

## **ABSTRACT**

### **“Civil Disobedience, Agency, and Moral Authority in Early Chinese Philosophy”**

In Classical Chinese thought, the right to reign is bestowed by Heaven (Tiān 天) upon a “chosen one.” The ruler-elect is supposedly an exceptional individual, an embodiment and paladin of virtue who has the duty and privilege to interpret Heaven’s will and to take care of people’s needs. Still, the Mandate of Heaven (*tiānmìng* 天命) is neither absolute nor indefinite, and can be forcibly removed under extreme circumstances.

“Challenging the mandate of Heaven” (Perry 2002) is a concept deeply rooted in the Chinese intellectual tradition. The right not only to remonstrate, but also to oppose institutionalized power is openly addressed in early Chinese texts (Roetz 2008). Resistance to the system is typically performed by and is considered a fundamental moral obligation of a true scholar-official. It can be achieved by assuming different kinds of behaviors that range from resignation from office in unfavorable times to withdrawal from public life, to upright dissent.

However, recent interpretations in particular of the *Mencius* have claimed that a “right of revolution” would be granted to the people (Tu 1993; Cheng 1998; Kim 2011). Such right can and should be exercised whenever basic human needs are no longer guaranteed due to the ineptitude or negligence of the sovereign. This interpretation is somewhat problematic (Tiwald 2008), as it ascribes people a high degree of freedom and autonomy in both their thinking and actions. Through the analysis of selected passages drawn from Classical Chinese philosophical literature, the present talk aims at reconstructing a narrative of popular dissent and problematizing the concept of “justifiable rebellion” in early Chinese thought with focus on the role and scope of intervention of the population.