

# Confucian “Humanity” (ren 仁) as a Resource for a Global Ethics

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## Abstract

This article argues that the core value of “humanity” (ren 仁) in the Confucian tradition may serve as a resource for global ethics in the 21st century. After presenting three major questions raised by the COVID-19 pandemic, it proposes a “reconciliation” between Confucian and Western traditions for a solution to the challenges of the pandemic. Confucian “humanity”, based on the idea of interpenetration between what is inside and what is outside, may pave the way to a true “reconciliation” in our era.

## Keywords

Confucianism, Humanity, global ethics, pandemic, reconciliation

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## I.

If there is one word in the time-honored Confucian traditions in East Asia that may serve as a resource for global ethics in the 21st century, that word would be “humanity” (ren 仁). In order to tackle the contemporary relevance of the Confucian notion of “humanity,” this paper will include three parts. The first part deals with the meaning and development of Confucian “humanity” in history; the second part ponders three major questions pertaining to global ethics as raised by the ongoing pandemic; and the third section illustrates the Confucian discourse on “humanity” as a possible agenda for our age of uncertainty.

In the history of Confucian humanism, the term ren, 仁, has had many divergent meanings, which can roughly be divided into four categories: (1) *Ren* as the location of physical and mental relief; (2) *ren* as an incessantly procreating capacity for value judgment; (3) *ren* as social ethics; and (4) *ren* as political endeavor. The first two belonged to the inner realm of individual human beings while the latter two belonged to the outer realm of human society and beyond. Confucian scholars advocated that humanity must necessarily penetrate through and interconnect both the inner and

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the outer realms, and that it was especially the “humane mind” (*ren xin*, 仁心) that constituted the foundation of “humane governance” (*ren zheng*, 仁政). As Ying-shih Yu put it, the development from the inner realm to the outer realm of humanity can be aptly called the “Confucian project” (Yu 2004: 400). I shall expound on the four different meanings of humanity in sequence.

First, Confucius and Mencius often explained humanity as the place in which people can put their body and heart-mind (*xin*, 心) at ease and let their spirit roam freely. Confucius said: “Of neighborhoods benevolence (*ren*) is the most beautiful. How can a man be considered wise who, when he has the choice, does not settle in benevolence?” (*Analects*, 4:1, Lau 1992: 28). Humanity, in Confucius’ thought, was the spiritual home of humankind.

Secondly, humanity originated in the capacity of the human heart-mind to make value judgments, a process which is both incessant and regenerative. Confucius’ disciple Youzi (有子, 518-? BCE) said, “The gentleman devotes his efforts to the roots (*ben*, 本), for once the roots are established, the Way will grow from there. Being good as a son and obedient as a young man is, perhaps, the root of a man’s character.” (*Analects*, 1:2, Lau 1992: 3). In this quotation, the phrase “once the roots are established, the Way will grow from there” means that if one stands firmly on the basis of morality, then one’s value consciousness will be generated in the process of incessant procreation.

Thirdly, the meaning of humanity constituted the interactive relations between “self” and “the other,” the core value of which was “loving people” (*ai ren* 愛人). When Confucius’ disciple Fan Chi (樊遲, 505 or 514 -? BCE) inquired about the meaning of humanity, the Master replied: “Love your fellow man” (*Analects*, 12:22, Lau 1992: 117–118, esp. 117). And, when another student, Zhonggong (仲弓, 522 -? BCE), inquired about the same question, Confucius’ response was, “Do not do to others what you yourself do not want others to do to you” (*Analects*, 12:2, Lau 1992: 109). What Confucius implied here was that humanity was made possible by taking others into serious consideration. This was humanity as interpersonal social ethics.

Fourthly, humanity was also taken to be a political endeavor, namely, what Mencius called “humane governance” (*renzheng*, 仁政). Confucius conceives the superior man – and consequently that of humanity – metaphorically progressing by moving through a series of concentric circles, proceeding from the “self” to family, society, state, and up to all under Heaven.<sup>1</sup>

To put the significance of Confucian humanity in perspective, we may say that the idea of “the perfectibility of man” underlies these four meanings of *ren* 仁. In the Confucian humanist tradition, to be human should be to be humane. Moreover, it was one’s autonomous choice to be a humane or an inhumane person. This foundational idea in Confucian humanism contrasted sharply with the idea of “the fallibility of man” in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

In the development of the concept of *ren* as the core value of Confucian humanism, Confucius and Zhu Xi represented the two peaks of Confucian influence. Confucius succinctly pointed out both the inseparability and the creative tension between humanity and ‘propriety’ (*li*, 禮). Zhu Xi composed his powerful “Treatise on Humanity” (*Renshuo*, 仁說) and bestowed ontological and cosmological implications on the Confucian discourse on humanity. By enhancing the level and scope of the significance of a human life, Zhu Xi, through expounding Confucian *ren* (仁) as the “existentiality of the existence of love” (愛之存在的存在性, Mou 1973: 244) made the Confucians reach new boundaries in their “search for understanding of the greater self” (Qian 1994: 278).

## 2.

The year 2020 may signify an *annus mirabilis* in the long history of human civilization. The Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) may, as Henry Kissinger worried, change the post-war “liberal world order” forever (Kissinger 2020: A.17). A professor of Princeton University suggested that the West must revise or abandon individualism to cope with the pandemic (Müller 2020). A

senior fellow of a think tank indicated that “at present the most helpful news about our ability to defeat the epidemic comes from what could roughly be called the Confucian cosmopolis” (Maçães 2020).

Before we ponder the possibility of the Confucian learning of *ren* 仁 to serve as a resource for global ethics during these times when the pandemic is wreaking havoc all over the world, I would like to draw attention to three major issues that the pandemic raises.

The first issue is how to overcome the excessive individualism which has developed since the Enlightenment. This question pertains to the setting of the proper relationship between the self and the others. In other words, how to maintain a dynamic equilibrium between individualism and communitarianism.

The second issue is how to re-establish the interactive relations between different sectors, be they individuals, societies, or states. The core of this issue lies in how to move from the present-day “detach” to the future “re-interconnectedness.”

The last but the most important issue is how to keep one’s mind-heart unperturbed and calm during a time when a pandemic is spreading and fear is rising. This issue pertains to the proper arrangement of the relationship between the self and the world.

The solution to the above-mentioned three issues has very much to do with a keyword, viz., “reconciliation.” Some sort of “reconciliation” between the self and other, humans and nature, and humans and super-nature has to be made before we can cope with the challenges of the pandemic. In the Confucian tradition, the best way to “reconciliation” lies in keeping the unperturbability of our minds. Confucius and Mencius both declared that their minds became unperplexed or unmoved from the age of forty. Wang Yangming reported his painful experience during his stay in Guizhou (貴州) of reaching spiritual enlightenment by means of “attaining innate knowledge” (*zhi liangzhi*, 致良知). As Mencius asserted:

For a man to give full realization to his heart is for him to understand his own nature, and a man who knows his own nature will know Heaven. (Lau 1984: 265).

Ōshio Heihachirō (大塩平八郎, 1783–1836) of late Tokugawa Japan, and Jeong Je-du (鄭齊斗, 정제두, 1649–1736) of Joseon Korea concurred with Mencius and Wang Yangming. Once we attain the spontaneity and calmness of our mind, the “great chain of being” from self to others and then finally to “ultimate reality” can be established.

### 3.

A possible cultural resource for a new global ethic after the pandemic could be found in the Confucian humanism focusing upon the core value of *ren* 仁.

The main theme or melody of the Confucian symphony of humanity was emanated from the humanist spirit of the intersubjectivity in the relations between people (and not between man and metaphysical or spiritual entities). In that way, East Asian Confucian discourse on humanity unfolded within the context of four major pillars of Confucian humanism, viz., the principles of unity of body and mind, the harmony between oneself and others, the unity of heaven and man, and the dialogue between the ancient and the present. The special emphasis on the “intersubjectivity” of interhuman relationships in the Confucian philosophy of “humanity” carries new revelations for the 21st century world.

A theoretically significant question pertaining to the core issue since the COVID-19 era, i.e. reconciliation, is the question of “the objectification of moral subjectivity”. Confucius and Mencius fixed the original scope of “humanity”; the Confucian learning on “humanity” was equipped

with an extremely powerful inner élan. Thus, the discourse on humanity cannot be confined to an abstract world of thought and reduced to an “intellectual game”, or as the Buddhist call it, “mental proliferation” (*xilun*, 戲論, Skt. *papañca*). Instead, with its inherent vitality, “humanity” required being put into practice and issued a Weberian “call” to intellectuals of all East Asian countries, arousing in them the practice of self-mastery. The Confucian scholars began with a cultivation of their own moral characters (*xiushen*, 修身) and a commitment to statecraft that would extend benefits and aid to the people. When together with his disciples Confucius expounded on *ren* 仁, he never defined its meaning, but only emphasized the method of its application. Confucian reflection on humanity was never just a series of theoretical discussions and inferences made by otherworldly hermits who resided in seclusion and considered themselves to be above the mundane world. On the contrary, though diverse in their content, the Chinese, Korean and Japanese discourses on humanity were all permeated with the never-altering quality of the view of the interpenetration of others and one’s self, the comprehensive connection of what is outside with what is inside. This idea of comprehensiveness is best expressed in Tan Sitong’s (譚嗣同 1865–1898) *Exposition on Humanity* (*Renxue*, 仁學). The inner force of East Asian Confucian discourse on humanity resembled galloping billows, which by their surging grandeur forcefully cleansed and washed down the coastline of the royal power of East Asian countries.

Consequently, the inner vitality of *ren* 仁 would inevitably press for raising the question: “In what way can the moral subject of ‘humanity’ be objectivized?” Once the “humane mind” requires its own practical realization and implementation in “humane governance”, this inevitably also involves the structures of power that exist in the actual world. Confucius and Mencius first preached the ideal of “humane governance” to the realm when the authority of the house of Zhou was already in decline, in the time of Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (respectively, 771–476 and 475–221 BCE) when feudal lords contended against each other in the struggle for supremacy. But after the great unification of the Chinese empire, the Confucian scholars were confronted with the supremacy of royal power. Thus, whereas the power possessed by the Confucian scholars who embraced and cherished the ideal of “humane governance” was conferred upon them by their ruler, their monarchs were in control of an ultimate and absolute authority. Between their sovereign and themselves there existed the relationship of subordination, and not a relationship of coordination. The extreme inequality of power that existed between both sides caused the Confucian discourse to be associated much more closely with the “art of governance” (*zhengshu*, 政術, the “art of politics”) and less with that of the domain of “philosophy of governance” (*zhengli*, 政理, “political philosophy”). In the end, Confucian learning on humanity could not be saved from becoming an “unfinished project,” and the ideal of “humane governance” could only turn into what was essentially a discourse of “counter-factuality” and was ultimately reduced to an everlasting nostalgia in the minds of Confucian scholars.

Humanism represented the essential idea in the cultural tradition of East Asian Confucianisms. In this tradition, the meaning of the notion of humanity or *ren*, 仁, experienced a series of creative transformations in China, Japan, and Korea. This set of continuities and discontinuities, this process of change and persistence turned into one of the most exciting movements in East Asian cultures.<sup>2</sup>

If we assume that the main task for Asian thought in the 19th and 20th centuries consisted in the “establishment and objectification of moral subjectivity”, then we might as well say that the challenge of the post-pandemic era lies in “promoting moral intersubjectivity”. In the 21st century, when many of us are striving for “reconciliation,” the East Asian Confucian discourse on *ren* 仁 has reached a new height. In its focus upon interpersonal relationships, it neither makes one completely abandon one’s self by following others, nor does it make people completely surrender themselves

to following only their own selves. The latent intellectual resource of “intersubjectivity” which the Confucian *ren* 仁 hides inside itself is exactly what is required for humankind in the 21st century.

With regard to the current international order, the 21st century is an age of multipolarity and not at all an age of a unilateral world order. This kind of new world-order is in urgent need of a new humanist spirit under which the core values of the Eastern and Western civilizations should be fused together in harmony to serve as its spiritual foundation. This is also the reason why, in the world of today, an intercultural dialogue is of such vital importance. The long and unbroken tradition of East Asian Confucian discourse on humanity, which stretches about three thousand years back in history, with its latent majestic humanist spirit and values, and above all the concepts of “humane mind” (*renxin*, 仁心), “humane governance” (*renzheng*, 仁政), and the “kingly way” (*wangdao*, 王道), is endowed with the capacity to lead the world towards a state of symbiosis, common prosperity, and peace through reconciliation.

## Notes

1. For a detailed illustration of the four meanings of humanity in East Asian Confucianisms, see Huang (2017): 136–149. See also Mittage (2010): 69–82.
2. For a discussion of this point, see Huang (2018).

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