



Deposited via The University of Sheffield.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/223349/>

Version: Published Version

---

**Article:**

Moore, T. (2024) Is Confucianism compatible with a Laclauian conception of democracy?  
Asian Studies, 12 (2). pp. 195-220. ISSN: 2232-5131

<https://doi.org/10.4312/as.2024.12.2.195-220>

---

**Reuse**

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike (CC BY-SA) licence. This licence allows you to remix, tweak, and build upon the work even for commercial purposes, as long as you credit the authors and license your new creations under the identical terms. All new works based on this article must carry the same licence, so any derivatives will also allow commercial use. More information and the full terms of the licence here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

# Is Confucianism Compatible with a Laclauian Conception of Democracy?

Thomas MOORE\*

## Abstract

This paper will introduce a novel perspective on Confucian democracy by connecting it with Ernesto Laclau's (2005) conception of democracy in *On Populist Reason*. Specifically, I argue that the normatively ideal ruler-ruled relationship in Confucian political theory can be conceptualized as the people making a radical investment in a virtuous leader. This argument will proceed in several steps. Firstly, I will provide context surrounding Confucianism and Laclau's (2005) novel political ontology. Secondly, I will draw on the psychoanalytic work of Jacques Lacan (2001) to explore the notion of a radical investment and how it can be appealed to by politicians, rhetoricians and philosophers through their use of empty signifiers, signifiers without a fixed conceptual signified (such as MAGA or "Take Back Control"). In Laclau's application of Lacanian psychoanalysis these represent an unachievable full harmonious community with no conflicts between different interests. I will then argue that a core part of Confucius' political message, his constant advocacy for a virtuous ruler modelled on the Sage-Kings of the Zhou dynasty, is essentially a Laclauian conception of politics, because the Zhou kings are playing the role of empty signifiers in Confucius' political theory. That is, they represent an unachievable ideal of a fully harmonious community. Finally, I argue that this increases Confucianism's potential for compatibility with democracy since these psychoanalytic dynamics could be replicable in modern democracies and would be normatively desirable should a virtuous leader utilize them.

**Keywords:** Confucianism, democracy, virtue, ruler, Laclau

## Ali je konfucianizem združljiv z laclauovskim pojmovanjem demokracije?

### Izvilleček

Ta članek uvaja nov pogled na konfucijansko demokracijo z navezavo na koncept demokracije Ernesta Laclaua (2005) v delu *On Populist Reason*. Natančneje, trdim, da je normativno idealno razmerje med vladarjem in vladanimi v konfucijanski politični teoriji mogoče konceptualizirati kot radikalno naložbo ljudstva v krepostnega voditelja. Ta argumentacija bo potekala v več korakih. Najprej bom predstavil kontekst okrog konfucijanstva in Laclauove nove politične ontologije. Drugič, oprl se bom na psihoanalitično

\* Thomas MOORE, University of Sheffield.  
Email address: tmoore5@sheffield.ac.uk



delo Jacquesa Lacana (2001), da bi raziskal pojem radikalne naložbe in kako se nanjo lahko sklicujejo politiki, retoriki in filozofi z uporabo praznih označevalcev, označevalcev brez fiksnega konceptualnega označenca (kot sta MAGA ali »*Take Back Control*«). V Laclauovi aplikaciji lacanovske psihoanalize ti označevalci predstavljajo nedosegljivo popolno harmonično skupnost brez konfliktov med različnimi interesi. V nadaljevanju bom pokazal, da je osrednji del Konfucijevega političnega sporočila, njegovo nenehno zagovarjanje krepostnega vladarja po vzoru kraljev modrecev iz dinastije Zhou, v bistvu laclauovsko pojmovanje politike, saj imajo kralji dinastije Zhou v Konfucijevi politični teoriji vlogo praznih označevalcev. Predstavljajo namreč nedosegljivi ideal popolnoma harmonične skupnosti. Nazadnje trdim, da to povečuje potencial združljivosti konfucijanstva z demokracijo, saj bi bilo te psihoanalitične dinamike mogoče ponoviti v sodobnih demokracijah in bi bile normativno zaželeni, če bi jih krepostni voditelj uporabil.

**Ključne besede:** konfucijanstvo, demokracija, vrlina, vladar, Laclau

To what extent is Confucianism compatible with democracy? This is a very salient question for East Asian countries influenced by this philosophy. Some previous authors have answered the question affirmatively, such as Fukuyama (1995). Others have clearly dissented, like Daniel A. Bell (2015), who has argued that a political meritocracy is a more appropriate model. In between, there are a variety of approaches to this question. Some of these try to reconcile the two through an institutional compromise, for example, Joseph Chan's (2013) proposal for a bicameral legislature composed of a democratic house and a meritocratic house, while others try to combine Confucianism with less traditional conceptions of democracy, like Sor-Hoon Tan's (2004) attempted reconciliation between Confucianism and Deweyan democracy.

This paper will outline a novel take on this question through a comparison between Classical Confucianism and a less traditional (and less liberal) form of democratic theory, as outlined by Ernesto Laclau (2005) in *On Populist Reason*. I will argue that the Confucian ideal relationship between the ruler and the people can be conceptualized in Laclauian terms and thus that there is potential for compatibility between Confucianism and this form of democracy. More specifically, my argument in this paper is that the normatively ideal Confucian ruler-ruled relationship can be conceptualized as the people making a radical investment in a virtuous leader.

This argument will proceed in several steps. Firstly, I will provide some context surrounding Confucianism and Laclau and a fairly detailed overview of my methodology and scope. Secondly, I will explain what it means to radically invest in what Laclau calls an "empty signifier". Thirdly, I will argue that Confucius' political vision can be conceptualized using the Laclauian framework. Specifically, I will

argue for an interpretation of the Sage-Kings the Confucians admire as empty signifiers (signifiers that signify a mythical version of the past) characterized by a full and harmonious community. Fourthly, I will argue that a Confucian investment in a virtuous ruler can be conceptualized as involving Freudian identification, which can be used to explain how a virtuous ruler can transfer their virtue to the people. Finally, I will show that conceptualizing Confucianism in these terms allows for a degree of compatibility between Confucianism and a Laclauian conception of democracy. To illustrate this final point, I will first use Nelson Mandela as an example of a virtuous leader who utilized the dynamics of Laclauian democracy established up to this point. I will then consider an objection that candidates who are unvirtuous by Confucian standards (such as Donald Trump and Yoon Suk Yeol) are more likely to emerge in Laclauian democracy, but I will respond by showing this risk can be mitigated through the use of candidate restrictions.

## 1. Context

### *1.1 Confucian Democracy and my Methodology*

Before I proceed further it would help the reader to understand the purpose of this comparison between Confucianism and Laclauian democracy if I first outline the general task facing Confucian democratic theory, explaining my purpose, scope and methodology in relation to this problem and previous literature in this area.

One problem with the potential compatibility of Confucianism with democracy is that there are serious concerns over the level of compatibility between the “liberal” in “Western liberal democracy” and Confucianism. As Sor-Hoon Tan vividly puts it: “The democracy that crusading Westerners usually preach to Asian societies is a liberal one that emphasizes the rule of law and universal rights, based on the assumptions of individual autonomy and of the government as a necessary evil to be limited as much as possible” (Tan 2004, 9). The problem with this is that “for most Asians, the philosophical baggage of liberal autonomy slows down the spread of democracy. A Confucian democracy would not be a liberal democracy à la America” (ibid.). I will not offer a detailed explanation of exactly why there are tensions between Western liberalism and Confucianism, as this would be beyond the scope of this article. What is important in the current context is that these tensions are widely established in the literature on Confucian political theory. This is important because it creates an opening for work that considers how compatible Confucianism is with other forms of democracy that are less in line with liberalism. Indeed, my motivation for this article is that Laclauian democracy constitutes a

form of democracy that differs substantially from Western liberal democracy, but has hitherto been unexamined in relation to Confucianism.

This brings us to the question of defining democracy. This is made difficult by the fact that there is no consensus as to the details of the definition of democracy within the democratic theory literature. As Sor-Hoon Tan puts it: “Whatever consensus there is on the value of democracy, it tends to be at the expense of specificity of content. Democracy is government by the people, but who constitutes the people? What does it mean for them to govern? What institutions and practices best serve that purpose?” (ibid., 10) As such, whenever we try to provide a clear definition of democracy we face the problem of either having a definition so thin that it is subject to a great many interpretations, or we have a specific and clear definition that many people will disagree with. This is not a problem unique to Confucian political theory either, as the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines democracy broadly as “a method of collective decision making characterized by a kind of equality among the participants at an essential stage of the decision-making process” (Christiano and Bajaj 2022). In this article, I will focus on examining Confucianism’s potential compatibility with Laclau’s specific definition of democracy where “the construction of a ‘people’ is the *sine qua non* of democratic functioning” (Laclau 2005, 112). To put it all too briefly, this means that the competition between different constructions of “the people” (social movements constituting collections of initially unrelated demands from various sections of the population that come together under an empty signifier) is itself constitutive of democracy. To fully elucidate this definition, it is necessary to explain the context surrounding Laclau, hence I will comprehensively define this at the end of section 2. All I hope to have established so far is that Confucianism is likely to be more compatible with forms of democracies less attached to Western liberalism, and that Laclauian democracy could be one example of this, and one that still satisfies a very thin definition of democracy as “government by the people”. Therefore, beginning some examination of its compatibility with Confucianism in the form of this article is a worthwhile pursuit.

What method am I being guided by in answering this question? Any extensive examination of philosophical methodology would be beyond the scope of an article that has the aim of laying some foundations for further comparative work involving Confucian political thought. However, it is nonetheless important to give the reader a few pointers here, in particular to show that my approach is heavily guided and inspired by existing approaches in the literature on Confucian democracy. In particular, my approach is heavily influenced by another prominent academic in Confucian democratic theory, Joseph Chan and his work in *Confucian Perfectionism* (2013), where he develops an account of Confucian democracy that

blends elements of Classical Confucian political thought with elements of liberal democratic thought to form a new Confucian political philosophy applicable in modern East Asian societies. As Chan puts it, his project is “a critical reconstruction of certain Confucian political ideas of the classical period for modern times” (Chan 2013, XI). What this constitutes is not contemporary political philosophy as traditionally conceived, and even less a project in history of Chinese philosophy involving a close exegesis of historical Confucian texts. Instead, Chan defines his project as an exercise in “philosophical reconstruction” and comparative political theory (*ibid.*).

The definition of comparative political theory is fairly self-explanatory. What, however, is “philosophical reconstruction” as Chan defines it? This method involves applying an ancient thinker’s view to contemporary issues. Hence “the primary interest in an ancient thinker is contemporary rather than historical, and comparative rather than exegetical. It does not simply interpret what is said in a text but extends and develops it to a point where comparison with contemporary perspectives is possible [...] the primary techniques of this method are conceptual analysis and comparative methodology” (*ibid.*, 207).

A key element (and presupposition) of the philosophical reconstruction approach involves what Chan terms a piecemeal approach to traditions, which “holds that a complex tradition of thought such as Confucianism is multilevel and multifaceted and has evolved dynamically over time, and hence can be somewhat deconstructed into different elements and perhaps different levels” (*ibid.*, 208). Therefore this approach “is sensitive to the fact that there are different elements at different levels of the tradition” that have the potential to be combined, mixed or synthesized with elements of other traditions (in this case Laclauian democracy) in a myriad of different ways (*ibid.*, 209–10).

To understand this better it might help to visualize contrasting approaches. The contrast to the piecemeal approach would be seeing Confucianism as an organic unity, inseparable from its original cultural context. Chan (*ibid.*, 209) labels this the ideal-type approach, an ideal type being an idealized version of a philosophical theory or cultural system that captures certain features about a complex reality and then constructs an idealized description of that reality by artificially drawing precise and clear conceptual boundaries around those features and ignoring those which do not fit the construct. Under this approach an analysis of the compatibility between the dynamics of Laclauian democracy and the Confucian sense of a virtuous ruler would not make sense, as what Confucianism constitutes is one organic unity with concepts such as the ideal sage ruler (*sheng* 聖) being inextricably linked to other concepts, such as *li* (禮) and *ren* (仁), so as to constitute a

philosophical system whereby parts cannot simply be carved off and said to remain legitimately Confucian. Therefore under an ideal-type approach examining one element of Confucianism (the ideal ruler-ruled relationship) against a very different theory of democracy developed in a different cultural context (Laclauian democracy) would not be a worthwhile exercise.

However, plenty of people in the Confucian democracy literature adopt the piecemeal approach over the ideal-type one. Another example is Sor-Hoon Tan, who adopts a similar approach to Chan here. In her own words “I am concerned with what Confucianism could mean now and in the future, not with what Confucianism is essentially [...] the survival of Confucianism is not dependent on preserving an idem-identity, requiring some kind of essence to remain the same; it has to do with an ipse identity that lies in meaningful continuity” (Tan 2004, 8–9). To Tan this continuity involves recognizing that what the key values within Confucianism (such as the family, filial morality, loyalty and respecting the old) mean and how they are actualized could change over time and space, including manifesting themselves differently in different cultural contexts (Tan 2004, 9). What I want to present in this article is a comparison of the ruler-ruled relationship in Confucianism with this same relationship in Laclauian democracy, with a view to laying the groundwork for showing how the two are in some ways compatible. Using the methodologies of Chan (2013) and Tan (2004) this is a legitimate pursuit, as it is justifiable to take one element of Confucianism (the ruler-ruled relationship) and analyse it in relation to democratic theory.

So, it should now be evident that I am not suggesting that the Classical Confucians thought in explicitly Laclauian terms. This would be both anachronistic and absurd. Rather I am arguing that the psychological dynamics of the Confucian ideal ruler-ruled relationship can be captured by a Laclauian conceptualization and that this reading is helpful because it has the potential to inform the debate surrounding Confucian democracy. I also want to reemphasize that I am not claiming to have established an argument in favour of a full and detailed account of Confucian democracy, this would be too ambitious for one journal article. Rather I want to draw attention to one aspect of what a fully-fledged theory of Confucian democracy would require (an appropriate ruler-ruled relationship) from a novel perspective, hopefully in the process giving new credence to the broader idea of Confucian democracy.

Finally, I should be clear that the primary audience for this article is those people in countries culturally influenced by Confucianism and whose decision to adopt (or maintain) democracy is influenced by how compatible certain forms of democracy are with Confucianism. In other words, I am asking whether Laclauian

democratic theory can be combined with Confucianism to make it presentable as an option in Asian countries where Confucianism forms an important part of the cultural heritage. In practical terms, I acknowledge that this is unlikely to have much impact on the political reality of contemporary Chinese society in the short to medium term, in the sense that China is certainly not going to adopt anything like a Laclauian model of democracy in the near future.

However, I would like to make two points in relation to this. Firstly I would like to point out that this is meant to apply to a wider context than China alone, and to cover other East Asian countries with a Confucian heritage. For example, established democracies in the form of Taiwan, Japan and Korea and countries with a hybrid model, such as Singapore, where the political reality of democracy and questions over which kind of democracy fits the culture is more salient than in China in the short to medium term. Secondly, in relation to China I would argue that there is still value in doing ideal theory in this way. As Chan lays out, ideal theory “explains or justifies an ideal conception of social and political order, bracketing off practical questions about feasibility and compliance” (Chan 2013, 1) whereas non-ideal theory “develops a nonideal conception that addresses these practical questions”. Chan uses an analogy to explain the importance of ideal theory here, stating that: “any form of political theorizing that lacks an ideal is like a ship embarking on a voyage without destination” (ibid.). I conceive of myself as operating on the level of ideal theory for the most part during my conceptual analysis of the compatibility of Confucianism and Laclauian democracy in this article, although I do start to consider non-ideal practicalities in sections 4 and 5. Even if the political reality in China means that the ship is unlikely to begin any significant progress towards this destination at present, it is still worth laying it out, as the ship is certain to never move at all if there is no destination set in the first place. So, what I hope to do in this article is to set out a promising point of departure for further explorations of Confucian political thought’s compatibility with Laclauian democracy that can give more consideration to certain non-ideal concerns than I have space for here.

## 1.2 Confucianism

Before I move on to the main body of my argument I should clearly set out the definition of Confucianism I am using here. Again, my approach is inspired by Chan (2013, 206) in that I am restricting my focus to Classical (pre-Qin) Confucianism. Going further than Chan, I specifically restrict my focus to the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), and the *Mencius*. So what I am referring to in this article with the

word “Confucianism” is the core tenets of the pre-Qin Confucianism in these texts, which in this article are those tenets that relate to the normatively ideal ruler-ruled relationship for the early Confucians. What is the justification behind this definition? Given the space constraints of a single journal article, it is inevitable that I will do some injustice to the breadth and complexity of Confucianism, given how many different versions have been developed over the past 2,500 years, such as Neo-Confucianism and New Confucianism. This necessitates zooming in on one point in the tradition, and the most sensible point to focus on here is the core classical Confucian texts, as these are the main basis of the Confucian tradition. As Chan puts it, the *Analects* and *Mencius* in particular “have constituted the paradigm and basis for critical reflection in the Song-Ming period and after” (Chan 2013, 206). As such, henceforth in this article “Confucianism” refers specifically to key tenets of the core Classical Confucian texts in the pre-Qin period.

Let me now give some brief background to this period. Confucius (*Kongzi* 孔子) was born in 551 BCE, during the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE), which was followed by the Warring States period of 475–221 BCE, a time of chaos and anarchy in ancient China. Here the term “ancient China” refers to an area much smaller than modern China, and one sometimes known as the central plains (*Zhongyuan* 中原), which was centred around the Yellow River. The sizes and boundaries of this area and the different states within it changed significantly and often rapidly throughout the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. Indeed, Cartwright (2017) estimates that at one point there were 100 rival states in the Spring and Autumn period and that there were 358 separate conflicts throughout the Warring States. What caused this chaos? From 1046 to 771 BCE the various states that constituted ancient China were unified under the Zhou dynasty, which in this period (the Western Zhou) exerted a reasonable degree of centralized power over the territory it controlled (Li 2011, 11). However, in 771 BCE the Zhou capital was ransacked and the King killed. After this the Zhou king still had nominal authority, but, in reality, was so weak that real power was in the hands of his vassals, who effectively governed their own states within what had previously been the more centralized structure of the Zhou dynasty (*ibid.*). Confucius’ time was thus a time of war, chaos and anarchy, caused by the conflicting goals of the leaders of the different states. However, as Ni comments, this chaos led to China’s “most fertile and glorious period in philosophy” (Ni 2011 26), because several different schools of thought emerged to try to offer a way out of the chaos. Not just Confucianism, but other philosophies such as Mohism and Legalism were also developed in this period.

What was the Confucian diagnosis and remedy for the chaos? A key part of Confucius’ diagnosis was that the rulers of his time now lacked the virtue of the early

Zhou rulers (and prior Sage-Kings). For example, in *Analects* (13.20) the rulers of Confucius' time are dismissed as “petty functionaries not even worth considering”, and in *Analects* (19.19) Master Zeng (a prominent Confucian disciple) states that “for a long time those above have lost the way and the common people have therefore become confused”. Following on from this, Confucianism's distinct answer to the question of how to get back from the current chaos to peace and harmony was to advocate for a return to the ways of the Zhou dynasty, most importantly its rituals and virtuous leaders (the latter will be the focus of this paper). Confucius regularly heaps praise on the early rulers of the Zhou dynasty (as well as prior Sage-Kings) (*Analects*, 7.5, 8.11, 8.20, 18.10, 18.11), particularly the Duke of Zhou—the brother of the dynasty's founder, King Wen—whom Confucius admires for having the wisdom and virtue to peacefully assume regency until King Wen's son was old enough to rule, as opposed to trying to seize the throne for himself. For Confucius, one of the key things ancient China needed to overcome the chaos it faced was the re-emergence of virtuous rulers. For example, in *Analects* (12.19) Confucius emphasizes that the virtue of a good ruler is like the wind and the common people are like grass, meaning that “when the wind moves over the grass the grass is sure to bend”. Moreover, *Analects* (2.3) emphasizes that the people will fail to respond to purely legalistic means of control and that governing them by virtue is necessary to give people the sense of shame they need to rectify themselves. Confucius' vision of the ruler-ruled relationship is thus that of a virtuous ruler who can unite the heterogenous population of the different states that constituted ancient China, in a manner reminiscent of the Western Zhou dynasty, while at the same time transferring their virtue to them.

### 1.3 Laclau

In *On Populist Reason* (2005), Laclau aims to build a new theory of political collective identity that can explain how people with radically different political preferences or demands can come together under the same movement (think, for example, of how the Brexit movement contained both ardent free-traders and ardent protectionists). Laclau develops this theory by starting with political demands (rather than individuals or groups) as the fundamental units of social analysis. Laclau sees demands as beginning in isolation (Laclau 2005, 73). For example, say the electricity supply breaks down in a slum. In response, the slum dwellers affected by this will demand that the relevant authority (say the local council) address this problem. However, if the problem is not solved, then this demand has the potential to become conjoined with other, similar demands, such as those for better housing or a better water supply, and this creates a collective

identity among those who possess these various conjoined demands. What precisely is it that conjoins these demands? In other words, what is it that transforms a vague feeling of solidarity between the people holding these individual demands into a collective identity or movement? To Laclau a collective identity can form around a plurality of demands when these demands are unified under a common “empty signifier” (Laclau 2005, 99), that is to say, a signifier that does not signify any fixed, conceptually representable signified. For example, a possible scenario in the case of the slum dwellers is that their demands are eventually absorbed under a slogan such as “Justice for Slum Dwellers”. To Laclau, “justice” acts as an empty signifier here because it does not signify any fixed, timeless conceptual content. To visualize this, consider how, until around two hundred years ago, beheading was viewed as a just punishment for serious crimes in most areas of the world, whereas almost everyone today thinks beheading is unjust. On this reading, what “justice” refers to has changed so radically over time that it would be bold to claim that the term always signifies some fixed, timeless conceptual content. To be clear, on the Laclauian view “justice” does not refer to a Platonic eternal form of justice and nor does it refer to something more banal like Rawls’s (1971) conception of “justice as fairness” with its two principles of justice. What then does an empty signifier signify? This is the subject of section 2.

## 2. Radical Investment in an Empty Signifier

To understand what an empty signifier signifies, we need to understand the Lacanian psychoanalysis that inspired Laclau’s notion of the empty signifier itself. Hence, this section will begin by giving a brief overview of Lacan, before using this to explicate the meaning of a radical investment in an empty signifier.

In Lacanian psychology we are understood as subjects of lack within a symbolic order. A detailed analysis of this is beyond the scope of this paper, but a brief outline of Lacan’s system is necessary for our purposes. To Lacan we begin life without a distinct sense of ourselves as separate from our mother, and are instead initially part of a mythical mother-child dyad. Gradually though, this unity is broken, as we come to recognize ourselves as distinct beings (Lacan 2001, 2). Lacan labels this period of individuation “the mirror stage”, reflecting the fact that when we come to recognize ourselves as distinct individuals we recognize our own reflection as ourselves (ibid.). At this stage in our lives we gain both a pre-cognitive sense of ourselves (what Lacan labels “the imaginary”) and start to think of ourselves using our particular society’s language and concepts (what Lacan terms “the symbolic order”). However, at the core of this sense of ourselves

there is always a gap. This is because reality is simply too complex to be inscribed into a fixed symbolic order. To understand this, consider how most theories and models, such as in economics (Friedman 1953, 160), do not purport to represent every complexity of reality, and this is because reality is simply too complex to be inscribed into the ontological categories which theories and models that attempt to describe reality have to use or presuppose. To Lacan this applies to the symbolic order, it is a discourse developed for the purpose of communication (and hence societal cohesion), and thus does not and cannot represent every aspect of reality (Lacan 2001, 279). However, this inability to fully comprehend ourselves leads to “the constant sense we have, as subjects, that something is lacking or missing from our lives [...] the Lacanian real [or lack] is this abyss at the core of our being” (Homer 2005, 87). To Lacan, this gap between the concepts we use to define ourselves and the complex multifaceted reality of our existence ultimately leaves us as subjects of lack.

Applying Lacanian psychology to political theory, Laclau argues that visions of a full harmonious society emerge to fill this gap by signifying a mythical fullness, akin to that of the mother-child dyad that existed prior to the emergence of any lack. Specifically, Laclau argues that the dislocations brought about by unfulfilled demands can be read in Lacanian terms as a lack in the symbolic order (society) (Laclau 2005, 114–15). This is where empty signifiers come in. An empty signifier is a sign—usually in the form of an aim, figure or symbol—that comes to fill the gap between society and the subject by signifying (on an unconscious, conceptually irrepresentable level) this lack’s opposite, a full and harmonious society where all demands are satisfied (*ibid.*, 117). To visualize this, think of the communist utopia postulated to be the final stage of history in Marxism or the liberal democratic order that Fukuyama ascribes to Hegel’s account of the end of history, where there is so little political conflict that our main problem is boredom (Fukuyama 1989, 18). In these cases, concepts that are rather amorphous and highly pliable are presented as stable objects of political affection, capable of orientating and motivating political action.

We can now understand that an empty signifier is not a signifier without *any* signified. As Laclau (2005, 105) emphasizes, a signifier without any kind of signified would just be nonsensical noise, since it would not mean anything. What an empty signifier signifies is something within the unconscious part of our psyche that is conceptually irrepresentable but that can be signified in some form. This is the Lacanian lack or the inability of any symbolic order to incorporate all political demands, as well as its opposite, the idea of a full and harmonious society, a symbolic order that *can* resolve all demands. This can be illustrated well by going back to our previous example of the slum dwellers. Recall that lots of individual

demands became conjoined under the empty signifier “Justice for Slum Dwellers”. This signifier mobilizes those affected by unfulfilled demands, by signifying the current absent fullness of the community (the lack in the symbolic order caused by the unfulfilled demands of the slum dwellers) and the opposite notion of a full harmonious community (a symbolic order or society without lack that incorporates all demands of the slum dwellers).

Crucially, this also illustrates how empty signifiers can overcome the heterogeneity of political preferences to create coherent collective identities out of unrelated (or even contradictory) demands. To Laclau there is nothing inherent in different isolated demands that conjoins them into a movement or collective identity, meaning we should regard the unity of a group as a retroactive effect of naming it using an empty signifier (Laclau 2005, 119). To illustrate this, let us once again return to our example. What constitutes the collective identity of the slum dwellers is that they have come together under the slogan “Justice for Slum Dwellers”. This is because there is nothing *inherent* to societal structure linking their demands. For instance, consider members of this hypothetical slum who are only affected by one of the following: a lack of electricity, lack of water or lack of appropriate housing. In theory the people affected by these issues could form sectionalist groups focused solely on their own issues, and the local authority could treat their demands differently, with different solutions for each, instead of negotiating with the movement as a whole. It is only through the conjoining of the demands under the empty signifier “Justice for Slum Dwellers” that we can talk of the “Justice for Slum Dwellers” movement as a unified movement or collective identity. As Laclau emphasizes, by signifying the absent fullness of society, empty signifiers go beyond the isolated demands conjoined within them, to become the name that unifies unrelated or even contradictory demands into coherent collective identities (ibid., 99).

We have now reached the definition of a radical investment in an empty signifier: making that signifier the “embodiment of a mythical fullness” (ibid., 115). In other words, to radically invest in an empty signifier is to see within it a full harmonious community, where all political demands are satisfied. Section 3 characterizes Confucius’ political vision in these terms.

Before I move on to section 3 though, I should revisit the definition of Laclauian democracy, as promised in section 1. There I said that the competition between different constructions of “the people” is itself constitutive of Laclauian democracy. We can now understand that this means a Laclauian conception of democracy can be defined as a competition between different popular identities (peoples), where these identities involve certain social demands coalescing around a certain

empty signifier. This definition of democracy does two important things. Firstly, it is in accord with a general thin definition of democracy as “a method of collective decision making characterized by a kind of equality among the participants at an essential stage of the decision-making process” (Christiano and Bajaj 2022), and can therefore be regarded as a legitimate definition of democracy. Secondly it is clearly a definition of democracy that is not necessarily attached to liberalism. Indeed, Laclau explicitly endorses the idea that liberalism and democracy are not necessarily related but rather are related only as a contingent historical articulation (Laclau 2005, 167). This makes exploration of its compatibility with Confucianism worthwhile in light of the context explored in section 1.

### 3. The Sage-Kings in Laclauian Terms

In this section I will argue that there is a case the normatively ideal ruler-ruled relationship for the Classical Confucians can be conceptualized in Laclauian terms. This will take two steps. Firstly, I will argue that through the notion of governing via *wu-wei* (無為), or ruling by not ruling, it is possible to view the Sage-Kings Confucius and Mencius admire in Laclauian terms. That is, it is possible to view these Sage-Kings (or at least the vision of them as set out by Confucius and Mencius) as empty signifiers which signify a full harmonious community, where all political demands are satisfied (in opposition to the lack that the chaos in ancient China could be characterized by). Secondly, I will argue that Freudian identification (another underpinning of Laclau’s theory of populism and democracy) could serve as a psychological mechanism for the phenomenon (promised by Confucius) of the ruler’s virtue being transferred to the people, with this reinforcing the emphasis placed by Confucius and Mencius on ruling through virtue and benevolent government.

#### 3.1 *The Sage-Kings as Signifying Absent Fullness*

What does Confucianism offer in its remedy to the chaos in ancient China, as explored in section 1? Firstly, it is insightful to note how much more emphasis is placed on the character of a ruler compared to any specific set of policies. Indeed, there is very little mention of any precise policies that the ruler should enact in either the *Analects* or the *Mencius*. There are a couple of notable exceptions to this in the form of *Mencius* (3A3), which discusses taxation and land policy in a lot of depth, even stating at one point that “benevolent government must begin with land demarcation”, and *Mencius* (5B2), where Mencius describes the system of

rank and income under the Zhou dynasty in depth. However, other than this the focus is very much on the personal qualities of the ruler and the idea of “benevolent government”, rather than on any specific policies. To be clear, the point I am trying to make here is not that the pre-Qin Confucians did not have any specific policies they wanted the rulers of their time to implement, rather it is the more modest point that the focus is very much elsewhere, on the character of the ruler, as well as the ability of a sage ruler to rule via *wu-wei*.<sup>1</sup>

What is rule via *wu-wei*? *Wu-wei* can be defined as the ideal of effortless action, action performed in a manner which is spontaneous, unselfconscious and perfectly efficacious (Slingerland 2003, XIX). This is a style of governance that Confucius attributes to have belonged to Sage-Kings like Shun, who were seen to have been capable of governing with this effortless, harmonious ease (Slingerland 2003, XIX). While the concept of *wu-wei* is implied multiple times in the *Analects*, the only explicit mention of the term *wu-wei* is in *Analects* (15.5) where Confucius states: “Is Shun not an example of someone who ruled by means of *wu-wei*? What did he do? He made himself reverent and took his proper [ritual] position facing South, that is all.” Shun here is one of the ancient Sage-King’s Confucius admires. In his commentary Slingerland discusses the meaning of *wu-wei* in this passage, differentiating between two distinct schools of thought. One interpretation, (beginning with He Yan) understands this *wu-wei* institutionally, in its literal sense of doing nothing (Slingerland 2003, 176). The notion here is that if the ruler can effectively fill the government with the right people and effectively set the machinery of government in motion, the government will more or less run itself, without the need for any action on the part of the ruler themselves. The other interpretation, which Slingerland regards as better supported, is that ruling by *wu-wei* means ruling by virtue, with the ruler morally perfecting themselves and thereby effortlessly transforming everyone around them (ibid.). The point according to this interpretation is that *wu-wei* does not literally mean doing nothing, but instead one does not force anything or consciously attempt to achieve results.

The notion that the ideal ruler rules via *wu-wei* is supported by other passages in both the *Analects* and *Mencius*. For example, governance by *wu-wei* is expressed—albeit without the use of the term *wu-wei*—in *Analects* (8.18), where Confucius declares: “How majestic! Shun and Yu possessed the entire world and yet had no need to actively manage (*yu* 與) it.” On the institutional reading of *wu-wei* this means that if one employs others to take care of government one does not have

1 According to the footnote, I can acknowledge that the *Xunzi* goes into more depth on the details of practical policies the ruler may want to implement with this more modest point still holding. I would suggest that even in *Xunzi* the themes identified above, especially the character of the ruler, are the core tenets, and not any specific policies.

to personally participate. Alternatively, and based on the rule by virtue conception of *wu-wei*, it is the perfection of Shun and Yu itself that is what allowed them to rule without ruling. Throughout the *Mencius* the advice given to the various rulers Mencius interacts with is consistently to practice benevolent government, often as opposed to increasing their territories. For example, in *Mencius* (2A1) the King of Qi is advised that no further increase in his territory or population is necessary and, after citing the example of King Wen, Mencius advises the king that he “can become a true king just by practising benevolent government, and no one will be able to stop him”. It thus appears that in pre-Qin Confucianism it is important for the ruler to have the qualities of virtue and benevolence, with the details of specific policies falling into place as a result of this.

The effect of a virtuous ruler on the people will be examined in section 3.2. For now, I want to consider how we could conceive of the idea of ruling by *wu-wei* or “ruling by not ruling” from a Laclauian perspective. As a project in philosophical reconstruction, my aim here is to suggest that there is compatibility with a key notion in Laclau’s theory, that of the ruler serving as an empty signifier. Namely that there is a case that the idea of the Sage-Kings serves the purpose of signifying a mythical past fullness, in the form of the harmonious society the Confucians claim to have previously existed under the rule of these Sage-Kings. Let me explain my reasoning behind this. Both interpretations of *wu-wei* given above present a picture of the past without conflict, where the ruler is capable of dealing with the political demands of their people spontaneously and efficaciously. On the institutional view this is because the ruler has the right ministers in place, on the rule by virtue view this is because of the ruler’s virtue itself. Either way, through this style of governance a state of harmony is achieved. Slingerland offers some interesting comments that further illuminate this. After quoting *Analects* (15.5) he states that, for Confucius, “in the ideal state of harmony between heaven and humans that prevailed in ancient times, the ruler had no need to act or to speak. He simply rectified his person and took up the ritual position fitting for a ruler and the world became ordered of its own accord” (Slingerland 2003, XXI). In Confucius’ view this sort of natural, spontaneous, unselfconscious harmony had once prevailed during the reigns of the ancient Sage-Kings Yao and Shun as well as during the Golden Ages of the three dynasties, the Xia, the Shang and the Zhou (ibid.). So, an idealized version of the past serves as Confucius’ moral, religious and political benchmark. Seen through a Laclauian lens it makes sense that these rulers are not specified as ruling by doing anything in particular. This is because instead of representing something concrete and specific they instead serve as empty signifiers that people can project their various demands onto.

Importantly, Confucius can also be interpreted as saying his time lacks this fullness, meaning, as per Lacan and Laclau, this fullness is presented in opposition to a current lack. Confucius constantly bemoans how far the rulers in his current time have descended into petty obsessions such as the desire for more territory, wealth and fame, as opposed to virtue (for example, *Analects* 16.1). This results in Confucius' dismissal of the rulers of his time as "petty functionaries not even worth considering" (*Analects* 13.20). A final point that can serve as evidence for this reading is that Confucius sees himself as put into the world by *Tian* (天), or Heaven, to bring China back to the fullness and harmony of the Zhou dynasty. For example, *Analects* (3.24) suggests that *Tian* intends to use Confucius to restore China to its prior state, and in *Analects* (9.5) Confucius says that King Wen (the first Zhou ruler) lives on in him and that he can come to no harm because *Tian* does not want his teachings to perish. As Slingerland puts it, for Confucius "the social world should function in the same *wu-wei* fashion as the natural world, and Confucius has been summoned to speak, to bring the world back into a state of wordless harmony, only because the way has been lost in his age" (Slingerland 2003, XXI). It is thus feasible that Confucius conceived of his purpose in the social world as to be aiding the restoration of this lost harmony that existed during the reigns of the ancient Sage-Kings, a purpose apt to be described in Laclauian terms.

Hence, overall, Confucianism's diagnosis of the problems in Chinese society at the time can be conceptualized using the Laclauian framework built up in section 2. There is a sense of a current profound *lack* in Chinese society at the time of the Classical Confucians, and the chaos of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods indicates this. Moreover, a Laclauian conceptualization of Confucius' solution to this is also possible, in that Confucius appeals for the restoration of what he presents as a past state of fullness, through the coming of a virtuous ruler modelled on the ancient Sage-Kings. Confucianism's political vision can therefore be characterized using Laclau's definition of radical investment as making an object the "embodiment of a mythical fullness" (Laclau 2005, 115), since this is what Confucius makes the Sage-Kings the embodiment of. Section 3.2 explores this ruler-ruled relationship in more depth, arguing that the idea of benevolent government could be given a psychological underpinning due to the Freudian identification that takes place if the radical investment is in the figure of a particular leader.

### 3.2 *The Freudian Ruler-Ruled Relationship*

Laclau's (2005) notion of the psychological dynamic that results from people making a radical investment in a leader is based on Freudian identification. Specifically, Laclau believes that when a particular person becomes the empty signifier, the radical investment people then make in them involves Freudian identification. In this section I will show that there is overlap between the Confucian tradition and Freud on identification, before arguing that identification can serve as a psychological mechanism whereby the ruler's virtue is transferred to the people.

In Freudian psychoanalysis, identification is the earliest form of emotional tie with another person (Freud 1921, 105). It happens, in the first instance, because boys take their fathers and girls their mothers as their ego ideal (their unconscious notion of a perfect ideal self that they aspire towards). To Freud, group identity operates according to this same psychological mechanism extended beyond its original familial function, in that group unity comes about through identification with the same leader (*ibid.*, 108). A group is hence defined by Freud as "a number of individuals who have put one and the same object in the place of their ego-ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego" (*ibid.*, 115). In this Freud's main point is that people identify with each other to form groups when they all take a certain leader as their aspirational ideal self, and, importantly, this psychological dynamic is an extension of the one that operates within the family.

The idea of benevolent government in reality (a key aspect of government by *wu-wei* on the virtue interpretation of *wu-wei*) can arguably be given a psychological reinforcement by being conceptualized in Freudian terms. Firstly, there is a strong case that the Confucian tradition identifies a similar psychological dynamic to Freud in terms of the relationship between the family and wider politics. For example, *Analects* (1.2) emphasizes that showing filial piety (having the appropriate psychological relationship with the father and mother) is the psychological root of the correct relationship with political leaders. *Mencius* (4A5) also suggests this, emphasizing that "the empire has its basis in the state, the state in the family and the family in one's own self". Also, as we have seen, the *Analects* highlights that having a virtuous ruler is crucial to having a virtuous and harmonious population. For example, *Analects* (2.3), which asserts that the people will fail to respond to purely legalistic means of control and that governing them by virtue is necessary to give people the sense of shame they need to rectify themselves.

Freudian psychoanalysis gives us reason to think the *Analects* and *Mencius* are not wrong to place a large amount of emphasis on the virtuous ruler. To Freud, the moral qualities of the leader are important because, like the father, the leader is a

key person that ego-ideals are based on. Since the ego-ideal is one whom you desire to be like or emulate, then a virtuous ruler in power will make the people more virtuous because the people will seek to emulate them. Conversely, non-virtuous rulers will lead to a population with no sense of shame and the chaotic disunity the Confucians warn comes with this (and which was certainly present in Confucius' time). There are of course important qualifications and nuances to this psychological dynamic in practice. For example, a virtuous ruler is unlikely to inspire everyone, and even people to whom the ruler successfully transfers their virtue will have a degree of autonomy from this identification process. Nonetheless I hope to have demonstrated that there are some similarities that can serve as a basis for further reflection on the compatibility of Confucianism and Laclauian democracy. Therefore, in summary, the ideal ruler in Confucianism is a virtuous one who inspires virtue in the people, which the Freudian notion of the people taking a leader as their ego-ideal can serve to give some psychological reinforcement to, in terms of the practical reality of this idea. This practical reality and implications of the conceptualization built up thus far are what I now move on to.

#### 4. Confucianism and Laclauian Democracy

What are the implications of the conceptualization developed above with regard to Confucianism's compatibility with modern-day democracy? "Seeing the Confucian ideal ruler-ruled relationship through a Laclauian lens can make sense of what Confucius is advocating politically in a way that has the potential to allay doubts about the replicability of the ruler-ruled relationship in modern democracy, where a plurality of (often competing) interests or demands needs to be accounted for (see, for example, Elstein 2010)." The major question is how is this virtuous leader supposed to unite heterogenous political demands? Laclau highlights two important elements behind an assemblage of heterogenous demands kept together by a leader. The first is the fact that group unity is retrospectively constituted by the name of that leader and the second element is Freudian identification with that leader (Laclau 2005, 100). The first element points to the fact that the leader's name itself acts as an empty signifier, a signifier that points to the absent fullness of society. The leader hence becomes capable of acting as an impossible object, an object capable of taking within it multiple contradictory demands and thus forging a degree of homogeneity out of what simultaneously remains a fundamentally heterogenous population (ibid., 70). Viewed in these terms, there is hope that Confucius' virtuous leader could unite the different sections of a population, or at least a substantial proportion of them. Secondly, there is Freudian identification with the leader, whereby the

people take the leader as their ego-ideal, and hence come to identify with each other in their ego. As well as unifying people, this Freudian identification also explains how a leader could transfer their virtue to their people. Taking the leader as an ego-ideal means taking them as their—the people’s—aspirational ideal self that they aspire to be, hence the people *are* more likely to show more virtue if their political leaders are virtuous. Conceptualized in Laclauian-Psychoanalytic terms, there was thus the potential for Confucius’ solution to political conflict to work in ancient China.

Arguably there is also scope for a similar relationship to take place in modern politics. To see this it is helpful to consider Nelson Mandela, perhaps the closest modern equivalent to Confucius’ notion of a virtuous ruler. Indeed, Laclau briefly cites Mandela as an example of a leader whose name became the symbol of a nation (Laclau 2005, 100), and Olberding (2011) cites Mandela as a moral exemplar. Consider the situation in South Africa between the release of Mandela from prison in 1990 and his ascension to the presidency in 1994. Different sections of the population had different grievances against De Klerk’s incumbent National Party regime. These ranged from disillusionment due to racism (a concern held by almost all black South Africans and many white ones), to black South Africans concerned with poor living conditions as a result of the Bantustan policy (which put 90% of the population in 10% of the country), to white business owners who were suffering from their inability to hire black workers (Rees 2015). This shows that the political grievances against the National Party regime varied widely and were often contradictory. For example, many white business owners hated the employment policies but supported the Bantustan policy, as it prevented overcrowding in the areas they lived in. Nonetheless, the ANC managed to unite all these people (the substantial majority of the country) under the slogan “Free Nelson Mandela”. On a Laclauian reading, this overcoming of heterogeneity was due to the demands being conjoined under the empty signifier of Mandela’s name, which came to contain the promise of an absent fullness, a harmonious South Africa where the demands of all were satisfied. There is also evidence of Freudian identification here. At the time South Africa was ripe for violence, but Mandela managed to significantly diffuse this, resulting in far less violence than there otherwise would have been (Rees 2015, 380–81). In the psychoanalytic framework I have outlined, this can be interpreted as the people taking Mandela as their ego-ideal, and hence replicating his virtuous stance of non-violence. As such, in Mandela we have a modern example of Confucius’ virtuous ruler in practice.

## 5. Virtuous Rulers in Practice—An Objection

In this final section, I want to spend some time addressing a serious potential concern with this conception of Confucian democracy, namely how, in practice, do we ensure or encourage the emergence of virtuous rulers, like Mandela, as opposed to non-virtuous ones, so that we can have a normatively desirable ruler-ruled dynamic? This is a very salient objection with regard to modern-day politics. After all, arguably the most prominent group currently taking advantage of the populist psychoanalytic dynamics explored above are not virtuous people like Mandela, but right-wing populists, such as Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, people who do not come anywhere close to meeting a Confucian standard of virtue. This is not a phenomenon unique to the Western world, either. For example, the right-wing populist Yoon Suk Yeol was recently elected in South Korea despite a series of controversial statements, including praising the former military dictatorship and blaming low birth rates on feminism (Rashid 2022). Neither is it a uniquely modern problem for Confucianism. As we saw with *Analects* (13.20), Confucius bemoans the rulers of his day for lacking virtue. Therefore, it is important to outline a response to this if my case for Confucian democracy rests on the presence of virtuous rulers in practice.

To respond to this objection, I will advocate for the permissibility of certain restrictions on who is eligible to run for office in the first place. I do not want to be too specific about what kind of electoral rules would be best here, as this would require a full and detailed account of this system that is beyond the scope of this article. It is enough for my purposes to point out that there are a variety of ways in which we can influence the political system to encourage the emergence of those who are virtuous by Confucian standards within these political systems. The objection to this form of Confucian democracy on the grounds that a virtuous ruler is unlikely to emerge has less force if there are mechanisms in place to try and encourage their emergence (or at least to eliminate the chance of people that Confucian standards would deem actively unvirtuous emerging).

The issue of candidate restrictions has already been examined in the Confucian democracy literature, for example by Joseph Chan (2013) in *Confucian Perfectionism*. It would not be beneficial for this article (given the space constraints) to delve into the details of previous normative justifications for this (as opposed to outlining why it might be a useful response to the objection above given my prior argument). It is however perhaps worth briefly reminding the reader that the nature of the debate surrounding democracy in East Asia is very different to that in the West. Unlike in the West, it is not going against the grain to not be in favour of democracy (and even more so a liberal type of democracy) in many East Asian

countries, as evidenced by the concrete fact that many are not democracies (e.g., China and Singapore) and many academic authors argue that non-democratic models may be more appropriate than democracy in this context.<sup>2</sup> So, given that the aim of this article is to contribute to the debate over what form Confucian democracy may take in East Asian countries influenced by Confucianism, it is appropriate not to spend too much time reviewing arguments over whether democracy is something we have a right to in the first place, and details of what this right consists of.

What I want to do here instead is show broadly why some form of candidate restrictions (or candidate selection system) could be justified as a response to the prior objection. Let me lay this out in relation to my argument in previous sections. Firstly, why the focus on leaders in the political system? I explained above that leaders in the political system become empty signifiers, with people taking them as their ego ideal and emulating their actions. This means that, for the purposes of comparison between Confucianism and Laclauian democracy, it is far more important that the key leaders—as well as other figures who are likely to come to public attention—are virtuous, while this is less important for those who hold less prominent positions, such as MPs in a legislature. These key leaders could be presidential candidates in a presidential system (such as in the US or South Korea) or the key leaders of political parties in a parliamentary-style system (such as Britain). What is important is that there are certain restrictions applied to those with potential for leadership positions who are in the public eye.

Now we have discussed who these candidate restrictions would apply to, let us move on to describing the form they could take. To start with we could have a list of restrictions on who can run that reflect what society sees as virtuous (which in countries influenced by Confucianism would involve Confucian virtues). This is not as controversial or as different from practice in even the most liberal democracies as it might initially sound. For example, the US Constitution prevents people under 35 from running for president, reflecting the value their society places on maturity and having some experience of life before being in a position as important as president. If we want to avoid a Trump-style populist taking advantage of a semi-democratic system in an Asian country, it would not be too much of a stretch to extend this exclusion to people facing court cases and certainly those who have been found civilly liable for sexual assault and defamation (as Trump was found guilty of in relation to E. Jean Carroll (Halpert and Matza 2023)). Quite how immaculate we would want the records of these politicians to be is

---

2 For example, Bell (2015) in *The China Model* argues that China's political system represents a viable alternative to the West, more appropriate for East Asian countries influenced by Confucianism than a democratic system would be.

a matter for debate in the relevant country. Any criteria set in this context could reasonably include past inflammatory comments or even conduct in the candidates' personal lives. This would lead to candidates like Boris Johnson (who called Muslim women "letterboxes" and has had multiple extra-marital affairs (BBC News 2018)), Yoon Suk Yeol (who has made a series of controversial statements, including praising the former military dictatorship, blaming low birth rates on feminism and more recently calling the US Congress "bastards" (Shin 2022)) and Donald Trump (who is facing multiple court cases for fraud, election rigging, sexual assault and defamation (Greve and Cameron 2023)) being ruled non-eligible to stand for high office in the first place.

As mentioned earlier, not dissimilar suggestions have already been proposed in the Confucian democracy literature, including by those who broadly support some form of Confucian democracy. This can involve going further and advocating not just candidate restrictions but also candidate selection. For example, in *Confucian Perfectionism* Joseph Chan entertains a non-democratic way of selecting representatives, which in his view is a selection mechanism that should be used to select one house in a bicameral legislature. According to Chan, these representatives should be "seasoned participants in public service" (Chan 2013, 107), with those responsible for selecting them including "senior secretariat staff serving in any of the public institutions mentioned above or experienced political affairs journalists who interact with senior public servants on a regular basis" (ibid., 108). Chan's rationale for this is that these people have a mature and developed understanding of any potential "seasoned participants". There is no barrier in principle to this being applied to the key leaders in the political system, possibly with some elections then being held amongst those deemed worthy to stand in them. Of course, having the background of being seasoned participants in public service, and being seen as good enough to be chosen by senior secretariat staff and other relevant people who know these individuals, such as journalists, would also likely be effective at precluding the emergence of characters such as Trump, Johnson and Yoon, so long as there are also checks within this system and it does not become corrupt. Therefore, a system of initial candidate selection applied to the leaders of the political system would be another way of solving this problem and hence, resolving the objection considered in this section.

Finally, it is worth saying that this idea of candidate restrictions places no restriction on the ideological type of politics one can support. What I mean by this is that it does not restrict, say, someone's ability to argue for a left-wing set of policies, a right-wing set of policies or a mixture of the two (as we have seen for example with the Five Star Movement in Italy). It only restricts the *character* of the people who are arguing for this. This is worth mentioning because one potential

worry about this idea of candidate restrictions is that it imposes a certain kind of politics on people. This could be said to be particularly concerning within the context of my argument, as the very idea of an empty signifier depends upon the ability of this signifier to potentially absorb any possible demands (as outlined in section 2). I therefore want to highlight explicitly that it is not the case that the idea of candidate restrictions prevents this. It is certainly fair to say that, broadly and historically, different sides in politics have each possessed both virtuous and less virtuous characters, in other words among the subset of people we could regard as virtuous (or at least not actively unvirtuous) there has been little commonality in the type of politics they support. For example, there are Republican members of Congress who have none of Trump's personal vices, but still support the same set of policies he does. Equally, among the Democrats in Congress who opposed most of Trump's policies, there are virtuous and less virtuous characters (for example, Senator Bob Menendez was recently charged with bribery and corruption but refused to resign (Cohen, Zengerle and Goudswaard 2023)). Someone with a set of policies mostly the same as Donald Trump's during his time in the White House—for example, tax cuts for the wealthy, immigration restrictions and protectionism—would not be prevented from running under this system. It is Trump's character, not his policies, that candidate restrictions would attempt to counter. Therefore, candidate restrictions do not prevent the conjoining of any number of different political demands under an empty signifier.

To conclude this section, what matters is that I have shown some kind of candidate restrictions could be used to increase the chances of virtuous people gaining high positions in modern-day politics. The idea of candidate restrictions represents one of these, as does Chan's proposal of candidate selection. Exactly what form is adopted and in which countries are practical questions beyond the scope of this article. The idea here is simply to show that there are many feasible and implementable versions of candidate restriction or selection that could be used to increase the virtuousness of the people we see in politics.

## Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have argued that the Confucian ideal ruler-ruled relationship can be conceptualized in Laclauian terms as the people making a radical investment in a virtuous ruler, and that this leads to a degree of compatibility between Confucianism and Laclauian democracy. I first illustrated that to radically invest in an empty signifier means to take that signifier as the embodiment of a mythical fullness. Next, I argued that the Sage-Kings (including the early Zhou rulers)

referenced in the *Analects* could be conceptualized as empty signifiers precisely because they represent a mythical fullness, which was absent in Chinese society at the time and which Confucius viewed as his task to revive. After this, I showed that an important part of radical investment in a leader is Freudian identification, and argued this can help us conceptualize how a virtuous leader could transfer his virtue to the people. I then demonstrated Confucianism's potential compatibility with a Laclauian conception of democracy. Specifically, I argued that Mandela met the criteria of a virtuous ruler under our Laclauian conception of Confucianism, because (with the help of the rest of the ANC) he united a series of heterogeneous political demands around the empty signifier of his name and managed to transfer his virtue to the people through the psychological mechanism of Freudian identification. Finally, I answered the objection that these kinds of virtuous leaders are few and far between in modern world politics, with actively unvirtuous characters being common, by exploring the possibility of candidate restrictions to increase the virtuousness of those in power. Overall, we can conclude that there is a potential for compatibility between Confucianism and a Laclauian conception of democracy, albeit with some potential caveats to adapt Confucianism to a democratic context, such as candidate restrictions. I hope in presenting this argument I have provided a promising point of departure for further explorations of the compatibility of Confucian political thought and Laclauian democracy.

## Acknowledgements

I thank Dr Udit Bhatia, Dr Joshua Forstenzer, Dr Sarah Flavel and two anonymous reviewers for their feedback. This paper also benefited from presentation at the European Association for Chinese Philosophy Conference 2023. This research was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UKRI) [Grant Number AH/R012733/1].

## References

- BBC News. 2023. "Boris Johnson Faces Criticism over Burka 'Letter Box' Jibe." *BBC News*, August 6, 2018. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-45083275>. Accessed November 4, 2023.
- Bell, Daniel A. 2015. *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Cartwright, Mark. 2017. "Ancient Chinese Warfare." *World History Encyclopedia*, November 17, 2017. [https://www.worldhistory.org/Chinese\\_Warfare](https://www.worldhistory.org/Chinese_Warfare)



- Olberding, Amy. 2011. *Moral Exemplars in the Analects: The Good Person is That*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Rashid, Raphael. 2022. "Devastated': Gender Equality Hopes on Hold as 'Anti-Feminist' Voted South Korea's President." *Guardian*, March 11, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/11/south-korea-gender-equality-anti-feminist-president-yoon-suk-yeol>. Accessed October 30, 2023.
- Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rees, Rosemary. 2015. *Searching for Rights and Freedoms in the 20th Century*. London: Pearson.
- Shin, Hyonhee. 2022. "Gaffes, Controversy Overshadow South Korean President's Trips to U.N., London." *Reuters*, September 23, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/gaffes-controversy-overshadow-skorea-as-yoon-trips-un-london-2022-09-23/>. Accessed November 1, 2023.
- Slingerland, Edward, trans. 2003. *Confucius Analects*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Tan, Sor-Hoon. 2004. *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction*. Albany NY: SUNY Press.