

Conference on “Confucianism, Law, and Politics in Korea: Past and Present”

Centre for East Asian and Comparative Philosophy
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This project and conference aims to explore theories of Confucian constitutionalism with a special focus on Korea, the most Confucianized society before the so-called “Western Impact.”

Though, for the past two decades, comparative political theory has grown into a recognized subfield in political science or social sciences in general, scholars in the field still show rare interest in how political theory as a set of postulates or arguments engages dialectically with sociopolitical practice (and vice versa). Often what we find in the field is a cross-cultural methodology, global philosophy, or a pure conceptual or historical analysis but hardly a political theory that has imbibed concrete human experiences, practices, and aspirations. This problem is especially serious in the scholarship on Confucian political theory and philosophy, first because of the dominance of pure textual studies in the current practice of theorization and second and more importantly, because of scarce attention among scholars to how people in the past, present, and future “Confucian” society lived, live or might live under particular social, political, legal, and economic contexts. Even when scholars engage in the practical question of Confucian political theory such as the institution-building of Confucian democracy and/or constitutionalism, their proposals tend to be speculative (solely depending on one’s idiosyncratic interpretation of ancient Confucian texts), abstract, and merely assertive, bearing little relevance to East Asia’s modern social condition.

All the more problematic is that increasing interest in Confucian constitutionalism notwithstanding, disciplinary barriers are still too formidable for scholars in various academic disciplines such as political science, philosophy, legal studies, and history to engage in productive interactions. Philosophers and political theorists often forget that the very notion of Confucian constitutionalism was coined by a group of legal scholars while legal scholars rarely pay attention to the normative dimension of Confucian constitutionalism and its theory-building. Likewise, though historians show increasing interest in a particular mode of the configuration of law, politics, and institutions under past Confucian dynastic regimes, their relative unfamiliarity with legal and philosophical concepts and theories prevents them from developing a robust theory of Confucian constitutionalism.

Our project attempts to develop what can be called “rooted Confucian political theory,” a kind of theory that is of immense practical use in Korea and beyond, by bringing political scientists/theorists, philosophers, historians, and legal scholars together and encouraging them to engage in multi- or cross-disciplinary intellectual interactions and collaborations. In order to achieve our goal, we divide our project (and conference) into two parts: the first on law, politics, and institutions during the Confucian Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) and the second on legal and political practice and institution development in contemporary and future Korea’s post-Confucian social context (where “post-Confucian” means Confucian in a non-monistic sense), which makes the Korean polity socially relevant and culturally rooted.

Presenters (in alphabetical order)

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