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“Confucian Freedom: Practice, Morality, and Responsibility”

Abstract: Is freedom exclusively a western privilege? Is freedom present in Confucianism? This paper attempts to elaborate on freedom in Confucianism and argues that unlike Western freedom that stresses an individual’s natural rights, Confucian freedom requires one to gain freedom through gradual efforts in one’s entire life. Moreover, Confucian freedom is a layered process, which includes practice, morality, and responsibility. Practice and morality help a person achieve individual freedom, while responsibility brings communal freedom. Only when collective freedom is achieved in a Confucian society can Confucian freedom get fulfilled. Understanding Confucian freedom will help us better comprehend alternatives to western understandings of freedom.

Introduction

Freedom, a value that spawned the United States of America's birth in 1776, has significantly influenced and guided the US's development throughout its history. This concept is also deeply ingrained in American culture and political structure. Even though freedom becomes a prevalent idea because of the US's promotion worldwide, American freedom is not the only standard of freedom. On one hand, freedom is a universal value that each individual deserves to pursue. On the other, based on different understandings of freedom, people have various methods of acquiring it. Especially in China, the pattern of manifestation of freedom rooted in Confucian values is distinct from freedom rooted in western liberal values. In particular, I argue that Confucian freedom constitutes a progressive advancement, as Confucian freedom's three crucial elements— practice, morality, and responsibility—correspond to freedom at the individual, interpersonal, and communal levels. Once people internalize three elements and go through the process of each level, they will obtain Confucian freedom. In understanding this notion of freedom, it will broaden the scope of the concept of freedom and provide us more possibilities to practice freedom in the current world.

Individual Freedom and Practice

Increasing one's competence and gaining freedom are tightly connected in Confucianism. According to Confucian tradition, a person's possession of certain skills facilitates him/her to do things comfortably out of willingness, which means being free from most external constraints. The best way to acquire competence and skill is through consistent learning and practice. For example, Confucian once said: "is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application" (*Analects*, 1.1)? Here, Confucius regards learning as a delightful thing. With

constant learning, one can practice skills and knowledge in different fields, becoming stronger and competent. Then, one will liberate his/her mind with the following empowerment, as one can apply his/her skills and practice to a broad scope to live a meaningful life.

A metaphor about an archer in early Confucian literature yields valuable insights into the practicing of a certain skill or ability that brings individual freedom (Camus, 1043). As a non-contact sports, good archery skills rests on the effort of individual players. One must conduct earnest training to shoot far away and accurate. The greatest obstacle for an archer is neither a more powerful opponent nor adverse circumstances but a “self” that does not want enough, stops halfway, or is lured by ends not consonant with the Way (*Analects*, 4.6, 6.12, 7.30, 9.31). This underscores persistent learning as a part of archery, and making progress depends on one’s will power. Of course, after a person learns from instructions, he/she needs to practice the knowledge to internalize it. With a combination of the learning and practice, one can improve to reach a realm that liberates one from previous inabilities.

Mencius also acknowledged that knowledge helps a person gain freedom by saying, “commencing is a matter of wisdom, concluding is a matter of sageliness. Wisdom is like skill, sageliness is like force. Just as in shooting from a distance of a hundred paces or more, to reach the target is a matter of strength, but to hit it is not accomplished by sheer force” (Mencius, *Wanzhang*, B10). Mencius contends that wisdom is in the commencement of a pursuit and is comparable to accuracy. A wise person thus is like an archer whose gaze is fixed on a target and is strategically poised, ready to discharge arrows at opportune moments. Once an archer reaches the realm that is described above, he can shoot anything at any moment, and he can easily win the archery competition as well as gain admiration from others. In this way, his skill makes him an expert in archery. Other people have to consult him to be a better archer. Kings from different

countries will invite him to train their armies with rich rewards. His skill opens him to a broader world and allows him to gain influence and power to set the rules. This type of learning and practicing can be applied to many other activities. For example, if a scholar has a profound knowledge in a certain area, he will become an authority. He has earned the freedom to set standards or rules in the field based on his knowledge, so he is free in his scholarship; if a soldier trained himself hard so that he could shoot accurately, run fast, react instantly, and judge the situation correctly, he will be free in the battleground as he has a better chance of surviving, winning honors, and contributing to the triumph.

In addition, the Chinese philosopher Ni Peimin relates the practice of kung fu to cultivate one's overall ability. Similar to the archery example, Ni describes a great kung fu master as possessing "cultivated spontaneity" – a kind of virtuosity that is obtained after a person has practiced so well that his skills and sensibilities have internalized into his second nature (Wang, 257). We can understand this "cultivated spontaneity" as having been obtained after a long as well as consistent process of practice.

One might argue that this high skill level can be out of reach from most people because not everyone can attain this ability on the basis of limited resources and opportunities. For example, the Chinese college entrance examination is regarded by most Chinese people as an opportunity to be a steppingstone to freedom after a long time of cultivating one's knowledge. Due to the fact that the number of high-quality universities are small, a huge number of students cannot enter the good universities. This makes the exam extremely competitive, and it takes too much effort for an ordinary person to acquire the entrance ticket. As a result, some people acquire freedom, but most people cannot. Therefore, the logic behind this freedom appears to be

cruel. Particularly, these additional conditions appear to make the attainment of freedom a luxury that many people in the world actually cannot afford.

Despite the fact that only a limited number of people may obtain freedom when they have high scores on the Chinese college entrance examination, at least students have equal access to this life-changing opportunity. This equal access guarantees the possibility of gaining freedom. Confucius was an advocate for “teaching without distinction” (*Analects*, 15.39), which indicates that freedom is not designed for a small group but open to everyone in society. Whether a person can eventually increase his/her competence and gain individual freedom or not depends on this person’s individual striving. Some people cannot bear hardships and hard work to learn, so they acquire less freedom than people who learn persistently regardless of all sorts of difficulties. This notion stresses human agency and autonomy. For example, in terms of learning knowledge and practice skill, although some elites and rich people have more resources and get the best training, they still fail. Somebody who is poor but tries hard will do better and gain freedom, and it is not rare in Confucian society. Hence, different levels of individual efforts make the result different regardless of people’s background. There is a fair mechanism allowing everyone to pursue freedom behind the competitive and perhaps cruel learning process that appears on the surface.

Interpersonal Freedom and Cultivating Morality

Confucianism emphasizes harmonious human relations in society. For example, Confucius argues that all human relationships involve a set of defined roles and mutual obligations; each participant should understand and conform to his/her proper role. Starting from individual and family, people acting rightly could reform and perfect society (Berling, 6). Therefore, a Confucian conception of freedom thinks highly of the interpersonal interactions. To

have interpersonal freedom, individuals need to carefully fulfill their own duties to bring convenience to others. After all, a larger scale of freedom will be achieved when many moral beings in society are concerned, help, and get along well with others. If people can maintain good relations, they will benefit by having a more satisfactory lifestyle through perceiving that their external world is supportive. As a result, people gain freedom in their interpersonal relations by cultivating morality.

“Choosing good” (择善) is a key idea of achieving interpersonal freedom through cultivating one’s morality (Li, 909). Choosing good is an exercise of freedom because first, it is a successful application of individual autonomy that maximizes one’s wellbeing. Second, it requires one to cultivate his/her morality. Since the very beginning, Confucianism requires a person to be competent to choose through comparison. For example, Confucius says, “I learn broadly so I can choose the good and follow it” (*Analects*, 7.28). Also, choosing good people to learn from (“*bijiao*”比较) is important. As a famous Confucian saying goes, “when I walk along with two others, they may serve me as my teachers. I will select their good qualities and follow them, their bad qualities and avoid them” (*Analects*, 7.22). This shows that people can compare themselves with anyone else in their daily life to make an improvement. Confucians emphasize the importance of learning from others, particularly learning through association to motivate the individual to obtain good virtues and get rid of bad behaviors (Li, 910). In this way, one cultivates one’s morality and becomes an amiable person, well-respected by others. Thus, choosing good is to decide between more than one option and compare each of them. It requires interpersonal interactions to identify what does good mean. Cultivating one’s morality is the necessary condition to choose good successfully.

Further, choosing good can be seen as the guiding principle of freedom, since the purpose of endowing rights to a person to choose without coercion is to ensure that this person can make a choice purely out of his/her autonomy. Especially, if a person possesses the knowledge and the ability to recognize the good, it is highly likely that this person will do good actions that do not harm others and choose the right things to benefit him/herself. This Confucian notion of comparison that encourages people to take example by others is different from western notion of freedom that praises nonintervention among human interaction, but its purpose is similar to John Stuart Mill's harm principle. Confucius said, "when we see a man of virtue and talent, we should think of equaling them; when we see a man of a contrary character, we should turn inwards and examine ourselves" (*Analects*, 2.17). This urges a person to learn good from others and get rid of the bad through frequent human interactions. Then, one can become a better person as well as increase the quality and quantity of one's choices. Gradually, the person can gain more freedom in terms of choosing good among many possibilities in front of him/her. Ultimately, from the Confucian perspective, the individual who so chooses will gain liberation and empowerment as he /she will never be constrained by incapability and do not follow like sheep.

In Confucian freedom, another crucial element that shapes interpersonal dynamics and promoted a harmonious human relation is the idea of "ren" (仁). *Ren*, sometimes translated as love or kindness, is not any one virtue, but the source of all virtues. The Chinese character literally represents the relationship between "two persons," or co-humanity—the potential to live together humanely rather than fighting and quarreling like birds or beasts. *Ren* keeps ritual forms from becoming hollow. A ritual performed with *ren* has not only form, but ethical content; it nurtures the inner character of the person, furthers his/her ethical maturation. Mencius once said, "The person with *ren* is invincible" (Mencius, *Lianghuiwang*, A5), suggesting that genuine

freedom can be achieved through encouraging a person to cultivate interpersonal interaction through *ren*.

Cultivating *ren* as an indispensable method to access Confucian freedom can be seen in many areas. As Confucius mentioned, “there is nothing that gentlemen compete; if at all, it is in archery. They bow when ascending (the shooting platform) and upon descending drink (together)—such competition is truly of gentlemen” (*Analect*, 3.7). Camus argues that “these lines specifically mention saluting and sharing drink, ritual norms that evidently out competition in check and promoted camaraderie” (Camus, 1048). This passage conveys the theme that the competition between gentlemen is non-violent. Archery epitomizes a benign rivalry that does not entail inflicting injury on fellow players. So, cultivating one’s *ren* does not involve harming others. Rather, the more one cultivates oneself the more it is an advantage for others because activities like archery are the means for nourishing human relations. By internalizing *ren* as part and parcel of personal character, people will care for each other and establish friendship and trust. The more one cultivates oneself in the archery activities, the better one’s relations with others will be. This symbolizes the gallantry of archers, which has an overarching goal of *ren* because cultivating *ren* demands effort and determination analogous to that of competing athletes.

Moreover, Mencius continues that *ren* is the highest conferment by heaven and is itself a secure dwelling and he invokes the image of an archer: “the person who is *ren* is like an archer: the archer aligns himself before discharging (arrows). If he does not hit the mark, he does not resent those who outdo him but checks himself (for what needs adjusting)” (Mencius, *Gongsunchou*, A7). Mencius argues that the person who is *ren* does what an archer does through “aligning himself” and adjusts his posture in order to hit the target. In other words, a person with

ren is well disposed to correct mistakes, just like the archer who “turns toward himself” after missing the target thus highlights self-responsibility. This displays a strong sense of self, autonomy, and responsibility, which are key elements of agency and individualism in Western discourse. Yet the focus of *ren* here, in addition to long-term actuation of skill, is to cultivate one’s morality so as to act benevolently in interpersonal relations. Thus, by practicing archery, one is learning how to nourish his virtue to thrive in a given system

To conclude, *ren* encompasses one’s moral integrity. It directs one’s power to and is thus construed as the goal for human agents. *Ren* can also be the Confucian’s *Dao*(道) (doctrine) for building a harmonious society where one gets along well with others and is concerned about people other than himself. This society will be well developed both materially and spiritually under everyone’s joint efforts. Individual autonomy is also fully maximized through the practice of *ren*. As long as a person obtained *ren* and *ren*-related virtue, he will acquire an ability to follow the will of his heart without overstepping the line (Wang, 259). This higher form of freedom is what enables a cultivated personality to act in a spontaneous manner that would naturally win other people’s favor and maintain good relationships with surroundings to be free interpersonally.

Collective Freedom and Responsibility

Confucius regarded a civilized society with a stable, unified, and enduring social order, and he spent the whole life educating people to act in the way conform to such a society (Hall and Ames, 5). Despite the fact that people gain individual freedom through practicing certain skills and obtain interpersonal freedom by cultivating one’s morality, we need to keep in mind that for an ordered and harmonious society, individual freedom and interpersonal freedom are

merely the means, not the ends. The eventual success of freedom depends on whether the society as a whole will acquire freedom or not. In other words, collective freedom is the highest level of Confucian freedom that can liberate society, instead of being confined to the small group who are privileged enough to practice a skill and cultivate morality. This vision is very different from Mill's argument that individuality is the foundation of a free society and the bottom line for people's well-being (Mill, 100-110). For the sake of achieving collective freedom, the concept of responsibility is an essential ingredient.

First, Confucian freedom connects choice with responsibility. Xunzi has argued that people have sufficient control over what kind of person he/she could be and is therefore responsible for his/her character as well as his actions issuing from it. For example, Xunzi remarks: "what does it mean that even ordinary people on the street can become Yu (禹)? The answer is that Yu can become Yu is his practicing morality and norms. If ordinary people on the street devote themselves to the study of morality and norms wholeheartedly focusing their intention on it and do not cease to accumulate goodness for a long period of time, then they can be connected to spiritual intelligence and arrive at the status of the sage" (Kim, 25). Xunzi contends that what hinders one from becoming virtuous is simply one's refusal to apply one's moral capacity. Once a person makes a choice among many desires without hesitation, as well as controls his/her mind to assess the appropriateness of the situations, he/she can do the same as the ancient sage King Yu. Genuine responsibility for one's choice and action requires one to be responsible not only for how one chooses and acts but also in one's character in order to be a fully responsible moral agent (27).

Mencius once mentioned the connection between responsibility and choice by illustrating that each part of one's body has different functions. Some functions are more important than

others and deserve more attention, so “one should not harm the more important parts of oneself because of the less important parts” (*Mengzi GaoziA14*). A whole individual can become a “nobleman” (君子) or a “petty man” (小人) depending on which part of one’s body one chooses to value more and take care to develop. For example, some value delicious food and drink to satisfy their taste sense, so they are despised by others and become petty man. Others value knowledge and virtue to nurture their brains, and they are respected by others and become a nobleman (Kim 23). In the Confucian value system, people think highly of nobleman because the nobleman seeks righteousness (*yi*, 义). While people look down on petty man as petty man only sees profits (*li*, 利). In the case of a nobleman with righteousness, he/she will practice free choice with responsibility. For example, Yao Ming, a former NBA basketball player, currently the chair of the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA), manifests what is a Confucian nobleman. First, Yao had become wealthy and won fame during this NBA career. He could choose to do anything he wanted after his retirement, but he chose to become the chair of CBA and pledged to improve Chinese basketball’s competitiveness worldwide. His job was not easy. He conducted many reforms within the organization. He also had to negotiate with various interest groups to find the best solutions for each side. In September 2019, when Chinese national basketball teams lost a series of games in Olympic qualification contests and failed to obtain the seat for 2020 Olympics, many people put the blame on Yao’s bold reforms. One journalist asked Yao: “in your opinion, who should be responsible for China’s loss?” Contrary to everyone’s expectation, Yao answered simply and decisively: “Me!” Yao’s answer gained him respect (*Global Times*). He could have enjoyed his life with his previous success, and it was not necessary for him to launch so many controversial reforms. Yao’s choices did not bring him immediate victory. On the contrary, people regarded his solution a failure. Yao held the responsibility and continued

making a change. He is not practicing freedom for himself but to contribute to the whole nation's basketball progress. Yao's responsibility brings Chinese basketball freedom. For example, before Yao, fewer teenagers would treat the basketball career as the future career choice, and mainstream society did not respect professional basketball players. Also, the management of the Chinese Basketball Association had been chaotic and corrupt. Now, all these above have changed. More teenagers are playing basketball, professional basketball players are gaining a better social status, and CBA management has become more mature and successful. Chinese basketball is freer from previous constraints due to Yao's efforts.

The "petty" man will not face up the responsibility when making choice, and David Cameron's Brexit vote in 2016 is an example of such choice. Being the former head of the Conservative Party and former prime minister, David Cameron had the freedom of making a choice of whether to exercise a Brexit referendum or not. He chose to have a referendum as he thought people would vote for staying. When the outcome was not what he preferred and Brexit was unavoidable, David Cameron resigned immediately, leaving a mess for future leaders (O'Brien, 1). Apparently, David Cameron did not hold the responsibility of his freedom. A free choice without responsibility tends to generate chaos and undesirable results.

Nobleman and petty man's contrast illustrate that responsibility plays a crucial role in determining the consequences of free choice. John Stuart Mill's argument that "the actions of individual should only be limited to prevent harm to other individuals" is compatible with Confucian's idea that responsibility conditions one to make the most beneficial choice not only to his/herself but to society. Thus, I argue that Confucian freedom that stresses the relation between choice and responsibility can be seen as the Confucian version of Mill's "harm principle."

When a person is responsible in reshaping his character and controlling his desire mentioned by Xunzi and holds his responsibility in choosing to benefit others suggested by Mencius, he contributes to a higher form of freedom. Ni describes this higher form of freedom as the “freedom of needing no choice,” which enables a cultivated personality to act in a spontaneous manner that would agree naturally with social coordination norms (Wang, 259). For example, Yue Fei, the ancient heroic figure, encountered the moral dilemma of fighting for his country or staying at home to take care of his elderly mother. The resolution of his moral dilemma was obtained when his mother, inspired by her own devotion to her country, tattooed four Chinese characters on Yue’s back as she urged him “to exert absolute loyalty and repay your country” (精忠报国). As Ni argues, the understanding of a person’s freedom should not be separated from the context of the community to which the person belongs—as no one is an isolated individual. Yue Fei finally devoted his whole life to defending his country, sacrificing himself to free the entire nation from being conquered and enslaved.

Yao Ming and Yue Fei’s examples are examples of exercising freedom with responsibility in both modern-day China and ancient China. Both of them excelled in their field and maintained good interpersonal relations with others. Yao is well-known for making friends in both the US and China. Yue is documented as a Confucian sage who possessed a high quality of *ren*, loyalty (*zhong* 忠), and filial piety (*xiao*, 孝). After achieving individual freedom and cultivate their morality, inspired by their sense of responsibility, both of them gave up their personal enjoyment, dedicating themselves to defending national interests. Their choices reflect the connection between responsibility and collective freedom: individuals who gain freedom

with their practice and morality will devote themselves into the achievement of other people's freedom, which is the ultimate pursuit of Confucian believers.

Of course, people may argue that responsibility is merely for elites since they are the only group of people capable of applying it. In response Carl M. Johnson contends that both elites who gain individual freedom and interpersonal freedom and the mass who are still on the way of acquiring freedom both share responsibilities to ensure the freedom of each other. For example, by instilling in the majority a sense of responsibility for the preservation of those rights through virtue (*de* 德) and ritual (*li* 礼), Confucianism creates a guarantee of rights for the minority.

From the elite's side, responsibility to the masses is encouraged by promoting responsiveness to the fulfillment of the needs of the less privileged. From the masses' side, their own responsibility grows the more they aspire to *ren* and attain mutual regard through the exhortative example of exemplary persons. Finally, the critical consideration is that rule through *ren* at its best can non-coercively lead people to cultivate a good human nature. In this way, every group in society gets along with one another. Together, they obtained freedom because their potentials are maximized, their dignities are respected, and their rights are protected under Confucianism (Johnson, 60–62).

In sum, responsibility connects free elites and unfree ordinary people under Confucianism. Thanks to the responsibility from all sides, collective freedom secures everyone in society to maximize his/her interests. This condition is also compatible with the phrase “the togetherness of man and heaven” (*tianrenheyi* 天人合一), which has been construed to mean that personal, societal, political, and cosmic order are coterminous and mutually entailing, and that, from the human perspective, this order is emergent in the process of one's own self-cultivation.

When the order of “the togetherness” is achieved, in the Chinese sense, it also means the ultimate freedom is realized because it maximizes collective good so that the majority in society is safe, easy, and free to choose among desires and not interfere with others (Hall and Ames, 1–20). For example, in the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, social order was maintained, and everyone in society followed quarantine rule with self-discipline. As a result, China contained the pandemic in a few months, and Chinese people as a whole were free for mobility and economic activities. Thus, with selective sacrifice of individuality and personal rights to embrace communal responsibility, people in China achieved a kind of freedom that western countries struggled to provide in the pandemic because of western understandings of individual freedom.

Furthermore, since responsibility is not a common concept associated with freedom in the West, it might be meaningfully compared with the core of western freedom— individual rights. Lee argues that “we live in a rights-infatuated time” that people always claim their rights but not mention obligations (Lee, 367). Lee’s concern is that people may bring about the danger of “a right to do wrong” when asserting one’s right in some inappropriate circumstances under a rights-centered mindset. By contrast, Confucianism regards rightful claims or self-assertion as inimical to maintaining social harmony and advocates for developing one’s virtue to make people caring and benevolent. Once everyone in the community has good virtues of thinking about others and overcoming one’s internal constraints – that is, lower desires or first-order desires—there will be a genuine sense of freedom. This type of freedom is derived from the qualities necessary for one’s successful contribution to the good that is common to all community members. In such a virtuous community, chronic alcoholics and drug addicts are diminished because of their weakness of will, internal constraints, and conflicting desires. After all, in Confucian freedom, an individual with desires in sharp conflict with moral values is not

free even when open options are guaranteed. Whereas in Western freedom, feeding one's desires is the embodiment of ensuring individual rights under the notion of nonintervention. By maximizing one's desires and getting rid of conformity, westerners believe that their freedoms are also fulfilled.

Conclusion

All in all, freedom under Confucianism is different from most people's perception of universal freedom under Western liberalism. For Confucians, freedom is not a natural right that everyone owns immediately when he/she is born. To gain freedom requires a person's individual striving. Through learning and practicing a skill, one can achieve individual freedom. Then by cultivating one's morality, one will possess the ability to choose good and behave in a way that renders one to maintain good interpersonal relations with others to live a comfortable life. The most essential part of Confucian freedom is its association with responsibility. Only when a person's practice of skill and cultivation of morality ultimately promote the achievement of freedom of a large group without coercion can this person acquire genuine freedom, and one cannot do so without one's responsibility to others, to society, and to the world.

Confucian freedom can be applied to supplement the drawbacks of western freedom. Take the US as an example. First, the US claims that people can freely choose religions, nationalities, sex, profession, and residence. However, it is not completely true. For example, blue-collar workers cannot change their jobs to lawyers or scholars freely; poor people cannot move to rich neighborhoods; LGBTQA groups still face significant pressure from society and stereotypes; many discriminatory rules constrain non-citizens in the US, etc. In substance, in the US, to gain freedom, the individual capability and external limitations still matter, which is

different from western media's publicity that freedom is always within reach simply because it is derived from people's unalienable natural rights.

Moreover, the concept of freedom was a powerful weapon that the West adopted to confront the Soviet Union's Communist regime during the Cold War. The West flaunted more individual freedom than the Soviet Union to be its political systems' advantages. The collapse of the Soviet Union contributed to the common belief that western freedom indeed matters (Iber). However, western conceptions of freedom faces some challenges from the rise of China. China today is very different from the Soviet Union, and Confucian freedom allows Chinese people to exercise autonomy that appears to be a viable alternative to that in the West.

Additionally, the Second Amendment of the US Constitution guarantees the right of the people to keep and bear arms. However, there are countless deaths and injuries resulted from gun shootings nationwide every year. People's freedom is threatened due to widespread insecurities (Stevens and Paul). Ironically, under the name of protecting a "free state," the second amendment infringes people's right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. By contrast, due to the Chinese government's efforts to protect collective interests and freedom, China becomes one of the safest places in the world. People in China can go to any place at any time, and the crime rate there is much lower than the crime rate in the US (NationMaster). The contrast here reflects an irony for the term "free state" as understood by the US.

Of course, Confucian freedom has shortcomings, too. In terms of practice, if a person wants to go through all three levels of freedom, he/she has to spend a vast amount of time cultivating him/herself. Unfortunately, not everyone can be privileged enough to concentrate on such a process. People may have to make a living by doing other work but are unable to improve themselves from those works. Besides, Confucian freedom can be achieved extensively only

when everyone has equal access and the same condition to improve him/herself. However, throughout Chinese history, many people could never approach all three levels of freedom due to the lack of access. This may explain in part as to why Daoism and Buddhism became popular in ancient China because they provided alternative freedoms for people who could not obtain freedom by following Confucian doctrines. Lastly, collective freedom may lead to oppression. The Chinese writer, Lu Xun, sharply criticized the prevalent oppression in Chinese society in the 20th century. These oppressions happened due to people's rigid obedience to the Confucian code of ethics. Women, political dissenters, religious groups, and the poor are usually the ones who were sacrificed for achieving collective freedom. Also, during the Great Leap Forward movement in the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, the majority's oppression toward the minority caused many tragedies in the name of collective interests (Hall and Ames, 10). At present, Chinese government's determined suppression of political dissenters from Hong Kong in 2019 and the containment of the development of religious extremists of Uighurs in Xinjiang also reflects that small groups must abide by the rules of large groups in order to achieve collective freedom.

Despite shortcomings in the Confucian sense of freedom, understanding it provides an additional tool to help us cope with the challenges in today's world. For instance, unlike what Western colonists did in past few centuries, people can neither find an empty new land with ample resources then migrant there nor loot other countries to enrich themselves. Instead, people have to enhance their capacity to fully utilize the existing land and resources. Western freedom encourages people to go to the streets to claim their natural rights. Even though it indeed boosts people's dignity and pride, it rarely brings feasible plans to increase people's living standard. While Chinese people also take to the streets to protest, Confucian freedom motivates individuals

to develop their internal capabilities and maximize one's potentials to bring concrete changes to the community. In this way, it allows us to improve the overall productivity and distribute resources more efficiently. Therefore, acknowledging and practicing Confucian freedom can bring many benefits. Before we claim our liberty as an unalienable right, we had better focus on improving ourselves and creating the foundations to support this right, promoting not only the individual freedom, but also exercise that freedom responsibly within a community and thus also engendering a collective freedom. As a result, freedom is first a concept to prevent one from being a victim of arbitrary power, and then an idea to provide all human beings the capability to make a change and possibility of living in a safe, friendly, and harmonious society.

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