

Confucius's Concept of *Ren* and its Application in Education

SHI, Zhongying (Beijing Normal University)

E-mail: szying@bnu.edu.cn

Abstract

Confucius was a great philosopher and educationist of ancient China, the founder of Confucianism. *Ren* (仁) is the central concept of his philosophical and educational theory, and a main topic of his discussions with different disciples. Three sayings are of the most importance for the essential of *Ren*. The first one is “to love others”, which is the guiding principle; the rest are “do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire” and “to help others to take their stand in so far as he himself wishes to take his stand, and get others there in so far as he himself wishes to get there”, which are the standards for action. From a methodological view, sympathy is the basic way to practice *Ren*. Confucius' these comments upon *Ren* are of great significance for modern education. They inspire us to reflect upon the human nature in education, the value judgment in education and the role of sympathy in moral education and development.

Keywords

Confucius, *Ren*, Human Nature, Moral affection, Value Judgement in Education

1. Introduction

Confucius (551 BC – 479 BC) was a great philosopher and an educationist of ancient China. A great amount of ancient books survived after his edition. He was the founder of Confucianism and the earliest private school in China. His contribution to the promotion of culture and education was so great that for about 2,500 years, he has always been admired by Chinese people and the Temples of Confucius were built in different places. Many people came to sacrifice him in festivals. During the process of modernization in the 20th century, Confucius suffered from many criticisms, some of which were irrational and even of personal insults. While, criticisms cannot always cover the great contributions he did to our state. Recently,

there appears a renaissance movement of the Chinese traditional culture and people of different social levels became interested in Confucius. *The Analects* (論語) is widely read nowadays in China.

In his philosophy, the concept of Ren (仁) is of the most importance. Some scholars even call his philosophy the philosophy of Ren. While, people's opinions diverge on how to interpret this concept. One reason contributes to this phenomenon is that Confucius' statements of Ren vary with the contexts of his discussions with his different disciples; another reason is that scholars after him, including Mencius (孟子), ZHU Xi (朱熹), WANG Yangming (王陽明), KANG Youwei (康有為) offered different interpretations of Ren in different backgrounds, which make the literature on Ren expand greatly. This article will try to re-analyze the concept of Ren based upon a close reading of *The Analects*, in order to clarify the essential of Ren and reveal how it can be applied to education of nowadays. I do hope this article could interest those scholars from Japan and other countries.

2. The Essential of Ren

According to LIU (2008), Ren, as the central concept of Confucius, appears 109 times in *The Analects*. Considering that *The Analects* consists of only 11,705 characters, it is fair to say that Ren is very important for Confucius. Ren appears directly and also indirectly; sometimes in Confucius' discussions with his disciples, sometimes in Confucius' comments upon other people, historical or contemporary. One of the direct examples is that, "Fan Ch'ih(樊遲) asked about Ren. The Master said, 'love your fellow men'" (12:22; LAU, 1979, p.116).¹ While, it also appears indirectly when Confucius commented upon some other issues, like "the Master said, 'It is rare, indeed, for a man with cunning words and an ingratiating face to be of Ren'" (1:3; Lau, 1979, p.59). However, Confucius never clearly defined what Ren is, no matter in direct or indirect way. This makes some people feel very hard to understand the concept of Ren. Some even claim that Ren is mysterious. Sometimes, it looks like one of the moral requirements and sometimes it seems to be equated with morality.

While, the concept of Ren is never beyond our comprehension. We can still understand the essential of Ren, if we closely read Confucius' great

¹ All the translation of *The Analects* in this article is basically from the Penguin Classics Edition (1979), translated by D. C. Lau, an excellent bilingual scholar from Hong Kong.

amount of statements of it. Wittgenstein told us that “the meaning of word is its use in the language. And the meaning of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its bearer” (PI: 43; Wittgenstein, 1958, pp.20-21). Though never giving us a definite definition of Ren, Confucius did tell us what kind of behavior can be called Ren and what cannot in particular situations. We can still find a way to understand the essential of it, if we give our attentions to those distinctions made by Confucius.

Three paragraphs are worth attention, since they contains Confucius’ direct statements on Ren. The first one is that, “Fan Ch’ih(樊遲) asked about Ren. The Master said, ‘love your fellow men.’” (12:22; LAU, 1979, p.116) This is a summary statement of Confucius about Ren. To love ‘fellow men’, which refers to others, is compared with ‘to love yourself’. Ren is the emotional connection between me and others. To be a man of Ren is to hold strong affection to others. The next paragraph is that, “Chung-kung(仲弓) asked about Ren. The Master said, ‘When abroad behave as though you were receiving an important guest; when employing the services of the common people behave as though you were officiating at an important sacrifice. Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire. In this way you will be free from ill whether in a state or in a noble family’” (12:2; LAU, 1979, p.112). Confucius’ this statement consists of three stages: the first one is about how should people behave in their daily lives in accordance with Ren, to show respect to others; the second one promotes the standards of behavior up to an abstract ethical principle which means that never force others to do what you yourself do not desire; the last one is about the result of the behavior of Ren, which would never bring resentment whether in a state or in a noble family. However, the time Confucius lived was a time of resentment because of the dramatic social changes. Here the last paragraph that needs our attention is that “when answering Tzu-kung(子貢), Confucius said, ‘a man of Ren helps others to take their stand in so far as he himself wishes to take his stand, and gets others there in so far as he himself wishes to get there. The ability to take as analogy what is near at hand can be called the method of Ren’” (6:30; Lau, 1979, p.85). Ren means sympathy, which would help yourself and others to achieve their goals. “Help others to take their stand in so far as he himself wishes to take his stand, and get others there in so far as he himself wishes to get there” was compared by Confucius with “do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire”. If the latter one is

of the negative Ren, which refers to what you should not do; the former one is of the positive Ren, which refers to what you should do. Confucius' concept of Ren consists of these two closely related parts. More than a strong affection to others, Ren is also an action which shows your sympathy to others and your effects on others.

If the credo of ancient Greek philosophers was “the love of wisdom”; comparatively, Confucius' philosophy was “the love of people”. The term *people* here refers to others. While, since everyone exists as “the other” to anyone else, “to love yourself” was also generalized and contained in this believing. In this sense, Mencius defined Ren as “the people”². A person who pursue this virtue with his whole life can be called a man of Ren; this kind of action can be called an action of Ren; and politics of this kind can be called the politics of Ren; our society can be called “back to Ren” if everyone lives in accordance with Ren and makes a community of love.

3. Confucius' Advice on How to Practice Ren

As stated above, Ren, the core concept of Confucius, is basically “the love of people”. It contains two principles of sympathy: 1, do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire; 2, Help others to take their stand in so far as he himself wishes to take his stand. However, Ren still seems difficult to reach in our practice, though not absolutely impossible. Confucius' discussions with his disciples can be seen as his advice on how to practice Ren.

Firstly, Confucius hoped that everyone should use their subjective initiatives to behave in accordance with Ren. Ren is like seeds which have already existed in everyone's heart, not only those talented ones. Since Ren is closely related to our attitudes, affections and moral concerns to others, it comes out in anyone's heart and can be achieved by anyone. As Confucius said, “is Ren really far away? No sooner do I desire it than it is here” (7:30; Lau, 1979, p.90). He also believed that the practice of Ren requires no special ability. “The Master said, ‘I have never met a man who finds Ren attractive or a man who finds non-Ren repulsive. A man who finds Ren attractive cannot be surpassed. A man who finds non-Ren repulsive can, perhaps, be counted as Ren, for he would not allow what is not Ren to

² Interestingly, Ren (仁) and People (人) pronounce the same in Chinese.

contaminate his person. Is there a man who, for the space of a single day, is able to devote all his strength to Ren? I have not come across such a man whose strength proves insufficient for the task. There must be such cases of insufficient strength, only I have not come across them” (4:6, Lau, 1979, pp.72-73). However, Confucius did required more upon the elite than upon common people. As one of his disciples, Tseng Tzu (曾子) said, “A Gentleman must be strong and resolute, for his burden is heavy and the road is long. He takes Ren as his burden. Is that not heavy? Only with death does the road come to an end. Is that not long?”(8:7, Lau, 1979, p.93) In Tseng Tzu’ view, a gentleman has the responsibility to practice and carry forward Ren. Confucius even said that, “When faced with the opportunity to practice Ren do not give precedence even to your teacher” (15:36; Lau, 1979, p.137). This saying reveals Confucius’ encouragement to his disciples to practice Ren in their coming days and it is interesting to compare it with Aristotle’s famous saying that “Plato is dear to me, but dearer still is truth”.

Secondly, Confucius emphasized the restraint of desire, and he put the observance to the rites as an important act in political life. According to him, those selfish desires, including lust, avarice, and greed for power, are the worst enemies of Ren. Xun zi(荀子), a Confucian philosopher after Confucius analyzed that, once the selfish desires went out of control, they would expand crazily and dominate our attitudes, affections and value judgments, make us the slaves of our desires. It would break our sympathy to others and the community we live in. Based upon this, when Yen Yuan(顏淵) asked about Ren, the Master said, “To return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self constitutes Ren. If for a single day a man could return to the observance of the rites through overcoming himself, then the whole Empire would consider Re to be his. However, the practice of Ren depends on oneself alone, and not on others” Yen Yuan said, “I should like you to list the items.” The Master said, “Do not look unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not listen unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not speak unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not move unless it is in accordance with the rites” (12:1, Lau, 1979, p.112). The restraint is not equal to elimination. To restrain our desires is to keep them in control, not evolving into a disastrous ending. In this sense, “to overcome the self” in Confucianism is different from “to destroy the desire” in Buddhism and “to eliminate the desire” in Daoism. In Confucius’ view, one should

restrain his desires to the extent as not to violate the rites. One should not look, hear and do anything, as long as the rites do not allow. No doubt that the rites here refers to the Rites of Zhou(周礼), which represents the ideal society for Confucius.

Thirdly, Confucius emphasized that the persistence to practice Ren is very important. Since Ren comes from everyone's heart, it is never something too difficult to achieve for common people. Nevertheless, Confucius admitted that to persist on Ren is of difficulty. He praised his disciple Yen Hui (顏回)³ that "in his heart for three months at a time Hui does not lapse from Ren. The others attain Ren merely by fits and starts"(6:7; Lau, 1979, p.82). A gentleman like Yen Hui could persist on Ren for three months, while common people just did it occasionally. Hence, those who want to become a man of Ren, should practice consistently, reflect and restrain himself during his whole life. "The Master said, 'Wealth and high station are what men desire but unless I got them in the right way I would not remain in them. Poverty and low station are what men dislike, but even if I did not get them in the right way I would not try to escape from them. If the gentleman forsakes Ren, in what way can he make a name for himself? The gentleman never deserts Ren, not even for as long as it takes to eat a meal. If he hurries and stumbles one may be sure that it is in Ren that he does so'"(4:5, Lau, 1979, p.72). This saying means that a gentleman should always be with Ren. His daily life should be in accordance with Ren, even in troublesome or dangerous situations.

Fourthly, Confucius emphasized the function of learning in understanding and practicing Ren. As we know, Confucius himself loved studying very much. He learnt from books, and also those of different occupations in the society. "The Master said, 'Even when walking in the company of two other men, I am bound to be able to learn from them. The good points of the one I copy; the bad points of the other I correct in myself'"(7:22, Lau, 1979, p.88). Though only a few people could be called Ren, Confucius numbered three historical persons. "The Viscount of Wei(微子) left him, the Viscount of Chi(箕子) became a slave on account of him and Pi Kan(比干) lost his life for remonstrating with him. Confucius

³ Yen Hui (顏回) and Yen Yuan(顏淵) was actually the same person. Hui was his first name. In ancient China, only people in higher position could call others in their first names. Therefore, Confucius could call him "Hui". While, Yuan is his courtesy name(字).

commented, ‘there were three men of Ren’”(18:1, Lau, p.149). All of them lived in the time of King Zhou(紂王, ?–1046 BC), who was the last king of the Shang(商) Dynasty and also one of the most famous tyrants in Chinese history. Wei was King Zhou’s brother, but chose to leave the government; Chi and Pi Kan were King Zhou’s uncles and never gave up criticizing his policies. Finally, Chi was put into prison and Pi Kan was killed. They enjoyed Confucius’ praise probably because they dared to correct King Zhou’s ruthless doings, even making the supreme sacrifice. Another historical figure that Confucius praised was Kuan Chung(管仲, 720 BC ?–645 BC). “Tzu-lu(子路) said, ‘When Duke Huan(桓公) had Prince Chiu(糾) killed, Shao Hu(召忽) died for the Prince but Kuan Chung failed to do so.’ He added, ‘In that case, did he fall short of Ren?’ The Master said, ‘It was due to Kuan Chung that Duke Huan was able, without a show of force, to assemble the feudal lords nine times. Such was his Ren. Such was his Ren’(14:16, Lau, p. 126). Owing to Kuan Chung’s efforts, Duke Huan could be recognized as the Hegemon by other states, which avoided a lot of probable wars that were disasters for common people. This met Confucius’ requirements of politics of Ren. Besides, when “Tzu-kung asked about the practice of Ren. The Master said, ‘A craftsman who wishes to practice his craft well must first sharpen his tools. You should, therefore, seek the patronage of the most distinguished Counsellors and make friends with the gentlemen of the most Ren in the state where you happen to be staying’”(15:10, Lau, 1979, p.133).

Fifthly, Confucius made some other important statements when talking about the practice of Ren. For example, he said that “being good as a son and obedient as a young man is, perhaps, the root of a man’s Ren”(1:2; Lau, 1979, p.59). It means that Ren always begins with those very trifles in our daily lives. He also said that “It is rare, indeed, for a man with cunning words and an ingratiating face to be of Ren”(1:3; Lau, p.59). Our inner affections, respects and concerns, rather than those “cunning words and an ingratiating face”, constitute Ren. In some other places, Confucius said that “of neighborhoods Ren is the most beautiful. How can the man be considered wise who, when he has the choice, does not settle in Ren?”(4:1, Lau, 1979, p.72) It shows that a harmonious society contributes a lot to the growth of a person of Ren. It was also believed by Confucius that “the man of Ren reaps the benefit only after overcoming difficulties. That can be called Ren”(4:22;

Lau, 1979, p.84). A gentleman of Ren would always prefer to overcome any difficulties if that is required by Ren and seldom consider about the benefits he can get.

All those sayings become a supplementary part of the essential of Ren, and make Confucius's concept of Ren of richer contents and higher operability.

4. Ren's Application in Education

Based upon the analyses above, Confucius' Ren is neither an isolated virtue, nor a generic term of all the other virtues. Ever since Mencius, Chinese People tended to put "Ren, Justice, Proper Rite, Knowledge and Integrity(仁,義,禮,智,信)"⁴ together. However, unlike other moral virtues or Five Human Relationships(五倫)⁵ of Confucianism, Ren does not refer to any particular ethical relationship between people. Ren is neither a generic term of other virtues. To achieve Ren is not like a game of collection of other virtues, which would make the concept of Ren very demanding. However, Ren is never isolated from others, rather they have very close and inner connections. Confucius once said that, "what can a man do with the rites who is not of Ren? What can a man do with music who is not of Ren?"(3:3, p.67) It means that Ren plays as the essential of all the rites and music. It is also the source of all the virtues and benevolence. Without Ren, without the sympathy and concerns to others, neither can one understand all the virtues nor practice those virtues and become a man of morality. Modern Chinese philosopher FENG You-lan (馮友蘭) has commented that "a man of Ren is a man of public spirit. However, he will show his affections and concerns to others. Whether a man is of justice is only about whether he has the public spirit. While, the concept of Ren is more than that. Ren contains an emotional feeling to others. This is about the nature of man in his moral behaviors. Therefore, CHENG Yi (程頤) said that Ren is the public spirit embodied in people's feelings. And ZHU Xi said that the core of Ren is about people" (Feng, 2007, pp.118-119).

Confucius' concept of Ren influenced the Confucianism theory and

⁴ Sometimes, Integrity(信) is not included here.

⁵ The concept of Five Human Relationships was propounded by Mencius, which refers to five fundamental relationships between people: King-Subject, Father-Son, Elder-Younger brothers, Husband-Wife and friends.

Chinese people's sense of order in their daily lives greatly. Mencius applied it into politics and emphasized the significance of the common citizens in the state. When talking with King Hui of Liang(梁惠王), Mencius said that, "what is the point of mentioning the word 'profit'? All that matters is that there should be Ren and Justice"⁶(1: A: 1; Lau, 1970, p.49). He held a view that "the Three Dynasties won the Empire through Ren and lost it through cruelty. This is true of the rise and fall, survival and collapse, of states as well. An emperor cannot keep the Empire within the Four Seas unless he is of Ren; a feudal lord cannot preserve the altars to the gods of earth and grain unless he is of Ren; a Minister of a Counsellor cannot preserve his ancestral temple unless he is of Ren; a Gentleman or a Commoner cannot preserve his four limbs unless he is of Ren. To dislike death yet revel in cruelty is no different from drinking beyond your capacity despite your dislike of drunkenness" (4: A: 3; Lau, 1970, p.119). According to this, Mencius made his famous claiming that "the people are of supreme importance; the altars to the gods of earth and grain come next; last comes the ruler" (7: B: 14; Lau, 1970, p.196). Its influence continues until now. Confucius' concept of Ren has been widely applied into different aspects of Chinese society, including our ethics, business, education and medicine. People resent those who make profits through deviating from Ren. On the contrary, those who sacrifice their lives to pursue Ren are always respected and admired.

Confucius' Ren is also of great importance in education.

Firstly, it inspires us to think about some fundamental problems in philosophy and philosophy of education, which includes "what is the nature of human being?" "How does a man reaches maturity?". Particularly about the nature of man, different philosophers have offered different ideas from a very ancient time. In the west, answers have come as "reason" (Aristotle, Descartes), "naturalness" (Montaigne, Rousseau), "culture" (Ernst Cassirer, Eduard Spranger), "labor" (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels), "play" (Schiller, Johan Huizinga), or "economic man" (Adam Smith, Alfred Marshall). For Chinese philosophers, some defined the nature of human as good; some as evil; some said there exists neither goodness nor evilness; some said that goodness and evilness are mixed together. While for Daoism, the nature of human should be in correspondence with the Nature. Compared

⁶ All the translation of *Mencius* is also basically from the Penguin Classics Edition (1970), translated by D. C. Lau.

with them, Confucius did not offer a very clear proposition on it, and he just said that “men are close to one another by nature. They diverge as a result of repeated practice” (17:3; Lau, 1979, p.144) which means that the natures of different people are very close to each other. The sympathy in his Ren also suggests that there exist some fundamental feelings, attitudes and value judgments that can connect our human beings. For Mencius, this became the standard to tell the difference between human and brutes. He said that “slight is the difference between man and the brutes. The common man loses this distinguishing feature, while the gentleman retains it. Shun(舜)⁷ understood the way of things and had a keen insight into human relationships. He followed the path of morality. He did not just put morality into practice”(4: B: 19; Lau, 1970, p.131). Modern Chinese scholar QIAN Mu(錢穆) also agreed that “a society cannot be built without Ren; human beings cannot last long without a society; education cannot exist without a time that is long enough. Therefore, Ren is the source of our human culture and a common human nature across different cultures.” Since Ren is such a common human nature, it will normally define the maturity of human beings. “To become a man”, is some kind of mission that one needs to accomplish in correspondence with Ren, rather than a natural result.

Secondly, Ren tells us the importance of sympathy in education. In my opinion, in the western philosophy of moral education, no matter in virtue ethics, deontological ethics, utilitarianism, or in the school of values clarification, the moral affection has always been ignored. Compared with the western philosophical tradition founded upon logos, Confucius’ concept of Ren is not exactly a theory abstracted based upon logics. It contains a great amount of affections, showing one’s respect, concerns, forgiveness, responsibilities and hopes to others. A man of Ren acts not only according to some principles, but all to his inner emotional feelings. In private and public lives, the idea of “to love others”, the principle of “do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire” and “to help others to take their stand in so far as he himself wishes to take his stand, and get others there in so far as he himself wishes to get there” are founded upon sympathy of our human beings. Sympathy functions as a mental mechanism which connects us with others and adjusts our behavior. As Adam Smith said, “and hence it is, that to

⁷ Shun, also known as Emperor Shun, was a legendary leader of ancient China.

feel much for others and little for ourselves, that to restrain our selfish, and to indulge our benevolent affections, constitutes the perfection of human nature; and can alone produce among mankind that harmony of sentiments and passions in which consists their whole grace and propriety”(Smith, 1801, p.38). The lack of sympathy, or the lack of Ren, might be one key reason why the ethic knowledge and action separate and inhospitality dominates our society.

Thirdly, the concept of Ren makes us reflect upon the value judgment in our modern education. Modern education developed with the modern society, which is basically founded upon individualism, utilitarianism, scientificism and performancism. It emphasizes the priority of individual, utility, intelligence and performances. Compared with this tradition, Confucius’ concept of Ren emphasized the priority of others, moral, harmony and the development of human nature (see Chen, 2015, pp.36-74). Therefore, it will help us to solve those problems, like the conflicts between people because of individualism, the inequality in our society because of the extreme utilitarianism, the oppression upon human spirits because of scientificism, and the ignorance of the development of human nature because of performancism. It will lay a foundation for personal development, a harmonious society and a collaborative development of human beings.

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