

# The Human Being in Chinese Civilization

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Due to its late emergence in China, the concept of human rights has hardly been touched upon in traditional Chinese culture. However, the topic of the human being and his dignity has frequently engaged the discussion of traditional Chinese thought. The Chinese understanding and interpretation of human rights related closely to their historical and cultural contexts, and could date back to the early era of Chinese civilization and its specific values.

The history of Chinese thought may be characterized as intrinsically humanistic and the theory of the human being can be regarded as the basis of Chinese humanism. It is no exaggeration to state that humanism came to dominate Chinese traditional thought from the very beginning of real philosophical consciousness. However, it is a special kind of humanism. With a strong emphasis on the importance and dignity of the human being and with a concentration on humans as vehicles for fulfilling the ultimate value in the world, Chinese humanism has been developing under a specific social and cultural background which is entirely different from that of western countries.

On the subject of the human being, heated discussions and debates have been going on among different schools of traditional Chinese philosophy, of which the three most influential are: Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist. However, as the Confucian philosophy initiated by Confucius has long been deemed orthodox in Chinese society, it gradually won the appreciation and support of imperial rulers across the dynasties, and became the mainstream of traditional Chinese thought and culture. Its ensuing 2000-year-long domination of Chinese society enabled Confucian philosophy to play an extremely important role in the Chinese way of thinking, lifestyle, cultural and psychological structure, as well as the formation and evolution of the socio-political system. Even in the daily life of contemporary modern China its influence can still be felt. Therefore, any discussion of a person and that person's dignity within the framework of traditional Chinese culture should primarily be measured against the yardstick of Confucianism.

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As is known to all, Confucius (551–479BC) was the founder of Chinese philosophy. He was the first to establish a set of philosophical systems relating to man, ascertaining the future direction of the development of Chinese philosophy and culture. Prior to Confucius, only a smattering of philosophical views, unsystematic and hardly attentive to man, were to be found among the ancient documents. In the Shang dynasty, it was believed that all natural phenomena and human activities were controlled by the supernatural Supreme Being, namely 'Heaven' (T'ien) or 'God' (Ti), and that man was no more than a plaything resigned to the inviolable supernatural forces of 'Heaven'. But this idea was gradually changing, and people began to adopt a more rational view of 'Heaven'. In the 11th century BC, Chou's victory over Shang marked a transformation from the old ideas on 'Heaven' and 'God' to new interpretations. In the past, the rule of 'Heaven' over man had been general and absolute, and all major human activities had to be conducted with 'Heaven's' permission. Until the Chou dynasty, new ideas had come to be accepted. For a ruler, although he still needed the empowerment of 'Heaven', his rule relied more on his personal morals and good behavior than on whether and how Heaven favored him. As noted in the *Li Chi (Book of Rites)* 'The people of Yin (Shang) honor spiritual beings, serve them ahead of ceremonies ... The people of Chou honor ceremonies and highly value the conferring of favors. They serve the spiritual beings and respect them, but keep them at a distance. They remain near to men and loyal to them.' Meanwhile, the belief in 'Heaven' underwent a change too: it no longer interfered in major human activities as an anthropomorphic deity, but played its role as a moral source and a Supreme Being in the spiritual world. Therefore, man determines his own fate by his virtues instead of solely by permission of 'Heaven'. 'Heaven is hard to depend on.' 'Heaven is not to be trusted.' These discourses showed that man began to acquire an awareness of self-reliance, hereby paving the way for the emergence of human philosophy.

Confucius was the representative of this new thought. Although he maintained that he was empowered by 'Heaven' to fulfil holy missions, and retained his traditional belief in 'Heaven', he did not go on to explore how 'Heaven' interfered in human activities. A prevailing opinion at that time was that 'Heaven' was rather remote while human activities were quite near to us. It was hence unnecessary to dwell much on 'Heaven': 'The way of Heaven is distant, while that of man is near. We cannot reach the former; what means have we of knowing it?' (*Tso Chuan*). Confucius took a similar attitude in this regard, as evidenced by a remark of Zi Gong (a disciple of Confucius): 'We can hear our Master's views on culture and its manifestation, but we cannot hear his views on man's nature and the Way of Heaven' (*Analects V, 12*). This means that the Way of Heaven was not a topic in the discussions between Confucius and his disciple. In Confucius' mind, Heaven, as the source for social order and morality though, was no longer the omnipotent god arranging all activities for man. In some cases, his understanding of Heaven even took on a naturalist hue. For example: 'Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses and all things are continually being produced, but does Heaven say anything?' (*Analects XVII, 19*).

As for other spiritual beings, Confucius openly expressed his suspicion. In response to his disciple Fan Chih's question as to what is 'wisdom', he said: 'To give

oneself earnestly to the duties due to men, and while respecting spiritual beings, to keep aloof from them, may be called wisdom' (*Analects* VI, 20). Confucius was against worshipping spiritual beings, and held no interest in the spiritual world or the afterlife. He rather set it aside. He did not explore metaphysical problems either, but paid more attention to man and his daily life. As an answer to Chi Lu's question on serving spiritual beings, he once said: 'While you are unable to serve men, how can you serve the spirits?' (*Analects* VI, 11). Also, 'The subjects on which the Master did not talk were: extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder and spiritual things' (*Analects* XVII, 20). To him, the greatness of man lies in himself, for 'man can make the Way (Tao) great' and not that 'the Way can make man great'. The great contribution of Confucius to the history of Chinese thought was that he shifted people's attention from the supernatural to man himself. Man henceforth became the center of Chinese philosophical thought.

Thanks to Confucius' influence and the long-standing domination of Confucianism, traditional Chinese culture has not seen such belief in an omnipotent God, such a conception as the creation of man and the world by God, or such craving for another world after man's death or the immortality of the soul. To the Confucian school of thought, the most important value is man's existence and life in the real world and society, which rests primarily with his own efforts. This strongly characterizes how Chinese civilization views mankind.

The Doctrine of Jen or benevolence lies at the core of the Confucian school's philosophy of man. Jen, or benevolence, has frequently engaged the attention of 'Analects' by Confucius. Scarcely used in the past and hence not so old, the word referred to the benevolence bestowed by a ruler on his subjects. Confucius, however, imbued it with new interpretations and implications, raising it to the level of the general morality and supreme values specific to man. In terms of etymology, the word benevolence is made up from the signs for 'double' and for 'man', denoting the relationships between people. Confucianism holds that man always lives in his interactions with others, hence the group life of humanity. Benevolence is that ethical principle regularizing the relations between people. The principal difference between humanity and other animals lies in the fact that a human being, following the ethical principle in his relations with others, lives an ethical group life. In this sense, the nature of man is benevolence.

In his *Analects*, Confucius mentions benevolence some 109 times, with different interpretations in different cases. Here, the general meaning of benevolence is worth noting. As recorded in *Analects*, responding to his disciple Fan Chih's question as to what is benevolence, Confucius answers 'It is to love all men'. This might be the most precise definition given by Confucius. 'To love all men' is the supreme principle regularizing interpersonal relations, wherein lies the very essence of the doctrine of benevolence. This kind of love begins with love for one's relatives (such as children's love for their parents), expands to others, and then to all. For Confucius, benevolence, deeply embedded in the nature of man, is inherent and innate; hence his remark: 'Is *jen* a remote thing? If I desire *jen*, *jen* is at hand' (*Analects* VII, 29). His successor Mencius made it more explicit by saying: 'Benevolence is man'. Here he directly equated benevolence with human nature.

Confucius was the earliest Chinese thinker to regard human nature as an issue in

its own right. Later on, the discussion and disputes around human nature were to engage the attention of all philosophical schools during the pre-Qin period, playing an important role in promoting the development of Chinese humanism. It was Confucius who framed the important idea that men are all similar in nature, as evidenced in his remark: 'By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice they become very different' (*Analects* XVII, 2). He seemed to favor a natural equality theory, maintaining that men are born with similar natures', and that differences between them are acquired, as a result of different environmental factors and personal efforts. The Confucian school emphasizes the role of education, regarding it as the most important means by which to develop human nature. As human nature is basically the same, all men should be granted the chance to be educated, Confucius stated: 'In teaching there should be no distinction between classes' (*Analects* XV, 38). In this respect, the ideas of Confucius differ considerably from those of Plato, for the latter held that men were born unequal, and that only a few elites should be given the best education (*Republic* III, 415). The educational thinking of Confucius was in advance of its time. Although it is hardly practicable for all men to be given an equal chance in education, he recognized in theory the similarities inherent in human nature, and that all men should have an equal chance of becoming prominent in morality and talent through education and personal learning. This high plasticity of mankind, one of the fundamental ideas of the Confucian school, has had a great effect on the development of Chinese thought.

Confucius' doctrine of benevolence marks the commencement of self-awareness in Chinese philosophical thought. The individual has assumed subjectivity and initiative as a subject. 'Self' has thereby been established. Of course, this 'self' as a subject did not derive from the subject-object dichotomy, or the separation and opposition between man and nature, but from the relations between 'self' and 'others'. Despite its manifestation in relation with others, 'benevolence' always begins and is revealed in the individual himself. While explaining to his disciples the essence of benevolence, Confucius pointed out that benevolence is 'Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you' (*Analects* XII, 2) and, in a more active sense, 'wishing to establish his own character, also establishes the character of others, and wishing to be prominent himself, also helps others to be prominent' (*Analects* VI, 28). Therefore, the standard of benevolence lies in man's mind, i.e. his nature. As a moral subject, man is free from the constraints of external compulsive forces, and acts from his internal desires. The practice of benevolence is voluntary rather than compelled. Moral behavior is as highly self-conscious as practicable.

In the teachings of Confucius the doctrine of benevolence falls into two related parts: the self-cultivation doctrine based on the pursuit of benevolence; and the doctrine of bringing peace and happiness to others based on the practice of benevolence. The integration of these two parts constitutes the unique Confucian theory of man.

Confucian teachings believe that benevolence is human nature, and that only when one attains this moral quality can one become a real man. Yet benevolence is not innate, but acquired through postnatal 'self-cultivation' and continuous learning, i.e. through long and painstaking efforts. Confucius himself once observed that 'self-cultivation' and learning processes were continuous from the ages of 15 to 70. Mencius, on the other hand, deemed that human nature, though innately good, was

but a germ, a potential, and could be lifted to the moral level of benevolence only by 'self-cultivation' and learning. Another representative of Confucianism, Hsun Tzu, in contrast, insisted on the evil quality of human nature. This notwithstanding, he also maintained that man could be transformed through education and laws, and that all men could become princely sages through their own efforts. The Confucian school stresses that one's self-perfection of morality rests entirely with oneself – through incessant learning and strict self-control. That is, you must correct yourself as soon as your words fail to match your deeds.

According to the Confucian viewpoint, 'self-cultivation' is not the ultimate goal of the individual. The benevolence acquired through 'self-cultivation' also needs to be extended to others; as put by Confucius: 'to cultivate oneself brings peace and happiness to others, to the common people' (*Analects* XIV, 45). 'Self-cultivation' is an inherent moral principle, while 'bringing peace and happiness to others' is the application of this principle to external interpersonal relations. The practice of benevolence is to love others, regard them as men, sympathize with them, cherish and respect them, and to consider others in their own position. As advocated by Confucius, man should not only 'love others', but 'overflow in love to all'. Hence, the love meant by him is a universal love. To him, to love others is more than pure sympathy, but to do good and bring benefit to others, i.e. 'to bring bountiful benefits and a better life to all people' (*Analects* VI). Meanwhile, however, as a realist, Confucius did not dwell on the abstract discourse of universal love, but, starting from the realities of Chinese society, advocated differentiated love. To him, the kindred love among family members is the most fundamental and natural, whence comes benevolence. Hence his remark, 'Filial piety and fraternal submission – are they not the root of all benevolent actions?' (*Analects* I). To begin with kindred love, extend it to others and to all who participate in human nature, and to establish a harmonious interpersonal relationship is the whole process of the practice of benevolence.

In Confucianism, the family is an indispensable link between individuals, society and the state, playing its specifically important role. The family is the core and basic unit of man's group life, whereas society and the state are the extension and expansion of family life. So long as family relationships are well treated in conformity with the principle of benevolence, which is then expanded throughout society to set up a social network of mutual respect and love, the entire state and all of society will become peaceful and harmonious. This is why Mencius said: 'The root of kingdom is in the state. The root of the state is in the family. The root of the family is in the person.' The *Great Learning*, another Confucian classic, proposed a famous formula: 'people are cultivated, then the family is regulated, then the state is rightly governed and finally the whole kingdom is made tranquil and happy'. The Confucian formula has long been esteemed by the Chinese in their living practices, and has had a potent influence in Chinese history.

The Confucian doctrine of man places particular stress on concern and respect for man. As man is virtuous, he is above other animals. Accordingly, the Confucian school attaches great importance to the shaping of personality, and to the maintenance of a noble spiritual level. Man should respect and love himself, and persevere and devote himself to moral ideals; as Confucius expressed it: 'The commander of

the forces of a large state may be carried off, but the will of even a common man cannot be taken from him' (*Analects* IX, 25). Even common people should have their own aspirations and respect, which no one can take away from them. In Mencius' mind, the image of a real man (namely, a man of fortitude and courage) is one who manages to retain his morality and personality through all kinds of hardship and ordeals, and one who is 'above the power of riches and honors to make dissipated, of poverty and mean condition to make swerve from principle, and of power and force to make bend' (*Mencius* BK III, part 2, 2). A man as such could even sacrifice his life for his morality and ideals. He would not seek to live at the expense of injuring his virtue. He would even sacrifice his life to preserve his virtue complete (*Analects* XV, 8). 'I like life, and I also like righteousness. If I cannot keep the two together, I will let life go, and choose righteousness' (*Mencius*, VI, part 1, 10). This noble personality that disregards personal life as cherished by both Confucius and Mencius has stood as an example encouraging intellectuals to uphold the spirit of sacrifice throughout the long history of China.

It is worth noting that although the Confucian school takes individuals as the starting point, and stresses personal respect and the perfection of personality through self-cultivation, it believes personal development cannot be attained until it follows the socio-ethical norms universally recognized and accepted. In other words, only with the necessary prerequisite of harmonious interpersonal relations can personal moral growth be achieved. Personal values are fully recognized and respected, which must first be measured by one's fulfilment of social duties instead of by one's personal achievements, for, according to the Confucian school, personal values can only be fully realized in families, society and the state, and each one's personal fate is closely related to the collective. Educated intellectuals, in particular, have a strong sense of social obligations and historical mission. The Confucian school, while recognizing personal interests and desires, favors moderation and opposes extremist individualism and the blind pursuit of personal desires. It stresses the importance of maintaining social justice. When personal interests go against social interests and conflict with social responsibility, individuals must exercise self-moderation so as to control their personal behavior in line with moral norms. Therefore, in the past, absolute individualism did not gain much ground in China, and the pursuit of personal rights and interests was discouraged.

It is also worth noting that Confucian theory seldom talks about man in terms of abstract thought or meditation, but in relation to his social practices. Man, as an organic whole, has his own physical needs, emotions, desires, ideas, will, etc., all of which constitute an independent subject, possessing his own independent personality and values. But to the Confucian school, only in real social life can a person meet all demands in order to achieve his social ideals, improve his personality, manifest his values and calm his mind. His ultimate goal is fully attainable in this world rather than inaccessible and remote. Some Chinese scholars call this attitude 'practical rationalism', for it is in the first place the rational spirit adopted by a person when confronting daily problems so that he can live practically and rationally, and adopt a cool and realistic attitude toward the surrounding social environment. Hence, he need not resort to God, nor need he escape from this real world to another one for the freedom of the soul or for spiritual solace. On account of these Confucian

influences, China has neither fallen under theocracy, nor sunk into mysticism and fanaticism. In this sense, Chinese thought is highly secularized – with a view to solving man’s daily problems and placing more stress on ethics than on metaphysics.

Last but not least, the ideal realm of man, according to the Confucian school, is the harmony of man with nature. Generally speaking, such concord implies the establishment of a unified and harmonious relationship between man and nature, for the existence of man relies on and is closely related with that of nature. Man should respect nature and love all natural things. In a broader sense, the harmony between man and nature strives to integrate man with the whole universe, lifting man up to a position as insurmountable as heaven. Man might then fully develop his nature. ‘He can assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth, he may with Heaven and Earth form a union’ (*The Doctrine of Mean*). This is the highest praise of man, and the most affirmative recognition of man’s dignity in traditional Chinese culture.

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