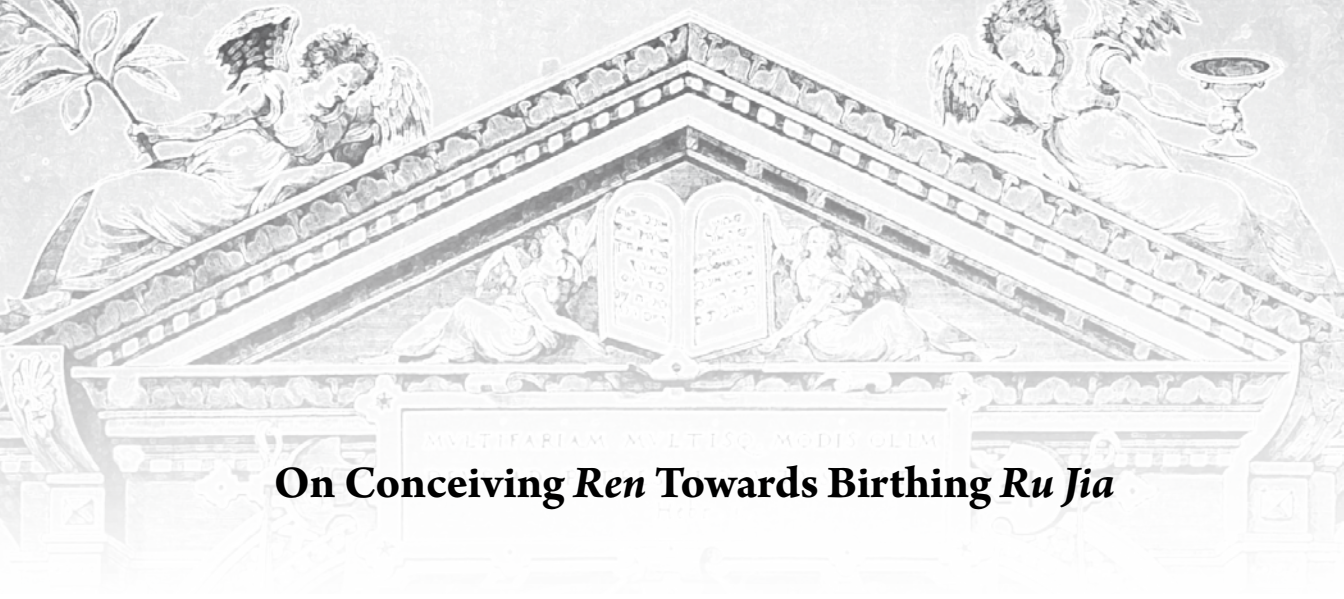




On Conceiving *Ren* Towards Birthing *Ru Jia*

Richard Ang, O.P.

Ren is the key concept of Confucius' philosophy. Thus, it dominates and guides all his teachings. *Ren* is a plurisignificative character. Etymologically, it refers to two people in a harmonious relationship. In the *Ru Jia*, there are at least five interrelated meanings of *Ren*, such as, 1) *Ren* can be taken as a particular virtue which is benevolence and it is to love others in a graded manner. 2) *Ren* can be taken as a general virtue and as such, it is universal and primary to which all particular virtues are connected. 3) *Ren* can be taken as an innate moral principle and in this light, an initial moral sensibility that has to be developed in the course of one's life. 4) *Ren* can be taken as an ethical ideal and this is *Ren* in its ultimate perfection with the complete transformation of the self from its disintegrative and selfish concerns towards the responsiveness of the profoundly relational person. 5) Finally, *Ren* can be taken as a general practice and they are *Zhong* and *Shu*. *Zhong* is positive, doing something for the self and then doing something for others. *Shu* is negative, thinking about what one should not do to others when one takes oneself as a measure for them. All these are the nuances of *Ren* and they will be exposed, analyzed and discussed in this paper.

Keywords: *Ren, Zhong, Shu, Junzi, Ru Jia, Lun Yü*

I. *Ren*: The Primary Concept of Confucius' Philosophy

The *Lun Yü* has an ostensibly incoherent and aphoristic nature, but in spite of that, Confucius undoubtedly disclosed that his philosophical teachings (including that of *Li*) were brought together by one single concept. This key concept in his philosophy is what is known as *Ren*.

The character appears more than a hundred times in the *Lun Yü*,¹ suggesting that it has primacy over the other concepts like *Yi*. *Ren* can be identified as Confucius' life ideal: what a person should aspire for and what society should equally strive for in order to have lasting peace and harmony. For instance, in a striking dialogue with two of his closest disciples *Zi Lu* and *Yan Hui*, Confucius provided an instantly recognizable illustration of this ideal.²

Yen Yuan and Chi Lu being by his side, the Master said to them,

"Come, let each of you tell his wishes."

Tsze-lu said,

"I should like, having chariots and horses, and light fur clothes, to share them with my friends, and though they should spoil them, I would not be displeased."

Yen Yuan said,

"I should like not to boast of my excellence, nor make a display of my meritorious deeds."

Tsze-lu then said,

"I should like, sir, to hear your wishes."

The Master said,

"They are, in regard to the aged, to give them rest; in regard to friends, to show them sincerity; in regard to the young, to treat them tenderly."³

These ideals of Confucius and of his two disciples are identical to the extent that they communicate a high regard for other men and women, but they are at variance in terms of their ways of thinking and comportments. *Zi Lu* was utilitarian in approach in the sense that he wished to share his material provisions with friends in order to have a public display of his generosity. On the other hand, *Yan Hui* was moralistic in the sense that he felt a very strong obligation to dedicate his talents and good works to the service of others. This moral obligation leads to unself-conscious efforts for the benefit of other men and women. Confucius, their Master, proceeded

¹ Joseph Wu, *Great Thinkers of the Eastern World: The Major Thinkers and Philosophical and Religious Classics of China, India, Japan, Korea, and the World of Islam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 5.

² Ch'u Chai and Winberg Chai, eds., *Confucianism* (New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1973), 34.

³ *Analects* 5:25 (James Legge translation).

much further. He desired to nurture the aged and to cherish the young not because of any utilitarian motive or of a strong moral imperative intensely felt, but for the higher reason of a sense of fellow-feeling with other men and women. All his actions were not just upright actions but were also *Ren* actions. It was because of these that Confucius has been known as a teacher of *Ren*.⁴

Evidently the ideas of Confucius which convey his life ideal are not strictly speaking ideas in the abstract. Instead, they are practical insights of a cultivated person, permeated with a sense of purpose and a passionate concern for the welfare of his fellow human beings. These insights are manifested in the life of Confucius and are well represented in the concept of *Ren*. *Ren* is the primary concept of Confucius' philosophy, dominating and guiding his teachings. It can even be said that his ethics and his politics all emerge from this governing doctrine.⁵ The following quotations with accompanying explanations are unmistakable proofs.

“Is he not a man of complete virtue, who feels no discomposure though men may take no note of him?”⁶

This shows that being recognized is not the standard pleasure of the man with *Ren*.⁷ With or without recognition, he continues doing about his business nonchalantly.

The Master said,

⁴ Ch'u Chai and Winberg Chai, eds., 34.

⁵ Ch'u Chai and Winberg Chai, eds., 34-35.

⁶ *Analects* 1:1 (James Legge translation) N.B.: James Legge translates *Ren* as virtue, while other English terms are used by other translators such as goodness, benevolence or humaneness. All of these are acceptable to a certain extent but they are generally found wanting, due to their inability to embrace the multiple nuances of *Ren*. Just like *Li*, *Ren* is a highly fluid character and the proponent prefers to maintain the use of the transliteration *Ren* in the course of his discussions. However, in direct quotations culled from different English translations, he shall be dependent upon the English word used by the different translators. Noteworthy is that there is another Chinese character which is also translated into English as virtue besides *Ren* and this is the ideograph *De*. Accordingly, *Ren* is understood as a virtue of the human person and it includes everything which refers to *De* but excludes everything which refers only to the individual. It is because the context of the community is a necessary condition for *Ren*. See Ernst Faber, *A Systematical Digest of the Doctrines of Confucius* (Hong Kong: China Mail Office, 1875), 71. On the other hand, *De* is generally translated too as virtue but it also originates from the *De* that connotes “to get.” One attains virtue by following the *Dao*. See Paul Strathern, *The Essential Confucius* (London: Virgin Books Ltd., 1999), 11. *De* is an individual achievement through personal cultivation and the *Dao* is none other than the Confucian vision of the good life as a whole or the ideal of human excellence. See Antonio S. Cua, *Moral Vision and Tradition: Essays in Chinese Ethics* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 274. Here, the Confucian *Dao* is not the abstract *Dao* of Lao Zi, which has a metaphysical bearing.

⁷ E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, *The Original Analects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 145.

“Those who are without virtue cannot abide long either in a condition of poverty and hardship, or in a condition of enjoyment. The virtuous rest in virtue; the wise desire virtue.”⁸

Here it is indicated that *Ren* is unswerving in harsh conditions as well as in moments of achievements.⁹ Therefore *Ren* involves constancy throughout life. Though there is no discussion of habits in Chinese philosophy, this constancy amounts to it.

The Master said,

“He who exercises government by means of virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn toward it.”¹⁰

The idea of a virtuous ruler is joined with an astronomical symbol.¹¹ A ruler of *Ren* will not have to exert much effort in convincing his subjects to follow his commands. His exemplary character alone has enough moral force to sway people to subjection. Therefore Confucius also taught that politics and government should be founded on *Ren*. This was sorely not the situation during the latter *Zhou* Dynasty when many rulers and princes were immoral.

“If a superior man abandons virtue, how can he fulfil the requirements of that name? The superior man does not even for the space of a single meal, act contrary to virtue. In moments of haste, he cleaves to it. In seasons of danger, he cleaves to it.”¹²

This statement implies that Confucius underwent a series of trials and difficulties during his life, but had successfully kept his principles intact. *Ren* therefore entails an individual commitment to it.¹³ Furthermore, *Ren* should embrace all the aspects of everyday life.

It appears that Confucius was convinced that the moral foundation of social order rests on the primary concept of *Ren*. Although the character is used many times in the *Lun Yü*, hardly did Confucius give a well-defined account of this key concept. It is written: “The subjects of which the Master seldom spoke were-profitableness, and also the appointments of Heaven, and perfect virtue.”¹⁴ His reservation would seem

⁸ *Analects* 4:2 (James Legge translation).

⁹ E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, 13.

¹⁰ *Analects* 2:1 (James Legge translation).

¹¹ E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, 109.

¹² *Analects* 4:5 (James Legge translation).

¹³ E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, 14.

¹⁴ *Analects* 9:1 (James Legge translation).

to reveal the profundity of his idea of *Ren*, of the reverence with which he tackled the question of what it meant to be *Ren* and also of the need he acknowledged for each person to contemplate *Ren* in his personal experience.¹⁵ Even though his disciples were constantly asking him about it, no precise definition was ever forthcoming or perhaps even possible,¹⁶ “for the practice of humaneness does surely proceed from the man himself.”¹⁷

As a teacher, Confucius enticed his disciples to discover the truth on their own with his able assistance. He expected people to do their own thinking and tried to stimulate them; emphatically saying that he would not think for other people with them doing nothing at all. Though he was often very elusive, for that very reason there are many implications in his aphorisms that can be thought-provoking in a wide coverage of contexts. This applies to his concept of *Ren*.

II. The Etymology of *Ren*

In order to understand the different lights and shades of the enigmatic character *Ren*, it is wise to go back to its etymology because a study of its origins would add intelligibility to the Confucian conceptualization of *Ren*.

There are two interpretations of the etymology: a more popular one and a more radical one. According to Nicholas F. Gier, the character *Ren* is a combination of *Ren* 人 meaning human person and *Ehr* 二 two horizontal lines meaning number two. This then signifies that the idea of relationality is at the origins of *Ren*.¹⁸ Literally speaking, the character refers to two human beings. Therefore it distinctively points to human relationships. A person is irreducibly a social being.

Paul Strathern has a similar understanding of *Ren*. According to him, the character is made up of two components: *Ren*-man 人 and *Ehr*-two 二. Man plus two is equal to man to manness. In other words, *Ren* is not concerned merely with the individual but with social behavior or moral character displayed in a public situation.¹⁹ It is also prudent to add that whenever *Ren* is spoken about, it has to be seen in the context of the community.

¹⁵ Thomas Cleary, trans. *The Essential Confucius: The Heart of Confucius' Teachings in Authentic I Ching Order* (New York: Harper, 1992), 3.

¹⁶ David R. Schiller, trans. *Confucius: The Collected Conversations or, The Analects/Lun Yu* (Charlton: Saga Virtual Publishers, 1997), 190.

¹⁷ *Analects* 12:1 (Raymond Dawson translation) N.B.: Dawson's translation is preferred over Legge's translation for the former expressed it declaratively while the latter's translation is in the form of a question rendering it weak and tentative.

¹⁸ Nicholas F. Gier, “The Dancing Ru: A Confucian Aesthetics of Virtue” *Philosophy of the East and West*, Volume 51, Number 2 (April 2001), 51.

¹⁹ Paul Strathern, *The Essential Confucius* (London: Virgin Books Ltd., 2002), 10.

Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr. give an alternative explanation of the character. According to them, *Ehr* 𠄎 is in fact an early form of *Shang* 上 meaning above or to ascend, which was also written as *Ehr* 𠄎 in the oracle bone inscriptions. Such an interpretation would emphasize the growing distinguishing characteristics one develops in becoming a person of virtues, thereby setting a direction and influence in one's community and the world at large.²⁰ To specify, a person of virtues is elevated and looked up to as an exemplar by everyone and order results from imitating the model.

Whatever interpretation is taken, the fact remains that *Ren* presupposes the idea of harmony, that is, one person getting along well with another person or one person setting a good moral trend for others to emulate. To comprehend fully the etymological meaning of *Ren*, an accompanying study of its sources in the Ancient Classics is inevitable. This will shed light on the *Ren* of Confucius.

III. The Pre-Confucian *Ren*

The character *Ren* is very infrequently referred to in the literature before the time of Confucius. It is cited only five times in the *Shujing*²¹ and only two times in the *Shijing*.²² *Ren* 仁 was almost certainly associated with *Ren* 人 meaning “human beings” or “persons,” but the latter initially did not point to biological human beings as such, but members of some tribes or noble clans.²³

There are actually two major scholarly views regarding the early usage of *Ren* 人. One opinion holds that *Ren* originally referred to the requisite qualities making one a distinctive member of a particular tribe or noble clan.²⁴ Arthur Waley elaborates that *Ren* originally meant “freemen” or “men of the tribe” in contradistinction to *Min* 民 meaning “subjects.” To possess the qualities required in a tribe or clan therefore is to be good and there is no more sweeping form of tribute can be given by the men of a tribe than to say that a person is one of them. Members of the tribe exhibit kindness towards one another that they do not show to foreigners. *Ren* in Chinese eventually came to denote “kindness,” “gentleness” and “humaneness.” Finally when the old

²⁰ Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr., trans., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 1998), 48.

²¹ *Shujing* is otherwise known as The Book of History or The Book of Documents. It is one of the Ancient Classics.

²² *Shijing* is otherwise known as The Book of Songs or The Book of Poetry. It is also one of the Ancient Classics.

Jingpan Chen, *Confucius as a Teacher* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1990), 250.

²³ Kwong-Loi Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 23.

²⁴ Kwong-Loi Shun, 23.

division between *Ren*-freemen and *Min*-subjects was disregarded, *Ren* became a general character for human being and the adjective *Ren* came to be known as human in opposition to animal. It was applied to behavior worthy of a man or woman as different from the behavior of animals.²⁵ *Ren* therefore is that which distinguishes people from brutes. Animals do not have the capacity to have this essential quality with its moral implications.²⁶ Only human beings have.

Another stance maintains that the character originally signified “to love” or “the sensitive part of human feelings,” explicitly “the kindness of rulers toward his subjects.”²⁷ The Chinese had the traditional impression that the rulers of the past were kind and benevolent. For instance, in the *Shujing*, it is said that the primal ancestor of the *Shang* people, who served the legendary *Shun* under the capacity as education minister, followed a policy of consideration and gentleness in dealing with the people. There is also the tale of King *Tang*, founder and developer of the *Shang* Dynasty, who ruled the people with leniency. King *Tang* became a famous icon of benevolent government.²⁸

Our king did not approach to dissolute music and women; he did not seek to accumulate property and money. To great virtue he gave great offices; to great merit he gave great rewards. He employed others as if their abilities were his own; he was not slow to change his errors. Rightly indulgent and rightly benevolent, from the display of such virtue confidence was reposed in him by the millions of the people.²⁹

This paragraph enumerates the benevolent actions of King *Tang* which brought about harmonious relationships among the people in the kingdom. His genuine concern for their welfare made him a model of benevolence and his administration is one prime example of benevolent government. It was because of this that it received the Mandate of Heaven.

There is another understanding of *Ren* in the *Shijing*. In this classic, *Ren* appears more than once in concurrence with *Mei* 美 meaning “handsome and strong,” or “handsome and noble.” When a lady sings deferentially of a man riding out to go hunting, an aesthetic paradigm instead of someone bestowed with moral virtues is being praised as an entirely pleasing lover.³⁰ Therefore the character *Ren* was used in the *Shijing* to portray noble huntsmen. It is conjectured that the concept of

²⁵ Arthur Waley, trans., *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 27.

²⁶ C. Alexander Simpkins and Ann Simpkins, *Simple Confucianism* (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2000), 56.

²⁷ Kwong-Loi Shun, 23.

²⁸ Kung-Chuan Hsiao, *A History of Chinese Political Thought, Volume One: From the Beginnings to the Sixth Century A.D.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 105.

²⁹ *Shujing* IV, ii, 5 (James Legge translation).

³⁰ Hyun Hochsmann, *On Philosophy in China* (Toronto: Wadsworth, 2004), 12-13.

Ren is understood as “manly” or “manhood” in a certain sense.³¹ This justifies James Ware’s translation of *Ren* as “manhood-at-its-best” which is based upon its meaning in this Ancient Classic. However, the character *Ren* is brought about not because of the superiority of male reason, but virtues most probably developed according to a vocational model of nondomestic versus domestic duties, i.e. public and private duties.³² Many illustrations show that a number of Chinese women were also able to advance great virtues and exercise a considerable political power despite their restricted roles in society, e.g. a certain *Ming Fu* criticized her husband for his lapses as charioteer for the minister of *Qi*.³³

Below is an example of how *Ren* is used in conjunction with *Mei* in the *Shijing*.

Shuh has gone hunting;
And in the streets there are no inhabitants.
Are there indeed no inhabitants?
[But] they are not like Shuh
Who is truly admirable and kind.
Shuh has gone to the grand chase;
And in the streets there are none feasting.
Are there indeed none feasting?
[But] they are not like Shuh,
Who is truly admirable and good.

Shuh has gone into the country;
And in the streets there are none driving about.
Are there indeed none driving about?
[But] they are not like Shuh,
Who is truly admirable and martial.³⁴

This ode seems to repetitively exalt the qualities of *Shuh* which are extraordinary and are not possessed by other men, making *Shuh* a role model, a cut above the rest. In that case, *Shuh* is ascended or elevated in the light of what Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr. were stating when they related the etymology of *Ren* with that of *Shang*-above. Like what was discussed previously, these characteristics have something to do more with what is aesthetically pleasing than with what is morally upright. Eventually, in the philosophy of Confucius, what is morally upright also becomes aesthetically pleasing when *Ren* and *Li* are combined.

³¹ Jiyuan Yu, “Virtue: Confucius and Aristotle” *Philosophy of the East and West*, Volume 48, Number 2 (April 1998), 323.

³² During those times in Ancient China, men had public duties while many of the women stayed at home to do domestic household chores.

³³ Nicholas F. Gier, 282.

³⁴ *Shijing* I, vii, 3 (James Legge translation).

In summation, the Pre-Confucian *Ren* had business to do with benevolence of rulers as can be gleaned from the *Shujing* or with aesthetic models as can be seen from the *Shijing*. These Ancient Classics can be said to be the sources of the Confucian *Ren* for they had an enormous impact on Confucius.

Karyn L. Lai accentuates that an important issue in discussions of the philosophy of Confucius is the role of the past. Appealing to the past appears to be a characteristic peculiarity of the Confucian tradition. In the *Lun Yü*, Confucius endorses the way of life during the earlier part of the *Zhou* Period; he also puts on a pedestal the dedication and accomplishments of the legendary sage rulers of long ago with regards to their economy in personal affairs, efficient and non-aggressive government and moral leadership. This feature of Confucian argumentation is closely related to edifying and educational concerns. Quotations of historical examples are for the function of validating a distinct point rather than for reporting historical situations correctly.³⁵ The *Shujing*, which contains accounts about the kings and their exploits, therefore plays a very substantial role in learning about the past.

The Master said,

“Extreme is my decay. For a long time, I have not dreamed, as I was wont to do, that I saw the duke of Chau.”³⁶

Here the Duke of *Zhou* refers to *Zhou Kung*. After the death of his brother *Wu Wang*, *Zhou Kung* did not usurp the throne from his nephew; instead he willingly trained the young inexperienced boy *Zheng Wang* on how to be a good ruler. The dream speaks of Confucius’ idealization of the benevolent persona of *Zhou Kung*.³⁷

The Master said,

“Great indeed was Yao as a sovereign! How majestic was he! It is only Heaven that is grand, and only Yao corresponded to it. How vast was his virtue! The people could find no name for it...”³⁸

This excerpt romanticizes another sage king and cultural hero. This time the figure comes from pre-dynastic times, meaning even before the establishment of the *Xia* Dynasty.

Besides voluminous allusions to the *Shujing*, the *Lun Yü* also treats the *Shijing* as a voice of authority from more ancient times, appealing to its poems to buttress its

³⁵ Karyn L. Lai, “Learning from the Confucians: Learning from the Past” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Volume 35, Number 1 (March 2008), 99-100.

³⁶ *Analects* 7:5 (James Legge translation).

³⁷ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *The Chinese: Their History and Culture* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), 34.

³⁸ *Analects* 8:19 (James Legge translation).

specific arguments. The passages of the *Shijing* lend insights into the variety of human life and experiences. These experiences are more wide-ranging than those that any one person will go through over a lifetime. Ergo, the Ancient Classics are generally a collection of information about the past and experiences of diverse communities. They are materials that an assiduous person would examine to understand more about his world.³⁹ The following quotations from the *Lun Yü* demonstrate the influence of the *Shijing* to Confucius:

The Master said,

“Though a man may be able to recite the three hundred odes, yet if, when entrusted with a government charge, he knows not to act, or if, when sent to any quarter on a mission, he cannot give his replies unassisted, notwithstanding the extent of his learning, of what practical use is it?”⁴⁰

Memorization of the *Shijing* is necessary, but familiarization with its verses is not enough to create a well rounded-person. One has to think and reflect on the meaning of the different odes and has to apply it to present affairs. Knowledge should be combined with practice.

Ch'an K'ang asked Po-yu, saying,

“Have you heard any lessons from your father different from what we have all heard?”

Po-yu replied,

“No. He was standing alone once, when I passed below the hall with hasty steps, and said to me, ‘Have you learned the Odes?’ On my replying ‘Not yet,’ he added, ‘If you do not learn the Odes, you will not be fit to converse with.’ I retired and studied the Odes...”⁴¹

The question of Confucius to his son shows the importance of the *Shijing* as the source of a person's ideas and teachings. It gives one the capacity to engage in intelligent conversations, making one eloquent and fluent.

IV. The Confucian *Ren* and its Nuances

Based on the respected status of the Ancient Classics in the texts of the *Lun Yü*, it is not far-fetched that Confucius borrowed his concept of *Ren* from sporadic

³⁹ Karyn L. Lai, 106.

⁴⁰ *Analects* 13:5 (James Legge translation)

⁴¹ *Analects* 16:13 (James Legge translation)

references to it in the Ancient Classics, such as the kindness of rulers to their subjects or the exceptional aesthetic quality in people worthy of high regard. However, reflecting upon the Ancient Classics and having an inventive mind, Confucius did not just readily adopt what was given. He also transformed and extended the connotation of *Ren*, making it alongside *Li*, the cornerstone of his socio-moral philosophy. The *Ru Jia* subsequently expanded it in the course of time.

Benjamin I. Schwartz declares that in the *Shujing* and the *Shijing* there is already the idea that the objective socio-political order is reliant upon the virtues of kings and officials. The language of personal virtues in these Ancient Classics is already resonant with the comprehensive notion of *De* 德. This character may have originally been correlated with an inner spiritual-ethical power which capacitates kings and officials to inspire people's behavior. Only rulers possessing this spiritual-ethical power can sustain the socio-political order. One novel thing in Confucius' idea of *Ren* is that moral power is not the prerogative of those in political authority alone – commoners like himself may also have *Ren*.⁴²

Commoners like Confucius may teach his fellow commoners how to realize *Ren*, i.e. how to become a *Junzi*. Like what was previously pointed out, the *Junzi* was at the outset social rather than moral in implication. It originally referred to men of noble birth and of superior rank. Ancient Chinese society was very hierarchical. There were the class of the noblemen and the class of the common people. Positions of power were hereditary and exclusive for the noblemen. However in the *Lun Yü*, the *Junzi* has conclusively obtained a moral significance.⁴³ The *Junzi* began to refer to a person of virtues, particularly to a person of *Ren*. Any person could become a *Junzi* not by birth but by moral cultivation and education. This did not indicate though that Confucius had totally discarded hereditary rank. On the contrary, he still hoped that those of noble birth may be formed to become true gentleman in the ethical sense of the word. It was only through this way that there can indeed be an effective moralization of society.⁴⁴ However in his pioneering perspective, everybody can be formed to become a *Junzi*, whose main characteristic is the possession and realization of *Ren*. “The Master said, ‘In teaching there should be no distinction of classes.’”⁴⁵

But what is *Ren*? Reading the *Lun Yü*, it can be concluded that Confucius never gave it a clear-cut definition. Many of his disciples requested the Master for further clarification. Even to a modern reader, *Ren* may appear to be vague and imprecise, most especially to those trained in Western categories. In the *Lun Yü*,

⁴² Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985), 76.

⁴³ Benjamin I. Schwartz, 76-77.

⁴⁴ Benjamin I. Schwartz, 77.

⁴⁵ *Analects* 15:28 (James Legge translation)

several verses apparently run counter to each other that they give the impression that *Ren* is something paradoxical, e.g. *Ren* is accessible and *Ren* is far away, or that *Ren* is one of the many things enumerated therein, which is actually the position that this writer is taking. In other words, *Ren* is multi-faceted and can never be encapsulated in just one understanding. To strictly define *Ren* is to commit an act of injustice to this concept which eludes exactness. Instead of providing a strict definition, the proponent is favorable to the discussion of the many distinct descriptions given to *Ren*, making use of the relevant texts of the *Lun Yü* as well as of supplements coming from the early *Ru Jia*.

In the assessment of the writer, *Ren* may be taken to mean any of the following depending upon the context or the circumstance upon which the character is used: 1. as a particular virtue, 2. as a general virtue, 3. as an innate moral principle, 4. as an ethical ideal, and 5. as a practice.

1. *Ren as a Particular Virtue*

The simplest assertion that Confucius makes on *Ren* is that *Ren* is to love others. In this respect, *Ren* corresponds to the virtue of benevolence. Although to love others is not to be done indiscriminately. It has to have a guiding principle otherwise it is as good as spoiling and ruining the object of love. And so, in one instance in the *Lun Yü*, Confucius specifies that only the person of *Ren* knows how to love and knows how to hate others too, but no person is inherently worthy of being hated. However, in order to really love others, one has to hate their evil doings so as they may be compelled to be educated to become better persons.⁴⁶ The following are textual evidences.

Fan Ch'ih asked about benevolence. The Master said, "It is to love all men." He asked about knowledge. The Master said, "It is to know all men."⁴⁷

Here *Ren* is taken as loving all others in answer to all wars. This is *Ren* as benevolence in the *Lun Yü* text.⁴⁸ Benevolence can either refer to an ordinary individual loving others or to a sovereign loving his people. Confucius' answer to his disciple's question on knowledge is interconnected with the first answer on love. Love should be informed by knowledge.

The Master said,

"It is only the truly virtuous man, who can love, or who can hate others."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Shu-hsieu Liu, *Understanding Confucian Philosophy* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), 18.

⁴⁷ *Analects* 12:22 (James Legge translation)

⁴⁸ E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, 95.

⁴⁹ *Analects* 4:3 (James Legge translation)

Ren is not just congeniality, but it progresses towards that direction. It is also accompanied by the facility to evaluate others. Enthusiasm for what is right presupposes opposition to its opposite. Right is not only different from wrong, but it is better than wrong.⁵⁰

Thus *Ren* as benevolence is not the love of a devoted parent smothering his child with fondness or the love of a ruler to his people intoxicating them with corruption. Authentic love in *Ren* entails profound wisdom and sound judgment.⁵¹ It is not a kind of love that is blinded by strong sentiments, but a kind of love which brings about the transformation of the object of benevolence. This is only possible if love is guided by knowledge about the person loved. To love another person is not just to show him kindness, but to know his status and weaknesses, correct his faults and help him improve himself as a person.

The uncomplicated statement of *Ren* as to love others therefore is actually not as simple as it sounds. Love in Chinese is *Ai* 愛, which involves one's mind thinking of other's bodies. This type of loving others originates from the feeling of tranquillity, reverence and closeness found in the depth of one's heart. Though *Ai* may stem from blood relationships which are very particular, it is meant to be a universal emotion.⁵²

Ai can also be taken as to favor others or to be humane to others. *Ren* as benevolence thereby can be understood as being concerned about others, which derives from an affectionate feeling one has towards other people. And so to be a person of *Ren* or to have the virtue of benevolence, one must care for other human beings. Even if the entire concept of *Ren* cannot be condensed merely to *Ai*, at least it can be said that caring about others occupies a prominent place in this concept.⁵³

Confucius wisely retained the Pre-Confucian understanding of *Ren* as benevolence of rulers, but the new development is that everybody can show love or benevolence to other fellow human beings, whether one is a nobleman or a commoner. For example, Confucius identified *Yan Hui* (a poor young disciple who avoided official positions) as a man who did not deviate from *Ren* for three consecutive months.⁵⁴ By being benevolent to others; a peasant or a ruler may become a *Junzi* in the moral sense and conversely by failing to be benevolent to others; a prince remains only a *Junzi* in the social sense. In the example above, Confucius was implying that *Yan Hui* was on his way to become a *Junzi* in the moral sense.

⁵⁰ E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, 13.

⁵¹ Shu-hsieu Liu, 18.

⁵² Ge Zhaoguang, "The Continuation and Rejuvenation of the Intellectual Tradition (I)" *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, Volume 33, Number 3 (Spring 2002), 19.

⁵³ Chenyang Li, *The Tao Encounters the West: Explorations in Comparative Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 97-99.

⁵⁴ Kwong-loi Shun, 24.

The Master said,

“A youth, when at home, should be filial, and, abroad, respectful to his elders. He should be earnest and truthful. He should overflow in love to all, and cultivate the friendship of the good...”⁵⁵

Ren as love or benevolence begins at the family but it does not end there. It is continually extended to society until it covers all peoples.

Confucius argued that the natural affection existing between relatives within one's family is the starting point of social morality. Confucian doctrine has a hierarchical feature to it, including benevolence.⁵⁶ He explained that *Ren* as benevolence starts from its assumedly most personal and enduring source – the love of one's parents and the rest of the family members, but it extends to other relationships until it ends with the stage of benevolence toward all humankind.⁵⁷

This is the essence of *Ren* as benevolence. *Ren* primarily means loving family and relatives. The love based on blood-bond relationship is the basic foundation of *Ren*. Loving family and relatives is very crucial because it takes on the old system of the patriarchal clan and agricultural family of the early *Zhou* Dynasty. But benevolence is not merely nepotism because it is also expansive. It involves loving other fellow human beings as well. This necessitates the relationship between the self and the community. Its underlying principle is to preserve peace and unity in society.⁵⁸ It can be recalled that for the Chinese the world is one big family. Tu Wei-Ming beautifully writes:

“In the Confucian tradition, human flourishing entails a series of concentric circles encompassing the self, the family, community, society, nation, world and cosmos. Since the self is conceived as a centre of relationships rather than an isolated individual, we can envision Confucian self-realization in terms of a gradual expression of self-consciousness to embrace an ever-extending network of human-relatedness.”⁵⁹

The *Da Xue* confirms this by stating:

⁵⁵ *Analects* 1:6 (James Legge translation)

⁵⁶ Confucian love is graded and differentiated. The intensity of love for people depends on one's closeness or remoteness to them. Naturally, the intensity of love is stronger for family members than for strangers. Nevertheless, Confucian love emanates from the family to the community. In contradistinction, the love of *Mo Zi* is an undifferentiated love, which is equal.

⁵⁷ Wei-Bin Zhang, *Confucianism and Modernization: Industrialization and Democratization of the Confucian Regions* (Wiltshire: Antony Rowe Ltd., 1999), 32-33.

⁵⁸ Brian Carr, ed., *Morals and Society in Asian Philosophy* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1996), 153.

⁵⁹ Tu Wei-Ming, “Humanity as Embodied Love: Exploring Filial Piety in a Global Ethical Perspective” *Jen, Agape, Tao with Tu Wei-Ming* (Binghamton: Institute of Global Cultural Studies, 1999), 28.

“The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons.”⁶⁰

Later in Mencius,⁶¹ *Ren* is discussed almost exclusively in the meaning of benevolence, most especially the benevolence of government. Both Confucius’ and Mencius’ perfect form of government is one which exhibits *Ren*. Mencius observed that princes of some states took the people away from their work during the farming seasons, making it difficult for them to till the land and attend to the needs of their families. In effect, the people suffered starvation while family members were separated. These princes did not love their people. Mencius was convinced that in order to become a true ruler, one must love the people and practice the governance of benevolence. To paraphrase it, being benevolent is the only way to be an effective ruler. Both Confucius and Mencius believed that if the government takes good care of its people, there would be no crime and poverty. If the ruler loves his people, he will ensure that they do not miss their farming seasons so that they will have good harvests in good years and be prepared for bad years. When people have enough provisions, they conduct themselves well and do not steal or rob.⁶² The following quotations display the correspondence of Confucius’ and Mencius’ teachings.

The Master said,

“To rule a country of a thousand chariots, there must be reverent attention to business, and sincerity; economy in expenditure, and love for men; and the employment of the people at the proper seasons.”⁶³

This statement makes explicit that benevolence in government embraces paying attention to details such as people’s livelihood and welfare. Such an attitude can only arise from a ruler or a prince with benevolence.

Tsze-chang said,

“What is meant by being beneficent without great expenditure?

The Master replied,

⁶⁰ *Da Xue* (James Legge translation)

⁶¹ Mencius is the second major figure of the *Ru Jia*. It was Mencius who further elaborated Confucius’ understanding of *Ren* as benevolence. As Plato was to Socrates, so was Mencius to Confucius.

⁶² Chenyang Li, 98.

⁶³ *Analects* 1:5 (James Legge translation)

“When the person in authority makes more beneficial to the people the things from which they naturally derive benefit; - is not this being beneficent without great expenditure?”⁶⁴

Here the person in authority refers to the ruler or the prince. According to Confucius, the ruler or the prince should prioritize the welfare of the people whom he is serving. One way of doing it is to make them self-sufficient.

‘Therefore an intelligent ruler will regulate the livelihood of the people, so as to make sure that, for those above them, they shall have sufficient wherewith to serve their parents, and, for those below them, sufficient wherewith to support their wives and children... After this he may urge them, and they will proceed to what is good, for in this case the people will follow after it with ease...’⁶⁵

A benevolent ruler or prince will see to it that he cares for all peoples by caring for all families like his concern for his very own family. The expansion and extension of benevolence is implied in here. By doing this, he will easily win the support of the populace.

‘If your Majesty now will make pleasure a thing common to the people and yourself, the royal sway awaits you.’⁶⁶

This statement has a similar content to the preceding one. A ruler or a prince who treats all peoples the way he treats his very own people; that is by being responsive to their needs; will win the heart of the masses.

‘...If its ruler will put in practice a benevolent government, no power will be able to prevent his becoming sovereign...’⁶⁷

This seems to suggest that a benevolent government will win not just the support of the people but the Mandate of Heaven as well. In Confucian tradition, the Mandate of Heaven is seen in the mandate of the people. It is analogous to the Latin phrase *vox populi, vox dei*.

This is being faithful to the pre-Confucian meaning of *Ren* which is kindness of rulers to the people, but this old concept is suffused with new meanings in Confucius. It becomes consciousness of human others, i.e. an individual (whether a commoner or a nobleman) becoming conscious of his fellow human beings translated concretely into the action of love or benevolence. Therefore it is clear that

⁶⁴ *Analects* 20:2 (James Legge translation)

⁶⁵ *Mencius* 1:1:7:21 (James Legge translation)

⁶⁶ *Mencius* 1:2:1:8 (James Legge translation)

⁶⁷ *Mencius* 2:1:1:10 (James Legge translation)

in the Confucian tradition, the self can only be realized within the matrix of society such as in the five basic relationships. Without the others, the self is incomplete and unfulfilled. And similarly, without the consideration of others, the concept of *Ren* self destructs and ceases to exist.

2. *Ren as a General Virtue*

Confucius further expressed *Ren* in a new approach. In pre-Confucian Classics, *Ren* always represented a particular virtue which is none other than benevolence or love. Until the time of Confucius, the Chinese had not yet developed a notion of a general virtue which is universal and primary and to which all other particular virtues are connected. Confucius was trying to transmit a comprehensive ethical doctrine which needs a basic virtue on which all particular virtues are founded. In this manner, Confucius not only made a tremendous advance. He also built Chinese ethics on a solid base.⁶⁸ Since it is an all embracing virtue, it is not surprising that Confucius was often reluctant to define it.⁶⁹

Many of Confucius' remarks on *Ren* in the *Lun Yü* go beyond the conception of *Ren* as a particular virtue. Here are samples coming from the text which prove that Confucius also spoke of *Ren* as a general virtue, containing all particular virtues (including benevolence and love) and other moral characteristics, establishing their goodness.

The Master said,

“The firm, the enduring, the simple, and the modest are near to virtue.”⁷⁰

These are the traits that can be found in the superior person, while the opposite of these traits are those that can be found in the inferior person.⁷¹

Tsze-chang asked Confucius about virtue. Confucius said, “To be able to practice five things everywhere under heaven constitutes... virtue.” He begged to ask what they were and was told, “Gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, earnestness, and kindness...”⁷²

Ren as general virtue covers gravity, generosity, sincerity, earnestness and kindness. It is all embracing but it cannot just be reduced to any one of these.

Tze-hsia said,

⁶⁸ Wing-Tsit Chan, “Chinese and Western Interpretations of Jen (Humanity)” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Volume 2 (1975), 107.

⁶⁹ Raymond Dawson, trans., *The Analects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), xxi.

⁷⁰ *Analects* 13:27 (James Legge translation)

⁷¹ E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, 104.

⁷² *Analects* 17:16 (James Legge translation)

“There are learning extensively, and having a firm and sincere aim; inquiring with earnestness, and reflecting with self-application: - virtue is in such a course.”⁷³

Here learning is by inquiry followed by personal reflection rather than by memorization of texts. And this learning is or leads to *Ren*.⁷⁴ Therefore even learning is subsumed peculiarly under *Ren* as a general virtue.

For Confucius, *Ren* as general virtue is the highest moral principle. If it cannot be defined, then how is it to be understood at least? Charles Muller provides a very plausible explanation. Accordingly, *Ren* as general virtue is the center of all forms of virtuous attributes and conducts. As a general virtue, it is never shown in daily activities as a thing in itself but rather in different forms of virtuous human qualities and actions like wisdom, propriety and uprightness. *Ren* as a general virtue necessarily lacks its own discernible function. It is not something obvious or identifiable in itself. Rather, it can be apprehended through other functional virtues like fidelity, filial piety, humility, generosity, fairness, etc. In making pronouncements about *Ren* based on the appearance of these particular virtues, the demonstration of a few occurrences alone is never considered adequate to make someone eligible as a person of *Ren*. To be included in this category, one must exhibit an extensive range of virtuous qualities in diverse conditions over a protracted period of time.⁷⁵

Ren as a general virtue lacks its own perceptible function because it underlies all virtuous behaviors. What lies beneath or what lies beyond particular virtues cannot be easily discerned. It is the virtue of virtues, making particular virtues what they are, instilling them with moral significance. *Ren* as general virtue further enables one to differentiate between what is truly particularly virtuous from what is not, e.g. between authentic courage from what is mere recklessness. All particular virtues have one common denominator, in each of them there is high regard for human life or for humanity as a whole. Without this condition, there cannot be any particular virtue. Take for instance, recklessness is not a particular virtue because it endangers not just the life or reputation of the doer of the action, but also imperils the existence of other people in the community for no apparent good reason at all. In here, there is obviously an absence of regard for humanity. On the other hand, courage is a particular virtue because it promotes the good of the self and the others even if it is accompanied by some form of menace. A man of courage may even sacrifice himself in defending the life of his community. Now, even a particular virtue such as knowledge which appears to be concerned only with the self is actually concerned

⁷³ *Analects* 19:6 (James Legge translation)

⁷⁴ E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, 186.

⁷⁵ Charles Muller, “Tiyong and Interpenetration in the *Analects* of Confucius: The Sacred as Secular” *Bulletin of Tokyo Gakuen University* (March 2000), 3.

with the others. In Confucian tradition, knowledge is supposedly both informative and transformative. Theory and practice are inseparable. A person transformed by his knowledge in turn transforms also his society. Therefore all particular virtues obtain their ethical sense either directly or indirectly from *Ren* as a general virtue, but it does not follow that these particular virtues are collapsible into the general virtue of *Ren*.⁷⁶ Courage is not *Ren* as a general virtue, because the latter includes all other qualities which may not be found in the virtue of courage.

C. Alexander Simpkins and Anne Simpkins are reasonable in affirming that *Ren* is the *Dao* of humanity, the wellspring from which all virtues flow. It transcends all virtues because it is the principle of central harmony.⁷⁷ It might as well be that *Ren* as a general virtue is virtue in the abstract or virtue in itself.

3. *Ren as an Innate Moral Principle*

The author firmly asserts that for Confucius *Ren* is inherent in the nature of the human person. At birth, everyone is readily endowed with *Ren* in the form of an initial moral sensibility. One such textual evidence from the *Lun Yü* which supports this theory is this statement: “Is virtue a thing remote? I wish to be virtuous, and lo! Virtue is at hand.”⁷⁸ Ezra Pound, unlike James Legge’s translation, renders it this way: “Manhood, how is it something afar off; I want to be human, and that humanity I get to.”⁷⁹

Another supportive passage is this: “Is the practice of perfect virtue from a man himself, or is it from others?”⁸⁰ Ezra Pound translates it declaratively as: “This business of manhood sprouts from oneself, how can it sprout from others?”⁸¹ Another text is this: “Heaven produced the virtue that is in me.”⁸² These sentences are highly suggestive of the instantaneity of *Ren*. They imply that *Ren* is within the person’s immediate reach, requiring no effort for its possession all because a human person is naturally equipped with a rudimentary form of *Ren*. The only way to make sense of this is to understand that *Ren* is “built-in” within the moral system of man, although not everyone can be fully sensitive of it. Some are able to go way beyond this level of initial moral sensibility, while some remain inert in this stage, but the fact remains that everybody is born with it. Everybody is conscious of himself and of human others. It

⁷⁶ Julia Po-Ah Lai Tao, “Two Perspectives of Care: Confucian Ren and Feminist Care” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Volume 27, Number 2 (June 2000), 217.

⁷⁷ C. Alexander Simpkins and Anne Simpkins, *Simple Confucianism* (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2000), 35.

⁷⁸ *Analects* 7:29 (James Legge translation)

⁷⁹ *Analects* 7:29 (Ezra Pound translation) N.B.: Ezra Pound’s translation is preferred over James Legge’s because “manhood” or “humanity” comes closer to the idea of human nature.

⁸⁰ *Analects* 12:1 (James Legge translation)

⁸¹ *Analects* 12:1 (Ezra Pound translation)

⁸² *Analects* 7:22 (James Legge translation)

is what distinguishes humans from animals. Richard Gotshalk describes *Ren* as “one element of our native stuff and substance, namely an initial feeling of human being for human being, one that is ours through our human endowment and is directly evoked and expressed in response to the presence of other human beings.”⁸³

Granted that *Ren* is an innate moral principle, in all probability the author maintains, the nature of the human person is good. Although in the *Lun Yü*, Confucius never asserts that human nature is good, but the truth of the matter may be implicit in this quotation:

“By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart.”⁸⁴

If human beings are equal in nature, then what is their nature? Mencius embraces the point of view that human beings are born with goodness, but people have many desires that can lead them astray. Apparently, his predecessor Confucius is convinced that there is an enormous potentiality in the human person. To cultivate such a potentiality is to follow the natural course of things.⁸⁵ *Ren* as an initial moral sensibility is included among the potentialities that can be found in human nature. Thereby Confucius showed an implicit faith in man’s goodness and perfectibility, but it was Mencius who explicitly taught about the natural beginnings of *Ren* and the goodness of human nature. This is his proof for the goodness of human nature:

From this case we may perceive that the feeling of commiseration is essential to man, that the feeling of shame and dislike is essential to man, that the feeling of modesty and complaisance is essential to man, and that the feeling of approving and disapproving is essential to man... The feeling of commiseration is the principle of benevolence. The feeling of shame and dislike is the principle of righteousness. The feeling of modesty and complaisance is the principle of propriety. The feeling of approving and disapproving is the principle of knowledge... Men have these four principles just as they have four limbs.⁸⁶

Mencius accounted that there are good seeds inherent in human nature. These seeds are potencies which when developed will result with particular virtues in the person concerned such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety and knowledge. Moreover, it is up to the person to discover and enhance these inborn

⁸³ Richard Gotshalk, *The Beginnings of Philosophy in China* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1999), 70.

⁸⁴ *Analects* 17:2 (James Legge translation)

⁸⁵ Donald H. Bishop, ed., *Chinese Thought: An Introduction* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985), 19.

⁸⁶ *Mencius* 2:1:6 (James Legge translation) N.B.: The researcher will just limit his discussion to the feeling of commiseration as the principle of benevolence.

capacities through self-cultivation. As it is said in Mencian terms, the feeling of commiseration is the principle of benevolence. The researcher remarks that this feeling of commiseration is none other than *Ren* in its rudimentary form or *Ren* as an initial moral sensibility.

All men have a mind which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others. My meaning may be illustrated thus: - even nowadays, if men suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, they will without exception experience a feeling of alarm and distress. They will feel so, not as a ground on which they may gain the favour of the child's parents, nor as a ground on which they may seek the praise of their neighbours and friends, nor from a dislike to the reputation of having been unmoved by such a thing.⁸⁷

This is the classic example given by Mencius to substantiate his theory that the feeling of commiseration is spontaneous and natural in the human person. *Ren* in its initial stage is inherent and in one aspect unlearned. It is located in the heart sensitive to the sufferings of others which all human beings possess.

Mencius tries to explain human capacity for altruistic regard in terms of inherent feelings of commiseration that arise in one's heart⁸⁸ when suffering is being witnessed. He did not resort to any external transcendental sources or make any appeal to consequentialist and pragmatic reasons. As made obvious in *Mencius* 2:1:6, commiseration is an immediate response to the impending danger faced by the child and not based on any motives such as the desire to obtain praise or to fulfill some personal likes. The Confucian paradigm is to extend this feeling of commiseration to everybody in the world and as follows, to make it a general disposition of the person concerned. Therefore, the probable reason why Confucius declared that *Ren* comes from the self and not from others is because the feeling of commiseration is a natural feeling that comes from the heart of the person.⁸⁹ One arrives at *Ren* neither by way of intellect nor by way of emotion, but by intuition. *Ren* is inborn in all human beings and everybody has the inkling for it, but the person whose intuition is more perceptive has a better apprehension of *Ren*.⁹⁰

Therefore every person must, in his own nature, look for and nurture his instincts for goodness and place himself in harmony with the *Dao*. If a person develops and exercises his natural powers like the feeling of commiseration, he is on the path to becoming a *Junzi*. However, *Ren* cannot just be interior and personal, but it

⁸⁷ *Mencius* 2:1:6 (James Legge translation)

⁸⁸ In Ancient China, heart and mind are interchangeable.

⁸⁹ Julia Po-Ah Lai Tao, 217-218.

⁹⁰ Charles A. Moore, ed., "The Basis of Social, Ethical, and Spiritual Values" *The Chinese Mind: Essentials of Chinese Philosophy and Culture* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1967), 153.

should also become social by the cultivation of the person's character from without.⁹¹ Conclusively, it can be said that the nourishment of the feeling of commiseration is the beginning of all virtues.

4. *Ren as an Ethical Ideal*

On one hand, *Ren* is an innate moral principle which is present in every person. On the other hand, *Ren* is to be brought into fruition in one's life and this developmental process is by no means easy. Paradoxically may it sound, *Ren* is given and *Ren* is also acquired. This expresses an honest truth about Confucius' philosophy. To borrow loosely two Aristotelian terms, the former is *Ren* in potency (innate moral principle), while the latter is *Ren* in actuality (perfect *Ren*). The difficulty of achieving the latter as an ethical ideal is constantly re-echoed in the *Lun Yü*:

“The man of virtue makes the difficulty to be overcome his first business, and success only a subsequent consideration;—this may be called perfect virtue.”⁹²

Ren is described indistinctly in terms of the process of achieving it, which is laden with difficulties and the end result is *Ren* as a perfect virtue, an actualization of what is latent in the initial moral sensibility.

Sze-ma Niu asked about perfect virtue.

The Master said,

“The man of perfect virtue is cautious and slow in his speech.”

“Cautious and slow in speech!” said Niu;—“Is this what is meant by perfect virtue?”

The Master said,

“When a man feels the difficulty of doing, can he be other than cautious and slow in speaking?”⁹³

The disciple who asked this question was mistaken because he thought that a person of *Ren* is plainly someone who speaks circumspectly.⁹⁴ However, Confucius explained that a person of *Ren* speaks with caution because the realization of *Ren* is extremely complicated and remains to be an ethical ideal for most people. In other

⁹¹ Leo Sherley-Price, *Confucius and Christ: A Christian Estimate of Confucius* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1951), 135-136.

⁹² *Analects* 6:20 (James Legge translation)

⁹³ *Analects* 12:3 (James Legge translation)

⁹⁴ E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, 90.

words, although *Ren* is given to all, very few are able to attain its perfect form. To many people, it is a continuous struggle. In a way, this partially clarifies why Confucius refused to talk so much about *Ren*.

Tsze-chang asked,

“The minister Tsze-wan thrice took office, and manifested no joy in his countenance. Thrice he retired from office, and manifested no displeasure. He made it a point to inform the new minister of the way in which he had conducted the government;-what do you say of him?”

The Master replied,

“He was loyal.” “Was he perfectly virtuous?” “I do not know. How can he be pronounced perfectly virtuous?”⁹⁵

Confucius in his lifetime refused to identify a person who has attained perfect virtue, even exemplary officials. This makes it appear that one always has to strive for this ethical ideal in such a way that it is a never ending process. Moreover, Confucius even confessed implicitly his ignorance of perfect virtue.

The Master said:

“That I’ve become a sage and mastered Humanity? How could I say that of myself? I work at it and teach it, never tiring. You could say that much. But no more.”⁹⁶

Confucius even adamantly refused to make himself as an exception. It might be out of modesty and it might be out of truth. Nevertheless, he accentuated that steady effort is needed in order to reach this ethical ideal. A person who thinks he has perfect virtue may be far from it in reality.

In the *Lun Yü*, *Ren* as perfect virtue is attributed only to the sages of China’s distant past and not to existing socio-political figures of the day. Such an ascription is designed to encourage persons to root themselves more securely in their authentic tradition and also to make an end that is as elusive as moving towards and arriving at the horizon. The weight for Confucius is placed on the cultivation of the self in the light of one’s present social context. A person is born and established by a network of relationships that must likewise be developed and extended. Although these

⁹⁵ *Analects* 5:18 (James Legge translation)

⁹⁶ *Analects* 7:34 (David Hinton translation) N.B.: David Hinton’s translation is clearer and simpler than that of James Legge.

relationships are directly interpersonal, their deeper meaning lies in their character of placing and incorporating the person in the larger world most broadly taken.⁹⁷

Here we understand that *Ren*, in order to reach its ultimate perfection, must transcend its individual beginnings and approach a kind of universality without disregarding what is given, i.e. *Ren* as an initial moral sensibility in the heart. The movement is from the inside to the outside, a kind of a centrifugal force emanating from the self to the family, community, nation and the world in order of sequence. The process of achieving *Ren* as an ethical ideal therefore is complex for the very reason that each person is different from the other and that every relationship is unique by virtue of particular persons being involved. David Hall and Roger Ames write that “for each unique person the way of achieving humanity is necessarily going to be different.”⁹⁸ One thing remains constant, humanity or perfect *Ren* is achieved when the self finds its meaning in the others, when the individual is integrated into the heart of the community. This is the ethical ideal of supreme virtue in Confucius’ philosophy.

Ren is necessarily the transformation of the self with its disintegrative and selfish concerns towards the responsiveness of the profoundly relational person. The fact that the number “two” is attached to the notion of *Ren* shows that perfect virtue or humanity is achievable only within the context of community through interpersonal relationships. Confucius was resolute in his stand that the development of the person is only possible with other persons in the human world.⁹⁹ The realization should be pointed out is a social one. For Confucius, one achieves perfect *Ren* by participation in society. What is being entailed is a willingness to take part in collective living and to look for a shared and collaborative solution. It is in this sense that *Ren* is something that one must accomplish, not something which is merely given or conferred by birth.¹⁰⁰

Even if Confucius decisively committed himself to *Ren* and believed in its possible realization, he fully acknowledged the harsh realities of life, i.e. *Ren* did not always prevail. He said: “This may be regarded as the achievement of what is difficult.”¹⁰¹ There were even times when he exhibited despair, but despite all these, he remained unshaken in his commitment to this ethical ideal.¹⁰² He said: “The

⁹⁷ David Jones, “Teaching/Learning through Confucius: Navigating our Way through the Analects” *Education about Asia*, Volume 5, Number 2 (Fall 2000), 5.

⁹⁸ David Hall and Roger Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), 115.

⁹⁹ David Hall and Roger Ames, 15-16.

¹⁰⁰ R.P. Peerenboom, 22-23.

¹⁰¹ *Analects* 14:2 (James Legge translation)

¹⁰² Shu-hsien Liu, 21-22.

determined public servant and the humane man never seek to preserve life in such a way as to injure humaneness, but they will sometimes even sacrifice their lives in order to achieve humaneness.”¹⁰³

This calls attention to the ongoing process of becoming a man of *Ren*. Becoming a *Junzi* in the moral sense may be a difficult task; nevertheless it is not impossible. Attaining *Ren* is a real option for everyone and becoming a *Junzi* is a living option for everybody.¹⁰⁴

5. *Ren as a General Practice*

Ren as a practice or exercise is known as *Zhong* 忠 and *Shu* 恕, two correlative characters which are introduced in the *Lun Yü*. These two characters serve as concrete guide on what to do and not to do in order to achieve perfect *Ren*. *Zhong* and *Shu* are contained in the following text:

The Master said,

“Shan, my doctrine is that of an all-pervading unity.”

The disciple Tsang replied, “Yes.”

The Master went out, and the other disciples asked, saying,

“What do his words mean?”

Tsang said,

“The doctrine of the master is to be true to the principles of our nature and the benevolent exercise of them to others—this and nothing more.”¹⁰⁵

The character *Zhong* is made up of two parts: 中 middle and 心 heart. Literally it means with one’s heart at the very center.¹⁰⁶ *Zhong* means to serve with one’s whole heart without any pretensions.¹⁰⁷ It is not totally selfless because it begins with doing something for one’s self, then doing something in turn for the sake of others. It appears that the other becomes an extension of the self.

“Now the man of perfect virtue, wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others...

¹⁰³ *Analects* 15:9 (Raymond Dawson translation) N.B.: Raymond Dawson’s translation is more explicit than that of James Legge.

¹⁰⁴ David Jones, 5.

¹⁰⁵ *Analects* 4:15 (James Legge translation)

¹⁰⁶ Ch’u Chai and Winberg Chai, eds., 36.

¹⁰⁷ D. Howard Smith, *Confucius* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1973), 71.

To be able to judge others by what is nigh in ourselves;—this may be called the art of virtue.”¹⁰⁸

Clearly this passage refers to *Zhong* as a way of practicing *Ren*. *Zhong* involves positive injunctions like to establish and to enlarge. It is extending to others what one finds beneficial for one’s self.

“In the way of the superior man there are four things... To serve my father, as I would require my son to serve me... to serve my prince as I would require my minister to serve me... to serve my elder brother, as I would require my younger brother to serve me.... to set an example in behaving to a friend, as I would require him to behave to me...”¹⁰⁹

Zhong as a practice is given a more detailed explanation by the *Zhong Yong* in terms of the basic relationships in Chinese society. It implies *Zhong*’s close connection to *Li* since basic relationships in society are concretely regulated by the latter understood as a comprehensive concept, e.g. how a son should treat his father and how a person should treat his friend. *Zhong* also involves the right relations between superiors and subordinates and one may be a superior or a subordinate simultaneously since one plays multifarious roles in real life.

Zhong then is positive and very clear. It directs one’s behavior in active terms, instructing one to treat others according to the right standard (that is with kindness and consideration) and to cultivate a sense of righteousness by fulfilling what should be done in accordance with one’s role relationships and situations in life. It also encourages one to treat others conscientiously with empathy. *Zhong* is likewise decisive because it entails one to conduct one’s self according to love and respect in an unconditional and earnest manner. And the measure of judgment in choosing and settling on what one should do is within one’s self, at one with one’s nature. Decisions on how to behave towards parents, relatives and others are made according to this.¹¹⁰

On the other hand, the character *Shu* is made up of two components: 如 like or as if, and 心 heart. Literally it means like one’s heart or as one’s heart. *Shu* thereby means to put oneself in the place of others.¹¹¹ It is usually identified as negative and prohibitive, that is, thinking about what one should not do to others when one takes oneself as a measure for them. *Shu* is the opposite but complementary partner of *Zhong*.

¹⁰⁸ *Analects* 6:28 (James Legge translation)

¹⁰⁹ *Zhong Yong* 13:4 (James Legge translation)

¹¹⁰ C. Alexander Simpkins and Anne Simpkins, 57-58.

¹¹¹ D. Howard Smith, *Confucius* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1973), 71.

Chung-kung asked about perfect virtue.

The Master said,

“It is...not to do to others as you would not wish done to yourself.”¹¹²

Here *Shu* is presented as a proscription. It appears that *Shu* tries to prevent the consequences of any harmful behavior towards others by nipping the bud right from the very start, that is, from the heart of the person. The person himself will have to judge on his own what should not be done to others by introspection, by considering the things which he does not like done to himself.

Disciple Kung asked,

“Is there one word which can be used as a practical guide throughout one’s life?”

The Master said, “Perhaps ‘shu’ is a word like that. It means not failing to yield to the display of excellence in others, just as you would not wish inferiority to be imposed upon you.”¹¹³

This passage practically has the same meaning as that of the preceding one. *Shu* is explicitly mentioned twice in the *Lun Yü*.

“When one cultivates to the utmost the principles of his nature, and exercises them on the principle of reciprocity, he is not far from the path. What you do not like when done to yourself, do not do to others.”¹¹⁴

Shu is further restated in this text of the *Zhong Yong*. This passage alludes to the initial moral sensibility to be developed in one’s life by the exercise of *Shu*.

“What a man dislikes in his superiors, let him not display in the treatment of his inferiors; what he dislikes in inferiors, let him not display in the service of his superiors; what he hates in those who are before him, let him not therewith precede those who are behind him; what he hates in those who are behind him, let him not therewith follow those who are before him...”¹¹⁵

Shu is given a more detailed formulation by the *Da Xue* in the context of the basic relationships in Chinese society. The criterion for judgment again resides within the self. It also indicates the close connection existing between *Shu* and *Li*.

¹¹² *Analects* 12:2 (James Legge translation)

¹¹³ *Analects* 15:23 (David Schiller translation) N.B.: David Schiller’s translation is clear and precise.

¹¹⁴ *Zhong Yong* 13:3 (James Legge translation)

¹¹⁵ *Da Xue* 10:2 (James Legge translation)

Shu then has a negative expression in the form of a prohibition, that is, not to treat others as one would not want to be treated. One becomes the point of reference for the measure of conduct, meaning to say, the source of standard is within the heart, in each person's humanity. Furthermore, in practicing *Shu*, one should not rely on acknowledgment coming from others. Each situation is an occasion to do the right thing and to behave properly. If others do not behave properly, then even more one is challenged to behave properly. In *Shu*, the norm of action should not be dependent on one's passing interactions with others who may be unappreciative. Others may not always respond and reciprocate and they may even commit injustices, but the exercise of *Shu* is not dependent upon others' responses. It is complete and of itself. One does it because it is the right thing to do.¹¹⁶

Zhong and *Shu* are two sides of the same coin. The practical outcome of both the positive and the negative formulations differ little in importance. Both require that one should put one's self in the other's place and vice versa then decide what should be done or not done. The negative formulation is conceivably to put more focus on putting the other in one's place than putting one's self in the other's place, but the outcome is the same. Both formulations are however prone to be abused, if they are misinterpreted. The negative formulation might lead to inaction and the positive formulation might lead to aggression. Confucius was wise to have taught these two forms of the practice of *Ren* thus avoiding extremes of inaction and aggression.¹¹⁷ *Zhong Shu* is actually the general practice of *Ren*.

In conclusion, the researcher reiterates that *Ren* has many facets. It can be taken as a particular virtue, as a general virtue, as an inner moral principle, as an ethical ideal and as a general practice. These various aspects of *Ren* are closely interrelated and each component contributes to a more profound understanding of this fundamental concept of Confucius' philosophy.

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¹¹⁶ C. Alexander Simpkins and Anne Simpkins, 58-59.

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Fr. Richard Ang, OP holds a Doctorate in Philosophy from the University of Santo Tomas, Manila. His areas of specialization are Rational Psychology, Ancient Philosophy and Oriental Philosophy. He may be contacted at the Priory of St. Thomas Aquinas, University of Santo Tomas, Manila.