

The Way of *Rén*

CONFUCIANISM can be summed up as *réndào* (仁道, the way of *rén*). Along with Daoism, it subscribes to the Chinese worldview shaped by *Yi Jing* (易經, *The Book of Change*). Its main focus is to achieve harmony in human society by means of promoting the way of *rén*. It is a strong conviction of Confucianism that people can live a good life in a harmonious society. Based on a key tenet of *Yi Jing* that knowing *dào* (道, the way) is essential for achieving and maintaining harmony, Kǒngzǐ (孔子, Confucius) developed the main thesis of his philosophy on how a person can come to know *dào* by becoming a virtuous person. As more and more people become virtuous, they would know *dào* and use such wisdom to build a harmonious society together. To this end, Confucianism seeks to guide and transform people into virtuous members of society through the cultivation of *dé* (德, virtues).

The Cultivation of Virtues

Rén

In Confucianism, the cultivation of virtues centers on the virtue of *rén* (仁, kindness, benevolence). *Rén* is the most prominent virtue that encompasses all the other virtues. The Chinese character ‘仁’ is composed of two characters: ‘人’ and ‘二’. The character ‘人’ means “human” or “people”. The character ‘二’ is the Chinese numeral for “two”. Together these two characters mean “two people”. The original meaning of ‘仁’ reveals tellingly how the character came to



Figure 1: The traditional Chinese character *rén*

be used to represent the virtue that governs how two people should treat each other. As ethics is seen in the Chinese culture as a matter of how people live with others and treat each other, *rén* became the virtue that encompasses all the other virtues. In *Lún Yǔ* (論語, the *Analects*), Kǒngzǐ typically teaches *rén* with examples of how one should treat other people under various circumstances. These examples serve to elucidate the proper ways of handling inter-personal relationships.

A person who has developed the virtue of *rén* is called a *jūnzǐ* (君子) and is an ideal person to be emulated and learned from. A *jūnzǐ* would be a royal and dedicated government official or public servant, a loving husband or wife, a firm and caring parent, a filial son or daughter and a trustworthy friend.

Kǒngzǐ's blueprint for achieving harmony in human society is quite commonsensical and down to earth. The more *jūnzǐ* there are in a society the more harmonious it would become. Kǒngzǐ himself further explicates *rén* in terms of two other virtues: *zhōng* (忠) and *shù* (恕).

Zhōng

Zhōng can be translated into a wide variety of words such as sincerity, truthfulness, dedication, loyalty and being unbiased. Again, we can gain a deeper understanding of its original meaning by decipher the Chinese character. The character '忠' is made up of two characters: '中' and '心'. The character '中' has two meanings: (1) "inside", and (2) "middle" or "center". The character '心' means "heart".

Accordingly, the first literal meaning of '*zhōng*' is "from the inside of one's heart". Based on this meaning, to be truthful with ourselves and sincere toward others, we need to engage in self-reflection to make sure what we say and do comes from our hearts. For Confucianism, the cultivation of virtue starts with being honest with oneself. This is why daily self-reflection is greatly emphasized in Confucianism. To improve oneself and become a *jūnzǐ* over time, one needs to know oneself—especially one's shortcomings. By recognizing and acknowledging one's deficiencies, one could then begin to work on correcting them and become a better person. Psychologically, this is a hard step to take, for facing our shortcomings does not make us feel good about ourselves. However, it is the first hurdle we need to cross if we want to improve ourselves.



Figure 2: The traditional Chinese character *zhōng*

Furthermore, it is only when a person is truthful with him- or herself can he or she be trusted by others. A trustworthy person would of course be faithful and royal, and always do his or her best for others. This is why *zhōng* also means being royal and dedicated.

The second literal meaning of ‘忠’ is “heart in the middle”. To put one’s heart in the middle means to have an “unbiased heart”—to be fair, just and unbiased. The virtue of *zhōng* is paramount in combating prejudice, discrimination and bigotry.

Shù

Shù is often translated as empathy, compassion and forgivingness. The character ‘恕’ is formed by combining two characters ‘如’ and ‘心’ together. As we saw earlier, ‘心’ means “heart”. The character ‘如’ means “similar”. So ‘恕’ literally means “a similar heart”. To have the virtue of *shù* is to have a heart similar to the heart of the person whom one cares about. This means, first of all, to be sensitive and considerate, to have empathy, to put oneself in another person’s shoes. Moreover, a person who has empathy would more likely be compassionate and forgiving.

Kǒngzǐ was among the first great sages to articulate the Golden Rule. He stated the rule as “what you do not want done to yourself, do not do to the others.” It is clear that to follow the Golden Rule is to practice the virtue of *shù*.

The virtue of *zhōng* motivates us to be dedicated and strive to be our best. However, we are only human and, despite our best efforts to be good, can still make mistakes in life. When we err or transgress, we need others to forgive us. By reciprocity, when others come up short or misbehave, we need to find room in our hearts to forgive them. It is never easy, but without *shù*, it would be hard to mend relationships and sustain harmony. When Zǐgòng asked Kǒngzǐ to sum up his teachings with one word, Kǒngzǐ picked *shù*. This indicates how important Kǒngzǐ thinks *shù* is. Once we understand how *zhōng* and *shù* are supposed to complement each other, we come to appreciate why both virtues are essential in the way of *rén*.



Figure 3: The traditional Chinese character *shù*

Lǐ

The cultivation of virtues is to be implemented through *lǐ* (禮, the norms of decorum and civility). Kǒngzǐ, unlike Mèngzǐ (孟子) and Xúnzǐ (荀子) after him, does not presuppose that human nature is good or evil. Rather, he thinks that human nature is something that can be worked on and improved. His approach is to do our best to teach all kinds, regardless of people's innate likenesses and differences. This underscores the humaneness of Confucianism. Kǒngzǐ's concern here is not about whether people are born evil, or born good but corrupted by the environment. Rather, his position is that we need to do our best to raise and guide children once they are born into this world. He sees learning as a process of personal transformation. To know the art of cooking, one would need to become a chef. To know the art of gardening, one would need to become a gardener. To know love, one would need to become a loving person.¹ Likewise, to know *réndào*, one needs to become a *jūnzǐ*. An apprentice who aspires to become a *jūnzǐ* has to follow *lǐ* so that decorums are internalized over the years and become his or her second nature. Gradually he or she would become a *jūnzǐ*—a person of *rén*.

To build a culture conducive to personal transformation, Kǒngzǐ advocates the establishment of proper institutions and customs to influence and cultivate members in a society. Those with power and status should especially be self-reflective and diligent in setting good examples for others to follow.

The Renaissance of Confucianism

Confucianism not only became the mainstream philosophy in China but also greatly impacted the cultures of many Asian countries such as Korea, Japan and Singapore. In recent decades, it has enjoyed a renaissance in many Asian countries and gained popularity globally. Confucianism, given its championing of harmony, can serve as an beacon of peace in the age of globalization when the increased interactions among nations and peoples lead to an ongoing challenge to peace and harmony. Kǒngzǐ deeply believes that harmony in human society



Figure 4: The traditional Chinese character *lǐ*

¹Truthful to the heritage of *Yi Jing*, Kǒngzǐ grasps learning as a process of change—to learn something, one would need to transform oneself. This insight into learning has become the bedrock of education for more than two thousand years in the Chinese tradition and has greatly influenced many Asian cultures.

can be achieved when we learn to treat each other right. The way of *rén* is his way to harmony, and is even more relevant today than the Period of Spring and Autumn and the Era of Warring States.

The Internalization and Institutionalization of Civility

The basic tenet of Confucianism that harmony can be achieved when people learn to treat each other right may seem so obvious as to border on banality. But its truth and practicality have been borne out throughout human history.

Even though the basic idea of *réndào* is easy to grasp, its implementation demands a long-term dedication and broad-scale institutionalization. The internalization of *lǐ* at the personal level and its institutionalization at the societal and global level would take decades to cultivate. Even after we succeed in such a monumental undertaking, we would still need to sustain it from generation to generation. For Confucianism, a civil and humane society is like a rose garden and we need to be constant gardeners.

Mutual Respect and Reciprocity

Mutual respect and reciprocity serve as lubricant to lessen frictions in human interaction and thus are essential in fostering harmony in human society. Each one of us would like others to respect us. But from daily experiences, we also find it very difficult to respect someone whose acts are affronts to our sensibilities. If we would not respect someone whose acts we deem disagreeable, how could we demand others to respect us when we behave in much the same manners toward them? To earn and be worthy of respect from others, we need to first conduct ourselves in proper manners. This is why *lǐ* plays a central role in Confucianism and is always meant to be practiced with reciprocity. As Kǒngzǐ emphasized, when we demand a son to be filial, we should also expect his father to be loving and kind. Likewise, it is unreasonable to ask for a younger brother to be respectful toward an older brother without requiring the latter to be friendly to the former.

How we should act reciprocally toward each other becomes our responsibilities to ourselves and to others. The emphasis on the responsibilities that come with inter-personal relationships can counterbalance extreme individualism, restore family values and promote social harmony. A person who deserts his family can never get away with the lame excuse “It is my life,” and we would do well not to forget the saying “No man is an island.”

Harmony, not Domination

It is not difficult to see that much of violence and suffering in history is a product of the craving for power to dominate and exploit others deemed inferior. Having seen so much killing and turmoil during the Period of Spring and Autumn, Kǒngzǐ loathed and despised *bàdào* (霸道, the way of domination and bullying), and championed *réndào* as a remedy for human brutality and cruelty. Kǒngzǐ had no illusion that human society could ever be perfect. Still, he truly believed that it could be made more harmonious with ongoing diligence, and urged us to do our best. In a society of *rén*, there would be less bigotry, violence, greed and obsession with power, but more civility, justice, generosity and compassion.

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