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Exploring economic equality through a dialogue between Confucianism and limitarianism

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ABSTRACT

Limitarianism, introduced by Robeyns, advocates for establishing a maximum threshold on individual wealth to prevent excessive accumulation. Robeyns' work primarily draws from Western thought and does not engage with East Asian traditions such as Confucianism. This paper aims to bridge that gap by exploring the potential for dialogue between limitarianism and Confucianism on economic equality and distributive justice, using sufficientarianism as a nexus. I examine how Confucianism and limitarianism each relate to sufficientarianism and how these relationships can facilitate meaningful exchanges. Confucianism could potentially align with limitarianism by presenting it as a pragmatic, problem-driven philosophy for achieving economic equality consistent with Confucian ideals. The paper also addresses limitations of this dialogue and suggests potential directions for future research.

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Introduction

Professor Ingrid Robeyns' latest book (2024), *Limitarianism: The Case Against Extreme Wealth*, represents the culmination of her exploration of limitarianism, offering a wealth of new examples and in-depth discussions that build upon her previous works and interactions with fellow scholars. Limitarianism advocates for establishing a maximum threshold on individual wealth to prevent excessive accumulation by any person. According to Robeyns, extreme wealth concentration is harmful for society in multiple ways, such as leading to social and economic inequalities, undermining democratic processes, and contributing to environmental degradation. In her earlier publication (Robeyns 2023a), she articulates the non-intrinsic or instrumental values of limitarianism, emphasizing how excessive wealth can lead to unmet urgent needs and political inequality. Chapters 2–4 of her latest book expand on these arguments, providing additional empirical evidence and examples (Robeyns 2024, 17–96). Furthermore, Robeyns and other scholars present various supporting arguments for limitarianism, which are further explored in

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the new book. For instance, in Chapter 5, Robeyns elaborates on how permitting the super-rich can have detrimental effects on the environment and exacerbate climate change (Robeyns 2024, 97–118).

Rather than merely summarizing the content of each chapter in her book, the goal of this paper is to contribute to the advancement of limitarianism from an East Asian perspective. Drawing primarily from the West, Robeyns (2024) does not appear to address or interact with East Asian traditions, such as Confucianism. I aim to bridge this gap by initiating a dialogue between limitarianism and Confucianism. Unlike the historical approach to limitarianism and Western philosophy discussed by Kramm and Robeyns (2023), I will not explore whether elements of limitarianism can be found in the history of Confucianism. Instead, I aim to explore the potential for a dialogue between limitarianism and Confucianism on the issue of economic equality and distributive justice, using sufficientarianism as a nexus. While sufficientarianism emphasizes setting a minimum threshold of goods for everyone and limitarianism focuses on establishing an upper limit on resource accumulation, some scholars propose that these two ideologies should incorporate aspects of each other's principles. Conversely, in the realm of Confucianism, some scholars contend that Confucian teachings uphold a principle of sufficiency for all individuals. Below, I examine how Confucianism and limitarianism each relates to sufficientarianism and how these relationships can facilitate a meaningful exchange between them. Finally, I will address some limitations of this dialogue and briefly extend the discussion to political equality as a suggestion for future research.

Confucianism and sufficientarianism

While Confucianism is most famous for emphasizing various moral virtues and familial and communal relationships, it also offers a perspective on economic distribution and justice (Wong 2023). Confucians usually refer to the following passages in their works on economic distribution. First, in *Analects* 16:1, the chapter 'Ji Shi (季氏)', Confucius appears to think that uneven distribution and instability are more serious problems than poverty and underpopulation (Confucius n.d.-a). Confucians usually emphasize that the root of social unrest lies not in scarcity but in inequality. It also underscores the Confucian belief that societal stability is threatened more by unfair distribution than by their absolute quantity. This is typically considered the starting point for discussing issues of economic distribution within Confucianism.

Confucians often refer to two additional passages for more detailed guidance on economic distribution. In the chapter 'Li Yun (禮運)' of the ancient book *Liji* (禮記), a passage discusses what Confucians call 'the Grand Union (大同)', describing an ideal society from the Confucian perspective (Confucius n.d.-b). In this ideal society, people extend love and care beyond their own families to others. Resource distribution is based on ability and need, ensuring that everyone – from children to the elderly – receives adequate support throughout their lives. This is particularly important for those in need, such as widows, orphans, childless men, and people with disabilities, who should be treated with kindness and compassion. This vision illustrates a society where resources and responsibilities are shared equitably. People work for the common good, ensuring the elderly are cared for, the able-bodied have employment, and the young are nurtured.

This reflects a commitment to distributive justice, where social harmony is achieved through equitable distribution rather than mere abundance.

While the previous discussion focuses on economic equality in an ideal society, Confucianism also addresses practical guidelines for distribution in a non-ideal society. In such a society, described as ‘Small Tranquility (小康)’ in the chapter ‘Li Yun’, people are encouraged to primarily care for and love their families while adhering to traditional rites (禮). Additionally, Mencius, regarded as the second most important figure in Confucianism after Confucius, advocated for the ‘well-field system (井田制)’, an ancient method of land distribution.¹ In *Mencius* 3A:3 (《孟子·滕文公上》), it is explained that this system divided land into nine sections within a square, with the central section designated as a communal field for public welfare purposes. Eight families, each with a private plot, would collectively cultivate the communal land. This approach aimed to ensure fair land allocation among families, balancing private and communal responsibilities. Mencius viewed this system as a means to reduce economic disparities and promote fairness, reflecting Confucianism’s ongoing commitment to justice and equality (Mencius n.d.).

Different Confucians may offer diverse interpretations of these texts, but they generally agree that these passages, along with other Confucian writings not addressed here, collectively demonstrate Confucianism’s deep engagement with issues of economic equality and distributive justice. They advocate for ideas that prioritize the equitable well-being of all members of society. Drawing from ancient Confucian thought, contemporary scholars like Joseph Chan (2014), Chenyang Li (2024), and Sungmoon Kim (2018) have expanded on the Confucian perspective regarding equality. Despite some divergences in their viewpoints, this discussion will focus exclusively on two key aspects relevant to the purpose of this paper.

First, they acknowledge that Confucianism generally upholds certain forms of economic equality, particularly regarding a baseline of goods and well-being for all individuals. Both Joseph Chan (2014, 160–177) and Sungmoon Kim (2018, 136–164) suggest that Confucian notions of equality could evolve into an East Asian variant of sufficientarianism, similar to concepts articulated by Frankfurt (1987). The common ground is that each household should possess adequate resources, such as land, to sustain a materially secure and morally upright existence. The goal of societal justice is to enable every individual to live a virtuous life aligned with Confucian principles. According to Joseph Chan (2014, 178–190), practical implementations like the well-field system and other resource allocations are instrumental in ensuring the principle of sufficiency. The primary and secondary layers of support and care are rooted in familial and communal networks, such as villages or communes. Mutual aid derived from these relationships and communities is considered superior to governmental aid, as it fosters virtuous associations. When familial and communal support proves inadequate, the government is morally obligated to provide direct welfare aid, especially to the most deprived members of society, serving as a last resort. This multilayered approach reflects the Confucian emphasis on ethical relationships and the good life, not just material distribution.

The second point relates to the negative thesis of sufficientarianism. Sufficientarianism can be divided into positive and negative theses. The positive thesis asserts that justice requires ensuring everyone has enough resources to meet basic needs, while the negative thesis posits that inequalities above the sufficiency level are morally permissible. The

previously discussed Confucian ideas align more with the positive thesis, with contemporary Confucian scholars largely agreeing on this aspect. However, the negative thesis is more relevant to our discussion here, and it remains a topic of debate within Confucian discourse. Specifically, Confucian scholars generally agree that under certain conditions, economic inequalities beyond the sufficiency threshold may be morally permissible, but they differ on what those conditions are. Li (2024, 219–239) advocates for ‘proportional equality’, which involves treating individuals differently based on their due or desert. In this view, people are rewarded according to their contributions, and inequalities are justified based on personal merit. Joseph Chan (2014, 160–177) also agrees that merit and contribution are important; beyond the sufficiency threshold, income and resources should be distributed based on people’s merits and contributions, and inequalities arising from this are not considered illegitimate.

However, Kim (2018, 136–164) argues that Confucianism does not provide a philosophical foundation for supporting unlimited inequalities beyond a sufficiency threshold. Instead, he argues that inequalities should be limited to maintain social harmony and prevent severe disparities from undermining relationships. Mencius’ high threshold standard further restricts inequalities, viewing material sufficiency not only as essential for individual flourishing but also as a precondition for achieving the Confucian ideal of harmony within the family, community, and governance. In short, Kim suggests that Confucianism advocates for constrained inequality based on desert and contribution but does not endorse unconstrained inequalities that violate Confucian values of community and harmony. The debate on limiting inequality beyond the sufficiency threshold continues in contemporary Confucianism, presenting an opportunity for dialogue with limitarianism, as I will argue below.

A dialogue between Confucianism and limitarianism through sufficientarianism

One may wonder how sufficientarianism and limitarianism can be integrated, as they initially appear to represent distinct approaches in distributive justice. Sufficientarianism emphasizes establishing a minimum threshold of goods for everyone, while limitarianism stresses setting an upper limit on resource accumulation. Although Robeyns denies that limitarianism can be reduced to sufficientarianism, she argues that limitarianism can be seen as a partial account of justice and harmonized with principles like egalitarianism and sufficientarianism to address wealth inequality and political domination (Robeyns 2023b, 184). She emphasizes its non-intrinsic values, advocating for a problem-driven philosophy that resonates with a wide array of moral commitments (including sufficientarianism) and addresses real-world issues of extreme wealth.

Other scholars explore the relationship between limitarianism and sufficientarianism in more detail. Colin Hickey (2023) suggests that sufficientarianism and limitarianism can complement each other, forming a multi-threshold approach that acknowledges both minimum and maximum thresholds. Dick Timmer (2023) proposes using limitarianism not as an ideal distributive pattern but as a mid-level principle or presumption that connects fundamental normative theories to specific contexts. Tammy Harel Ben Shahr (2025) proposes a relative threshold approach that effectively addresses urgent, contextual needs and counters incentive-related objections, aligning with justice principles like

sufficientarianism without relying on strong normative assumptions about human flourishing. Although Robert Huseby (2023) questions whether limitarianism is necessary and suggests that other justice principles, such as sufficientarianism, might better address the problems of economic inequality, there are responses defending the problem-driven philosophy and action-guiding potential of limitarianism, highlighting its practical uses in addressing societal issues (Robeyns 2023b). Critics like Lena Halldenius (2022) argue that limitarianism fails on its own premises, both as a partial theory of justice and as a guide to decision-making. This is because it does not convincingly surpass other redistributive schemes such as sufficientarianism and contradicts evidence that people accept more inequality as societies become more unequal.

The debate is ongoing, revealing that while sufficientarianism and limitarianism appear distinct, there are discussions about integrating them within the framework of economic equality and justice. As both limitarianism and Confucianism explore their relationships with sufficientarianism, this intersection offers promising common ground for further examination. Integrating limitarianism into a broader framework of distributive justice raises questions about its support across diverse cultural contexts, with Confucianism emerging as a significant candidate in East Asia. While Confucianism may not overtly address the upper thresholds of income and wealth distribution, it is deeply concerned with resource allocation and its impact on societal well-being. Confucianism emphasizes principles related to the distribution of resources, advocating for a version of the positive thesis of sufficientarianism. The core objective is to ensure that individuals possess adequate resources to live a materially secure and ethically virtuous life by Confucian standards. While the stance on the negative thesis remains subject to debate, Confucian ideals often endorse a merit-based approach to economic equality. Some proponents, like Kim (2018, 136–164), advocate for constrained inequality to preserve social harmony and strengthen familial relationships, reflecting core Confucian values. Under conditions where the upper limit on resources is defined by the need to uphold these Confucian ideals, such as promoting social harmony, ensuring fair resource distribution, and fostering community relationships, Confucians may view limitarianism as a pragmatic instrument.

Examples and empirical cases discussed in chapters 2 and 3 of Robeyns (2024, 17–71) might lead Confucians to view limitarianism as an effective tool for upholding their ideals. In Chapter 2, Robeyns (2024, 17–40) examines how extreme wealth concentration keeps the poor in poverty while inequality continues to grow. Confucians, such as Mencius, emphasize an ‘objectively high threshold standard’ for material well-being, not just a bare minimum subsistence level (Kim 2018, 150–151). Robeyns argues that the commonly used \$1.90 per day poverty line does not reflect a decent standard of living. The Confucian view would likely see the continued high rates of poverty, even by slightly higher thresholds, as unacceptable. Detailed data is presented showing how the richest have captured a disproportionate share of the spoils of globalization. By illustrating how most economic gains have accrued to the top 1% rather than the poor and middle classes, and pointing out the global economic system being ‘rigged’ against the Global South through unequal exchange, these issues highlight unconstrained, disproportionate inequalities that the Confucian view would likely find unacceptable. This also challenges the Confucian idea of deserved inequalities. If the inequalities result from structural exploitation rather than legitimate desert, the Confucian doctrine would likely reject such inequalities as violating the principles of public equality and social harmony.

Chapter 3 argues that it is nearly impossible for extreme wealth to be accumulated without some portion of it being tainted by unethical or illegal means (Robeyns 2024, 41–71). Some Confucians accept deserved inequalities beyond the sufficiency threshold but also stress the importance of moral self-cultivation and social harmony. Wealth derived from systematic crimes against humanity, such as Nazi atrocities or slavery, would be seen as morally tainted and undeserved from a Confucian standpoint. In addition, Confucians recognize deserved inequalities but only to the extent that they do not erode social harmony or undermine the equal sufficiency of the people. Unethical practices like worker exploitation and aggressive tax avoidance by multinational corporations would be seen as violating the Confucian ideal of a harmonious social fabric. The use of the ‘wealth defense industry’ to minimize tax burdens in morally dubious ways would also be at odds with the Confucian emphasis on moral self-cultivation and the collective good. Tax evasion by the wealthy, which deprives governments of much-needed revenue and further entrenches inequality, would be viewed as undermining the ability of the state to fulfill its role in promoting the people’s well-being.

Other chapters in Robeyns (2024, 118–202), such as Chapters 6 through 9, might also be framed by Confucianism, suggesting that limitarianism can be viewed as a useful instrument for promoting Confucian ideals. Due to the length limitations of this paper, I will leave this for readers to consider further in the future. At this point of our discussion, I would like to address a general point about limitarianism. Many current suggestions regarding limitarianism focus on the maximum threshold for *individual* income and resources. For instance, Robeyns (2024, xviii) proposes a political limit of around 10 million pounds/dollars/euros per person and an ethical limit of approximately 1 million, arguing that wealth exceeding these thresholds becomes excessive and unjustified (i.e. super-rich). She acknowledges that these figures may only apply specifically to certain European societies, such as the Netherlands, and emphasizes that the exact numbers are relative to the living standards of different societies.² However, as scholars like Thaddeus Metz have pointed out, cultures such as those in Africa or Confucian traditions may consider the distribution of resources in terms of family rather than individuals (Metz 2025). This consideration is worth discussing further here, as it highlights the importance of cultural context in determining appropriate thresholds for wealth distribution.

While I agree that Confucianism emphasizes familial values, I urge readers to be cautious about oversimplifying the East–West dichotomy regarding familial versus individual values (B. Chan 2025, 2019). It is often depicted that the West prioritizes individual freedom and autonomy, while the East focuses more on relationships and community. This dichotomy is frequently framed as a debate between ‘individualism’ and ‘collectivism’. Although this distinction may hold relevance in certain contexts, it risks oversimplifying the complexities of Eastern and Western moral traditions. In Confucianism, while family values are indeed important, other considerations must also be acknowledged. As previously mentioned, in the book *Liji*, the Confucian ideal emphasizes that people should care not only for their families but also for everyone in society, with resource distribution based on merit.³ Therefore, focusing solely on family values oversimplifies the Confucian perspective.

Nevertheless, Confucianism can significantly inform discussions of equality and limitarianism when we focus on minimal and maximal thresholds. Confucians would suggest introducing multi-layered and relative thresholds that reflect the importance of

different relationships. The Confucian three-layered approach mentioned before, which involves familial, communal, and governmental support, can be adapted to establish both minimal and upper thresholds for wealth and resources. Confucianism already employs a multilayered approach to ensure the sufficiency of well-being across different layers (J. Chan 2014, 178–190). In this context, we might consider setting parallel maximum thresholds at each tier, in addition to focusing on individual wealth limits.

There are two possible approaches for our consideration. First, we might directly set up thresholds at each level of family, community, and government. This enables a flexible system of limits, allowing upper limits to vary according to the collective needs and responsibilities of each layer. A family's threshold might reflect its role in supporting members, a community's limits could align with its collective goals, and governmental thresholds might focus on societal objectives like harmony in the society. These limits can be important. For example, a government without limitations on its power – including the power to control wealth within society – can be much more dangerous than any individual becoming super-rich. Alternatively, we may establish upper limits for individuals that are informed by the dynamics of family, community, and government. This approach posits that these limits are relative and adaptable, reflecting the influence of each layer. An individual's upper limits could vary based on familial responsibilities, community resources, and governmental goals. This multi-threshold strategy maintains a focus on individual limits while allowing flexibility to address the unique circumstances of each layer. No matter which approach we use, these suggestions broaden the scope of economic equality to include societal contexts, aligning with Confucian values of ethical relationships and the pursuit of the good life. By applying these approaches to limitarianism, we can achieve economic equality through a balanced societal support system. This suggestion complements limitarianism with Confucian ideals, offering a new dimension for consideration beyond most current proposals.

Future research directions

In this paper, I have outlined how Confucianism could potentially align with limitarianism by presenting it as a practical tool for achieving economic equality consistent with Confucian values. This suggests that in East Asia, Confucianism might lend moral support to limitarianism. Nonetheless, this approach has its limitations, as Confucianism may not inherently advocate for limitarianism unless it empirically supports Confucian ideals. If empirical findings suggest otherwise, justifying Confucian support for limitarianism would be challenging. The debate on empirical evidence, such as that between Robeyns (2024) and Halldenius (2022), becomes crucial; however, determining which side is more empirically accurate is beyond the scope of this paper.

It is also crucial to note that Robeyns (2024) contends that extreme wealth concentration is harmful to society in multiple ways, including undermining democracy and political equality. Robeyns demonstrates that wealth inequality poses a serious threat to democratic values and institutions, highlighting several mechanisms through which money can translate into political power, thereby giving some citizens more influence than others (Robeyns 2024, 72–96). Scholars hold varying views on whether Confucianism endorses political equality and democracy, ranging from a strong endorsement of political equality and democracy (B. Chan 2014; Kim 2018) to viewing them merely as

instruments to promote Confucian ideals (J. Chan 2014), to outright opposition to political equality (Bai 2020), supporting meritocracy or even non-democratic regimes (Bell 2015). Given the connection between limitarianism and political equality, there is potential for limitarianism to reinforce the argument that Confucianism may further support political equality and democracy. However, this topic is also beyond the scope of this paper and could only serve as a promising avenue for future research.

Notes

1. It is named this way because the Chinese character for 'well' (井) resembles the division of land into nine sections.
2. Robeyns notes that major cities like New York, Tokyo, or Paris have significantly higher living costs, so the threshold for classifying someone as 'super-rich' should be higher there (Li 2024, 13). Hong Kong, where the author of this paper currently resides, can also be included in this list, as its housing costs remain among the top 10 globally, despite recent decreases.
3. 'Thus men did not love their parents only, nor treat as children only their own sons. A competent provision was secured for the aged till their death, employment for the able-bodied, and the means of growing up to the young'. (Confucius n.d.-b).

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