2 Confucius and the Confucian Concepts *Ren* and *Li*

Troubled by the unrest of the Spring and Autumn period, Confucius (Kongzi) (551–479 BCE) proposed the ethical reform of society. His proposal involved the elimination of the power-mongering and exploitative behaviours of those in power. The process was to be initiated and led by leaders of society who were paradigmatic men of broad education and ethical insight.

As the instigator of these ideas, Confucius is recognised as the founder of the *Ru-jia* doctrine (School of Literati), what we call the Confucian tradition in the west. The *Ru*-ists were educated men who sought to share and realise their insights on the ethical administration of government. Historically, the *Ru*-ists were part of a larger movement of educated scholar-officials (*shi*) appointed as advisers to those in power.[1]

Ru-ist education consisted in the cultivation of an ethically and ritually disciplined life. Some *Ru*-ists extended the rigours of ceremonial court ritual to the social and domestic arenas. Due to this phenomenon, Confucians have sometimes been thought of as traditionalists advocating traditional ritual court behaviours. It is interesting that Confucius in the *Analects* (7:1) notes that he is a transmitter, not a creator. But did he see himself primarily as a proponent of traditional ceremonial ritual?

Reading the *Analects*

The key text for Confucius' ideas is *The Analects of Confucius* (*Lunyu*). The text consists of fragments not written by Confucius himself but compiled by his disciples and second-generation disciples and collated over a period of time approximately seventy years after his death. The surviving text was probably formalised at around the Western Han period (206 BCE–9 CE).[2] More recently, scholars have also turned their attention to another unearthed version believed to pre-date the received version.[3]

The 499 short passages in the *Analects* are not systematically organised and repetitions and inconsistencies are common. Because it was written by a number of authors, there are several different interpretations of the key concepts in the *Analects*. It is possible to see differences between passages that are more or less authentic (reflecting Confucius' ideas) and others which have been modified or inserted at a later time.[4] We may also treat the text as a repository of insights into the intellectual history of Confucianism and of China more generally. Yet again, a good number of contemporary scholars – philosophers in particular – take the *Analects* as a text that is open-ended. These scholars continue to work on fresh commentaries and contemporary applications of ideas in the *Analects* text.

Confucius emerges from the *Analects* as a committed, conscientious and skilful thinker. In many passages a range of people, including dukes and governors of villages, consult him on issues relating to good government and, more broadly, the good life, and passages show how Confucius takes various factors into consideration and how he balances them to arrive at a decision. Many first-time readers of the *Analects* are struck by the lack of basic normative principles or criteria upon which Confucius bases his decisions. For instance, in *Analects* 13:18, he expects sons and fathers to cover up for each other's misdeeds:

> The Governor of She in conversation with Confucius said, "In our village there is someone called 'True Person.' When his father took a sheep on the sly, he reported him to the authorities."
>
> Confucius replied, "Those who are true in my village conduct themselves differently. A father covers for his son, and a son covers for his father. And being true lies in this." (trans. Ames and Rosemont Jr 1998a: 166–7)

Some people feel at a loss to explain how Confucius, known widely as the founder of Confucian ethics, could make such *im*moral prescriptions, and *Analects* 13:18 is often viewed with moral distaste because it endorses lying. But if we continue to reflect on this passage, there are more questions we want to ask. These include, What were the punishments, if any, for theft? What was the worth of a sheep? How was the neighbour affected? What are the consequences for the child, if he reveals his father's theft, and if he doesn't? The situation of this child is a uniquely difficult one and presents no easy solution. It is futile to speculate on the 'correct' answers to these questions. We should focus on more pertinent issues as, for instance, those at the meta-ethical level

of enquiry. These issues include the place of family and loyalty in ethical life, the ethical significance of relationships, the requirement to cover up for another, Confucius' method of moral deliberation and its criteria.

Realistically, what Confucius is meant to have said to a duke about running a state, or how Confucius seats himself while eating, will have little relevance for us today. Perhaps we should not expect the *Analects* to provide normative answers to our ethical dilemmas. Instead, we might read it in order to understand the complexities associated with the process of moral reasoning as the early Confucians understood it. If this is correct, we may gain an understanding of how the Confucians studied the ancient texts (*Analects* 8:8, 1:15; 7:18; 8:3) and learnt from experiences of enlightened people in the past, that is, understanding how others may have acted admirably or fallen short of particular requirements (*Analects* 7:22). Seen in this light, the *Analects* is a collection of diary entries of other people's behaviours rather than a book of authoritative sayings or a comprehensive and systematic philosophical treatise. As a *manual of appropriate action and behaviour*, it can be used to generate and encourage reflective thinking about our own actions and commitments.

With this methodology in mind, let us proceed to examine two foundational concepts in Confucianism, *ren* (humaneness) and *li* (behavioural propriety). Together, they crystallise the Confucian ideal of cultivated humanism. Any understanding of Confucian philosophy rests on how we understand these two concepts and the interplay between them.

Ren: Humaneness

Ren is mentioned only occasionally in texts pre-dating Confucius.[5] In its earlier usage, the term referred to some manly or virile quality, particularly that of a king. For example, in two hunting poems in the *Book of Poetry* (*Shi Jing*), *ren* refers to two huntsmen who are 'handsome and *ren*' (Schwartz 1985: 51). In the *Book of History* (*Shu Jing*), *ren* refers to the benevolent attitude of the ruler to his subjects. In the hands of the Confucians, however, the term gradually came to denote a moral quality characteristic of humanity. Hence, it is not surprising to find some variation in its use in early Confucian philosophy, to denote humanity in general, humaneness as a distinguishing characteristic of humanity, or the primary human virtue of compassion. This characteristic was referred to in many ways, but most commonly as an inborn disposition or a feature of collective socio-political life. The meaning of the concept is

also revealed in its Chinese character: *ren* (仁) is comprised by two characters, the left signifying humanity (人) and the right, two (二). This suggests that the concept pertains to human relatedness. Hence, the term has been variously translated into English as benevolence, love, humaneness, humanity, human-heartedness, compassion and sympathy.[6] Nevertheless, its meaning in the *Analects* is multifaceted and some more recent translations of *ren* avoid its identification with any one English term. Aspects of *ren* are considered in the following sections.

Ren as Love

Ren is 'to love all humanity', so says Confucius in *Analects* 12:22. James Legge (1815–97), a Christian missionary to China and an early translator of the classical Chinese texts into English, looked for opportunities to identify Confucian *ren* with Christian love (Legge 1893–5, vol. 1). Confucius' remark, which identifies *ren* with a general, indiscriminating love would have served Legge's purposes well. However, in *Analects* 4:3 it is said that 'only the man of *ren* knows how to like and dislike others', which suggests that the person of *ren* is discriminating in his assessment of others. Furthermore, in *Analects* 17:24, Confucius is explicit about the kinds of people he dislikes. Is there a tension between the two ideas, one that proclaims a general love for all and the other a discriminating appraisal of people's qualities? There is also a sense of a rather judgemental sternness in Confucius' recommendation that harm should be requited with justice, not kindness:

> Someone said, "What do you say concerning the principle that injury should be recompensed with kindness?" The master said, "With what then will you recompense kindness? Recompense injury with justice, and recompense kindness with kindness." (*Analects* 14:34, trans. Legge 1991: 288)

This unambiguous statement brings out an even-handed approach to what is just or right. The idea of undiscriminating love seems to be tempered by Confucius' critical assessments of people's moral qualities.

Ren, the Confucian Golden Rule

The golden rule takes the (moral) person as its starting point. It operates on the assumption that there is general agreement between people about desires

and interests. In the *Analects*, the concept *shu*, translated as reciprocity or mutuality, captures the essence of the golden rule: there is much give-and-take in relationships (*Analects* 15:24). In *Analects* 4:15, *shu* is also accorded fundamental significance, this time in conjunction with another concept, *zhong*:

> The Master said, "Zeng, my friend! My way (*dao* 道) is bound together with one continuous strand." …
>
> Master Zeng said, "The way of the Master is doing one's utmost (*zhong* 忠) and putting oneself in the other's place (*shu* 恕), nothing more." (trans. Ames and Rosemont Jr 1998a: 92)

Zhong is commonly translated as 'conscientiousness' or 'doing one's best '. However, these translations do not help us to understand why *zhong* should be coupled with *shu*. Perhaps a translation of *zhong* not in terms of action (*doing* one's best) but commitment (*being* one's best) will help us see their correlation better. In a nutshell, to *be* one's best (*zhong*) – so as to optimise one's achievements – involves the fostering of mutually benefiting relationships (*shu*). If we follow this line of reasoning, we might say that the self is enhanced and extended by relationships that enrich it. In this light, *zhong* and *shu* may be understood as two dimensions of the same process, hence the reference to 'one continuous strand' (*yiguan*).

The *Analects* presents a version of the golden rule: 'do not do to others what you do not wish to be done to yourself ' (12:2; 15:24). This negative formulation of the golden rule is sometimes dubbed the 'silver rule' because it has a more passive approach: it does not require good or moral action but only ones that do not bring about harm (Allinson 1985: 305–15). In Confucian philosophy, the cultivation of mutually satisfying and beneficial relationships is an integral component of the good life. Self and society are symbiotic rather than mutually exclusive: the paradigmatic self benefits others in society (*Analects* 6:30). The Confucian ideal society is the ideal family writ large: the sage king is the benevolent father of the nation-family (*Analects* 8:6). The family environment is the first context where one learns to put oneself in the other's place.

Ren and the Cultivation of Special Relationships

The cultivation of *ren* begins with the development of family relationships with their correlative emotions and special obligations. In other words,

one first learns about human attachment through interaction with family members. Hence it is said that filial piety (*xiao*) and brotherly respect (*di*) are the root of *ren* (*Analects* 1:2). This characterisation of *ren* which emphasises different emotional attachments (*Analects* 2:24) is sharply distinguished from *ren* as indiscriminating love, as considered above.

We might pause at this point to question the meaning of the 'root' of *ren*. It may mean that caring affection – especially the kinds of emotional attachment we have to family members – is a basic, defining trait of all humanity. This interpretation takes filial piety and, by extension, other familial ties as a primary fact of human existence. Alternatively, 'root' may indicate that the family context provides the first environment for moral development. Within this environment, one learns to be loyal, to empathise, negotiate, love, care, gain sympathy, express regret, balance competing loyalties and prioritise obligations (*Analects* 4:18). The skills learnt in the family environment are vital for a person's interactions with others in later life. If the *Analects* is correct that family relationships play a dominant role in one's formative years – that they shape the person in many important and subtle ways – it follows that contemporary moral philosophers should give serious consideration to these primary sources of influence in the moral life of the agent.

Ren as Ethical Wisdom

The *Analects* offers many examples of how *ren* shows itself in the life of the Confucian paradigmatic individual. For example, it is associated with five attitudes: deference, tolerance, making good on one's word, diligence and generosity (*Analects* 17:6). It is one of six desirable qualities of character (together with wisdom, making good on one's word, uprightness, courage and resoluteness (*Analects* 17:8)). It is realised in different contexts: domestic, public and social (*Analects* 13:19). One's commitment to *ren* must be manifest in both word and deed; Confucius intensely disliked glib talkers (*Analects* 12:3; 13:27; 4:22; 14:27). Realising *ren* in one's life is an overwhelmingly difficult task (*Analects* 15:10, 15:9). In taking up the challenge, one must learn widely yet reflect on what is close at hand (*Analects* 19:6; see also *Analects* 2:11). This captures the essence of practical wisdom: an ability to learn from others *in order to* reflect on one's own situation, and to apply these insights to one's actions. The person of *ren* is confident in his dealings:

> The Master said, "The wise (*zhi* 知) are not in a quandary; the authoritative (*ren* 仁) are not anxious; the courageous are not timid." (*Analects* 9:29; trans. Ames and Rosemont Jr 1998a: 132)

The simplicity of the statement highlights the calmness of the *ren*-person. Confucian scholar Antonio Cua aptly describes the enviable disposition of the man of *ren*: '[h]is *easeful* life is more a matter of attitude and confidence in his ability to deal with difficult and varying situations, rather than an exemplification of his infallible judgement and authority' (Cua 1971: 47). A more thorough reading of the *Analects* will allow readers to acquire a sense of the depth and breadth of *ren*, perhaps as the ultimate moral achievement in life. A fuller understanding of the concept requires an examination of other key concepts in the text.

Li: Behavioural Propriety

The concept '*li*' is also one of considerable elasticity. The term can refer to the normative codes of conduct in ancient or modern Chinese society, to the concrete instantiations of these codes in daily life, or to a concept. It was used in pre-Confucian texts to denote ritualistic religious behaviour for the purpose of inducing supernatural protection and blessing. It was believed that the will of the spirits could be influenced through ritual sacrifice (Skaja 1984). Many of the rituals, such as harvest and thanksgiving ones, were conducted only by the emperor, also referred to as the 'Son of Heaven'. However, during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the scope of the concept was gradually extended. For instance, it was also used to refer to ceremonial ritual in the petty courts (Dubs 1966: 116).

We can detect some of these variations in the scope of *li* in the *Analects* itself, which at times uses it to refer to religious ritual (*Analects* 3:17) and at others to the comportment of the cultivated person (*Analects* 12:1). Yet another usage in the *Analects* refers to behavioural propriety in the ordinary interactions of the common people (*Analects* 2:3). Partly because of its association with ancient behavioural norms, the concept *li* evokes a sense of conservatism. However, its employment in the *Analects* is not always consistent: at some points it appears to be rather inflexible (*Analects* 3:17), yet at some others amendable (*Analects* 9:3).

Standards of behavioural propriety served as guides for correct behaviour in a range of relational contexts: between children and parents (*Analects*

2:5), subject and ruler (*Analects* 3:18) and prince and minister (*Analects* 3:19). *Li* mapped out different standards for appropriate behaviour according to one's place in a particular relationship. In this way, individuals are familiarised with the different obligations and emotions that are appropriate in specific relationships. Ideally, continued *li*-practice fosters a deeper appreciation of human relationships. In addition, *li* also have an aesthetic dimension as they introduce a level of decorum in one's interactions with others (*Analects* 8:2). We should also note the anti-conformism which comes across in *Analects* 2:3:

> The Master said, "Lead the people with administrative injunctions (*zheng* 政) and keep them orderly with penal law (*xing* 刑), and they will avoid punishments but will be without a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence (*de* 德) and keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety (*li* 禮) and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves." (trans. Ames and Rosemont Jr 1998a: 76)

This passage draws a sharp contrast between *li* and penal law (*fa*) as instruments of government. According to this passage, the motivational drive associated with the avoidance of punishment is an inferior one. The culture of penal law made people 'clever' and glib in order to evade punishment.[7] In contrast, Confucian *li* must be manifest in action (*Analects* 1:3, 4:24; 14:20; 14:27). Added to these concerns was the issue of penal law being overly general and universalistic.[8]

A number of the passages in the *Analects* emphasise that *li* must be practised with reverence (*Analects* 3:26; 17:21). In 17:11, the practice of both *li* and music is grounded in the sincere intentions and emotions of the gift-giver and the performer respectively:

> The Master said, 'Surely when one says "The rites, the rites," it is not enough merely to mean presents of jade and silk. Surely when one says "Music, music," it is not enough merely to mean bells and drums.' (trans. Lau, 1979a: 145)

The presentation of gifts – even expensive ones such as jade and silk – is an act devoid of significance if it is not accompanied by the appropriate underlying emotions. The analogy with music is informative too: clanging bells and beating drums do not constitute music. Meaningful performances of music are always accompanied by appropriate emotions. Are these appropriate emotions in effect expressions of *ren* itself?

Many of the passages in the *Analects* suggest a deep connection between *ren* and *li*: one's concern for humanity must be expressed intelligibly in lived contexts. In the words of the scholar Tu Weiming, Confucian self cultivation is about 'Learning to be Human' (1985: pp. 51–66). Here, it is important to reflect on the normative force of *li*, as inflexible norms of conduct may stifle individuality. Is there room in Confucian philosophy for the individual to challenge the status quo? This depends on how the relation between *ren* and *li* is understood, and which of the two concepts is thought to have precedence.

Ren and *Li*

In the *Analects* there is divided opinion regarding the relative priority of *ren* and *li*. Conversations associated with the disciples Ziyou and Zixia usually emphasise the greater significance of *li* while those involving Zengzi, Zizhang and Yanhui show a greater commitment to *ren* (Schwartz 1985: 130–4). This disagreement was later characterised as the '*nei-wai*' (inner-outer) debate. *Nei* captures the essence of the concept *ren*; it refers to the internal, perhaps innate, moral sense of humanity. By contrast, *wai* captures the spirit of *li*, the externally imposed, socially constructed norms which guide and in some ways limit the inner self. This debate approximates the nature-nurture question within the western tradition and its implications for moral cultivation. Which is more fundamental to the Confucian programme, natural (inner) moral inclination or its (outer) cultivation? *Analects* 6:18 makes it clear that both basic disposition (*zhi*) and refinement (*wen*) are necessary. Confucius here wittily rejects overemphasis on either:

> The Master said, "When one's basic disposition (*zhi* 質) overwhelms refinement (*wen* 文), the person is boorish; when refinement overwhelms one's basic disposition, the person is an officious scribe. It is only when one's basic disposition and refinement are in appropriate balance that you have the exemplary person (*junzi* 君子)." (trans. Ames and Rosemont Jr 1998a: 107–8)

There is no unqualified support in the *Analects* either for an 'inner' or 'outer' morality. Nevertheless, it is worth examining more of its passages to gain a better understanding of *ren* and *li* and their implications for contemporary debates.

Ren is Fundamental

Analects 3:3 asserts the priority of *ren* over *li*:

> The Master said, "What has a person who is not authoritative (*ren* 仁) got to do with observing ritual propriety (*li* 禮)? What has a person who is not authoritative got to do with the playing of music (*yue* 樂)?" (trans. Ames and Rosemont Jr 1998a: 82)

Music has two dimensions, one being the performative and the other its underlying emotion (*ren*). By analogy, the practice of *li* encompasses both performative know-how and the expression of human feeling. Neither *li* nor music are meaningful if they are not accompanied by the appropriate human sentiments (*ren*). In this passage and a number of others (2:8, 3:3; 3:12, 3:26; 17:17; 17:21; 19:14), *ren* is the ethical and motivational basis of *li* acts. In *Analects* 3:26, Confucius effectively sums up the futility of mechanical compliance:

> "What could I see in a person who in holding a position of influence is not tolerant, who in observing ritual propriety (*li* 禮) is not respectful, and who in overseeing the mourning rites does not grieve?" (trans. Ames and Rosemont Jr 1998a: 88)

In western moral philosophy, the intentions of the moral agent are often considered more ethically significant than behavioural compliance. Some contemporary Confucian scholars, perhaps influenced by this, seek to parallel this preference by placing emphasis on *ren*, the 'inner' commitment of the moral agent. Tu Weiming is a notable proponent of this view. He argues that commitment to human well-being (which he identifies with *ren*) is the foundation of Confucian ethics. As such, it cannot be overridden by behavioural norms which are contingent on historical and social factors. He provides an anecdote, citing the comments of the modern Chinese writer and critic, Lu Xun (1881–1936):

> During the Ming-Ch'ing [Ming-Qing] period, quite a number of widows committed suicide hoping to show that their acts were in conformity with the *li* of chastity. In view of such stupidity, Lu Hsün [Lu Xun] was quite justified in calling this type of *li* "eating man" (*ch'ih-jen*) [*chiren*]. (Tu 1968: 37)

For Tu, *ren* comes to the rescue of *li*. In cases where *li*-practices are no longer acceptable or detrimental to humanity, *ren* has the role of upholding a

commitment to humanity. *Ren* is fundamental and therefore dubbed the higher order concept: '…*ren* as an inner morality is not caused by the mechanism of *li* from outside. It is higher-order concept which gives meaning to *li*' (1968: 33). In other words, *ren* provides the criteria for assessing *li*-practices. Tu seeks to establish the relevance of Confucian philosophy in contemporary debates. However, although his presentation of Confucian thought is enlightening, his understanding of *ren* as 'inner morality' requires more thought as it may generate the impression that *ren*-cultivation is a process directed by an autonomous, free-willing agent. Additionally, the scope of *ren* might be reduced if it is identified with 'morality'.[9] Finally, the description of *ren* as a higher order concept might downplay the significance of *li* within the Confucian tradition in a way that is misleading.

Li is Fundamental

We could also argue that *li* is the primary concept in Confucianism. Unlike *ren*, *li*-practices are more readily observable and can be regulated. From the practical point of view, it is through observing and practising *li*-behaviours that one learns about *ren* (cf. *Analects* 12:1). Henry Skaja (1984) believes that *li* is the fundamental concept in Confucianism. In his account, *li* fulfil spiritual, educative and governing functions. This means that *li* have an educational and civilising effect on individuals as they instil restraint and observation of propriety. Accordingly, a society of people guided by *li* will be orderly (*Analects* 1:2). But most importantly for Skaja, *li* are the conduit for human feeling, an 'objectification of the spirit of man' (1984: 49–50). According to Skaja, the process of self cultivation is seen primarily in terms of socialisation:

> Confucius…*transformed* and *generalized* the meaning of *li* from mere "rite" or "ritual sacrifice" to the necessary educative and self-reflective socialization process, itself, whereby man becomes humanized, i.e. socialized. (1984: 62–3)

However, we should perhaps be concerned that, if *li* have a basic place in Confucianism, then Confucian self cultivation may be reduced to a socialisation process. This is in fact a common criticism of Confucianism, that it advocates the subjugation of individuals to society. For instance, *Analects* 1:2 may be used to justify the conditioning of people's minds in order to establish an orderly, submissive society:

> Master You said, "It is a rare thing for someone who has a sense of filial and fraternal responsibility (*xiaodi* 孝弟) to have a taste for defying authority. And it is unheard of for those who have no taste for defying authority to be keen on initiating rebellion…" (trans. Ames and Rosemont Jr 1998a: 71)

The view that *li* is primal would give force to the portrayal of Confucianism as conservative traditionalism.

Ren and *Li* are Interdependent Concepts

The most persuasive view of *li* and *ren* is that *ren* and *li* are inextricably interdependent concepts. This means that either of the two concepts is meaningless on its own. According to this view, *ren* is manifest only in *li*-practices. *Ren-li* interdependence has been most clearly articulated by Shun Kwong-Loi.[10] Shun explains their interdependence by analogy with the use of language. For example, to understand the concept of tense *is* to be able to use its various forms effectively. Conversely, the effective use of grammatical structures associated with tense is an indication of a person's grasp of the concept. Analogously, to understand the depth of human feeling is to be able to express it appropriately; and one's ability to express human feeling is an indication of one's emotional maturity. Hence, in the case of language, Shun suggests that mastery of the usage of tense is *both* necessary and sufficient for the mastery of the concept within the linguistic community. One cannot plausibly claim to have mastered one but not the other. Similarly, one cannot claim to have fully mastered *li* without also understanding the human feeling it conveys; nor can one claim to be a person of *ren* if one is repeatedly unable to convey that to others. Shun's analysis of the *ren-li* connection is a creative and philosophically satisfying one as it raises other important issues, including the criteria or basis for modifying *li*. It is a good example of contemporary scholarship in the field that both critically analyses ideas in Chinese philosophy and enlivens them in contemporary debate.

***Ren* and *Li* in Contemporary Philosophical Debates**

Although we might wish to introduce an element of creativity in the textual interpretation of the *Analects*, we must also balance that with the maintenance of its integrity as a text of the Warring States period. While the

tendency is to emphasise *ren*, for a number of obvious reasons, we should also keep in mind that the concept *li* plays a significant role in the philosophy of the *Analects* and that *li*-practices have been the dominant face of Confucianism in the Chinese historical context. To put it slightly differently, perceptions of Confucianism have very much been shaped by understandings of *li* in the lived Chinese context.

Nevertheless, there have been interesting and insightful developments of *li* and *ren* by contemporary scholars in the English-speaking world. Some scholars employ the tools of an analytic approach in order to critically scrutinise the concepts and to assert their continuing significance.[11] Recently, a number of scholars have turned their attention to the concept *yi* (appropriateness) in the *Analects*.[12] They argue that *yi* adds another layer to moral reasoning in Confucianism. Identified as 'appropriateness' or 'right', *yi* plays a particular role in practical deliberation as it reflects the Confucian concern for ethical appropriateness rather than normativity. That is, there is emphasis on doing the 'right' thing in a particular context, rather than merely following a rule or norm. Comparative ethical analyses such as this have immense benefits for philosophical inquiry and dialogue across different philosophical traditions. Especially in ethics and moral philosophy, scholars note that Confucian philosophy attends to the contexts of social engagement and focuses on concrete moral practice in a much greater way than traditional western moral philosophy does. Other recent examples of productive encounters include the comparisons of Confucian *ren* and the feminist ethic of care, and discussions of environmental and ecological thinking in the Chinese philosophical traditions.[13]

Another contemporary rendition of *ren* and *li* is to emphasise their significance in self cultivation in contemporary socio-political contexts. Discussions by David Hall and Roger Ames have led the debates in this area. Their interpretation of *ren* as 'person-making' – though sometimes criticised as rather too post-modern – has been influential in discussions of Confucianism in a democratic context.[14] Another significant discussion in socio-political philosophy concerns the status of *ren* and *li* in the continuing development of culture and society in East Asian countries. A good example is the issue of the place and continuing significance of Confucian philosophy in a global context in which human rights are deemed fundamental. There is also the question of how Confucian philosophy might have shaped the discourse and ideas of the Asian values debate.[15]

Together, *ren* and *li* comprise the core of Confucian philosophy and an in-depth understanding of their interplay reveals many fundamental elements of Confucian thought. The study of *ren* and *li* prompts further enquiry into issues associated with the moral cultivation of the self in a relational, socio-political context. One important issue concerns the concept of self and relationality. In Confucian thought, the cultivation of mutually enriching relationships is integral to the self and its identity. This concept of an interdependent self generates a view of morality that defies normativity and generalisation, and focuses on the practical realisation of human goodness in lived contexts. Confucian philosophy highlights the need for moral philosophers carefully to consider the concept of the interdependent self and how it is constituted by its relationality.

Another issue associated with self-definition relates to the impact of social and ethical norms on individuals. From a Confucian point of view, it is critical to understand the criteria for decision-making which will, if necessary, override outdated or even harmful *li*-practices. How does the developing moral individual acquire a critical distance from social norms? What kinds of skills are necessary for an intelligent assessment of the continuing relevance and applicability of existing norms? These in turn raise further questions regarding how moral norms are decided upon and by whom, and how they are instituted in particular societies. Of course, these questions are important in contemporary contexts as well.

Finally, whether Confucian philosophy embodies or engenders a 'collectivist' ideology is a topic worthy of further consideration. The collectivist point of view is contrasted with an 'individualist' philosophy that is a defining characteristic of liberal democratic societies. But a more thorough understanding of Confucianism actually challenges the collectivist – individualist characterisation of socio-political organisations. In fact, the Confucian concept of the interdependent self, which sits at the crossroads of *ren* and *li*, cannot simply be characterised as embodying a collectivist approach to socio-political organisation. The cultivation of particular relationships is critical to the well-being of both society and the individual. The measures of personal well-being are linked to one's successes in negotiating relationships and balancing competing demands and obligations. The Confucian account of the interdependent self sets it within a rich tapestry of relationships; hence, Confucian philosophy offers a complex, realistic picture of self-in-community.