

# SINGAPORE SYMPOSIUM IN LEGAL THEORY

## DEMOCRATIC EQUALITY OR CONFUCIAN HIERARCHY?

BY Professor Joseph Chan  
*The University of Hong Kong*

7 MARCH 2017, TUESDAY

5.00PM – 7.00PM (TEA RECEPTION STARTS AT 4.30PM)

LEE SHERIDAN CONFERENCE ROOM, LEVEL 1, EU TONG SEN BUILDING  
FACULTY OF LAW, NUS (BUKIT TIMAH CAMPUS)

### ABSTRACT

In contemporary Western political philosophy, the term “social hierarchy” often carries a negative connotation and “social equality” a positive one. Political theorists who subscribe to some sort of egalitarianism think that social hierarchy is morally problematic and must be avoided as much as possible, whereas social equality is praiseworthy and any departure from it requires serious justification. Why is social hierarchy morally problematic? Because, they say, it oppresses and stigmatizes people, and treats them as if they are inferiors or slaves. And why is social equality praiseworthy? Because it accords people dignity, advances their interests, and promotes solidarity and communion. In this paper, I argue against these stereotypical attitudes toward hierarchy and equality. Hierarchy and equality per se are neither problematic nor praiseworthy. They are good or bad, right or wrong, only insofar as they are structured and operated in ways that affect people’s wellbeing and virtue and express certain kinds of relationship. There can be good forms of hierarchy that promote people’s wellbeing and virtue and express attractive ethical relationships, and there can be bad forms of equality that produce the opposite. The key to a healthy relationship, equal or otherwise, is the virtue of its participants. Without virtue, no relationship can secure what is right and good for the participants.

### ABOUT THE SPEAKER



**Joseph Chan** is Professor in the Department of Politics and Public Administration at The University of Hong Kong. His scholarship spans analytic political philosophy, Confucian political thought, the history of Western political thought, and contemporary Chinese and Hong Kong politics. He is the author of *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times* (Princeton, 2014) and co-edited with Melissa Williams and Doh Shin *East Asian Perspectives on Political Legitimacy: Bridging the Empirical-Normative Divide* (Cambridge, 2016). He has been published in numerous leading journals such as *Ethics*, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, *History of Political Thought*, the *Journal of Democracy*, *Philosophy East and West*, and *China Quarterly*.

Joseph serves on the editorial boards of many journals, including *Law and Philosophy*, *Journal of Law and Religion*, and *Law, Ethics and Philosophy*. He was head of the Department of Politics and Public Administration from 2002-2004 and 2011-2013, and is an elected member of the University’s Council.

### Participation is By Invitation Only

Registration commences at 4.30pm and light refreshments will be served. For more information, please contact Ms Yvonne Lim at [lawylhh@nus.edu.sg](mailto:lawylhh@nus.edu.sg)