example, pinpoint potential fissures in the sovereign's oversight, intimating a possible tacit endorsement of oppressive practices. Fukuyama (2016) also famously introduces the "Bad Emperor" dilemma, highlighting the inherent fragility of the Chinese sovereignty system. His contention—rooted in the axiom that benevolent leadership is as much a boon as malevolent leadership is a bane—emphasizes the system's vulnerability, particularly given the lack of robust mechanisms to dethrone a maligned "Bad Emperor" (Fukuyama 2016, 387). Hence, these institutional analyses may insinuate that while the Chinese sovereignty system offers a distinctive top-down accountability framework, its stability could be compromised unless fortified by more bottom-up, institutionalized measures of accountability.

Envisaging the trajectories of Chinese sovereignty requires more than historical or textual introspection—it demands a meticulous synthesis of empirical and institutional

insights. The continuity discerned between premodern and modern (inclusive of the Republican era) conceptions of sovereignty is emblematic of this dynamic, living philosophy. Theoretical paradigms, such as Olson's (1993) exploration of the economic genesis of the state and the rational choice model posited by Garfias and Sellars (2022), shed light on the more nuanced motives, strategies, and tools inherent to the psyche of the sovereign subject that other approaches – such as those by Jenco—might miss. Incorporating empirical and institutional analyses paves the path for a richer, more nuanced understanding. An exploration of Confucian sovereignty within the Chinese Republican era from my "interdisciplinary" approach, indeed, introduces a compelling threefold framework. Grounded in a comprehensive reception and interpretation of Confucian ideas, an acknowledgment of the active role of the subject, and an examination of culture, institutions, and actors, it transcends conventional textual analysis or case study methodologies.

Navigating the trajectory of Confucian ideas, it becomes evident that purely textual analysis or historical debates-based perspectives often yield a conception of sovereignty that is either grounded in canonical Confucian text or circumscribed by dialogues and arguments from the intellectual leaders of the Chinese Republican era, such as Liang Qichao, Tan Sitong, and others. These methodologies, although beneficial in their respective domains, may potentially distort our understanding, leading us to perceive the Chinese conception of sovereignty as more "morals-based" than it actually might be by overlooking the profound influence of Legalism on the evolution of Confucianism. A deeper understanding of the dynamics between Confucianism and Legalism mandates an in-depth scrutiny of the empirical and historical trajectories of Chinese societal structures. Without such an analytical lens, one risks overlooking the interplay between Confucianism and Legalism, which have existed in varying degrees of tension throughout Chinese history. For instance, pre-Qin Confucian scriptures, particularly those from Kong Zi and Meng Zi, stand in stark contrast to the hierarchical motifs that Legalism champions. However, the myriad "distorted" historical transmissions and their manifold embodiments have forged an unexpected alliance between the two philosophical behemoths. My analysis, therefore, advances a more holistic platform, extending beyond these confines to glean a more nuanced picture. Without consideration of social scientific observations—such as the role of elite relationships and networks in the distribution of highest political authority—we risk ignoring the nuanced mechanisms that contribute to the formation, evolution, tensions, and attributes of the Chinese concept of sovereignty. Thus, it is through a more "interdisciplinary" and holistic lens—examining the Chinese state deeply intertwined with Confucianism as a living entity—that we approach a comprehensive understanding of what Chinese sovereignty might entail. This broader perspective incorporates a more diverse reception and interpretation of Confucian ideas and underscores the active role of the subject who engages in a dynamic act of interpretation. The ongoing totality of these interpretive acts will, over time, necessarily come to be teeming with "distortions" and "transmission gaps". Such a messy, lived process, characterized by enhanced "subjectivity", yields a treasure trove of varied interpretations—giving rise to a "big data pool" of "subjective" and "distorted"

receptions of Confucianism, which, to understand, requires more interdisciplinary investigation. Simultaneously, it necessitates envisioning Confucianism as an evolving set of ideas, institutions, practices, and perceptions—a vision deeply resonating with MacIntyre's (1984) insightful connection between the values of specific traditions and their embodiments in shared practices, histories, and institutions. Furthermore, my approach adapts the interdisciplinary institutionalist perspective to define culture as a complex of values, interests, and ideologies overlaying ontological assumptions, collective purposes, and claims to knowledge.

5. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have proposed an "interdisciplinary" exploration of Confucian political theory, envisaging Confucianism as a living entity. Interweaving evolving ideas and practices, this tapestry is underpinned by culture, institutions, and the interplay of societal actors. By integrating phenomenological hermeneutics, genealogy, and strong normative and transformative ethos, my approach could be used to encapsulate the lived experiences and subjective interpretations of both intellectual elites and common citizens across Confucian societies. In juxtaposition with Jenco's methodology, which positions Confucianism mainly as a collection of historically situated thoughts and actions, several fundamental divergences become apparent. Although I acknowledge the merits of Jenco's approach, I argue for a broader view – a view that transcends textual analysis to become aware of the pervasive impact of Confucianism across social strata and historical epochs. This methodology incorporates not only historical debates and textual data but also significant social and institutional changes, shifting power dynamics, and Confucianism's interplay with other doctrines and practices as well as its reception and transmission by elites and non-elites alike. In this broader conception, Confucianism is not confined to individual mentalities; instead, it is studied in its fuller historical reality, which permeates, shapes, and defines Chinese ethos and societal structures. The focal point for understanding Confucianism in this manner should incorporate its reception, interpretation, and embodiment within Chinese societies, rather than presenting a myopic focus on elite discourses. While these texts are an important element of my proposed process, reading them should not entail the passive absorption of information; rather, it requires an active, interpretative process of dialogue, exchange, and application. Thus, the significant role of the broader populace in shaping and transmitting Confucian ideals is acknowledged.

My "interdisciplinary" approach thus yields a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese sovereignty, emphasizing diversity in the reception and interpretation of Confucian ideas. By integrating the distortions and transmission gaps into the analysis, we capture the dynamism and subjectivity inherent in Confucian interpretation. This broad lens allows us to appreciate the potential contributions of Confucian political philosophy and its resonance with other traditions, better encapsulating Confucianism's pervasive and influential nature than Jenco's more confined scope. The methodological question of how political theorists can more effectively and productively engage with

cultural/religious traditions is not, of course, limited to Confucianism. I thus encourage further investigations into how an "interdisciplinary" approach might be applied to non-Confucian traditions, such as Hellenism or Hinduism. I believe that such an exploration would benefit political theory or political philosophy as a whole.

However, there is a possible challenge to this hybrid method and to Confucian political constructivism in general. The challenge arises from the fact that some practices in China nominally considered Confucian were not actually Confucian in reality. It can be challenging to determine which institutions are more or less "Confucian" or "important", given that Confucianism in China has undergone numerous changes throughout its history. This raises concerns that an excessively inclusive conception of Confucianism could come at the expense of its authenticity and purity.

Addressing this challenge involves differentiating between political philosophy/theory and political ideology. For example, the political theory of Marx's communism often diverged when it was put into practice due to the influence of cultural and subjective factors, resulting in political ideologies like Leninism or Maoism. Although based on Marxist thought, these derivative forms presented decidedly different characteristics. Similarly, while there can be a Confucian political philosophy based on textual analysis, its real-world implementation often morphs into a Confucian ideology that would internalize various interdisciplinary influences. The interdisciplinary approach tends to focus more on this broader, ideological aspect of Confucianism rather than the purer, scholarly conception of Confucian philosophy. It is important to recognize that a philosopher's political philosophy, in its purest form, needs not heavily factor in holistic influences during its germination. This distinction is crucial in maintaining the integrity of Confucian political philosophy while acknowledging its practical, ideological manifestations.

It is also worth noting that few political institutions and practices were strictly and narrowly guided by Confucian principles and concerns. Even the most idealistic Confucian officials had to engage with the real politics of their time and make pragmatic choices and political compromises. Nonetheless, some versions of Confucian ideas ultimately guided their behaviors and calculations. Therefore, although some political institutions and practices seemed to be shaped by non-Confucian forces, they were nevertheless inspired by Confucian doctrines or proposed and practiced by statesmen who were immersed in some Confucian teachings. The obverse is also true. Confucianism does not dominate political agency, but rather loosely transforms, checks, and inspires it. For instance, the idea that "the ruler should repay services in the form of territorial posts" traces back to both Confucian doctrines and to edicts by which the emperor appointed officials (Yin 2022). However, this does not necessarily mean that it is improper to consider reciprocity as essentially Confucian. While the idea of reciprocity may have historically emerged in all mature political communities, it is made to be "Confucian" insofar as its particular presentations and justifications, whether implicitly or explicitly, refer to Confucian principles and Confucian consciousness.

The question of whether we should adopt a more accurate, authentic, and pure conception of Confucianism or a broader one that encompasses the historical movements, power struggles, and interactions between Confucian principles, real politics, and other traditions of political thought, depends on our goals for engaging in CPT. Are we seeking to study and understand a set of texts from other cultures, or do we aim to examine how other ideas, practices, and cultures, broadly speaking, could offer something beneficial to the theory and practice of our contemporary world? If the latter is the case, I argue that a robust conception of Confucianism is better situated to capture the distinct assumptions, preferences, ethos, and pathos of Chinese perceptions and mindsets. This, in turn, can help us understand the movement and paths of Chinese civilization over time. CPT should not focus narrowly on interpreting, recovering, and understanding "pure" and "narrow" writings from non-Western societies. Indeed, this is already done in the fields of comparative literature and regional studies. Rather, it should aim to uncover a more comprehensive "whole" by embracing its inherent practical and normative nature to explore ontological, moral, and political ideas – and the distinct ethos behind them – in order to develop politically and theoretically insightful perspectives that can benefit our contemporary world.

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