

The Importance of Process for Understanding Gender in Confucianism

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Abstract. This paper explores the nature of process in the cultivation of morality and character during the time of Confucius. The research denotes particular attention to the concept of the character of a gentleman, a phrase which is referenced throughout Confucius' Analects. The argument is made that the phrase 'gentleman,' does not inherently designate characteristics which are gender specific, but in actuality characteristics which are gender neutral and can be attributable to both sexes. Furthermore, it is illustrated through Confucius' and Mencius' writings (Mencius was a Chinese philosopher and student of Confucian philosophy, who lived during the 4th century) that the attainment of the status of gentleman was one which was meritocratic and based upon continual self-cultivation and transformation of character. This was a dualistic process involving the recognition of one's fallible nature and the consequent need for self-examination and self-correction. According to Confucian philosophy, a significant aspect of the cultivation of one's character was to be found through the individual's development of interpersonal relationships. Consequently, these interactions with others were to be viewed as a vehicle for altruism and not as a means for satisfying one's own needs. It was believed that by this dualistic process that one could, ultimately, evoke the most impact for good upon one's surrounding world and the government of the state.

Confucianism emerged under the Zhou Dynasty in China. It was during this period that Kongzi, also known as Confucius, felt the nation was unduly suffering due to the inadequate leadership at that time. He believed that those governing the nation were doing so with the objective of their own self-interest, as opposed to that of their fellow countrymen. Confucius held that the conduct and disposition of his contemporary government and its leaders were having a negative effect upon the character and actions of the people. He believed that the honoring of traditional ritual forms and a reawakening to classical Chinese writing of its 'Golden Age' could return the nation to the state of excellence it once held. Confucius sought to embody these qualities through the concept of the junzi or "gentleman."¹

This paper will argue that Confucianism held to the belief that a person's growth as a "gentleman" of character necessitated his interaction with others and the development of interpersonal relationships. It was believed that in order to receive the ultimate

value of connection with other people, one must first have an understanding of his or her own fallible nature. Consequently, the self-development of an individual was deemed a two-fold process in which the need for humility and the recognition of an imperfect nature were recognized. As Confucius observed, it was only through the realization that this self-examination and self-correction was to be a lifelong process that an individual would be able to benefit both themselves and other people. Others would gain from the individual's self-cultivation by means of the natural outward flow of virtue from the individual to the family, and then to the greater society itself, ultimately bringing about peace and security. Moreover, it can be argued that if one holds to these qualifications of what constitutes a gentleman in Confucian thought, along with the subsequent meritocratic processes entailed, one can see that the characteristics of a gentleman are not inherently gender specific, but rather, are ones to which any gender may aspire.² Therefore, understanding the egalitarian side of Confucianism, particularly as it relates to women, represents an important revisionist trend that has been developing over the past 15 years. Previous scholarship dismissed Confucianism and most of traditional Asian culture as oppressive and misogynist.

¹Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden ed., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophies* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001), 1-2.

²Chenyang Li, "The Confucian Concept of Jen and the Feminist Ethics of Care: A Comparative Study," *Hypatia* 9, no. 1 (Winter 1994):71.

Firstly, the traditional characteristics of a “gentlemen” during the period of Confucius will be explored. Confucian scholar, Chen Lisheng’s analysis of the Analects will be evaluated in the context of understanding the concept of a ‘man’ during the period of Confucius. The importance of positive inter-personal relationships to the proper rearing of young men will be examined through the works of historian Norman Kutcher, whose area of specialty is Chinese history. Professor of Asian Philosophy Huaiyu Wang’s evaluation of the use of the Chinese words Gantong and Ren will also be explored. In addition, the similarities in which feminist thought and Confucian morality share comparable virtues will be evaluated by Professor of Chinese Philosophy Chenyang Li. The ways in which Confucian scholar Roger Ames concurs with Chenyang Li’s use of the words Jen and Ren will be elucidated. Finally, the primary source writings of both Confucius and Mencius will be considered. Mencius, a Chinese philosopher, was thought to have incorporated much of Confucian thought into his own writings. It will be shown that Confucianism’s concept of a “gentleman” is relevant to both genders, because its inherent definition is one that is based upon a meritocratic foundation as opposed to the innate characteristics with which one is endowed.

Within Confucianism, the daily interaction that one had with others was considered the vehicle through which the process of inner transformation and character development were achieved in order to become a gentleman. It was through regular communication and contact with others, primarily through associations but also in daily interactions, that a person could achieve true transformation of character. Through the untiring pursuit of this process, as Confucius remarked in the Analects, an individual’s character was developed. If regular communication is the avenue through which one becomes a gentleman, then one can argue that the criteria for becoming a gentleman are not gender specific. Rather, they are attainable to all those who aspire to a higher level of morality and personhood. According to Confucius, one striving to become a gentleman would

come to understand that his role in these interactions was to learn from others, assist them, and to recognize that these relationships were not to be seen as a means of personal gain or self-validation.³

The existing scholarship on Confucianism and its core reflect a belief that in order to have an impact upon society one must first look inward and undergo a process of self-correction. This process of self-examination was exemplified by the question common in Confucius’ time, “What makes a man?”⁴ For Confucianism, the constitution of a gentleman does not stem from physical valor. Rather, it arises from the ability to continually examine the inner-self and question the motivation behind one’s actions and to use life’s circumstances as a continuous means of improvement. Recent scholarship has questioned whether Confucianism can stand parallel to feminism, since the characteristics advocated by Confucius were not of a physical nature, but could be embodied by both males and females.⁵

Both Mencius and Xunzi, students of Confucianism, agreed that pure “boldness,” if not used with the right intention, can be dangerous and detrimental to oneself and others. Confucius stated, ‘being bold yet with fear for nothing implies greed.’⁶ According to these scholars, therefore, there are two types of courage -- one fueled simply by unadulterated passion and drive, and another wherein energy and ambition have been trained and directed towards altruistic and noble purposes. Xunzi drew a comparison between dogs and pigs and those who allow themselves to be led by their untempered impulses, implying that those who are driven by corporeal desires, such as food, drink and money, are like animals that are compelled by pure “vigor, which is the inferior kind of courage.”⁷ Instead, it is suggested that one must continually train and monitor his emotions and have the ‘love of learning’ in order to achieve true courage.⁸ Therefore, a person’s true courage is found in their noble and altruistic actions on behalf of others.

Likewise, Norman Kutcher has argued that a significant aspect of life for men within the Chinese culture

³Kongzi (Confucius), “The Analects,” in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd ed. ed. Philip Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001), 23.

⁴Chen Lisheng, “Courage in The Analects: A Genealogical Survey of the Confucian Virtue of Courage,” *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 5, no. 1 (March 2010): 29.

⁵Chenyang Li, “The Confucian Concept of Jen and the Feminist Ethics of Care,” 72.

⁶Lisheng, “Courage in The Analects,” 7.

⁷*Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁸*Ibid.*, 3.

of Confucius' time was the cultivation of friendship. It was this type of relationship that was considered one of the greatest tools for implementing strong character, virtue, and understanding the importance of self-sacrifice for others. It was from such altruistic relationships that Confucius believed one could apprehend the true nature of learning, as opposed to obtaining solely scholastic knowledge. Relationships were considered such a valuable instrument for developing oneself as a person that careful emphasis was given to the question of with whom an individual should associate. Associations with overly indulgent or greedy people could lead to the same unrestrictive lifestyles and practices, and should be avoided.⁹

As argued by Kutcher, "Poorly chosen friends tempted one with evil pursuits such as drinking and gambling. They also removed one from the world that was centered on service to family and state."¹⁰ The restrictive and self-sacrificial aspects of friendship in Confucianism are seen, insofar as Confucius did not see camaraderie as something which a person would seek out to serve his emotional needs or to aid in abetting his insecurities. Rather, camaraderie was sought for the opportunity it presented to care for the needs of others, thus "stressing that friendship was only to serve the goals of the individual's learning of the Confucian way."¹¹

The idea of continually learning from one's surroundings is also found in the definition of Gantong. The basic meaning of Gantong throughout the centuries has been that of an uncovered pathway or flow between opposite "bodies or locations." Ren on the other hand has been understood to be the essence of Confucian thought and encompassed "benevolence...altruism...true manhood...compassion...charity..."¹² However, it was first argued by Confucian scholar Cheng Hao that Gantong was the original foundation upon which the definition of Ren was based. "Cheng alluded to an ancient medical text that described the paralysis of limbs as *buren* (literally 'not ren') and portrayed the person of ren as one who took all things in the world as one body that

was none other than the self."¹³ For Cheng, Ren meant to be in congruence with the surrounding world, open to the experiences that life wanted to teach. This corresponds with the Confucian belief that the greatest learning came from our surrounding environment, and that those in one's circle of relationships could bequeath the most benefit. It was these relationships and environments which allowed a person to improve himself and become a true gentleman.

Based on Confucianism's emphasis on the non-physical aspects of the qualities of a gentleman, some scholars have suggested that Confucianism is compatible with feminism. This is due, in large part, to similarities in characteristics of virtue as seen by both belief systems, which are gender neutral. Chenyang Li has investigated the corollary between Confucianism and feminism in the context of the word *Jen*, which holds the same traditional connotation as *Ren*. Li argues that both Confucius and feminist thought place the importance of the family's needs over that of the individual self, and that it includes a 'very strong sense of being responsible for the world.'¹⁴ Li also argues that feminist ideology and Confucian thought both negate the idea that there are "hard and fast rules" in all situations. Rather, one must weigh every individual circumstance separately in order to find what is the truth in that specific instance, as opposed to feeling compelled to come up with specific rules for every circumstance. "It is not to say that there cannot be any rules. There are rules. But rules cannot give us infallible solutions in conflicting situations of caring."¹⁵

Li is correct in concluding that the specific characteristics defining a gentleman's character are gender neutral. It seems, however, that Li's efforts to equate Confucius' ideals of a true gentleman with the feminist perspective becomes somewhat contradictory. He states that the feminist view, specifically as addressed by Noddings, concludes that there are no unfailing general rules or principles to be used as guidelines.

⁹Norman Kutcher, "The Fifth Relationship: Dangerous Friendships in the Confucian Context," *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 5 (December 2000): 1616.

¹⁰*Ibid.*,

¹¹*Ibid.*, 1620.

¹²Huaiyu Wang, "Ren and Gantong: Openness of Heart and the Root of Confucianism," *Philosophy East and West* 62, no.4 (October 2012): 463.

¹³*Ibid.*, 464.

¹⁴Chenyang Li, "The Confucian Concept of *Jen* and the Feminist Ethics of Care: A Comparative Study," *Hypatia* 9, no. 1 (Winter 1994):71.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 77.

Chenyang Li later attests to this perspective as being congruent with Confucianism. However, Li has also stated that “In Confucianism these specific rules are guidelines for young people to learn li, i.e., proper social behavior.”¹⁶ Also, the fact is brought out that Confucius advocated the Golden Rule of not doing to others what one did not wish done to them. Yet, additionally, he has pointed out that Confucius held to five points or virtues which ought to be practiced “everywhere under Heaven” if one wanted to be Jen.¹⁷ In this respect, therefore, Confucianism would not be congruent with the author’s feminist perspective. As such, this part of the argument appears to fall short, as Confucianism clearly does rely on principles that should be followed, in contrast to the feminist perspective of Noddings, which argues against the use of rules or principles as guidelines.

Conversely, it should be understood that such rules and guidelines are significant to the interactions and dealings within daily life, but that rules are made to enhance relationships and improve them, not to be observed in a rote manner, with the perspective of following the rules for their own sake. Consequently, invoking the adherence to such rules involves discernment as to their pertinence in individual situations. Just as in the Analects Confucius proclaims that while traditionally a linen hat is used during ceremonies, because it is more prudent he adheres to the majority rule in this instance and wears a silk hat.¹⁸

Confucius’ perspective on the qualities of a gentleman was one defined by a person’s character, virtue, and principled actions. For Confucius, a gentleman was not measured by his strength of body, but by the nobility of his character. Hence, he would continually seek to perfect himself, and engage in the pursuit of learning how best to serve others. It was in so doing that an individual would come to embody the desired qualities of Gantong and Ren, seeing all others as one with himself, and serving them with the highest ideals of humanity, emphasizing altruism and benevolence to all, and remaining open to life’s experiences. Thus, a person would learn the Way

of Confucius best by serving his friends unselfishly and embodying the highest ideals of humanity.

Confucian scholars like Kutcher, Wang, and Li, have alluded to the connection between one’s nature and the cultivation of relationships. But what was the process or path inherent to this character shaping? Both The Analects and the writings of Mencius stand for the proposition that the suitable cultivation of a person’s character was a dualistic process. The person needed to understand their own errant nature and their need, on a daily basis, to engage in continual self-correction and examination. Then one could reap the benefits of a genuine relationship and, thereby would be able to learn and grow from that bond. Confucian thought, consequently, demonstrated that proper character development was a two-fold practice, beginning with humility as a requirement for interpersonal relationships, which led to personal development. This process was not dependent on an individual’s status or gender, but required daily effort to improve one’s character.

Mencius, also a student of Confucian thought, gave an example of the need for humility in understanding both the fallible nature of society, and the ability to accept correction from others. According to Mencius, if there is a “person who is harsh to me. A gentleman in this situation” would firstly question himself as to why he would be so treated and would initially place the onus upon himself, believing that there must be some defect within his own nature that has aroused such a reaction. “I must not be benevolent. I must be lacking in propriety. How else could this situation have come upon me?!” Mencius goes on to say that if, after self-examination, a gentleman finds no immediate fault in himself, he must then question if he is ‘not loyal.’ This self-interrogation, thereby, conveyed the importance of a disposition of humility and willingness toward correction.¹⁹ This last passage, consequently, showed that Confucian thought adhered to the belief that an individual of mature character, if chastised, would not respond with ego or in self-defense. It also, therefore, demonstrates the

¹⁶Ibid., 76-78.

¹⁷Ibid., 72,76.

¹⁸Kongzi (Confucius), “The Analects,” Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy, 25.

¹⁹Mencius, “Mengzi (Mencius),” in Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy, 141.

importance of interpersonal relationships in the cultivation of proper character of an individual. Consequently, the passage illustrates that it can only be through a continual refining of one's nature that a person can achieve virtue of character.

Furthermore, the realization of the fallible nature of a person and the need to continually transform the negative part of their nature is understood in Confucius' *Analects*. "How could I dare to lay claim to either sage-ness or Goodness? What can be said about me is no more than this: I work at it without growing tired and encourage others without growing weary."²⁰ The *Analects*, therefore, demonstrate the view that man is imperfect and needs to continually work to transform himself. It is with this understanding that Confucius and Mencius expound upon the value of interpersonal relationships in an individual's life. Interaction with others is understood to be a vehicle for a higher state of being and awareness, rather than simply an outlet through which to mollify one's own needs and insecurities. As Confucius stated, "Every day I examine myself; as "in my dealings with others, have I in any way failed to be dutiful? In my interactions with friends and associates, have I in any way failed to be trustworthy?"²¹ This statement of Confucius, although ostensibly different from Mencius, emphasizes the significance of the dualistic process. Additionally, it points to the need for interaction with others, without which the perfection of one's nature would be difficult to attain. Confucius further explained in another passage that, "When walking with two other people, I will always find a teacher among them." Thus, Confucius demonstrated that by the interaction with others, one found a vehicle for cultivating a righteous character, as well as one for eliminating the negative attributes within themselves. "I focus on those who are good and seek to emulate them, and focus on those who are bad in order to be reminded of what needs to be changed in myself."²²

Both Mencius and Confucius emphasized that the transformation of the inner-self is a continuous, not a static process. It is not, consequently, based on that

which can be acquired because of gender or status. Rather, this individual transformation is solely meritocratic. The argument made by Li and others, therefore, is consistent with Confucian belief, demonstrating the merit and developmental process in attaining the character of a gentleman. Roger Ames has also explored Confucian thought in numerous works, concurring with Li's analysis that the term *Jen* denotes process and the continual transformative aspect of character development.²³ Ames, just as Li, has employed the use of the term *Ren*, to express the concept of *Ren* as denoting the necessity for interpersonal relationships with others in order to attain the true character of a gentleman. Thus, it lends credence to the claim that the character of a gentleman is based upon morality being a process through 'authoritative conduct' with others.²⁴

Therefore, the dualistic process of character development, and the common question of Confucius' time, "What makes a man?" reflect the ultimate aim of having a positive impact on society. When asked about the gentleman, Confucius replied that the gentleman "cultivates himself with reverential seriousness." When pressed by his disciple to elucidate further, he added that the gentleman "cultivates himself and thereby brings peace and security to his fellow men" and ultimately "to the common people."²⁵ A similar passage found in Confucius' *Great Learning* stated that with the cultivation of the individual, "their families were regulated." With the regulation of their families, "their states were rightly governed." Ultimately, with the state being governed justly, "the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy."²⁶ One can see, therefore, that the individual's self-cultivation extends outward towards his family and then outward again to the greater society or state, ensuring peace and security for the entire civilization.

The Confucian perspective held that the same elements which historically went into the development of

²⁰Kongzi (Confucius), "The *Analects*," *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 23.

²¹*Ibid.*, 3.

²²*Ibid.*, 22.

²³David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 114-15.

²⁴Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), 48.

²⁵Chan Wing-Tsit, *Chu Hsi and Neo-Confucianism* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 28.

²⁶Confucius, *Confucius: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean*, ed. James Legge (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), 359.

an individual's character were what constituted the qualifications of a true gentleman. Character development, moral virtue and self-discipline were all seen as intrinsic to the qualities of genuine human character. This was not an end unto itself, but a daily process, resulting in progress dependent upon the effort one exerted. Confucius indicated that this was an ongoing practice, and so difficult that, "as for actually becoming a gentleman in practice, this is something that I have not yet been able to achieve."²⁷ These qualities are not gender specific, and if applied outward from the individual to the family and to the greater society, would have to include both men and women in order to render the state peaceful and secure. As illustrated, the fact that the "Chinese word for person or people is gender-neutral ("ren")," lends weight to the argument that the meritocratic process of the development of Confucius' gentleman is applicable to both men and women. While Confucius' concept of a "gentleman" was once viewed as applying to the male gender, more recent scholarship has expanded it. Looking at Confucius' writings and examining the characteristics which make up a gentleman, one can see that they are not inherently gender specific, but are such that they are attainable by either gender. Confucius' concept of a "gentleman," therefore, can be argued to be applicable to a woman, as much as to a man.²⁸

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²⁷Kongzi (Confucius), "The Analects," *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 23

²⁸Li, "The Confucian Concept of Jen and the Feminist Ethics of Care," 83.