Hierarchy and Identity: A Daoist Response to Bell and Wang

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Abstract. The word 'just' in the book title *Just Hierarchy* can have various meanings. It can mean 'fair' (as an adjective), but also 'merely' or 'simply' (as an adverb). This second meaning points to another dimension of hierarchies: hierarchies are, in real life, often *not* simply hierarchies. They define individuals. In the Confucian role-based context of *Just Hierarchy* they determine who one is. They reify personal identity in a 'regime of sincerity'. Traditional Confucian hierarchies differ thereby from contemporary hierarchies in social function systems. Seen from a Daoist and amoral perspective, the primary problem with hierarchies is not that they are unequal, but that they tend to be taken too seriously. To achieve individual and social ease it is crucial to recognize the contingency of hierarchies and not internalize them.

Keywords. Hierarchy, Daoism, Confucianism, identity, *Zhuangzi*

I. Introduction: Two Senses of "Just Hierarchy"

The title of Daniel Bell and Wang Pei's book *Just Hierarchy* can be read in various ways, depending on how the word 'just' is understood. First, 'just' can be an *adjective* corresponding to the noun 'justice', similar in meaning to 'fair' or 'righteous'. It is one of the most common terms in the current global moral vocabulary. Obviously, Bell and Wang use the expression 'just hierarchy' in this sense.

After all, *Just Hierarchy* is a work on ethics. In line with almost all strands of contemporary Confucian philosophy in Asia and the West, the authors aim to modernize Confucianism so that it matches contemporary moral expectations. Traditional Confucian texts emphasize hierarchy in the context of behavioural propriety, family devotion, communal harmony, and loyalty or respect toward elders and political leaders. Such

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values may easily seem to be at odds with modern Enlightenment norms focusing on individual autonomy and subjective agency, and especially, with a conception of universal rights grounded in a supposed equality of all humans. The United States Declaration of Independence famously begins with a religious pronouncement that has become a civil-religious mantra today: "all men are created equal." This fundamental axiom of faith – a purported 'truth' held to be 'self-evident' – informs much of contemporary mainstream ethics, both in the academic and the public sphere. Accordingly, movements for social justice tend to identify the pursuit of justice with the pursuit of equality, or, now more and more often, of equity. Once social justice is measured in terms of equality or equity, hierarchies of any kind become morally suspicious. Bell and Wang, however, dare to defy the contemporary moral suspicion against hierarchy and argue for its alignment with modern-day justice. They try to re-orient the dominant understanding of justice away from equality and toward hierarchy so that the notion of a 'just hierarchy' does not sound oxymoronic.

The expression 'just hierarchy', however, can be read in a non-moral way as well. 'Just' is also an *adverb* meaning 'merely' or 'simply'. It can indicate, for example, that something is more harmless than it appears. Pointing to a white powder on a table, one can say it is 'just flour' to alleviate someone else's fear that it may be an illicit drug. Similarly, it is linguistically possible to point out that certain social conventions requiring one's submission are 'just hierarchy', but have no demeaning intentions and are of little further consequence.

Bell and Wang seem not to have intended the title of their book to be understood in such an ambiguous way. Here, they apparently use the word 'just' as an adjective to highlight a moral quality. And yet, in the course of their attempt to ethically defend hierarchy, they also portray it as benign as long as it meets moral standards. In this way, they combine ethical reasoning with emotional appeals promoting the *harmlessness* of hierarchy. Even if their book title is not intended to point out such harmlessness, their argumentation does.

Bell and Wang's book begins with a quite elaborate cultural pitch for hierarchy. In some detail, the authors describe, analyse, and praise the real-world practice of social hierarchies on the occasion of formal meals in China, or more precisely, in Shandong province, where they live and work. Reflecting on their personal experiences with such celebratory gatherings, they remember them as delightful get-togethers combining ritual aesthetics, moral practice, and communal happiness. A chart in the introduction (Bell and Wang 2020, 2) outlines the intricate seating arrangements at a round table where each position precisely indicates the respective hierarchical position of each participant. For readers unfamiliar with the local etiquette, the authors outline how not just the seating order but everyone's behaviour – from eating and drinking to toasting and speaking – is regulated by custom and indicative of social order. The main point stressed by Bell and Wang is that such formal meals are relished "[…] because they express several of the virtues of what we call 'just hierarchies'" (2020, 3). These virtues include not only 'humility' and 'modesty' (2020, 4), but also generosity, hospitality, responsibility, and, most importantly, "a sense of harmony" (2020, 6) resulting, at least in part, from jointly honouring distinguished guests or worthy leaders. Taken together, the authors affirm, such virtues contribute to a "morally uplifting" (2020, 7) experience that is "thoroughly enjoyable for the participants" (2020, 8). There is nothing sinister, harmful, or frightening to the hierarchies enacted during a formal meal, they suggest. On the contrary, the hierarchies are pleasurable and enchanting for anyone lucky enough to be involved.

Bell and Wang's depiction of a formal meal as both morally edifying and emotionally rewarding follows characterizations of ritual in early Confucian texts such as the classical *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), the *Xunzi* 荀子, or the *Analects* of *Confucius* (*Lunyu* 論語). According to these texts, a core function of ritual is to performatively transform chaotic or unstructured social disorder into order by establishing hierarchical divisions. These divisions are not intended to be antagonistic but rather

complementary. They are supposed to result in a harmonious and gratifying unity. The *Xunzi* pronounces famously and succinctly that what is separated by ritual is united by music (樂合同，禮別異 *Xunzi* 20:8[1]). Music was an integral part of ritual, and the words for music (*yue*) and joy (*le*) are written with the same Chinese character (樂). Like many other Confucian texts, the *Xunzi* emphasizes the inseparability of morality and joy in the conjunction of ritual and music. Millennia after Confucius and Xunzi, Bell and Wang find a similar amalgamation of ethics and pleasure in the hierarchy at a dinner table in Shandong: a hierarchy which is both morally just and 'just fun'. There is nothing to worry about, it seems. However, from a Daoist perspective, the traditional hierarchies addressed by Bell and Wang have a 'biopolitical' function and, by means of a 'regime of sincerity', force potentially uncomfortable role-based identities on individuals (see section II). Role-based hierarchies tend not only to be morally problematic, but what is more, they are often at odds with the function-based hierarchies in contemporary society (see section III). From a Daoist perspective, briefly introduced at the end of this paper, it is crucial to recognize the contingency of all hierarchies, both traditional and modern, in order to not over-identify with the socially constructed identities they impose on people (see section IV).

I. Not *Just* Hierarchy: The Death of the Seabird

Bell and Wang wish to entice Western readers – to whom the book seems to be mainly addressed – to view hierarchy more sympathetically. However, they candidly admit that their chances of success may not be very high. Non-Chinese readers, they assume not without reason, will have mostly been raised in accordance with mainstream Western enlightenment values and a civil-religious reverence to equality-oriented justice. These readers will likely suspect that hierarchies are prone to be unjust. The present article, however, is not intended to formulate a moral critique of the Confucian ideal of hierarchy from a contemporary Western

perspective. For theoretical reasons outlined below, I will not attempt to assess if hierarchy is indeed "compatible with egalitarian goals" (Bell and Wang 2020, 8) as Bell and Wang wish to show. Irrespective of the ethical merits of their argumentation, I agree with their assertion that social hierarchies are not only essential to social functioning today but have been so throughout human history. To strive toward their abolishment is both practically unrealistic and pragmatically undesirable.

The difference between Bell and Wang's approach and mine is of an amoral, and partly personal, nature. Simply put, I never enjoyed formal meals in China to the extent the authors apparently do. To be clear, I do not doubt at all the honesty of Bell and Wang's descriptions of their experiences. All their observations of ritual behaviour and emotionality at formal meals seem accurate and ring true to me. However, these observations, I am afraid, are only true for some and not true for all, and therefore only partially accurate. A formal meal in China will probably involve a wider range of emotions than those addressed by Bell and Wang. Such meals are ambiguous, not only morally, but also psychologically and socially. Perhaps Bell and Wang's account is comparable, let's say, to a description of an American evangelical Sunday service in the 19th century by a loyal member of the congregation. Given her true commitment to the community and her sincerely felt emotions at the event, this churchgoer may lose sight of the fact that participation in the service is not purely optional and that some of the attendees may not share the religious beliefs that are being celebrated or may have simply preferred to spend their Sunday morning doing something else.

In preparation for writing this article, I talked to a few friends, some Chinese, and some not, about their experiences with and feelings toward formal meals in China. The answers and reports varied, but almost everyone I talked to agreed that Bell and Wang have a point: many people will enjoy at least parts of such a meal – they might cherish the free (and sometimes luxurious) food, they might be glad to spend some time and chat with colleagues they like, or they may look forward to an opportunity

to make some social or professional connections. However, almost everyone also insisted that enjoyment is just part of the picture. The most pertinent point was made by one friend. When asked about such meals he replied instantly: "Well, it's work!" Bell and Wang, however, do not really address this crucial fact. Participation in formal meals in China is rarely voluntary. Of course, one can find excuses not to go, but simply saying 'no thanks' when invited to join would typically be considered rude or weird, or both. It can be safely assumed that everyone who is there is also *expected* to be there.

Social expectations are by no means restricted to mere participation. One is, for instance, expected to eat the food others put on one's plate. As Bell and Wang indicate, foreigners (including myself) are often forgiven for not meeting such expectations, yet the persistent food serving makes formal Chinese meals rather unenjoyable to me. As someone not very partial to most of the 'delicacies' offered, I either have to disappoint the hosts by refusing these unwelcome servings, or I have to eat them against my will if I consider them bearable. Often worse than the eating expectation is, for me, the expectation to engage in lengthy conversational rituals. More or less empty phrases have to be exchanged and not very inspirational questions have to be asked or answered repeatedly. I freely admit that on such occasions I often long for the only part of the meal ritual that Bell and Wang find morally questionable: the consumption of alcohol. After a few shots, the food can appear more agreeable and the conversation less forced. I trust that not only foreigners appreciate the somewhat liberating and relaxing effect of liquor at formal meals. Clearly, one function of drinking alcohol on such occasions is to counter the otherwise often stifling ritual rigidness.

My misgivings are personal – but they are probably not uncommon. A formal meal in China (or anywhere else, for that matter) is not always "thoroughly enjoyable" (Bell and Wang 2020, 8) for everyone, especially not for those who might have felt forced to attend. It gives rise to a wide spectrum of mixed emotions ranging from joy to boredom to anxiety and

stress.[2] During such a meal, one may sometimes feel like the seabird in an allegory of the Daoist text *Zhuangzi* (18: 5). This exotic bird was caught by the ruler of Lu, the home state of Confucius, which is symbolically associated with the exercise of Confucian morality. To properly treat it, the ruler "[…] prepared a banquet for it, having the music of the Nine Shao performed for its entertainment and supplying it with the best chops from the butcher for its delectation. The bird looked at it all with glazed eyes, worried and distressed, not daring to eat a bite, not daring to drink a sip, and after three days of this, the bird was dead" (Ziporyn 2020, 147).

Feelings of stress and anxiety at formal meals in China have to do with the fact that they are not merely leisure but, more often than not, a mandatory continuation of work, and, like work, they are thoroughly hierarchical. Again, my primary issue with the hierarchical structure of such meals is not moral – it is not first and foremost a question of whether the given hierarchy is just or unjust. The crucial problem is, instead, the extension of the hierarchical work structure beyond actual work. While a hierarchical structure at work no doubt makes operational sense – someone is in charge, and others execute tasks; someone presents a lecture, and others listen, someone teaches, and others do exams – it makes little to no operational sense at the dinner table. Clearly, the replication of the work hierarchy at a meal exceeds the mere organization of labour. Other just hierarchies would, at least theoretically, make equal or more sense, especially hierarchies directly related to the actual ritual that is performed. Why not rank the participants in accordance with their capacity to perform songs (not long ago, singing songs tended to be a part of formal meals in China), or according to their differing talents in presenting clever toasts?

Of course, no such 'just' alternatives are even considered precisely because the meal is not *just* a meal, but rather, as my friend pointed out, also work. In a way, the whole point of the meal is to confirm and deepen the work hierarchy by widening it beyond the workplace. The ritual transforms a social order limited to a professional setting into something that

is much bigger. Now the hierarchy is no longer just about doing a job, but about where one sits and what and when one eats at dinner – it becomes an *existential* hierarchy defining one's role in *life*.

The emblematically performed hierarchy at formal Chinese meals, manifested, for instance, in mandatory participation and mandatory seating according to rank, is neither simply an expression of moral virtues nor merely a benign occasion for communal joy. Instead, the hierarchical social order ritually constituted at a Chinese dinner table performatively extends a professional hierarchy and ascribes to each participant a social and psychological *identity*. Bosses are no longer just bosses at work, but also everywhere else. The same is the case for the underlings.

Underneath the more or less happy surface of a Chinese meal celebrating, according to Bell and Wang, a harmless, harmonious hierarchy, emerges a socio-political and psychological practice that shapes individuals through the performance and emotional adoption of socially ascribed roles. This practice is based on what Roger T. Ames calls a "Confucian role ethics" (Ames 2011). A Confucian role ethics constructs selfhood by behavioural and emotional commitment to the positions one occupies in a relational network of (mostly) hierarchical distinctions. This commitment is expected to be sincere – to be truly felt and wholeheartedly embraced. Against the background of such a role ethics, the hierarchy observed at dinner tables in Shandong by Bell and Wang is not 'just fun' but also a training exercise of an identity-shaping 'regime of sincerity'.

The *Zhuangzi* contains numerous allegories likening the Confucian ritual practice to the domestication of animals: the caging of birds (section 18:5), the dressage of horses (sections 9:3), or the slaughtering of oxen (section 3:2, see Moeller 2020). The ritualistic extension of a work hierarchy to domestic events such as a meal domesticates humans. It is an ancient version of 'biopolitics' that imposes a power structure on the act of eating. Ritual practice inscribes the biological act of eating with social meaning. Eating under the conditions and constraints of ritual fosters the internalization of an identity based on one's position in a hierarchy that

manifests itself in any daily life situation – for instance, in one's seat at a table.

As one reviewer of this article has correctly remarked, the *Zhuangzi's* critique of Confucian ritual as a biopolitical instrument of discipline may well be understood as a moral protest against an immoral practice. My intention here, however, is to highlight the amoral, or therapeutic, applications of this critique. Rather than highlighting the immorality of hierarchies, I wish to point out the psychological and existential stress they can produce. A strong correlation between stress and hierarchy has been widely documented in recent natural science, especially in the works of the renowned biologist Robert M. Sapolsky (2005; 2013).

II. Hierarchies Then and Now: From Human Roles to Social Systems

Arguably, the Confucian *locus classicus* rationalizing, and mandating social hierarchies is an extended passage included in section 4A: 4 in the text *Mencius*.[3] As it is common in early Chinese texts, the passage does not present a formal argumentation but a pseudo-historical narrative to make its point. Importantly, unlike Bell and Wang and most other contemporary moral philosophers, this narrative presents 'moral progress' *not* in terms of a transition from injustice to justice but as a transition from disorder to order. The difference between an emphasis on order rather than on justice is, I believe, a decisive distinction between traditional and modern Confucianism. The ordering process outlined in the *Mencius* begins with the ordering of nature: ancient sage rulers regulated the rivers and channelled the waters to enable agricultural production. The ordering of nature and the invention of agriculture went along with the separation between humans and wild animals – and the domestication of some of the latter in hierarchical subordination to the former. Importantly, to decisively distinguish between a human and an animalistic way of life, a second step of hierarchic ordering was necessary. The sage rulers –

legendary predecessors of later philosophical masters like Confucius (traditionally labelled the 'uncrowned king' or *su wang* 素王) and Mencius – therefore established the so called five 'human relationships' (*ren lun* 人倫) between father and son, ruler and minister, husband and wife, older and younger siblings, and between friends. In combination with one another, these five distinctively human relations reflect the complicated social hierarchies of early Chinese society based on kinship groups and their internal and external associations and exchanges.

This paradigmatic Confucian genealogy of morals has two essential characteristics. First, as mentioned, the primary purpose of the invention of morality in the form of a separation between a hierarchic social realm and an anarchic wilderness is not the pursuit of any higher idea of the good or (divine) justice, but the establishment of order. This is to say that the traditional Confucian moral logic is different from the contemporary Confucian moral logic of Bell and Wang. What matters most for Bell and Wang is, literally, to *justify* hierarchy by showing that it is just. What matters most for Mencius is to legitimize hierarchy by equating it with *order,* which in turn becomes the distinctive quality of human society. Hierarchy makes humans, as a species, humane, not simply because it is just, but because it is orderly.

Second, the equation of hierarchical order with being human on the level of the species has fundamental consequences for what it means to be human for the individual. Social hierarchy, exemplified in political hierarchy (rulers and ruled), gender hierarchy (men and women), and generational hierarchy (old and young), defines persons by their respective roles. These roles, to be sure, are complex: a man can be simultaneously ruler and ruled, father and son, older brother and younger brother, friend to various other men, etc.[4] Only by a sincere commitment to these roles, both behaviourally and psychologically, can one be truly humane in a Confucian sense. Outside of these role-based hierarchies, animalistic wilderness looms. From a Confucian perspective, hierarchies are not just 'just', they constitute human *identity*.

Despite their complexity, the hierarchical roles identifying the individual in traditional Chinese society were organically interwoven. The contemporary philosopher Henry Rosemont Jr. aptly describes the ensuing notion of personhood with the image of an 'onion' (Rosemont 2015, 14). The different roles one assumes during the course of one's life – from son and brother to husband and father – seamlessly grow around one another like the layers of the onion. Importantly, their reach is not restricted to the family: the political roles replicate family roles, which in turn include generational and gender roles. The role of the ruler, for instance, is to be a father of his subjects and the 'son of heaven'. The role of the minister is modelled after the role of the wife, etc. The organic interwovenness of the various roles makes them coherent and extends their reach. The role identities of a person are not respectively restricted to single and separate social settings but remain valid throughout all of society. This means, for instance, that a woman can never transcend female roles, and that age differences always matter. In order to guarantee the essential onion-like cohesion of role-based personhood, traditional Confucian hierarchies tend to block incompatible roles. It is difficult, if not impossible, for example, for a woman to become a ruler; and it is problematic, and even scandalous, if the old are subordinated to the young. From a contemporary perspective, such prohibitions may seem unjust, but what matters from a traditional Confucian perspective (as expressed paradigmatically in *Mengzi* 孟子)[5] is first and foremost the *order* that constitutes human civilization and individual identity. From this perspective, to confuse the hierarchical role-relations between women and men, or between the generations, would thoroughly corrupt social order and, simultaneously, destroy the coherence of role-based human identity. It would deform the integrity of onion-shaped personhood.

In modern society, notions of personal identity, and accordingly the logic of social hierarchies has changed fundamentally. According to the German social theorist Niklas Luhmann, a defining characteristic of modern societies is "functional differentiation" (see Luhmann 2012-2013). Since it is impossible to give an adequate account of the basic premises

of social systems theory within the limited scope of this article, it may suffice to say that it proposes that traditional social orders and hierarchies – based, for instance, on class or ethnicity – were increasingly replaced in importance by the hierarchies and orders produced by different social systems such as the economy, politics, law, academics, sports, etc. This means, for instance, that a woman is now no longer assigned 'female' roles in all systems, she may be a candidate in a political election, a judge at the court, or a financial investor in the economy – and her different hierarchical positions in each system are determined by each system and not by a gender-role identity. The onion of old, the self as an organic whole of multi-layered roles, has been replaced by less coherent but more flexible constructions of personhood.

The shift from traditional role-orientation to system-orientation does not only concern gender. Each system develops its own intricate hierarchies which do not cohere with the hierarchies of other systems. I may be a reasonably respected elderly professor in the academic system, but if travelling by plane, one of my young students who may have a business-class ticket will get a much better seat and much better food at the 'dinner table' than me since I can only afford economy class. From a traditional Confucian perspective, this treatment may seem disorderly, but from a contemporary legal perspective, it is just.[6] In modern societies, traditional role-orientations no longer define one's identity and one's positions within social hierarchies. Instead, hierarchies are oriented to highly diverse and dynamic modern functional differentiations that have no correspondence to and make little sense in the logic of the ancient world and its regime of sincerity.

While Bell and Wang describe the shift from traditional to contemporary hierarchies, at least in part, as a moral shift toward more just hierarchies, I prefer to describe it from an amoral descriptive perspective as a shift from role-oriented hierarchies to intra-systemic hierarchies. From a theoretical perspective, it seems prudent to outline the different social conditions of these hierarchies and, what is more, the different modes of human identity they reflect.

III. Conclusion: A Daoist View on Hierarchy

To conclude, I will briefly address Bell and Wang's account of the Daoist approach to hierarchy and suggest a modification. For Bell and Wang, Daoism offers a therapeutic escape for those suffering under the pressures of hierarchy. I believe that the Daoist critique goes further than this. Everyone involved in hierarchies, including those benefitting from privileged positions, is prone to internalize their status. Daoism subverts such a reification of hierarchical status and instead promotes a flexible and relaxed attitude toward the identity of both oneself and others.

To their credit, Bell and Wong highlight how various types of Daoism – including the *Laozi* 老子*,* Huang-Lao 黃老 Daoism, and the *Zhuangzi* – question its value from different vantage points. Acknowledging the potential downsides of hierarchies, especially for those at the bottom of the pile, Bell and Wang regard Daoism as a sort of ideological alternative for the less privileged. Interestingly enough, Daoism appears to them as an ancient philosophical predecessor of the contemporary 'culture of cuteness' in China and East Asia which is fascinated by and indulges itself in images of cuteness ranging from animated characters to, especially, cats. Quoting Simon May (2019), Bell and Wang stipulate that "[…] the culture of cuteness articulates 'a nascent will to repudiate the ordering of human relations by power, or at least to question our assumptions about who has power and to what end'" (Bell and Wang 2020, 103).

It is commendable that Bell and Wang recognize a subversive element in Daoist philosophy. Moreover, it is also praiseworthy that they acknowledge that Daoism opens up a social and psychological space outside hierarchies that orthodox Confucianism hardly allows. Where there is only wild and chaotic animality from a Confucian perspective, the Daoists, so to speak, see cute cats as providing emotional relief from the potentially relentless competition within hierarchical structures. Bell and Wang, appreciate that Daoist philosophy moves beyond a politics of hierarchy and attributes "[…] more social (and material) value for 'non-political

ways of ways of life that contribute to the social good such as the work of farmers, family caretakers, and manual workers"' (2020, 102).

To regard Daoist philosophy as a soothing complement countering the negative effects of political hierarchies makes sense, but also runs the risk of turning it into an, albeit secular, opium for the people, a sort of anaesthetic or hallucinogen for 'losers'. While, in my view, Daoist philosophy certainly has an essentially medicinal (rather than moral) orientation, its benefits are by no means only for the downtrodden. It may have to offer some important healing functions for the 'winners' as well. As much as hierarchies are prone to make those at the bottom suffer from chronic low self-esteem and feel stress (Sapolsky 2005 and 2013), they are likely to afflict those on top with the 'disease of conceit', about which, as a poet says, there "ain't nothing too discreet" (Dylan 1989).

A short pseudo-historic narrative in the *Zhuangzi* (21:10) introduces a person named Sunshu Ao 孫叔敖 who was three times promoted to high offices only to be dismissed from them three times as well. On none of these occasions did he show any emotional reactions. This makes a questioner wonder about Sunshu Ao's way of thinking. He explains: "When the job was offered, I realized it could not be rejected; when it was taken away, I realized it could not be kept. I understood that getting or losing it had nothing to do with me, and so I did not show any disappointment – this was all. How should I be better than others? And, also, I did not know if people's admiration of me was due to that job or to me. If it was due to that job, it had nothing to do with me; if it was due to me, it had nothing to do with that job. While wandering around in all directions, what time do I have to worry if others regard me as of high or low status?"

Similar to several other characters in the *Zhuangzi*, Sunshu Ao is unfazed by his rises and falls in social hierarchies. He is free from both despair and arrogance, and both are equally important. Especially under conditions of a role-oriented regime of sincerity, social hierarchies invite strong personal identification with one's roles. From a Daoist perspective, however, such hierarchies by no means reflect a sacrosanct human order

established along with the sagely invention of human civilization. In contrast to what is suggested by the Confucian narratives, the *Zhuangzi* regards social hierarchies as relative, conditional, and circumstantial, albeit unavoidable. To maintain mental and existential sanity – and to avoid both conceit and low self-esteem – it is imperative to be able to distance oneself from one's socially ascribed roles and ranks and not over-identify or internalize them.

Sunshu Ao is neither a loser nor a hermit – and Daoism is not a philosophy primarily aimed at losers or hermits. It is an existential philosophy that critically questioned the traditional Confucian regime of sincerity and its reification of human identity in hierarchies. It promotes social and psychological ease, and a flexible and equanimous approach to human identity by recognizing the utter contingency of social hierarchies, both past and present.

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NOTES

1 All indications of chapters and sections in early Chinese texts in this essay follow the database *Chinese Text Project* (n.d).

2 Moreover, as one reviewer has remarked, there is a "a variety of formal meals in China," including those "among relatives, friends, scholars, colleagues." Depending on the various forms of these meals, expectations and feelings of the participants will greatly differ.

3 Bell and Wang (2020, 57) quote briefly form this extended passage, emphasizing its historical importance and pointing to the (in their view just) hierarchy between intellectual and manual labour.

4 It has often been said that the relationship between friends is non-hierarchic. However, this is only the fifth and last 'human relationship', and it cannot be considered in distinction from the others. One cannot be only friend to everyone else without being also son or daughter, and ruler or ruled, as well as, likely, also younger or older sibling, and, sooner or later, husband or wife. Even if friendship is regarded as non-hierarchical it is subordinated to and enclosed in hierarchic structures. Friendship in early China existed within hierarchical social contexts.

5 See *Mengzi* 3A: 3-4: "If there were no nobles, no one would order the savages. If there were no savages, no one would feed the nobles. […] As to the ordering/governing of the world, […] Those who labor intellectually, order/govern the others. Those who labor physically, are ordered/governed by the others. The who are ordered/governed by others feed those others. Those who order/govern others, are fed by those others."

無君子莫治野人，無野人莫養君子。… 治天下 … 勞心者治人，勞力者治於人；治於人者食人，治人者食於人.

6 A reviewer of this article mentioned that a student's preferential treatment in such a situation may not damage the student's respect for the professor – in particular if the student is Chinese and has been exposed to certain Confucian values suggesting a different hierarchy between student and teacher. Therefore, the reviewer suggested, the student may "feel some awkwardness." I agree. This feeling of awkwardness results from the incongruity between traditional role-related hierarchies still persisting in today's society and the more recent hierarchies produced by functional differentiation.