

Editorial

The Individual and the Collective: From the Confucian Perspective

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Human existence as an autonomous individual or an interdependent member of a community is not an exclusive choice. However, in different periods of time, both past and present, and in different societies, both open and closed, there often exist opposition and conflict between these two modes of existence. For example, communitarianism resists what it perceives to be atomic individualism, while liberalism resists what it views to be monopolizing collectivism. Yet, the exploration and pursuit of the synergy and harmonious development of these two modes have always been among the goals of ethics and religious studies.

What ideas, theories, and wisdom does Confucianism provide regarding how individuals can exist independently and as members of a community? In modern China, Confucianism is often seen as a collectivist ideology suppressing individuality, advocating human inequality, or being ethically inadequate in dealing with a society of strangers. However, it is also defended as a set of values that opposes political power via the virtues of intellectuals and Confucians, affirms individual dignity and personal independence, and advocates for the equality of all humanity. These divergent perspectives prompt us to continue interrogating the following enquiry: What is the true nature of Confucianism in the relationship between the individual and the collective?

Confucianism, as an ancient and enduring school of thought, is both an ideological system in Chinese history and the value beliefs and faith of Confucians. It has a dual and complex relationship with political power. Being instrumentalized in the real world, it justifies autocratic rule and is an ideal from the perspective of Confucians that can be used to criticize the irrationality of reality and establish Confucians' personal pursuits. Yet, at the level of ideas and value beliefs, Confucianism seeks synergy between the individual and the collective, viewing self-cultivation and improvement, as well as participation in public affairs and the establishment of a good order, as different aspects of an individual's holistic mission. Apart from the Confucian advocacy of human inequality during the Han and Tang dynasties, the human nature theories of Confucianism in the pre-Qin, Song, and Ming dynasties emphasized human equality overall. Confucian ethics of benevolence 仁, sincerity 诚, justice 义, and beliefs in self fulfillment 成己 as well as the fulfillment of things 成物 are universally applicable and effective for living a good individual and collective life. Confucianism is suitable for both traditional societies of acquaintances and modern societies of stranger. Scholars such as Frederick W. Mote, Tu Weiming, and Roger T. Ames have provided different perspectives and arguments on these issues.

Scholars and researchers participating in this Special Issue have explored Confucian concepts, theories, and thoughts on the relationship between individuals and the collective from different perspectives and aspects, deepening and expanding upon pertinent topics and views in this field and making valuable contributions that are both commendable and appreciated. I would like to express sincere thanks to all the peer reviewers and editors involved in this Special Issue and to Assistant Professor Pi Mimi for assisting in the editorial work of this Special Issue.



Citation: Wang, Zhongjiang. 2024. The Individual and the Collective: From the Confucian Perspective. *Religions* 15: 199. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020199>

Received: 24 January 2024
Accepted: 29 January 2024
Published: 5 February 2024



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