Academic Freedom as a Duty rather than a Right: A Confucian Perspective and Beyond

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ABSTRACT This article explores the relationship between academic freedom and the field of political science, focusing on scholars' duty to engage in societal issues related to their area of expertise, rather than merely protecting their intellectual pursuits from outside influence. By drawing on and expanding the Confucian principles, it examines how this viewpoint informs the responsibilities of scholars and educators working within the discipline.

Academic freedom, when examined across diverse contexts, offers a contrapuntal understanding of how to engage in scholarship (Mégret and Ramanujam 2024). Most discussions tend to operate, however, based on an assumption that academic freedom is primarily a "value" or a "right." This rights-based perspective overlooks another essential dimension: academic freedom as a duty. A rights-oriented framework obliges individuals mainly to refrain from infringing the rights of others. In contrast, viewing academic freedom as a duty emphasizes the importance of conscious, relational practices (Campbell 2024; Escobar 2018; Gilligan 1982; MacIntyre 2001), instead of focusing on individuals. In the presence of oppressive authorities, academic freedom must be recognized as a fragile practice that carries considerable risks. This understanding can lead to a reluctance to exercise it when it is viewed solely as a right. However, when approached consciously as a duty, academic freedom becomes a means of public critique, regardless of the prevailing circumstances.

In the following discussion, we define academic freedom as the agency through which scholars fulfill their obligation to engage in societal issues related to their area of expertise, rather than merely protecting their intellectual pursuits from outside influence. In this context, academic freedom becomes a duty to support, critique, or transform the political and moral judgments of those in power. This viewpoint is deeply rooted in the Confucian tradition, which regards scholarship not as a solitary pursuit of truth but as an ethical practice that is interconnected with the relationship between the authorities and citizens, specifically in terms of legitimacy and governance. We also argue that the concept of academic freedom as the agency to fulfill a duty extends beyond Confucian thought to encompass other traditions, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, and Islam, and that it remains essential even within a liberal framework.

We begin by explaining the contemporary relevance of this topic and emphasizing the importance of reframing it within our profession. Next, we draw on Confucianism to illustrate that academic freedom can be viewed as a relational strategy, particularly when seen as a duty. This perspective encourages those in authority to practice self-restraint so they can coexist harmoniously with those whom they govern (Gibbs 2013). Consequently, an emphasis on rights consciousness may be unnecessary and even distracting. Before concluding, we explore various philosophical traditions that reinforce the significance of duty consciousness in the exercise of academic freedom.

PROFESSIONAL AND SCHOLARLY BACKGROUND TO THE ISSUE

The topic of academic freedom is currently a subject of intense debate, particularly among the members of those professional associations that advocate for the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement. This global campaign promotes the use of nonviolent economic, academic, and cultural pressure on Israel to end its occupation of the Palestinian territories. Tension is especially evident in the ongoing dispute within the International Studies Association (ISA), the largest academic organization for international relations in the United States that has more than 7,000 members. Within the context of the ISA, the BDS movement calls for a boycott of exchanges between the organization and universities that engage in ongoing cooperation with the Israeli military. The year-long conflict between the ISA's Governing Council and its Global South Caucus—particularly over positions on Palestine—reflects the deeper global inequalities that exist within academic governance.

Several scholars argue that supporting the BDS movement is an ethical obligation, whereas others believe that such an action

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would limit the rights of Israeli scholars to participate. This debate centers on the fundamental nature of academic freedom: Is it merely the freedom to acknowledge the equal dignity of all members, or does it also involve the responsibility to oppose the perceived ongoing genocide that undermines the relevance of the entire discipline? Those who feel that academic freedom implies a sense of duty connect it to their views on how organizations such as the ISA relate to the broader world beyond their specific activities. Scholars who feel this sense of duty exercise their academic freedom to affirm their connection to the larger public. Therefore, the governance of the ISA should not be the primary concern; that said, protesting the actions of the ISA Governing Council serves to illuminate the consciousness of exercising academic freedom as a duty.

This debate has complex implications for political science in general, because our field directly addresses the dire human conditions that have resulted from policy and governance failures. Political scientists have made inconsistent efforts to ameliorate those conditions. The ISA has a history of activism; for example, establishing an LGBTQA caucus to promote related research and expressing support for scholars who oppose the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The organization has consistently remained silent for decades, however, regarding the US government's boycott on Iranian scholars attending its conferences. In the past year, the issue of academic freedom has become particularly pressing because of some members' use of disruptive methods to signal their endorsement of BDS. Although ISA officially promotes "respect for diverse views," it simultaneously imposes its rights-based preference to ensure that attendees conform to dominant academic norms.

This tension often mirrors the polarization of the current political landscape in which two rights come into conflict: one group asserts the right to protest against the perceived genocide and the silence surrounding it, whereas the other emphasizes the need to preserve an amicable environment and adequate dignity to enable all individual scholars to participate in an exchange of views. The strong emotional drive to protest on behalf of victims suggests that it is vital to examine how these differing notions can ironically threaten members' sense of academic freedom.

We argue that the debate should be reframed from whose and what rights to protect to how critically to change the governmentality, so that it is in accordance with the tradition of Confucianism. Silence in the face of abusive authorities cannot be neutral; it might seem that remaining silent, as many do, is merely a right. For scholars who are immersed in an atmosphere of decolonial solidarity, their Confucian duty would not simply be to uphold an internal commitment to their right (not) to critique but to have a broader ethical and political responsibility to the societies and the authorities with which their scholarship engages. Academic freedom thus connects the ISA to the BDS movement, although this connection is not consistently applied.

A CONFUCIAN PERSPECTIVE ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM AS A DUTY

The concept of academic freedom, as understood in the liberal traditions, is largely absent from Confucianism (Tu 2005). This does not mean, however, that scholars within Confucian regimes are unable to engage in intellectual thought or teaching that opposes mainstream ideas or authorities. On the contrary, their intellectual tradition emphasizes an engagement with politics (Hao 2024). These scholars functioned within a system where academic expression was safe—except when it challenged political legitimacy. In this context, freedom was not an intrinsic value but a contingent privilege, shaped by the political system's legitimacy. Consequently, Confucian governance is fundamentally incompatible with the universalist claims of academic freedom that are often promoted by neoliberal institutions.

In the context of Confucianism, academic freedom involves *re/interpreting classical works to assess critically a regime's legitimacy* and is rooted in the tradition's focus on preparing leaders to consciously avoid abusing leadership (Hahm 2009; Son 2012; Tan 2011). Commoners are often expected to follow rather than be taught.[1] Scholars' primary responsibility is to impart the spirit of the Dao (Zha and Shern 2018)—the conceptual origin of all living things—within leaders. Dao can be seen as a force that nurtures life impartially, thereby opposing killing, especially massacres. It promotes a sense of mutual belonging. Scholars are tasked with exploring how politics can enhance the welfare of commoners by aligning leaders with the principles of Dao.[2] Insisting on this duty, despite personal safety concerns, reflects a type of academic freedom that is committed to upholding the welfare of the community.

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Confucianism places a significant emphasis on leaders' ethics (Gibbs 2013), underscoring the importance of rituals/rites and self-rectification to demonstrate that their governance is selfless. This governmentality of becoming a self-disciplining leader, in turn, helps ensure that commoners feel secure in their role as the provider of labor and crops that sustain the ruling class. Confucian scholarship focuses on enhancing the skills and techniques needed to maintain a healthy relational circle, as an ultimate value embedded in the Dao, that practices of academic freedom support. If scholars fail to fulfill their duty to critique the legitimacy of the leaders, leaders may loosen their governmentality and increasingly view commoners as threats. The sense of mutual belonging can diminish, eventually leading to a metaphorical cannibalism.

Scholarship that strictly supports rituals that assume rulers' benevolence as a default, however, may, either inadvertently or intentionally, protect abusive authorities, leading to the emergence

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of loyalists (Luo 2014; Noesselt 2015). These loyalists often believe that maintaining a hierarchical order is essential for ensuring that commoners remain willing to provide support to it. Their loyalty is shown by uncritically justifying the hierarchy of power. In contrast, critics emphasize the need for leaders to demonstrate restraint and care for commoners in their writings and teachings, which often makes the ruling class feel uncomfortable. Scholars from different generations may debate with each other on how duties should be prioritized, creating an ongoing public community. What makes these debates significant, for both the authorities and the scholars themselves, is the occasional but impactful critiques of the authorities that surface from time to time.

Although most scholars probably employ a combination of these two approaches, their expertise, skills, and choices can vary significantly (Kim 2013; Wood 1995). The key challenge lies in how scholars can fulfill their duty while balancing genuine loyalty with critical awareness. At the end of the day, believing in the ultimate triumph of Dao, scholars have the inevitable duty of practicing academic freedom. Even so, sustaining this sense of inevitability is becoming an increasingly acute issue, given that the authorities likewise compete to pressure scholars to play the loyalist role (Li and Zhu 2019). While loyalists are disregarded by the authorities, academic freedom focused on rights may likewise become irrelevant during the rise of fascism. In contrast, a sense of duty may prove stronger, despite being more precarious.

FREEDOM VERSUS LEGITIMACY

Under neoliberalism, academic freedom is conceptualized as a protected right that allows individuals to explore and study the natural and social worlds. In reality, however, this freedom is often influenced by the values of the privileged classes. Although institutions may invoke legal protections against harm and intimidation, these measures frequently protect those in power from criticism, rather than genuinely safeguarding intellectual dissent (Mulvey and Lee 2024). Consequently, neoliberal academic freedom is not universal; it is shaped by institutional mechanisms that exclude, discipline, finance, distribute, and depoliticize knowledge production. Thus, anti-genocide expressed through academic freedom must stem from a duty consciousness that is relational, rather than individualist.

This reframing shifts the scholar's dilemma between protecting the ISA and protesting on its behalf, as well as loyalty and critique under Confucianism, from merely preventing intervention to making ethical choices (Gao 2022). Each must decide for themselves when reinforcing the rituals serves the Dao genuinely and when critiquing is more effective for ensuring the welfare of the common people. Thus, academic repression in Confucian contexts involves not only silencing speech or suppressing scholars but also controlling and strategically interpreting the duty toward the imagined Dao. Ultimately, the question recurs: Who gets to define what serves the Dao? Even so, the authorities have a vested interest in the academic freedom of critics because listening to their insights can improve governance and enhance a regime's legitimacy over time.

Just as the distribution of rights capacity is uneven under neoliberalism, the number of courageous critics remains small in the Confucian traditions. These critics risk their careers or even their lives by challenging the state of governance. The sense of duty, or lack thereof, reflects academic freedom's practical nature and scholars' agency to exercise it. Freedom itself is not inherently valuable. Rather, the Dao-guided legitimacy that critics either challenge or enhance is (He 1991; Wang 2012; Zeng 2018). In a similar manner, ISA's protection of academic freedom for Israeli scholars is, at best, a secondary concern when viewed through the lens of duty. Without a sense of duty, academic freedom becomes a personal rather than communal issue. Conversely, even if it is prohibited, protesting against genocide regardless can resonate and unintentionally create a tradition.

Rulers in Confucian culture do not rely on formal rules to limit academic engagement for their own interests, because such actions would undermine their moral legitimacy. Instead, governance related to the academic freedom to criticize leaders is based on judgment and improvisation, with leaders and scholars negotiating what can be taught or written in response to the changing political contexts. This absence of fixed legal constraints does not lead to a greater range of options (Jiang 2022); rather, it results in an unpredictable intellectual environment where scholarship is often suppressed, co-opted, or selectively tolerated.

Yet, within this fragility lies a paradox: the absence of formal restrictions creates an environment that nurtures a tradition of intellectual resilience that persists, although it is seemingly tenuous. Confucian scholars have long described this perseverance in fulfilling the Dao as "a thread of cotton" (如缕)—thin, fragile, and easily broken yet never completely severed. This delicate yet resolute spirit of inquiry has historically kept political regimes accountable. It achieves this not by directly making improvements but by continually referencing the classic standards of legitimacy that have been set by past thinkers. This imagined thread has continued for millennia, demonstrating that the authorities could not solely appropriate the classics to define their legitimacy. Even when the authorities suppress academic thought, they must confront the persistent presence of intellectual dissent, which is deeply intertwined with their legitimacy.

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In contrast, if academic freedom within Confucianism is viewed as a duty to serve the Dao, then the tension arises not only between submission and critique but also between different interpretations of what it means to fulfill the Dao. Loyalists believe that rituals and hierarchy help create and maintain social harmony, whereas critics may perceive these elements as potentially masking abuse. Both groups act out of a sense of duty, but their moral compasses differ. Liberals face similar challenges: the question of which groups—the ISA Governing Council or Global South Caucus—ultimately divides justice from injustice cannot be resolved by equal rights. In other words, even under liberalism, academic freedom is a practice of duty consciousness, informed by a shared prior purpose.

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In short, academic freedom is more a practice and choice than simply a value, just as are the freedom to cook, dance, love, and so on. Only by insisting on the academic freedom to critique can one affirm a connection to the Dao, allowing this freedom to reflect the existential relationship that inspires it. In the long term, continuing practices ensure that the spirit of the Dao enhances the academic freedom of the collective to protest and bring disgrace on abusive authorities, rather than protecting individual scholars who are rectifying the true meaning of the classics.

In the Confucian tradition, academic freedom manifests as neither a legal or institutional guarantee nor a mandatory respect for the dignity of other scholars, to the extent that critics can easily embarrass loyalists. Instead, it is understood as an ethical commitment that influences those in power. In this context, academic freedom is not solely exercised by scholars but is also reflected in the self-perceptions and actions of leaders who may (pretentiously) abhor and keep a distance from loyalists at times, like a critic of themselves. Their legitimacy remains interconnected with a delicate thread that is fragile in nature but impossible to break completely (Mulvey and Lee 2024). This tradition sharply contrasts with the liberal rights-based model, in which academic freedom safeguards against authority and other forms of intervention, rather than representing a commitment to alleviating collective suffering.

A PLURIVERSAL PERSPECTIVE ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM AS A DUTY

Scholarship as a duty is not exclusively Confucian but is aligned with many traditions. In classical Islamic scholarship, knowledge (*ʿilm*) is viewed not as an individual right but as a duty to seek and share for the betterment of the *ummah* (community; Ismail, Faj, and Mupliah 2024; Sulaiman 2022). Thinkers like Al-Farabi and Avicenna, along with later scholars, framed philosophical inquiry as a means of comprehending the divine order and promoting just governance (Mattila 2022), which resonates with the Confucian view of scholars as mediators of the Dao. The principle of "commanding right and forbidding wrong" (*al-amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-n-nay ʿan al-munkar*) represents a scholarly duty that can be interpreted as exercising academic freedom in guiding professional associations during times of atrocities to act within the boundaries of divine law.

In the Mahayana Buddhist traditions, the pursuit of knowledge is tied to bodhisattva ethics—meaning that scholars are not free to inquire simply out of curiosity but must ensure that their scholarship alleviates suffering (Harris 2023; Willis 1979). Understanding suffering requires studies of the immediate context and sympathy for the individuals therein. Liberation from past and universal inquiries is essential to relieve the suffering of the present encounters. The Nalanda tradition (seen in ancient India, Tibet, China, and Japan) encouraged rigorous debate among monks but within a framework in which scholars had a duty to cultivate wisdom (*prajñā*) for the enlightenment of others (Tu 2019). The Tibetan monastic education system requires scholars to defend, refine, and propagate Buddhist philosophy, thereby reinforcing the concept that scholarship is a duty, rather than a self-serving right.

Before the Enlightenment, academic freedom in medieval Europe was closely linked to religious and moral obligations rather than individual rights. As represented by thinkers like Aquinas and Abelard, Scholasticism operated under the belief that it was a duty to pursue knowledge to uncover divine truth (Rexroth 2023). Scholars were expected to align their intellectual endeavors with religious ethics. Early humanists such as Erasmus (Bietenholz 2008 ; Van Ruler 2024) argued that scholars should critique rulers; however, this was not based on personal freedom. Instead, their duty was to ensure that the rulers governed wisely and ethically.

Many Indigenous traditions—for example, Andean, Māori, or Yoruba—position knowledge as a collective responsibility rather than an individual right. In Māori epistemology (Hikuroa 2016), *mātauranga* (knowledge) is not simply an academic pursuit but a duty to uphold *whakapapa* (genealogical and spiritual connections to the land and ancestors). The Andean ayllu system of governance expects intellectuals (often spiritual leaders or elders) to serve the community's needs (Brownlow et al. 2015), rather than to engage in unrestricted inquiry.

Returning to Confucianism, curiosity is likewise not regarded as an essential virtue because it may disrupt the natural flow of the Dao—even though modern scientific inquiry, driven by curiosity, is rooted in a belief in the need to discover the truth. Confucianism, however, emphasizes pragmatic goals such as affluence and security (Shusterman 2009). Although ancient civilizations were responsible for various discoveries and inventions, the knowledge that enhanced human capabilities was not highly esteemed. Instead, the priority within scholarly pursuits was to practice the Dao effectively through self-rectification. Ultimately, the extent to which scholars could evaluate and choose their relationships with the authorities depended on prevailing circumstances and practices.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AS PRACTICE

Without duty consciousness, we exert no freedom, and academic freedom is an obsolete value. When expressing our anger and depression through a call for BDS, we as individuals gain no enjoyment and protect no one else's rights. Nonetheless, standing with the victims is a duty that we owe to our sense of belonging, and so we act in this way. Only by acquiescing to the genocide might a right be needed to justify acquiescence.

Conventionally, the intellectual satisfaction of individual scholars makes academic freedom an ultimate value in itself. In the Confucian tradition, however, such satisfaction is formed within a relational community that views scholarship as a means of perfecting the Dao of collective nurturing. Because leaders are expected to adhere to the spirit of the Dao, academic freedom under Confucianism becomes a duty to evaluate the legitimacy of

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regimes. Similarly, in liberal contexts, academic freedom carries a critical duty to limit the government's abuse of power. The key difference is that liberalism further transforms academic freedom into an instrumental value that aims to promote natural rights universally. This shift tends to individualize the satisfaction of practicing academic freedom and distance it from collective nurturing. In our case, we often forget that it is a duty consciousness, rather than a rights consciousness, that has driven the Global South Caucus to exercise its academic freedom of protest.

Appeals to rights, which are never equally endorsed, can backfire and harm academic freedom. In contrast, when academic freedom is embedded in the sense of group solidarity, it is a testimony to the existential relation. A right is protected from interference, whereas a duty requires intervention. Although the right is often portrayed as a value, it actually serves a purpose that is defined by those who promote it. Asserting a claim to academic freedom can be precarious, leading to sacrifices, collateral inconveniences, and conflicting claims by the various parties involved. If scholars believe that exercising academic freedom is essential for achieving collective purposes, however, their judgment and actions recognize a conscious duty, rather than an entitlement.

The politics surrounding academic freedom are influenced by earlier and ongoing efforts of regimes everywhere to limit, suppress, or revoke scholars' beliefs and actions. For individuals who resist and belong to marginalized groups, invoking academic freedom to justify their actions often proves ineffective, however, because those in privileged positions are already exploiting this framework. The choice to dis/continue the BDS protests will reflect the current state of academic freedom. Therefore, academic freedom relies on the awareness and collective responsibility of the broader population. In essence, it is fundamentally about shared practices within the community.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. "The people can be made to follow a path, but they cannot be made to understand it." (民可使由之, 不可使知之。) in "Taibo," *The Analects*.
2. "If the people have enough, how can the ruler be lacking? If the people are lacking, how can the ruler have enough?" (百姓足, 君孰与不足? 百姓不足, 君孰与足?) in "Yanyuan," *The Analects*.

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