

RVP International Seminar 2026

*Self, Solidarity, and Civility**

Meeting Information

- **Date:** September 11, 2026
- **Meeting Type:** Academic Seminar (Session 12 of 5-week series)
- **Topic:** 25th Anniversary of 9/11 and the work *Theorizing Confucian Virtue Politics*, by Sungmoon Kim.
- **Facilitator/Host:** João J. Vila-Chã, SJ
- **Participants:** João (Portugal/Washington DC), Lidia (Poland/Washington DC), Zhao Xin (China/Washington DC), Mohan (India), Dian (Indonesia), Maduabuchi Frank (Nigeria), Nubong (Cameroon), Michał (Poland/Washington DC), Ravi Vincent (India), Hu Yeping (Washington DC), Franklin (Peru), Shiva (Sri Lanka), Oleksandr (Ukraine), Adrienne Black (Washington DC).

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Key Outcomes

The session opened with a global news roundup and extended commemoration of the 25th anniversary of September 11, 2001, drawing personal reflections from participants across Nigeria, Ukraine, China, Poland, Cameroon, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and India. The second half pivoted to three structured presentations on Sungmoon Kim's *Theorizing Confucian Virtue Politics: The Political Philosophy of Mencius and Xunzi* (2019), covering progressive Confucianism, virtue/ritual constitutionalism, and the moral vs. civic virtue distinction. Discussion converged on the universal tension between institutional design and moral cultivation as foundations for legitimate governance. The seminar will continue on Monday with four new presentations, completing the Kim book and potentially incorporating his 2023 constitutionalism volume.

9/11 Commemoration: Personal Reflections and Global Impact

- **Oleksandr (Ukraine):** Watched the attacks on television in Kyiv; recalled the vivid, “terrible pictures” of planes striking the towers and the screams of bystanders.
- **Xin (China, age 5 in 2001):** Memory formed not in real time but through years of annual retrospectives; recalls “big fire, planes, and dark smoking ruins.”

* Document elaborated with the Assistance of AI under the Supervision of Prof. João J. Vila-Chã. Before being distributed, the document was submitted to the revision/approval of the Participants in the Seminar.

- **Lidia (Poland):** Framed 9/11 as a generational rupture — the moment the international order “taken for granted” revealed its fragility; drew direct parallel to Russia’s war on Ukraine as a second rupture for Central Europe.
- **Nubong (Cameroon, ~age 8):** Remembered watching George W. Bush address the nation; noted that the Pentagon was also targeted but the attack failed; emphasized the event as a moment of global solidarity.
- **Michał:** Highlighted the Dunkirk-like spontaneous maritime evacuation of Manhattan — thousands of private boats converging without coordination to evacuate civilians across the Hudson River — as a landmark expression of solidarity.
- **Shiva (Sri Lanka):** Described how the post-9/11 global “war on terror” framework led to the LTTE (Tamil freedom fighters/terrorists) being internationally banned, accelerating the end of Sri Lanka’s 30-year civil war.
- **Dian (Indonesia):** Recalled sitting with her American business partner on 9/11; noted that despite global tension, their relationship remained grounded in mutual trust, and they proceeded to a furniture exhibition in Jakarta months later.
- **Ravi Vincent (India):** Was a postgraduate student; recalled Dr. Billy Graham’s address to the nation emphasizing human fragility and the need to turn to God; underscored that “human lives are very precious” and war is not the answer.
- **Adrienne:** Offered a forward-looking counterpoint, sharing news of NASA’s lunar economy initiative — moon base plans by 2027, helium-3 mining (valued at **\$20 million per kilogram**) for quantum computing, and drone delivery to the South Pole — inviting the group to balance retrospection with future-oriented thinking.

João’s Extended Reflection on 9/11

- Described hearing the news while waiting for a medical appointment; initially assumed it was a small plane; immediate thought: **“The world is collapsing!”**
- Characterized 9/11 as “a defining moment in the history of the 21st century” and expressed concern that 25 years on, many people — especially in New York — are beginning to treat it as if it “did not exist.”
- Troubled by reports that the New York mayor honored a defender of the terrorists on the anniversary, and that the U.S. president spoke more about himself than the nation.
- Drew explicit parallel between 9/11 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (February 24, 2022) as the two events he will “never forget” — both characterized as acts of terrorism.
- Condemned the Palestinian celebrations of both 9/11 and October 7, 2023, as “the most atrocious part.”
- Cited **Pope Benedict XVI’s Regensburg speech (September 12, 2006)** as one of the great intellectual responses to 9/11 — a diagnosis of the danger of any ideology that justifies violence in God’s name.

- Noted the enduring security costs of 9/11: airport body scanning, surveillance cameras, trillions spent on security globally that “should go to relieve famine and cure illnesses.”
- Condemned the use of children as instruments of militarization — citing an image of Russian schoolchildren armed with Kalashnikovs — as a form of abuse equivalent to what happens in Gaza and other conflict zones.
- Visited the 9/11 Memorial shortly before the seminar; described the twin reflecting pools as “a representation of the depth of the problem”, that is, in Gabriel Marcel’s terms, the violence «of man against man» as the culmination of “dishumanity”.
- Closed with the observation that the **77 nationalities** killed on 9/11 are all represented at the memorial, underscoring that it was not an attack on America alone.
- Key thesis: “**Evil, absolute evil, must be absolutely condemned**” — applied equally to 9/11, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and Hamas’s October 7 attack, etc.

Thematic Threads from Participant Discussion

Fear, Democracy, and Political Manipulation

- **Lidia** introduced Martha Nussbaum’s *Monarchy of Fear* as a lens: fear is a complex emotion with deep political valence; democratic societies risk accepting “exclusion, restrictions on freedom, and simplified us-vs-them divisions” when politicians weaponize fear.
- Argued that September 11 marks “the end of the time when everything was certain” and that the core democratic challenge is responding to fear without sacrificing democratic values.

Clash of Civilizations and Democratic Models

- **Yeping** offered three philosophical frames: (1) Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* remains relevant and has intensified intra-civilizationally; (2) the singular American democratic model has shown cracks, opening space for alternatives like **Confucian democracy**; (3) Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis is demonstrably refuted — “history is still going on.”
- Noted Habermas and Rosa as critics of liberal democracy’s internal paradoxes, and the uses of “soft authoritarianism” as alternative democratic paradigm.

Terrorism, Intelligence, and Values

- João argued that terrorists are not unintelligent — citing the Hamburg-educated lead pilot Mohammed Atta — but that they “have intelligence without authentic values” and lack self-knowledge.
- The problem is not solvable by surveillance technology alone; requires “transformation of the human heart.”

Presentation 1 — Progressive Confucianism and Seung Moon Kim (Xin Zhao)

Big Picture: Progressive Confucianism

- Term coined by **Stephen C. Angle** (Wesleyan University) in his 2012 book *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy*; Chinese: 进步儒学.
- Goal: moral progress for individuals **and** society simultaneously — no fixed endpoint, open-ended process.
- **Double structure**: inner moral cultivation (inner sage) + good political order (outer king) — neither works alone; they are mutually dependent.
- Boundary condition: a modern Confucian scholar who accepts gender oppression or denies political participation rights **does not qualify** as a progressive Confucian.

Two Camps within Progressive Confucianism

- **Confucian Meritocrats** (Tongdong Bai (白彤东), Daniel A. Bell): support political inequality justified by *benevolent rule*; authority legitimized by how well it serves the people's well-being, not by equal voting.
- **Confucian Democrats** (Sor-hoon Tan, Stephen C. Angle, Sungmoon Kim): support political equality, one-person-one-vote, broad participation; democracy has intrinsic value, not merely instrumental.

What Makes Kim Distinctive

- **Most complete defense of equality** among Confucian Democrats — addresses pluralism, public reason, perfectionism, and distributive justice simultaneously.
- **Engages opponents' own texts directly**: takes on Xunzi — the text meritocrats use to defend hierarchy — and argues it actually supports equality.
- **Unified research program** across five books (2014–2023): Confucian Democracy → Public Reason Confucianism → Pragmatic Confucian Democracy → Virtue Politics → Confucian Constitutionalism.

Chapter 1 Core Argument: Positive vs. Negative Confucianism

- **The Puzzle**: When King Hui of Liang asks Mencius how he might profit his state, Mencius replies: “Why must Your Majesty speak of profit? Let there simply be benevolence and righteousness [*ren* and *yi*].” (*Mengzi* 1A1). Mencius warns that, if the ruler makes profit the governing aim, officials and commoners alike will pursue their own advantage, and the state will be endangered. Although Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism, especially Zhu Xi, strongly affirmed the priority of righteousness over profit, it did not necessarily interpret the passage as a total rejection of material interest. Zhu Xi's commentary holds instead that one who acts from benevolence and righteousness does not seek profit as an ultimate end, yet will not fail to bring about genuine benefit.
- **Kim's challenge**: Two internal contradictions in the orthodox reading: (1) Mencius's own central ideal — *benevolent government* — is entirely about improving people's material and moral well-being, which contradicts suppressing all desire for interest; (2) the orthodox reading never clarified *whose* interest must be suppressed — the people's, the ruler's, or both.

- **Kim's thesis:** Both Mencius and Xunzi held a **flexible, reconstructive** view of interest — not suppression but **redirection** in service of benevolent government.
- **Negative Confucianism:** A Mencian strand of Confucian political thought that seeks to restrain the ruler's private interests and arbitrary exercise of power, rather than merely enabling the ruler's moral and political agency. Its constraining orientation was later expressed in practices of remonstrance and criticism by Confucian scholar-officials.
- **Positive Confucianism:** Enables and authorizes the ruler's legitimate exercise of power for public purposes, through political institutions, ritual order, civic support, and the cultivation of virtue; it emphasizes that effective and legitimate rule cannot depend on the ruler's personal moral perfection alone. This enabling dimension was often overshadowed by orthodox readings that stressed the ruler's moral self-cultivation and the restraint of private interest.
- **Mencius's answer: moral extension (*tui*).** Familial affection and compassion are cultivated and extended outward to the people: the king learns to transform his concern for those near to him into benevolent government for all. This is not a zero-sum transfer of concern, nor the fulfilment of an abstract and strictly impartial duty, but a process of moral growth in which partial attachments become the basis for broader public responsibility.
- **Xunzi's answer: ritual (*li*).** Ritual regulates and gives proper form to human desires, while law, rewards, and punishments help enforce public order; it assigns differentiated social roles and distributive claims; it constrains the ruler by subordinating private interest to public purposes; and, through repeated practice and patterned beauty (*wen*), it cultivates durable, non-instrumental attachment to ritual order.
- **Convergence:** Despite their sharply different accounts of human nature—Mencius holds that human nature contains innate moral “sprouts,” whereas Xunzi argues that it is bad or ethically unformed and must be shaped through deliberate effort and ritual—both develop positive Confucianism. Each seeks to transform narrowly private interest into public-minded concern and to enable political power to secure the people's common welfare.

Zhao Xin's Critical Observations

- **Methodological concern:** Kim's reconstructive approach can sometimes give decisive weight to isolated passages or conceptual contrasts in classical texts without fully situating them in their broader textual, historical, and commentarial contexts. This creates a risk of attributing to later thinkers—especially Zhu Xi—positions that are more systematic, uniform, or oppositional than their writings warrant.
- **Conceptual caution:** Kim's negative/positive constitutionalism is a productive reconstructive lens, but it should not be treated as a native classical Chinese distinction. It may privilege modern assumptions about state power, institutional authorization, and constitutional constraint over the relational and ethical grammar of Confucian politics: ruler–minister reciprocity, *minben* (“the people as the root”), ritual hierarchy, remonstrance, and moral cultivation.
- **Historical qualification:** The claim of convergence between Mencius and Xunzi risks understating the long Song–Ming marginalization of Xunzi within Cheng–Zhu Neo-

Confucian orthodoxy. From the Southern Song through the Ming, Mencius was elevated as the authoritative Confucian interpreter of human nature, whereas Xunzi was increasingly treated as heterodox because of his doctrine that human nature is bad and because of his perceived affinity with Legalist thought. His text was excluded from the core canonical curriculum, and he was removed from the Confucian Temple during the Ming, even though his ideas continued to exert indirect influence and some scholars continued to defend him.

Presentation 2 — Virtue and Ritual Constitutionalism (Lidia)

Kim's Constitutionalism Framework

- Kim does **not** claim classical Confucianism had written constitutions, judicial review, or individual rights; instead asks whether it contains **norms and institutions that organize power, legitimize it, and limit arbitrary rule.**
- Negative + positive Confucianism work together: power is both enabled and constrained — challenges the reductive view of Confucian politics as purely “rule by man.”

The Abdication Problem as Philosophical Test

- The Yao–Shun–Yu narratives—according to which the throne passed from Yao to Shun and from Shun to Yu on the basis of exceptional worth rather than biological inheritance—serve as Kim's test case for the source of legitimate political authority: is it grounded in the sage-ruler's moral judgment, Heaven's mandate, or the people's acceptance?
- **Core tension:** Political virtue is personal rather than heritable. Hereditary succession secures continuity of office and dynastic order, but cannot guarantee continuity of moral excellence; abdication privileges exceptional virtue, but raises a problem of authorization: who may identify the worthy successor, and what validates the transfer of power? In the Mencian account, the ruler may recommend a candidate, but Heaven authorizes the succession through the people's acceptance.
- **Mencius: virtue constitutionalism (*dezhi*).** The Mandate of Heaven is connected to the people's acceptance of a ruler, but the relationship remains interpretively contested: does popular acceptance constitute legitimacy, or does it disclose a prior legitimacy granted by Heaven? Mencius's language more readily supports the latter view—Heaven does not speak directly, but makes its will manifest through the people's response.
- The people matter decisively in moral and political terms: their welfare is the end of benevolent government, and their acceptance is an indispensable sign of legitimate rule. Yet they do not occupy the same constitutional role as rulers, feudal lords, and hereditary noble ministers, who are the principal actors in deliberation, remonstrance, and succession. Mencius's model is therefore better described as an **elite-mediated** rather than a popular or democratic form of constitutionalism.
- **Conservative accommodation:** Mencius does not reject hereditary monarchy. He seeks to preserve both the priority of virtue and the continuity of royal office, treating abdication as an exceptional mode of succession rather than a general alternative to dynastic rule. This produces a tension: when hereditary office is ordinarily accepted as legitimate, possession

of office can come to function as a presumptive—though not conclusive—sign of political worthiness.

- **Xunzi: ritual constitutionalism (*lizhi*).** Xunzi rejects abdication understood as the incumbent ruler's personal transfer of the Son of Heaven's authority to a chosen worthy successor. He thereby protects the unity and continuity of supreme political authority, shifting the emphasis from exceptional individuals to the enduring structure of ritual order, offices, norms, and institutions.
- **Wuwei (non-forcing or effortless rule):** For Xunzi, a ruler may govern with less direct intervention when political institutions do more of the governing work. *Fa*—here better translated as institutional models, standards, or laws—preserves and transmits political order across generations: rulers die, but the normative model of rule can endure. Ritual, law, offices, and administrative differentiation allow authority to become regularized rather than dependent on the ruler's exceptional personal virtue.
- **Tyranny and continuity:** Removing or replacing a tyrannical ruler need not destroy political order; it can restore it. The office and ritual-political order are more enduring than any individual officeholder, whose authority is conditional upon governing in accordance with public norms.
- **People and political agency:** Xunzi's metaphor is famous: "The ruler is the boat; the people are the water. Water can carry the boat, but it can also overturn it." The people possess real political agency because their support sustains rule and their withdrawal can bring it down. But this is not democracy or a constitutionally defined popular right of revolution: it is a warning that political authority depends upon the people's welfare, social order, and acquiescence.
- **Comparison with Western Constitutionalism**

Modern Western constitutionalism: often begins from the problem of power's abuse. It seeks to limit and regularize public authority through impersonal law, rights, procedures, divided or checked institutions, and standards capable of surviving the accession of bad rulers.

 - **Classical Confucian political thought:** begins from a partly different problem: how can political power be morally cultivated, ordered, and institutionally guided so that it can secure good government and the people's welfare? The central vocabulary is not primarily individual rights or separated powers, but virtue, ritual, remonstrance, public-minded rule, and the relation between ruler, ministers, and people.
 - **Shared problem, different idioms:** both traditions confront the danger of making political order wholly dependent on the personal character of whoever happens to rule. Yet they respond through different moral and institutional languages: modern constitutionalism emphasizes legal limitation, rights, and institutional checks; Mencian and Xunzian thought emphasizes, in differing ways, virtue, ritual order, ministerial remonstrance, popular welfare, and the conditional legitimacy of rulers.

- **Conclusion:** Neither Mencius nor Xunzi should be read as an early advocate of modern constitutional democracy. Their political world remains hierarchical, monarchical, and non-democratic, even where it contains resources for criticising arbitrary power and for holding rulers answerable to moral and public standards.

Presentation 3 — Moral Virtue vs. Civic Virtue: Li Before and After Ritual (Wang En)

Li (Ritual Propriety): Two Meanings

- **Moral virtue:** a cultivated and relatively stable disposition to respond appropriately to others through respect, care, self-restraint, trustworthiness, and role-sensitive responsibility.
- **Political institution:** a durable set of social and political norms, roles, practices, and offices that organizes authority, coordinates collective action, regulates relationships, and sustains public order and common welfare.

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Mencius: Pre-Ritual Moral Capacity

- **Mencius: innate moral capacities and ritual expression.** Human beings possess incipient moral dispositions—compassion or care, shame, deference or respect, and moral approval and disapproval—prior to their full ritual articulation. Ritual does not create these capacities ex nihilo; it cultivates, shapes, and gives them fitting, stable, and socially intelligible expression.
- **Burial illustration:** Mencius recounts that, in high antiquity, people who had left their parents' bodies unburied were overwhelmed with horror when they later saw them exposed and consumed by animals and insects. They covered the bodies not from fear of public opinion but because their inner moral feeling broke through in bodily distress. Proper burial thus gives ritual form to an already-present disposition of reverence and filial concern; it is not merely an externally imposed convention.
- **Political implication:** Civil or political virtue depends upon moral cultivation, but moral cultivation requires material and social conditions that allow it to develop. Good government must therefore secure the people's livelihood, protect them from conditions of desperation, and create the circumstances in which they can cultivate and express their humanity.

Xunzi: Pre-Ritual Disorder

- **Xunzi: pre-ritual disorder.** Human beings are born with desires. Where the pursuit of desire lacks measure, limits, and distributive boundaries, it generates competition; competition produces contention, contention disorder, and disorder poverty and insecurity.
- **Ritual as political achievement.** *Li* is not the spontaneous expression of an already-awakened moral heart. It is the deliberate achievement of the sage-kings: it establishes distinctions, allocates goods and roles, regulates the pursuit of desire, and makes stable

cooperation possible. Ritual does not suppress desire absolutely; it gives desire appropriate limits and socially sustainable channels of satisfaction.

- **From civic discipline to moral formation.** At first, ritual functions as a public and civic discipline: it coordinates conduct, restrains conflict, and makes social life possible even among persons who lack settled virtue. Through education, habituation, and repeated participation, however, ritual can reshape dispositions, emotions, and judgement, becoming internalized as moral character rather than remaining merely instrumental compliance.
- **Stability as an ongoing achievement.** Even in a well-ordered state, anger, envy, resentment, and competition remain possible. Ritual is therefore not a one-time founding act, but an enduring practice of regulation and cultivation: it converts recurrent sources of conflict into governed relationships, sustaining order without assuming that desire or disagreement will disappear.

Wang En's Critical Question

- In pre-Qing Confucianism, the concept of **Tian (Heaven)** was a crucial moral regulator — people's inner desire was checked by fear of heaven.
- In the modern information-transparent era, where everyone can see what others are doing and accumulating, the question arises: **can Confucian ritual still regulate desire without the metaphysical anchor of heaven?**

Open Discussion: Key Themes and Questions

Universality of the Virtue-Institution Tension

- **Franklin:** The Mencius/Xunzi debate maps directly onto Adam Smith's two books — *Wealth of Nations* (self-interest) and *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (sympathy/benevolence) — a tension Western political economy has never fully resolved.
- PISA results showing declining reading and analytical capacity in new generations suggest educational systems are not prioritizing moral formation alongside cognitive skills.
- Risk: the noble cause of economic development through technology can unconsciously drive the acceleration pathologies Rosa identified. 6567

Confucianism in Contemporary China

- **Xin:** Confucianism is not the government ideology (Marxism is), but remains a **cultural background** shaping daily life — filial piety, benevolence, social conventions — even if government values diverge.
- Many Chinese scholars are actively working to **modernize Confucianism** — combining it with freedom, democracy, human rights, dignity, and justice.
- **Wang En:** After the May 4th Movement (1915) and Marxist revolution, Confucianism was attacked as "a culture of eating people" (Lu Xun); post-Deng Xiaoping open policy created a desire-driven society without constructive philosophical grounding.

- Renewal must begin at the individual level — cultivating the heart, respecting others, caring for family — before societal change is possible.

Is Confucian Constitutionalism Democratic?

- **Lidia:** These theories cannot be recognized as democratic in the modern Western sense — no popular sovereignty, no universal political participation, no right to elect and dismiss rulers; the people are not an autonomous political subject.
- However, even authoritarian systems need popular support and develop propaganda to secure it — the difference lies in the **tools available to defend people** under democracy vs. tyranny.
- **Yeping:** Democracy must be understood as a **way of life**, not merely a political mechanism. She referred **Tu Weiming:** Confucian humanism can contribute to democratic modernity through a culturally distinctive path, one that joins moral self-cultivation, family and civic responsibility, education, and public-minded government. He points to the modern transformations and economic dynamism of Japan and the East Asian “mini-dragons”— including Singapore—as evidence that Confucian traditions can be resources for modernization. But economic success and Confucian cultural influence do not, by themselves, establish the presence of democracy; Singapore in particular has often been characterized as a soft-authoritarian or electorally managed polity.
- **Nubong:** Kim’s project is a call to **rethink politics as moral cultivation** — governance as a moral enterprise, not a mechanical process; raises four questions: (1) How do we create politics that is truly moral and transformative? (2) How do we build institutions that sustain virtue without siphoning freedom? (3) How do we nurture leaders who embody integrity? (4) How does Confucian virtue politics accommodate diversity of values and beliefs?

Mohan’s Challenge: Confucianism vs. Current Chinese Reality

- **Mohan:** Drew parallel between Kim’s one-person-one-vote argument and Ambedkar’s constitutional formula of “**one person, one vote, one value**” — noting Ambedkar may have borrowed from Confucianism while adding the equality of worth.
- Challenged whether Confucianism has any relevance in a China with no democracy, restricted human rights, and no freedom of movement — suggesting the current government has “thrown out Confucianism.”
- Found Confucian political philosophy “beautiful” and close to both Buddhism and Ambedkar’s philosophy.

Ravi Vincent: Innate vs. Acquired Goodness

- The Mencius/Xunzi debate (innate moral disposition vs. spontaneous impulses requiring discipline) mirrors a long-standing cross-disciplinary debate on whether goodness is innate or acquired.
- Contrasted with Transcendentalism, which believes institutions have spoiled society — while Mencius believed in innate goodness.
- Requested an English translation of the **Analects of Confucius** for further study.

Plan of Action for the 13th Session of the Seminar (14/09)

For Monday, we shall read and then discuss Part II (pp. 117-217) of Kim, Sungmoon. *Theorizing Confucian Virtue Politics: The Political Philosophy of Mencius and Xunzi*. Cambridge, United Kingdom ; Cambridge University Press, 2020. The Presentations are divided as follows:

pp. 117-146: Shiva

pp. 147-177: Oleksandr

pp. 178-217: Ravi Vincent.

A Fourth Presentation, by Franklin, shall deal with a careful reading of the pages [1-56](#) of Zhao, Tingyang. *All Under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order*. With Joseph E. Harroff and Odd Arne Westad. Great Transformations 3. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2021.

Appendix

Regarding the initial discussion in today's Session on the meaning and implications of 9/11, I share with you a short, meditative Video of my recent visit to the Memorial to the Victims of the Terrorist Act of 25 years ago, [here](#) (1 min.).

I also offer to your consideration and critical visualization, a documentary which I idealized for the State Television of Portugal in 2013, [here](#) (ca. 39 min.)

It would be great if during the Weekend you could find extra time to visualize these elements, even if in these two cases no one is obligated to do so.