



The Need for More than Role Relations

Queer Lives, Social Group Identities, and Confucian Self-cultivation

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Abstract

This article argues for the necessity of a social group ontology in Confucian ethics. The heart of Confucian ethics is self-cultivation begun in familial relations. Social group categories can disrupt family structures in ways that can only be ignored at a high cost to the well-being of biological family members who do not share the dominant group identities. To make this disruption clear, I will articulate the challenge queer lives pose for classical Confucian self-cultivation. This discussion will give rise to an account of queer chosen kin and its compatibility with the existing Confucian role-relational ontology. The incorporation of social group identities and an account of the sociopolitical constitution of persons is necessary not only for the development of Confucian social and political philosophy, but also for illustrating the significant ways in which Confucianism can shape cross-cultural discussions of ethical self-cultivation.

Keywords Self-cultivation · Social groups · Queer identities · Confucianism · Social ontology

1 Introduction

At the foundation of much of modern European moral philosophy is the discrete individual self. Whether descriptive or prescriptive, moral agents are seen to be rational, ideally self-sufficient, and free to act and to craft a life as they please. This model of agency and personhood has been challenged both within mainstream philosophy and from without. Some challenges have come from critical scholars, such as those working with feminist or anticlassist frameworks. Another set have come from scholars of nonmodern philosophical traditions, whether these are from within the Euro-

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American canon, such as ancient Greek philosophy, or from without, such as North American indigenous philosophies.¹

One such nonmodern philosophical tradition with the resources to challenge the discrete individualism of modern European moral philosophy is classical Confucianism. According to one contemporary revival of classical Confucian ethics, Confucian role ethics, the Confucian vision of the moral life is one grounded in “the perceived necessity of family feeling” for moral development (Rosemont and Ames 2009: xii). The logic is simple enough. First, “ethics” refers to meaningful existence rather than particular actions or outcomes in isolation, as much of modern ethical theory holds. Ethics is about the quality of our ongoing conduct in everyday life. What provides positive quality to this conduct is that it is rooted generally in a love of others; it comes from a disposition to care. This disposition to care for and love others is only possible when one is cared for and loved oneself, thus familial nurturance is paramount. The empirical fact that everyone has some sort of family (so the role ethicist claims) grounds the claim that this vision of the moral life can serve a general or universal function. The Confucian lesson, then, is that within the family one comes to understand the value of loving others and of cultivating mutual support for each other (Rosemont and Ames 2016: 51–52). Living a meaningful life is irreducibly intersubjective.

This Confucian vision of family life as the root of a meaningful life is admittedly idealistic, and role ethicists frequently acknowledge this fact. Henry Rosemont and Roger Ames write that they “have no truck with authoritarianism in any of its ideological disguises—sexist, patriarchal, racist, homophobic, or otherwise” (Rosemont and Ames 2009: xiii). They state, instead, that their goal in developing role ethics more generally is to build from the fact that every culture has some conception of family, and as such, Confucian role ethics has much to provide our contemporary world, in which the institution of family is not going to disappear any time soon and moreover where a great deal of strength and solidarity can be derived from the deepening and the extension of these familial relations. They write that while many have suffered or continue to suffer at the hands of family members, “family values can be seen as necessary for living full social, moral, and religious human lives,” and with a revitalized interpretation of Confucianism, “the importance of intergenerationality in human relations and interactions can be appreciated anew; a different way of defining oneself can be envisaged; a more robust concept of social justice might replace the narrow definition currently in vogue” (Rosemont and Ames 2009: xv).

The role ethical project is particularly attractive for my present purposes because, first, even if it offers a fairly optimistic account of ideal family life, it nonetheless takes seriously the power familial relations have in shaping a person. Here I will extend this project to account for the potential harms that power might produce. Second, the conception of correlative constitution at work in classical Confucian philosophy, especially the role ethical interpretation, offers something not readily apparent in contemporary Anglophone discourses on the ontology of sociality.

¹ I am following María Lugones and others in using the designation *nonmodern* to express that these philosophical traditions are not “premodern” but rather competing ways of knowing and being that are “at odds with a dichotomous, hierarchical, ‘categorical’ logic that defines modern European philosophy” (Lugones 2010: 743).

In this article, I argue that the role ethical conception of *human becomings*—the notion that persons are processes of individuated growth situated in a network of role relations and rooted in familial connections—provides a powerful explanatory framework for successes and failures in human flourishing today. However, the current Confucian social ontology structurally excludes certain vulnerable groups, such as queer persons and persons with disabilities. In particular, I will focus on the challenge queer lives pose to the role ethical conception of human becomings and introduce the social group ontology developed in Iris Marion Young’s politics of difference. In introducing a social group ontology compatible with the existing role-relational ontology, I argue that this revised account of Confucian role ethics can account for contemporary phenomena within queer communities in the United States, such as queer chosen families and the damage that follows rejection by biological families, and thus provides an alternative “family”-oriented way of life that is genuinely inclusive of queer lives.

2 Prefatory Comments on Methodology and Terminology

A cross-cultural philosophical account of queer lives requires an extended introduction in order to clarify not only methodology and terminology, but also the purpose of the inquiry itself. This article begins from two premises. First, classical Confucian philosophy has something unique and meaningful to contribute to contemporary reflections on ethics, politics, and well-being regardless of one’s cultural background. In other words, just as ancient Greek, modern European, and contemporary Euro-American philosophies are regularly turned to for insights into contemporary issues, so too should nonmodern philosophical traditions, such as Confucianism. Of course, revisions or creative applications are necessary for use in contemporary settings, but this is not to prejudice Confucianism as inadequate along (neo)colonial lines. One should be wary of any attempt to import a philosophical perspective wholesale into a new historical or cultural setting, and following the stage of charitable interpretation and translation of the classical texts, the next stage of responsible cross-cultural philosophy is the critical use of those philosophical resources to address contemporary philosophical and social issues. I say more about this later in this section.

Second, queer lives are worth living and moreover queer persons deserve to flourish as much as anyone else. Put another way, any philosophy of well-being or flourishing that purports to be inclusive of queer identities but at the same time structurally excludes or disadvantages queer lives is, to that degree, found lacking. It is this sort of well-intentioned but queer-erasing philosophical project that I wish to challenge and open up here. The other sort—the sort that would assert that flourishing or well-being is necessarily cisheterosexual—is left to demonstrate that such a view is anything more than a prejudicial relic. I will not be dedicating any space here to arguing that either Confucian philosophy or queer lives “count.” The burden of proof, as I see it, is on those who wish to claim otherwise.

These two premises—taken from cross-cultural and queer philosophy, respectively—necessitate a few comments on a methodology for cross-cultural queer

philosophy.² First, I use the term “cross-cultural” here rather than “comparative” in order to emphasize what work I see the present inquiry to be doing. Comparative philosophy, broadly, is both interpretive and constructive (Connolly 2015: 28–45). The interpretive dimension is what we might more properly call the comparative dimension. This stage of scholarship uncovers and reveals what different cultural traditions have to say in their respective philosophical reflections on the world. The constructive dimension, what I am calling the “cross-cultural” stage, is about making these philosophical resources do work.³ For example, we might ask how Confucius or Mencius understood the social constitution of persons. An interpretive (i.e., comparative) project, like much of Rosemont and Ames’s Confucian role ethics, offers such a culturally and historically contextualized conception of persons. With this conception in hand, we might further ask, as I am here, what work this conception of relationally constituted personhood can do for us today. In this second stage, one is working constructively (i.e., cross-culturally), and the focus is on returning to the present situation. It is important to note that according to this distinction between interpretive and constructive philosophy (or comparative and cross-cultural philosophy), my claims below do not amount to queer Confucian ethics but rather an account of queer lives that leverages Confucian philosophy for both explanatory and normative purposes.⁴

The choice of Confucian role ethics as an interpretive framework for classical Confucian philosophy requires justification. While there are other interpretive frameworks for classical Confucian philosophy (e.g., Confucian virtue ethics⁵ and a Confucian ethics of moral exemplars⁶), it is Confucian role ethics that seems to take most seriously the correlative cosmology assumed in the classical texts and to draw out this cosmology’s implications for the social constitution of persons. Moreover, to the extent that other interpretive frameworks take seriously the social constitution of persons, I believe much of what I argue here will apply to those frameworks, *mutatis mutandis*. Lastly, it is significant that since the first articulation of Confucian role ethics as a distinct interpretation of classical Confucian ethics, both Ames and Rosemont have consistently emphasized that this philosophy is opposed to oppression in all forms and thus inclusive of traditionally marginalized identities.

Several key concepts I use below require an extended introduction. In the following, I briefly provide provisional definitions of several key terms to be elaborated on in the course of the subsequent argument.

² It is beyond the scope of the present article to provide a full exposition of cross-cultural queer philosophy, and I must limit myself here to those points that are necessary for the primary analysis of the social constitution of persons.

³ I understand Jim Behuniak to be making a similar point when he writes that “postcomparative” philosophy is about what we are doing “intra-culturally” as philosophers after we have established what different philosophical traditions have to offer (Behuniak 2021).

⁴ Due to space constraints, this article largely limits itself to addressing the situation of queer lives in the contemporary United States. Where data is available to make comparisons to the contemporary situation in East Asian societies influenced by Confucianism, I will make those connections. These connections, however, amount to directions for further research. The question of what classical Confucian philosophy can do for queer lives in a non-Confucian cultural environment is ultimately quite different from asking what it can do in a Confucian culture where it may well represent the oppressive cultural norms LGBTQ+ communities must resist.

⁵ See, for example, Angle and Slote 2013.

⁶ See, for example, Olberding 2012.

First, Iris Marion Young distinguishes *social groups* from what I will refer to here as voluntary associations and aggregated sets. Voluntary associations are social identities one opts into or out of; for example, someone might join a running club and then identify as a member of that running club. Aggregated sets are a form of group membership where a criterion may be essential to class membership; for example, a person must run regularly for exercise to be a member of the aggregate group “Runners.” However, these criteria are ultimately arbitrary, and therefore most aggregated groups have little bearing on the lived experiences of their members. If they do, it is mostly likely because whatever criteria have been selected ultimately correlate with elements of some social group identity. *Social groups* are those ontological categories that determine one’s social location in relation to others and along axes of power. These categories include race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and so on, where one group occupies a position of privilege in relation to at least one other group that is disadvantaged, oppressed, or dominated (Young 1990). Two key distinguishing features for the present argument are: first, social group identities are unchosen and imposed on individuals, unlike associations that are a matter of individual choice; second, social groups are ontologically significant, unlike aggregates that are simply the set of all individuals with a certain quality.

Social group identities become especially important here because of the Confucian emphasis on intergenerational parent-child relationships and the contemporary psychological distinction between *vertical* and *horizontal identities*. Vertical identities are those social group identities that are shared between parents and children and thus transmitted intergenerationally within these relationships. If two Chinese parents have a child, the child will also be Chinese and the parents will be well-positioned to raise the child as culturally Chinese. Horizontal identities are social group identities typically not shared between parents and children, thus complicating the Confucian vision of intergenerational cultural transmission. Two hearing parents of a deaf child are not in a position to raise their child as Deaf without considerable outside help, because they are not similarly socially located as deaf in a hearing world (Solomon 2012: 2).

One such horizontal social group identity is a *queer* identity, for which it is necessary to first define *cisheteronormativity*. “Cisheterosexual” refers to the combination of cisgender and heterosexual qualities. To be cisgender is for one’s assigned sex at birth to correspond to one’s gender identity. This is to be distinguished from the minoritized identities of transgender, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, genderfluid, and so on. To be heterosexual is to be exclusively attracted to the “opposite sex” (i.e., a man attracted to women or a woman attracted to men). This is to be distinguished from the minoritized identities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and the like. A culture or society is cisheteronormative when it understands cisgender and heterosexual identities to be the default and views all other identities as deviations (or deviant). Queer, then, is the umbrella term covering any social location falling outside of this cisheterosexual norm. I am using “queer” throughout this article as an umbrella term for all LGBTQ+ identities. I will use it interchangeably with “LGBTQ,” “LGBTI,” and so on, when it is necessary to share the language of other authors (see, for instance, the section on empirical data below).

With these prefatory comments on methodology and terminology in hand, I return now to the argument for developing Confucian role ethics to include a social group ontology.

3 A Missing Corner of the Square⁷

Confucian role ethics is grounded in self-cultivation, the art of flourishing as a relationally constituted person. It is worth pausing here to flesh out the notion of a role relation and how these relations constitute a person. *Role-relational constitution* refers to constitutive interpersonal relations that individuate one as a unique self. This uniquely individuated self is neither a simple collection of social roles without any inner mental life nor a static and preexisting core self who is merely playing these roles in given situations, as some have argued. Persons are always ambiguously a focal integration of their underdetermined social roles, such as parent, sibling, friend, and student, as well as the unique particular in direct relation to the others in these relations. In other words, one is never simply a child, but is always a child *of that particular parent*. Similarly, if one were to strip away all of these constitutive social relations, one would not find some independent identity. The Confucian person is always socially located according to certain underdetermined but normative roles, and the Confucian process of becoming human (i.e., self-cultivation) is a matter of individuating oneself within this matrix of role relations through a process of enriching these constitutive relations (Sullivan 2016).

The role-relational constitution of selves involves several key points (Sullivan 2016):

1. There is no preexisting core self. One's identity is an ongoing process of achieved human becoming rather than a static state of human being; thus this is an antiessentialist conception of persons.⁸
2. Family is the root of personhood. A person is rooted in familial relations in that biological family relations are the first social situation one finds oneself in and also in that familial feeling and familial patterns of deference govern relations beyond the immediate family.
3. The self is a focal integration of a role-relational field. A person is located in a matrix of interdependent and constitutive role relations; thus this conception of persons is incompatible with discrete individualism.

⁷ In *Analects* 7.8, Confucius says, "I do not open the way for students who are not driven with eagerness; I do not supply a vocabulary for students who are not trying desperately to find the language for their ideas. If on showing students one corner they do not come back to me with the other three, I will not repeat myself." All translations of the *Analects* are taken from Ames and Rosemont 1998 with occasional modifications.

⁸ One might argue here that Mencius enumerates several qualities that seem to be essential to being human, and thus the role-relational interpretation is off the mark. I think this equivocates on two senses of "human." There is the species conception for which one might say that certain qualities generally obtain for all species members. On this account, there is a species-essentialist account of what it means to be human, and any particular fish, for example, is not a human because it fails to have these essential human qualities. There is a second sense of "human," however, referring to what it is to live a meaningful human existence. For this existentialist conception, one can be a member of the human species while failing to be human. Someone in a persistent vegetative state does not cease to be a member of the human species, but they do cease to live a minimally meaningful human life. In this latter sense, they are no longer human. On my reading, when Mencius lists the various qualities or sprouts with which all humans are born (e.g., *Mencius* 2A6, 6A6), he is referring to the species conception. When he states that the loss of these qualities makes one no better than a beast (e.g., *Mencius* 3B9), he is referring to the existentialist conception. I am grateful to Yong HUANG for pressing me to clarify this point.

4. The roles are relationally defined. “Parent” and “child,” for example, are correlated and cannot be defined, let alone lived meaningfully, absent each other.
5. Normative roles are open to revision and evolution. These roles are normative but underdetermined in that while social and historical context provide a starting point for embodying these roles in relation to others, the present situation in all of its complexity always demands a virtuosic interpretation of what it means to be, for example, “parent” or “child.” By “virtuosic interpretation,” I mean that the general norms of “parent-ing” and “child-ing” always require a creative instantiation in a given moment and in a given relationship depending on the unique person occupying and living that role of “parent” or “child.” Parenting is always in relation to a particular child, as childing is always in relation to a particular parent.

Despite this thick conception of lived social experience, the geography of this social ontology is currently lacking, for role relations do not comprehensively map the social landscape. In *Analects* 1.2, Master You 有 says,

Exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) concentrate their efforts on the root, for the root having taken hold, the way (*dao* 道) will grow therefrom. As for filial and fraternal responsibility, it is, I suspect, the root of consummate conduct and personhood (*ren* 仁).

Service to one’s senior family members will provide one with the footing to walk one’s own *dao*, as these family members serve as exemplars. However, this is not equally true for all children. For example, a queer child is more likely to suffer in the parent-child relationship than a cisheterosexual child, given said queer child’s horizontal social group identity, that is, their group identity that is typically not shared with their parents *and* that is stigmatized in the broader cultural context. When this happens, the root structure for growth and flourishing is positively harmful to the child if this root is treated as the exclusive or even primary means by which a child learns how to situate themselves in the world. Not only is it likely, as research into implicit bias is overwhelmingly demonstrating, that cisheterosexual parents in a cisheteronormative society will harbor (at least at first) some pernicious stereotypes about their child’s identity, but given the lack of lived experience of this social group identity on the part of the parents, it will be overwhelmingly the case that the parents will not know (without the help of other members of this social group identity) what it is like to navigate a cisheteronormative world *as queer*, let alone how to thrive in that particular social location. In this sense, when parents do not share a social group identity with their children and yet the parent-child relationship remains largely or exclusively the root of a child’s social existence and well-being, Confucianism can be said to fail queer children.

Thus at the structural level, even if parents are not positively harming their queer children through the perpetuation of discriminatory or prejudiced norms or through violence, as is all too common, a Confucian role ethics rooted in biological family relations is harming queer children insofar as it systematically neglects to provide a path for becoming human and flourishing. Today, this generally leaves the queer child in a difficult situation. On the one hand, the child can continue to grow from the root structure of their cisheterosexual family, which can mean living a life in the closet up to

and including entering a heterosexual marriage and producing children. On the other hand, they might seek out a new root structure from which to flourish, but in the process find themselves distanced if not cut off from the biological family.

All this being said, many contemporary queer kin relationships point toward a potential transformation of this Confucian familial conception of human becoming. Chosen families and other queer kin relations are common in queer communities not only among those who have been rejected by biological family but also by those who are loved by their birth family but need “other roots” in order to become human and flourish. There are a multitude of reasons for following the queer lead on this. First, the decentering of biological families to include queer kin better incorporates the existential needs of queer persons to live flourishing lives, needs that are often not met even when born into supportive families. Importantly, “decentering” in this context means broadening the conception of family relations to incorporate more roots and branches than the biological familial tree; it does not mean removing biological families from the framework and replacing them with chosen families wholesale. Second, the decentering of biological families provides room for including persons who do not marry or do not produce biological children, two social positions that are still stigmatized in both traditional (i.e., heteronormative) Sinitic and Euro-American contexts. Third, by introducing social group identities, especially horizontal identities, the Confucian social ontology can better account for the “rootedness” from which we all must grow. Much of this social landscape at the group level is currently hidden from critical analysis because most group identities are vertical identities shared between parent and child. It is not that queer persons are unique in having social group identities; it is just that their social group identities are not yet accounted for in the framework. Fourth, the theorizing of group identities provides a necessary foundation to the work currently being done on gender and economic justice in Confucian social and political philosophy, where social categories such as gender and class have been assumed but not explicitly articulated. Fifth, the incorporation of social group identities into the Confucian social ontology moves the discourse toward discussions of broader social justice issues beyond feminism and economic justice, such as queer liberation, antiracism, disability justice, as well as the intersections of these oppressions.

In what follows, I will argue that if Confucian role ethics aims to provide a conception of lived experience that accurately maps the contemporary social landscape, then there is a troubling absence of social group identities—what I will refer to as our *sociopolitical constitution* as distinguished from our *role-relational constitution*. The heart of Confucian role ethics is familial relations, and these social group categories impose themselves on family structures in ways that can only be ignored at a high cost to the well-being of family members from some marginalized group identities. To make clear what is at stake for marginalized identities, I will articulate the challenge queer lives pose for the Confucian account of self-cultivation both empirically and structurally. This discussion will give rise to an account of queer chosen kin and its compatibility with a Confucian role-relational ontology. The incorporation of social groups and an account of the sociopolitical constitution of selves is necessary not only for those who wish to see Confucian contributions to global discussions of self-cultivation and moral development but also for those working in Confucian social and political philosophy.

4 Queer Lives as a Challenge for the Role-relational Model

Queer lives pose two challenges to the role-relational model of human becoming. First, there is an empirical issue when one attends to queer lives today and the challenges many face within the family. Queer youth face disproportionately high levels of discrimination, abuse, violence, and rejection within the family when compared to their cisheterosexual counterparts, meaning family lives today for many queer persons are far from being the secure root of personal growth that classical Confucianism presumes. Second, there is an ontological issue when one identifies the constitutive nature of group identities for role-relational persons. While many social group identities are shared between parents and children and are thus learned primarily in the parent-child relationship, some social group identities are not. In these cases, the secure root for personal growth cannot be solely the parent-child relationship if human flourishing in one's social location is the goal. I will address each of these points in turn before introducing the potential for a queer transformation.

4.1 The Empirical Challenge of Toxic Queer-phobia in China and the United States

The fact of anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination is readily apparent in both China and the United States.⁹ In both societies, LGBTQ+ individuals are subject to greater personal and social hardships than their cisgender and heterosexual neighbors, all other factors being equal. Compared to cisgender and heterosexual individuals, LGBTQ+ individuals face greater housing and employment discrimination, increased risk of random violence, greater stigma from law enforcement and medical professionals, greater obstacles to necessary health care (especially beyond routine care, such as HIV/AIDS education and treatment, hormone replacement therapy, and gender confirmation procedures), and disproportionate mental health disparities rooted in the experience of the above and more. For my purposes here, I focus specifically on the situation of LGBTQ+ minorities in family relations, since the family is the root of Confucian self-cultivation and ultimately Confucianism has the potential for positive philosophical contributions to the queer experience on these grounds.

In China, a recent report from the United Nations Development Programme notes that the vast majority of queer lives are lived in the closet, “with only 5% of them willing to live their diversity openly” (UNDP 2016: 6). The pressures to remain in the closet exist “in many aspects of their lives, *most importantly within the family, where the deepest forms of rejection and abuse reside*” (UNDP 2016: 6; my emphasis). In families, where the disclosure of one's identity should be safest according to Confucian philosophy, “no more than 15% have the courage to do so,” and the majority of queer individuals “report having been unfairly treated or discriminated against” as a result of coming out to family (UNDP 2016: 8). Of all social environments, including work, religion, and school, “family is the place where rejection and discrimination occur most frequently,” with reports of both physical and emotional violence (UNDP 2016: 8). Of the particular pressures faced in the family, queer individuals are often pressured,

⁹ Importantly, the ideological roots of these prejudices are not identical nor are the manifestations of either the queer identities or the queer prejudices. That said, the harms that queer persons self-report in both cultural contexts speak directly to the structural issue with Confucian ontology that I am highlighting.

against their claimed identity, to enter into heterosexual marriages and produce children. The pressure is so strong that some enter “cooperation marriages” with other queer individuals. It is not uncommon for queer individuals to also report coerced psychotherapy and even so-called “conversion therapy” (UNDP 2016: 8).

Of all social environments addressed in the survey, the family ranked lowest in terms of acceptance of queer individuals. Over half of the respondents chose “low acceptance” or “complete rejection” to describe their family response to their coming out. In contrast, fewer than 30% chose “complete rejection” for their schoolteachers, their work supervisors, and their clergy (UNDP 2016: 16). Specifically, only 8.1% reported family members as being accepting at any level, with 57.6% of respondents citing “rejection.” The remaining 34.2% were “not sure,” almost certainly reflecting the fact that these respondents were not out to their family (UNDP 2016: 17), a conjecture supported later in the survey where 37.8% of LGBTQ+ minorities reported being only selectively open with any family members (peers, parents, or other) and another 47.6% reported not being open at all with family (UNDP 2016: 26). The family in China today is clearly not the secure root structure for queer persons that classical Confucian ethics requires.

The situation is also far from ideal in the United States. According to the Human Rights Campaign, approximately 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ+, which is startling when most sources estimate that LGBTQ+ individuals account for 5–15% of the total US population (Human Rights Campaign 2017). The two most common explanations for homelessness these youth give are “running away from home or being rejected by their families *because of their LGBTQ status*” (Human Rights Campaign 2017; emphasis mine). Moreover, the damage done to LGBTQ+ youth is not limited to those who are forced into homelessness. Of children in the foster care system, 30.4% identify as LGBTQ+, and of those with unstable housing, 25.3% identify as LGBTQ+ (Baams et al. 2019). These rates, again, are disproportionately high, and they are correlated with poorer performance in school, increased victimization, and poorer mental health outcomes. In one study, 78% of foster children were removed from or ran away from a foster family due to conflicts over their LGBTQ+ identity (Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs 2019).

Of children living at home, the situation remains troubling. According to the same IWGYP report, 30% of LGBTQ+ youth were subject to physical violence from a family member after coming out as LGBTQ+, and of those who end up homeless, 32% report physical, emotional, or sexual abuse at the hands of family due to their LGBTQ+ identity. Mental health disparities are numerous as well, with increased rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidality among LGBTQ+ youth, especially those who have remained closeted to family or whose LGBTQ+ identities have been rejected by family. According to the American Psychiatric Association, 4.4% of gays and lesbians and 7.4% of bisexuals considered attempting suicide, as compared to 2.3% of the heterosexual population. This rate jumps to 30.8% for transgender individuals (American Psychiatric Association 2017). Generally, LGBTQ+ individuals are 2.5 times more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, or substance abuse than their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts (American Psychiatric Association 2017).

The take-away here is twofold. First, today in both China and the United States (and in most of the world) queer youth are at risk. It is not simply that there is a Lavender Ceiling above which they cannot rise in social status as adults or a partial limit to the options they have in choosing their life paths. The risk queer youth face is erasure,

culminating in its most extreme forms in death, either at the hands of a stranger, their loved ones, or themselves. Second, this risk is not strictly from the so-called outside world against which the family serves as some sort of safe harbor. As respondents to the China report testify and the statistics in the United States bear out, the greatest risk is often in the family itself. The stigma attached to queer identities severs the very root all persons require, according to Confucianism, to survive and to thrive.

One might argue that enlightened and progressive biological families are the solution. Children and parents cocreate each other, so if a child is as radically different from their parents as I am claiming here, the parent should learn from the child's experience. Just as someone might educate their parents on a new hobby, such as bird-watching, or a new technology, such as social media, one can educate one's parents on queer life. It is logically possible that this might happen, and no one said relational growth would be easy and painless. Moreover, this response to queer exclusion would be entirely in keeping with role-relational self-cultivation rooted in biological kin. Such an ideal solution, however, is misleadingly simple.

For queer youth in a cisheteronormative society, anything short of queer kin (hopefully in addition to biological kin) will make a sense of place, of rootedness, of belonging, difficult to achieve and to maintain, because it is not just that cisheterosexual parents cannot teach queer children how to navigate a hostile society. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observes, queer youth are exposed to latent if not explicit cisheteronormativity far before they are mature enough to critically assess or to resist such behavior in their family members and the broader community (Sedgwick 2008: 81). Michael Warner similarly observes that heteronormativity "in combination with a potent ideology about gender and identity in maturation, [...] bears down in the heaviest and often deadliest way on those with the least resources to combat it, queer children and teens" (Warner 1993: xvi). Arguing that queer children might develop sufficiently healthy foundational social skills and a resilient enough identity to educate their parents despite this (at least) latently hostile environment is a tall order, and this belies the myth of the family sanctuary.

In response to media coverage of queer-targeted bullying and the related higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide among queer youth, liberal progressive discourse of late in the United States has focused on the importance of a supportive and loving (biological) family to protect queer youth from a sometimes overtly and often inadvertently hostile society.¹⁰ Jason Jacobs argues that, while we should push for supportive and loving biological family relations for queer individuals, this should not be oversold as *the* solution to marginalized queer life. Jacobs notes that the liberal progressive response assumes that "the [biological] family is uniquely blessed with the social and emotional resources required to shield LGBTQ+ kids from violence and guide them through the difficult work of identity construction" (Jacobs 2014: 320). However, loving, supportive, and protective cisgender and heterosexual parents "are still unable to familiarize their children with the traditions, habits, social codes, aesthetics, or values [i.e., the cultures] of specifically queer communities" (Jacobs 2014: 319). In Confucian terms, we might say that LGBTQ+ children are not exposed to, let alone guided to virtuosic proficiency in, queer *li* 禮 (social grammar).

¹⁰ As Young notes, oppression and domination today are often the result of "the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society" (Young 1990: 41).

As noted above, the function of intergenerational relations in Confucian role ethics is to guide one in becoming human and flourishing, and this guidance depends to a large extent on shared vertical identities. With these identities, such as race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality, parents teach their children a particular way of life and its social grammar because they share the culture of that particular identity (Solomon 2012: 2). Vertical identities one shares, at least initially, with one's parents, and it is, again initially, primarily through one's parents that one learns the meaning of these identity-shaping categories and how to live and to flourish with these identities.¹¹ When one does not share a horizontal group identity with one's parents, such as a queer identity or being deaf, all the love, education, and effort in the world is not going to enable parents who live a different social group identity to raise a deaf or queer child *as* Deaf or queer. In short, these are identities for which several necessary constitutive role relations must be found outside of the biological family. To return to the root metaphor, a wider and more diversified root structure is necessary for growth, and it is precisely the phenomenon one finds in contemporary queer lives.

4.2 The Queer Response

This structural challenge to Confucian role ethics is not as damning as it might seem. In fact, chosen kin emerged historically as a remedy to the above empirical challenge, and they may indicate a fruitful direction for Confucian cultural transformation and make a case for the relevance of Confucian philosophy for a global discourse on well-being. If Confucian role ethics is presented as a vision of the flourishing moral life grounded in family feeling and in particular the biological family (i.e., the root of consummate personhood) and if the most virtuous and loving cisgender and heterosexual parents could never successfully raise a flourishing queer child alone, then it would seem that Confucian ethics can only ever be a structurally cisheteronormative (i.e., queer-exclusive) vision of the moral life. But when one looks to contemporary queer communities in the United States and analogous kin relations in China, one sees, in an interesting way, the grounds for a constructive queering of the role ethical vision of family relations presented thus far.

Chosen families in the United States are a social phenomenon that emerged in the 1980s, but queer kin relations have a US history dating back to at least the 1950s and a history in China dating back much further. Kath Weston's anthropological study of the San Francisco queer community focuses on chosen and biological families and the contested nature of "family" that is "implicated in the relations of power that permeate societies" (Weston 1991: 3). In other words, all family structures are historically situated social constructs, and queer kin is a contemporary transformation of such constructs (as opposed to a derivation from or substitute for the so-called American family unit). Precursors to today's chosen families include the intergenerational mentor relationships between gay men in the 1950s and 1960s, where an older gay man provided a father-like guidance to a young, recently out gay man (Weston 1991: 120). Another example is the ball culture and its voguing houses in 1980s New York. *As Paris Is Burning* documents (however controversially) and *Pose* dramatizes, house

¹¹ I say we share these identities initially because one may leave one's religion, emigrate, join a new language community, and so on. These situations, however, are the exception rather than the rule with these identities.

members considered each other kin, with a mother leading each house and with house members taking the last name of the house (Weston 1991: xvii). In China, Golden Orchid Associations were, while not exclusively queer, kin relationships established by women in China during the Qing 清 dynasty (1644–1912) who wished to opt out of heterosexual marriages (Topley 1975). While some women entering these associations were heterosexual and opting out of the oppressive institution of marriage, many others were what we might refer to today as lesbian or bisexual women entering into committed relations with other women.

What qualifies these as “kin” relations? Judith Butler, in a discussion of same-sex marriage, adoption rights, and reproductive rights in France, defines kinship relations as follows:

If we understand kinship as a set of practices that institutes relationships of various kinds which negotiate the reproduction of life and the demands of death, then kinship practices will be those that emerge to address fundamental forms of human dependency, which may include birth, child rearing, relations of emotional dependency and support, generational ties, illness, dying, and death (to name a few). (Butler 2004: 102)

Chosen kin are a particular transformation of biological kin relationships to serve these sorts of purposes. In her study, Weston observes that many queer persons claim chosen families, which “consciously [incorporate] symbolic demonstrations of love, shared history, material or emotional assistance, and other signs of enduring solidarity” (Weston 1991). That these are the attributes Weston’s subjects focus on when characterizing queer kin illustrates that these sorts of relationships are not simply friends and neighbors. Many chosen kin relationships go through ups and downs and periods of intimacy and distance. These relationships are valued and relied upon *as* kin relations.

Importantly for the present discussion, these chosen families are not limited to those who have been rejected or have otherwise lost their biological family relations. Even those with self-described healthy and strong biological family relations identify some other queer kin. Weston argues that this indicates that queer kin are not substitutes for lost biological kin (Weston 1991). Given what I have argued thus far, I will go further and claim that queer kin offer something that biological kin simply cannot, namely the sort of vital relationships that are necessary for persons to become human and flourish *as queer*. Queer kin are the social environment, often including intergenerational relationships, where the transmission of culture takes place and revisions of social grammar occur. A hybrid sociopolitical/role-relational ontology accounts for this phenomenon and further opens up a path for queer flourishing in a hostile world.

5 The Sociopolitical Constitution of Persons

5.1 The Nature of Social Groups

The case of queer children and horizontal identities highlights a sociopolitical constitution of selves that has been heretofore omitted in Confucian ethics. Moreover, the continued omission results in the erasure of queer identities (among others). Most social

groups exhibit ways of life that are transmitted (and transformed) intergenerationally as vertical identities, for example, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, and so on. The assumption of cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied identities in Confucian ethics has obscured the constitutive nature these social groups have for persons; if one shares social group identities with one's parents, it is difficult to distinguish between interpersonal parent-child transmission of culture and group-wide intergenerational transmission. The introduction of the horizontal identity of queerness and its correlated chosen families brings this distinction into stark relief.¹²

I draw here explicitly on the work of Iris Marion Young on New Left social movements. According to Young, *social groups* differ from other forms of collectives, both *aggregates* and *associations*. Aggregates are classifications of persons based on attributes (Young 1990: 43). To establish aggregate group membership, one identifies some essential characteristic of the group and then identifies that characteristic in individuals. Thus the aggregate model slips into essentialism. Aggregate categories exist atemporally as natural kinds rather than existing as historical social constructions that are evolving. Moreover, individuals are ontologically prior to groups, since groups are understood to be nothing more than the set of individuals with some shared attribute. Lastly, the criteria for membership are arbitrary. The aggregate model cannot meaningfully distinguish between being a car owner and being a woman in the United States, for instance, and thus cannot do the work necessary here. In other words, aggregates do not necessarily correspond to any *way of life*. Therefore, there is no need for exemplars to guide one's development nor are there impediments to living well attached to these groups.

Alternatively, one might think of groups as associations. Associations, such as clubs, churches, political parties, or teams, are formally organized institutions (Young 1990: 44). But these rely on a voluntary, contractual model of relations, where individuals exist as complete persons prior to group membership. If car owners were to organize as a group in need of political representation or social accommodation, they might form such an association. As with the aggregate model, this model for group identity is unable to adequately account for those group memberships I am identifying here as sociopolitically constitutive of the self. If an oppressed identity is a voluntary association (as many antiqueer spokespeople in fact assert with the use of terms like "lifestyle"), then one's oppression is one's own fault; one's identity is supposedly a choice. Neither aggregates nor associations adequately capture the experience of group oppression, nor do they capture the constitutive nature of social groups (Young 1990: 43).

A social group is defined instead by a sense of identity—a self-identification with a social status and its common history—that is not exclusively the product of one's volition

¹² I should note before beginning that the omission of theorizing social groups in the Confucian literature is not a complete absence of all discussions of social groups. George Wrisley and Samantha Wrisley discuss intersectional oppression in terms of social groups, and Stephen Angle directly references Young's conception of social groups in his discussion of oppression for Progressive Confucianism (Wrisley and Wrisley 2016, Angle 2012). Moreover, the outpouring of feminist comparative writing on Confucianism referenced below, by its very nature, presumes some conception of social groups—at least the social category of gender. What I am contributing here is a deeper cut, so to speak. Not only is an ontology of social groups compatible with Confucian ethics, it is necessary for its own stated goals. Having established the latter portion of this process, I turn now to the former—the compatibility of an ontology of social groups with Confucian relational constitution of persons.

(Young 1990: 44). Young writes that group identification is a matter of encountering another collectivity whose cultural forms, practices, and way of life differ from one's own and where one's own are shared with some others. One will share a sense of identity with those who share one's way of life because of similar experiences, such as coming out, homophobia, racism, xenophobia, erasure, misogyny, and so on (Young 1990: 43). Social groups, therefore, are neither arbitrary nor voluntary. Moreover, insofar as a social group's relationships to other groups and the individual experiences constituting the shared sense of identity of its members constitute that social group's identity, any given social group is defined contextually and provisionally.

The description Young offers mirrors the notion of role-relational constitution from earlier. First, there is no preexisting core self who then adopts these social group identities. Instead, one's process of individuation is partially shaped by these social groups. Second and third, just as one is born into a matrix of unchosen familial relations, one is born into a constellation of unchosen group identities (e.g., able-bodied, Chinese, cisgender, bisexual, and so on). Thus one's individuated person is a unique focal integration of these various different group identities. Fourth, these social groups are relationally defined. Just as what it means to be a parent depends on what it means to be a child, a grandparent, and so on, what it means to be cisgender depends on what it means to be transgender, gender nonconforming, and so on. Finally, these social group identities are underdetermined. What it means to be Chinese today continues to evolve, just as what it means to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, pansexual, and so on continues to evolve with each generation. In these ways, Young's ontology of social groups is analogous to the role-relational ontology in Confucian role ethics in that both see identities as unique, multifaceted, in-process, and contextually forged. Moreover, both see the ideal society as one that appreciates the differences among these various identities.

This conception of social groups explains the phenomenon of chosen families detailed above. If elements of one's identity are cocreated with others insofar as one needs others to affirm that identity and also to educate one in the history, cultural forms, practices, and ways of life of that identity, then finding and developing kin relations to do just that is a matter not just of flourishing but of survival itself. This is particularly interesting for Confucian ethics because the Confucian focus on family relations as the root of personhood (as necessary for survival and flourishing) is in a sense affirmed by the queer construction of chosen families. These are not simply circles of friends, predominantly queer neighborhoods, or online forums. Queer persons are often forming kin relations to establish themselves and to flourish as members of their social group, a social phenomenon that is consistent with the role-relational ontology of Confucianism but thus far not discussed by Confucian scholars. Moreover, the particular example of contemporary queer life in the United States requires both models of social constitution for a complete explanation.

5.2 Benefits of Introducing Sociopolitical Constitution

There are several benefits to incorporating and developing a Confucian social group ontology into its account of self-cultivation:

1. Such an incorporation allows for a decentering of the biological family in the Confucian account of self-cultivation and intergenerational transmission. Such a decentering (a both/and rather than either/or form of decentering) in accordance with horizontal group identities creates a Confucian social order that at least does not structurally exclude queer lives. Of course, in response to the argument here, a majority of the heterogenous voices reviving Confucian philosophy in a multitude of different directions could decide that the cisheterosexual and reproductive family unit is the defining feature of the Confucian social world. However, this does not seem to reflect the real-world rise of LGBTQ+ rights recently in many Confucian cultures across East Asia. More specifically, such a position does not reflect the stated aims of Confucian role ethicists like Rosemont and Ames, and for my purposes here, this incorporation of a social group ontology better equips those developing Confucian role ethics to fulfill their promise of a philosophical account of human flourishing that is both rooted in family relations and in familial feeling and also not homophobic, racist, xenophobic, or otherwise prejudiced against vulnerable minorities.
2. The strong emphasis in Confucian ethics on the reproductive biological family does not just harm queer individuals. Persons who are nonmonogamous or remain uncoupled altogether face stigma in such a social order. Even monogamous cisheterosexual couples face stigma when they do not or cannot have their own children. A decentering of biological family in the normative account of what it means to flourish intergenerationally as a Confucian person and a Confucian community could be more inclusive of these narratives as well.
3. The added emphasis on sociopolitical constitution and social groups provides a more comprehensive social ontology. As mentioned above, Confucianism already theorizes role-relational constitution, which operates at the interpersonal ethical level. I exist in a social location (i.e., the intersection of my roles), and they are manifested most immediately in their corresponding interpersonal relations. What it means to be me is a matter of how I correlatively conduct myself in these relationships as someone who is both determined by *and determining* these roles. However, Confucianism also addresses social categories (i.e., groupings of these roles) at times, as well as social categories writ large. For instance, while wife, daughter, and mother are often referenced as unique roles, the social category of woman is referenced as well. Similarly, “the people” or “the masses” are also referenced as an important social category. The introduction, or rather the further development, of a social group ontology gives nuance to this nascent acknowledgment of social groups as constitutive of persons.
4. An account of sociopolitical constitution and social groups provides a stronger theoretical foundation for work currently being done on gender and economic justice in Confucianism. With increasing frequency, contemporary Confucian philosophy is engaging with questions of oppression and social justice. Several recent collections engage Confucian philosophy with contemporary feminist philosophy on issues relating to selfhood, epistemology, the environment, domestic violence, and methodology, among others (Foust and Tan 2016, McWeeny and Butnor 2014, Pang-White 2016). Another direction is engagement with economic justice, such as recent monographs from Stephen Angle, Erin Cline, and Henry Rosemont (Angle 2012, Cline 2013, Rosemont 2015). In terms of discrimination

- and sexual minorities, Sin-Yee CHAN, Sam Crane, Sarah Mattice, and Henry Rosemont have all broached the subject, to varying degrees, in their work on Confucian philosophy (Chan 2016, Crane 2013, Mattice 2016, Rosemont 2015). In the wake of the recent legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan, a recent special issue of *International Journal of Chinese & Comparative Philosophy of Medicine* features eighteen essays on Confucianism and the permissibility and the desirability (or not, in several cases) of legally recognized same-sex marriage (Fan and Wang 2018). What all of this recent work attempts to address to varying degrees are questions of oppression and domination. With a handful of exceptions, few have actually paused to articulate a general Confucian conception of contemporary oppression.¹³ Even in these exceptions, however, what remains missing (though not completely unmentioned) is a systematic articulation of what is absolutely necessary for any discussion of contemporary structures of oppression, namely the ontology of social groups.¹⁴
5. Finally, Young develops her notion of social groups in order to better address those injustices that go beyond legal and economic issues and that include issues of decision making, division of labor, and culture (Young 1990: 33). Young's conception of injustice is grounded in oppression and domination. Her five faces of oppression—exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence—are all at least partially the product of civic and cultural power dynamics between social groups and not strictly issues of criminal law or economic policy. For example, while women today in the United States are paid less than men for the same work (an economic injustice), this phenomenon is related to implicit biases against women, such as the pernicious stereotypes that they are poor leaders or that they will require more time off, as well as to the socialization of women according to certain norms of femininity, such as penalties for speaking up or negotiating a better starting salary (all of which are cultural injustices).¹⁵ The latter biases will not be remedied with legislation or equal pay alone and point to a larger issue of misogyny in the broader culture. The path to an inclusive and just society, then, involves moral and political attention to these group identities and group relations (e.g., racism, misogyny, ableism, xenophobia, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, etc.).

6 Conclusion

I began this essay promising some contribution to the pursuit of a contemporary and inclusive Confucian ethics of self-cultivation. Using the example of queer lives, I introduced an ontology of social groups to the Confucian conception of social constitution. While the present role-relational ontology of Confucian role ethics excludes queer lives from becoming human and flourishing, the queer practice of forming chosen kin serves as a useful direction for a transformation of Confucian social

¹³ Exceptions here include Angle 2012, Wrisley and Wrisley 2016, and Sullivan 2016.

¹⁴ This is not unique to Confucian theories of oppression and social justice. Ásta 2018 identifies a similar lacuna in contemporary Euro-American social justice literature.

¹⁵ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for helping me to clarify this point.

ontology. This may generate a more robust and inclusive account of contemporary Confucian self-cultivation while also potentially leading to a powerful Confucian contribution to contemporary issues of social justice. As for the further development of this claim, I will have to leave that to future work on Confucian insights into contemporary political inclusivity and social justice.

One possible direction for further study is the politics of shame. In the contemporary philosophical literature, there has been a resurgence in scholarship on the value of moral shame. Utter shamelessness, generally speaking, is a vice, and Confucian philosophers have been quick to add the tradition's unique moral psychology to this discourse. However, as with the Euro-American accounts, in the celebration of the benefits of particular forms of moral shame there is a near-universal silence on the debilitating effects of the weaponized shame and stigma deployed against minority identities, especially gender and sexual minorities. An analysis that incorporates how shame is unevenly distributed across social group identities would balance the analysis of these two sides of shame and in the process demonstrate the unique explanatory and normative force the Confucian conception of shame provides when one attempts to analyze how shame shapes lived experiences, for better or worse.

Another direction for analysis would be an archaeology of Confucian *li*. I have relied here on the notion of *li* as social grammar in the abstract. However, there is a strong case to be made that what makes a particular way of life and its social grammar *Confucian* is precisely the content of its "*li*." If this is so, are there particular prescriptions in Confucian *li* that explicitly and permanently preclude the sort of decentering and queering of the family that I am offering here? Alternatively, are there *li* that in fact support the less cisheteronormative social order that one might expect from a non-modern, lived philosophical tradition? At the outset of this article, I stated that I would be leveraging Confucian philosophy to better understand queer lives and that I was not offering a queer Confucian philosophy. Answers to these questions would bear directly on this latter project.

These topics of course do not exhaust the possibilities when we open up contemporary Confucian philosophy to the nonideal situations many of us find ourselves in today. If the *dao* is made in the walking, then this is a modest gesture toward where a future Confucian *dao* may lead.

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