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The Philosophical Foundations of Confucianism as the Common Ideational Heritage of East Asia

Abstract

Confucianism is among the elements that not only connect, but in a way, help define the East-Asian cultural sphere. Nevertheless, when approaching the study of Confucianism as such it soon shows itself to be an extremely rich and diverse, and, consequently, a hard to grasp notion that carries many tensions within itself. Confucianism can be seen in the following ways: as a tradition that for two and a half millennia has connected different philosophical schools; as the starting point of the civil religion and the political doctrine of Confucianism; as a transmitter of a specific, cultural heritage-based system of values – a system that managed to establish itself within the narrower cultural context of China, but also in the wider environment. This article tries to present one of the approaches to the study of Confucianism through the use of comparative philosophy. It tries to present the philosophical foundations of Confucianism and to show an outline of a unified Confucian ethical teaching, and then to contrast certain main elements of the Confucian tradition in China and Japan and thus the tense relationship between the universal and particular, which the tradition develops. Through such a presentation, both the strengths and weaknesses of seeing Confucianism as a unified philosophical tradition can be evaluated.

Keywords: East Asia, comparative philosophy, Confucian ethics, Confucianisms, *Dao*

Povzetek – Filozofski temelji konfucijanstva kot skupne idejne dediščine Vzhodne Azije

Konfucijanstvo spada med elemente, ki ne le povezujejo, temveč tudi pomagajo definirati vzhodnoazijsko kulturno sfero. Vendar pa se ob pristopanju k študiju konfucijanstva kot takega kaj hitro pokaže, da gre za izredno bogat in raznolik, zato pa težko zajemljiv pojem, ki v sebi nosi tudi številne napetosti: konfucijanstvo kot tradicija, ki že dve tisočletji in pol povezuje različne filozofske šole; kot izhodišče civilne religije ter politične doktrine konfucianizma; kot prenašalec specifičnega, na kulturni dediščini temelječega vrednostnega sistema – ki se mu uspe v različnih oblikah uveljaviti tako v ožjem kulturnem okolju Kitajske kot tudi širše. Pričujoči članek skuša predstaviti enega od pristopov k študiju konfucijanstva – in sicer s pomočjo metode primerjalne filozofije. Najprej skuša predstaviti filozofske temelje konfucijanstva ter očrtati podobo enovitega konfucijanskega etičnega nauka, nato pa s kontrastiranjem poglavitnih elementov konfucijanske tradicije na Kitajskem in Japonskem pokazati na odnos med univerzalnim in partikularnim, ki ga razvija tradicija. Tako se v članku pokažejo prednosti in pasti obravnave konfucijanstva kot opisane enotne filozofske tradicije.

Ključne besede: Vzhodna Azija, primerjalna filozofija, konfucijanska etika, konfucijanstva, *dao*

1 Introduction

The Confucian intellectual tradition is one of the elements that not only link but also help define the East-Asian cultural sphere. At the same time, the term itself represents a challenge on multiple levels.

The present article aims to examine the question of whether the discourse that begins with the canonical Confucian works and progresses through a rich commentarial tradition – exploring the notions that help to define within its framework its examinations of a life worth living, and doing so across different geographical, temporal, and disciplinary contexts – can, within the framework of the study of Confucianism (or, rather, Confucianisms), be seen as part of a united, developing, and still living dialogue on Confucian ethics. Or whether, due to the extreme diversity that has been presented by the tradition, spanning a good two and a half millennia, it is perhaps impossible to claim any real sort of philosophical continuity.

The main part of the article seeks to show how, in its original form, Confucian thought managed its discourses on the notions of the ethical, political, and cultural, and how flexible some of its conceptual frameworks could be. It then aims to briefly demonstrate, using the example of Japan – one of the countries that historically adopted Confucianism, and the one among them most geographically distant from China itself – how, despite its culturally specific origins and culturally specific frameworks and demands, in many ways

this philosophy still managed to preserve its conceptual core during its heyday in the archipelago, while at the same time embracing the features of its new cultural environment.

Lastly, the article seeks to problematize the notion of Confucianism in the context of comparative philosophy – while at the same time showing why this academic discipline has an indispensable place in the study of the Confucian tradition of ideas. It concludes by arguing that Confucianism, as an open, inclusive and still evolving discourse – precisely due to its complexity and multi-faceted nature – still offers, even in an age of global discourses, a rich source of philosophical insight, which is simultaneously deeply embedded in the historical reality of specific East-Asian communities, yet able to time and again open up the never-ending dialogues on both the universality and particularities of the shared human experience.

2 Overview of tradition

Confucianism was a term first used by Western missionaries. It is therefore a concept that originates outside the tradition itself. It is, however, not without a definite counterpart in the East Asian world.

In the West the tradition was named after Confucius – the oldest of the great Chinese thinkers – using a somewhat awkward Latinized form of the name and honorary title of Master Kong from the State of Lu (Kong Fuzi 孔夫子, 551–479 BCE). In the Chinese language, we distinguish the teaching from the social and political systems connected to it by using different terms with different semantic connotations, such as *ruxue* 儒学, *rujia* 儒家, *rujiao* 儒教, or even *kongjiao* 孔教. In English, however, the term "Confucianism" is used to refer to both the original philosophical discourse developed by Confucius and his successors and the normative ethical system that arose within the framework of the first Confucian reform during the Han 漢 dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE). The latter represented the foundation of the state ideologies and political systems of various East-Asian countries for many centuries to come.

There is no doubt that Confucius was a real historical figure, but one that in the texts relating his thought also plays the special role of the wise man, who in time was raised to the status of a sage. To understand Confucianism and why Confucius' name is so revered, we need to first take a closer look at how the tradition was established, maintained and developed in the first place.

For a long time the canonical Confucian texts encompassed the Five Chinese Classics: *Shu jing* 書經 (*Book of Documents*), *Shi jing* 詩經 (*Classic of Poet-*

ry), *Yi jing* 易經 (*Book of Changes*], *Liji* 禮記 (*Book of Rites*) in *Chunqiu* 春秋 (*Spring and Autumn Annals*). According to tradition, these works were edited by Confucius himself. It is clear from the titles of these works that the Five Classics contain a wide range of subject matter, ranging from historical descriptions of the works of the sage kings to poetry, from instructions on proper rites to a system for divination. To varying extents, the texts also served as starting points for different schools of thought in Chinese philosophy.

The main emphases in the Classics differ substantially from the main emphases in the Four Books, which make up the later Confucian canon and which include the *Analects.* The *Lunyu* 論語 (*The Analects*) consists of a collection of short discussions between Confucius, his disciples, and others – it is not a systematized philosophical work. Also written in dialogue form is the second of the Four Books, the *Mengzi* 孟子, named after Mencius (Mengzi 孟子372–289 BCE), one of Confucius' most influential successors. However the text that bears Mencius' name developed in a time that was quite different to the one in which Confucius taught and is as a result more systemic and polemic. The final two of the Four Books – the *Daxue* 大學 (*Great Learning*) and *Zhongyong* 中庸 (*Doctrine of the Mean*) – are actually chapters from the *Book of Rites*.

Confucianism in China underwent its first major reform during the Han dynasty. The ruling dynasty adopted doctrinal elements of the Confucian tradition into official ideologies, but suppressed its openness and breadth. In this way it created the aforementioned normative ethical system that we call either institutional or (later) religious Confucianism. In doing so it turned Confucius into an almost religious figure and a symbol of the sage, which, judging by the thoughts that have been passed down to us as his own, he would probably not approve of. For a time the Han dynasty thus also caused the suppression of an open Confucian philosophical discourse, while the Confucian tradition was largely preserved through a centralized education system and the civil service exams.

The thinker with whom Confucianism reached its next peak lived almost a millennium later. This was Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), seen as the last in a long line of teachers, who during the Song 宋 dynasty (960–1279) sought to respond to the challenges posed to Confucianism by Daoism and Buddhism by breathing new life into Confucian philosophical discourses. Zhu Xi synthesized the teachings of his predecessors and offered a comprehensive and well-ordered philosophical system. In addition, he reformed the formal Con-

fucian education in China and transformed the Confucian canon.[1] His School of Humanness and Structure (*xinglixue* 性理学)[2] marked the evolution of Confucian thought towards a profound and comprehensive metaphysical system that combined elements of the Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist traditions. Zhu Xi's teachings later spread and had a significant influence on the development of Confucian thought the surrounding countries, including Korea and Japan. It became the basis of new institutional forms of Confucianism and a constant intellectual challenge to Confucian thinkers of later eras.[3]

Finally, in all the countries where it had gained influence Confucianism had to face the challenges of modernization. In China (and further afield in Taiwan), a new form of Confucian discourse, *xin rujia* 新儒家, translated into English as Modern Confucianism, was thus born in response to the historical May 4th movement, while the general awareness of the Confucian tradition in Korea and Japan slowly faded away with the upheavals of the 20th century.

3 Confucianism as philosophy

In both its philosophical and institutional forms Confucianism was historically the starting point and basis for many practices, and is therefore more complex concept than it may at first appear. Kiri Paramore's book on Japanese Confucianism highlights the breadth and complexity of historical examples of Confucian practice:

> The 'practice' of Confucianism […] depended on historical context. It could be a mix of various elements that we today might describe using adjectives including religious, political, literary, artistic, educational, scientific, medical, and many others. So Confucianism is/was a religion in some manifestations, a political science in others, a literary practice or medical tradition in others. Most often it was a constellation of several of those and more. The nature of that constellation differed depending on the particular historic moment and society within which Confucianism manifested. (Paramore 2016)

Paramore describes the various expressions of Confucian practice, offering a starting point for an important question: how is it possible to extract from such diversity something that would represent a common conceptual essence, and is such a project even worthwhile?

1 Zhu Xi was the thinker who redirected the emphasis from the *Five Classics* to the *Four Books*.

2 The Western academic sphere calls this current "Neo-Confucianism".

3 The most famous among these is probably Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1427–1529) with his own School of the Heart-mind (*xinxue* 心学).

Approaching the different forms of Confucianism cannot be simple and requires multidisciplinarity from the outset – which also raises the question of appropriate research methods. If approaches to the Confucian tradition are diverse, it can be said that they often target a diverse set of aspects. At the same time, any categorial dissection can be seen as arbitrary. Such tensions can hardly be resolved once and for all. The philosophical study of Confucianism could also be accused of a lack of sensitivity to the incredible range of different expressions offered by the tradition.

It is here, however, that the difference described above seems to come into play to a greater extent. The philosophical and institutional forms of Confucianism are inextricably linked, but there is also a certain tension between them which manifests itself differently depending on the cultural, historical and social context. The real difference between the aforementioned forms of Confucianism, if not merely historical, is perhaps to be found precisely in their form and purpose: the discursive openness of the one and the doctrinal closedness of the other. In this sense Confucianism is a dynamic and open concept that can be the basis for the relationship between the various historical expressions of the tradition.

As Huang Chun-chieh points out:

> Furthermore, since East Asian Confucianisms exist in the midst of, and not over and above, the cultural exchanges and interactions among the countries of East Asia, it cannot be regarded as a single, fixed, and unchanging intellectual form that originated and was rigidly defined over 2,600 years ago on the Shandong Peninsula in China. Rather, we must appreciate that it has under-gone a continuous and ongoing process of development for over two thousand years across East Asia. Not only have East Asian Confucianisms progressed over time; they have adapted to suit each different locale they have encountered so that the manifestations of Confucian tradition in each locale seamlessly reflect the special features of that place while still instilling the central core values of Confucianism. (Huang 2018, 76, 77)

Huang seems to believe that we cannot speak of Confucianism in singular form – there are several Confucianisms, perhaps as many as there are localities in which the tradition has taken root. At the same time, however, he believes that fundamental Confucian values can survive the process of cultural and temporal re-contextualization.

Thus it seems that such values are still worth studying in all the different contexts, while at the same time it is a reminder that the capacity to take on new

qualities in new cultural settings may already be embedded in the Confucian philosophical tradition, and therefore should be taken into account from the outset. In such processes – through the open dialogue of different Confucian communities – Confucian concepts gain complexity and Confucianism, as a discourse that is not bound to gods and metaphysical assumptions, but is essentially concerned with a human life worth living, is not only able to survive, but also, in accounting for historical particularities, be enriched.

4 The philosophical foundations of Confucianism

Of course, the philosophical approach to the study of Confucianism should not be attempted naively, either. The tradition has certain characteristics that have a fundamental influence on its development and are of key importance to its understanding.

In their approach to Confucian ethics, Rosemont and Ames thus first point to linguistic differences: not only do Confucian concepts derive from a different cultural-linguistic background and are part of different "semantic cluster", but also the classical Chinese language behaves differently from the European languages (Ames & Rosemont 2016, 17-21), from which the conceptual systems that dominate global philosophical discourses today derive. To approach Confucian ethics is, first and foremost, to approach the language in which it was born and developed: and one of the efforts of a philosophical approach to Confucian concepts is to try to understand the underlying assumptions on which they are based, to understand their frame of reference.

It is precisely due to the above-mentioned characteristic of Confucian thought, i.e. that it can adapt to the different cultural environments in which it was developed, that Confucian concepts have an incredible breadth. The translations of terms are therefore unavoidably approximations that might differ from the original on such a fundamental level that by translating them we might lose their breadth and depth or we might burden them with semantic connotations that are completely alien to them. Rosemont and Ames argue that Confucian ethics, while containing elements we might initially recognize,[4] cannot be simply viewed as a parallel version of one of the classical branches of ethics developed in Western philosophy.[5] Instead, it is a *sui generis* ethical system with no direct counterpart in the West.

4 Confucianism, for example, possesses its own version of the "golden rule" as well as the concept of "universal virtues", but builds both on basic suppositions that are quite different.

5 Deontological, utilitarian and virtue ethics.

Confucianism is one of the oldest philosophical traditions and one that has been able to open a dialogue on human life in different cultural, historical and disciplinary contexts for two and a half millennia. That this is the case is perhaps due to one of the fundamental works of the Confucian tradition – the *Analects* of Confucius – and, alongside them, to the image of the sage Kong that they present. For in the *Analects*, although the dialogues and sayings presented in the text paint a picture of a complex ethical system, nowhere does Confucius give a systematic philosophical doctrine, but rather exhorts his disciples to make their own ethical endeavours.

Over the centuries and millennia Confucian philosophy mostly developed in the form of extensive commentaries and interpretations of the canonical works, or even as commentaries to commentaries, while it still managed to allow for original insights, defined by time and place. While Confucius stated "I am a transmitter, I create nothing new", from the very beginning his philosophical journey set out on a radical re-interpretative course that this way of thinking is bound to even to this day.

Here it thus seems worth giving an overview of the foundations of the teaching that the tradition has developed – through reading canonical texts and commentating on them. Of course, all the presented Confucian concepts were examined throughout the centuries and many interpretations were added, but for the purposes of the present article it is enough to limit ourselves to the basics, as presented in the *Analects* (and somewhat in the *Mencius*).

The next passage might serve as a good introduction to Confucian concepts, as it presents three key terms of Confucian ethics:

> The Master said, "Wealth and honours are what people desire. If they cannot be obtained without deviating from the proper way [*Dao* 道], then they should not be held. Poverty and meanness are what men dislike. If they cannot be avoided in the proper way, then they should not be avoided. How could an exemplary person [*junzi* 君子], who abandons humaneness [*ren* 仁], fulfil the requirements of that name? The superior person does not, even for the space of a single meal, act contrary to humaneness. In moments of haste, they cleave to it. In seasons of danger, they cleave to it."[6]

6 子曰：「富與貴是人之所欲也，不以其道得之，不處也；貧與賤是人之所惡也，不以其道得之，不去也。君子去仁，惡乎成名？君子無終食之間違仁，造次必於是，顛沛必於是。」(*Lunyu*, 4.5). In my translations I draw heavily on the one by James Legge (CTP), as well as that by Rosemont and Ames (1998), though I edit both when necessary to preserve my own translation of terms.

At first glance this passage offers a fairly simple contemplation on what people want and what they do not want, but at the same time it also presents in a single place three key concepts of Confucian ethics: the Way (*Dao* 道), exemplary person (*junzi* 君子) and humaneness (*ren* 仁).

Dao 道[7] appears in the *Analects* over 80 times and is the central philosophical notion of Confucianism, but also of other classical Chinese intellectual traditions. The character is constructed of a component, meaning "to walk" or "pass over", and one that shows a "head" (a stylized image of hair and an eye). In the *Book of Documents* the character is used for the first time in the sense of digging canals and "directing" a river, so that it does not overflow its banks. Many semantic connotations that this term later acquired are already present in this image. These are for example: to lead through, way/Way, road, method, art, teaching, explain, say and doctrine.

This concept is also developed in other Chinese philosophical traditions, so we must define the Confucian way in contrast to those others.

> The Master said, "Shen, my doctrine is that of an all-pervading unity." The disciple Zeng replied, "Yes." The Master went out, and the other disciples asked, saying, "What do his words mean?" Zeng said, "The doctrine of our master is to be true to the principles of our nature [*zhong* 忠] and the benevolent exercise of them to others [*shu* 恕], this and nothing more."[8]

The *Dao* is therefore the Way that possesses an all-pervading unity: it is the way shared by people. In this sense the Way is the common experience of the people, the common way of existing together, and at the same time the ordering principle of such existence. Since the common experience of the people is open-ended and complex, the notion of the *Dao* is also open-ended and complex; and the same goes for the notion of virtues (*de* 德) that preserve the *Dao.* In the Confucian philosophy this concept stands at the border between ethics, social and political philosophy – borders that are often blurred.[9]

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7 In certain of my explications of Confucian notions, I lean on the lexicon of concepts that Rosemont and Ames offer in the Introduction to their own philosophical translation of the *Analects* (Rosemont & Ames 1998).

8 子曰：「參乎！吾道一以貫之。」曾子曰：「唯。」子出。門人問曰：「何謂也？」曾子曰：「夫子之道，忠恕而已矣。」(*Lunyu*, 4.15).

9 Also blurred are the borders between other categories that have been developed within the framework of European traditions and which ought not to be forced upon Confucianism – i.e. the borders between the natural and social, individual and community, and so on.

In the above passage two more concepts are presented. *Zhong* 忠 is made up of component denoting the "middle" and "heart" (or heart-mind). It is a Confucian value that is often translated as "loyalty" or in the sense of "doing one's utmost for others". Here also we can observe the limits of translating the original Chinese terms. In his article "Zhong in the Analects with Insights into Loyalty", Winnie Sung shows how the meanings of the terms "loyalty" and *zhong* are different (Sung 2018). While loyalty denotes a special relationship but not necessarily also a commitment to ethical principles, *zhong* is always tied to the notion of the Way.

The other notion presented is *shu* 恕, which can be translated as "reciprocity" but is perhaps better described as "being able to step into the shoes of others". As such it is also presented in the following passage, defining the Confucian golden rule:

> Zi Gong asked, saying "Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life?" The Master said, "Is not reciprocity [*shu* 恕] such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others."[10]

The *Dao* thus possesses an all-pervading unity, while at the same time it is supported by the concepts meaning "to do one's utmost for others" and "not doing others harm". The Way is therefore not something hidden or hard to understand, but it does demand a clear effort from people. The Confucian *Dao* is not only the Way that is given and simply needs to be followed. The *Dao* is a concept that also helps transmit what came before – it transmits the whole of human experience – and yet is in every moment present and alive.

The *Dao* includes the different aspects of human life, it is the Way and the space, where people meet and coexist. Of course as such it is not only a descriptive term – like many other concepts in Confucianism and Chinese philosophy in general, the *Dao* possesses an ethical dimension and demands a certain commitment. Thus it also possesses its highest meaning: the harmonic co-existence is the highest expression of humanity. Every person is fundamentally embedded within this order – and is also responsible to it.

The following passage also speaks to this:

> The Master said, "A person can enlarge the Way; the Way does not enlarge the person."[11]

10 子貢問曰：「有一言而可以終身行之者乎？」子曰：「其恕乎！己所不欲，勿施於人。」(*Lunyu*, 15.24).

11 子曰：「人能弘道，非道弘人。」(*Lunyu*, 15.29).

A person is inextricably embedded within the transmission, interpretation and shaping of the Way – the Way is not something above and beyond. Confucius also discussed such concepts as Heaven (*tian* 天) and its mandate (*tianming* 天命), which to people represent the unreachable regulator and regulating principle. He also spoke of spirits and ghosts and practiced the prescribed worship, but in his key teachings he kept turning back to the ethical life of the people and kept an agnostic stance towards the otherworldly.[12]

The Way demands that people wisely receive what has been transmitted, to actively co-shape the common experience – through actions and words – to pass this experience on, as they themselves received it, and thus to enrich the lives of their successors. It is in this same light that we should understand the Confucian project at the centre of the Confucian re-interpretative efforts, as one more among the basic projects of Confucian philosophy. This is the principle of the "correct names" (*zhengming* 正名).

On this topic Confucius says:

> "If names are not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language are not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success. When affairs cannot be carried on to success, proprieties and music will not flourish. When proprieties and music do not flourish, punishments will not be properly awarded. When punishments are not properly awarded, the people do not know how to move hand or foot. Therefore a superior person considers it necessary that the names they use may be spoken appropriately and also that what they speak may be carried out appropriately. What the superior person requires is just that in their words there may be nothing incorrect."[13]

The principle of "correct names" undoubtedly greatly influenced the subsequent development of the Confucian philosophical project – since it clearly delineated the need for the Confucian superior person to always think in the direction of the practical: to always dedicate themselves the to a life-directed ethics – and at the same time it also means that the Confucian project is always a political one. The way in which Confucians approach the explication and definition of notions cannot remain an abstract effort, whose sole pur-

12 For his views on ghosts and spirits, see e.g. *Lunyu*, 6.22, 7.21, 11.12.

13 名不正，則言不順；言不順，則事不成；事不成，則禮樂不興；禮樂不興，則刑罰不中；刑罰不中，則民無所措手足。故君子名之必可言也，言之必可行也。君子於其言，無所苟而已矣 (*Lunyu*, 13.3).

pose is to reach the highest truths – the names refer directly to social roles and practices. As such, they essentially – in their very "correctness" – act as a kind of ethical compass and a call to practice that should be in accordance with the Way.

However, precisely due to its nature for Confucius the *Dao*, as that which the people follow, also cannot be the basis of rigid Legalist principles. If anything, Confucius actually rejects the idea of guiding the people with the power of laws.

> The Master said, "If the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame. If they be led by virtue [*de* 德], and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of ritual propriety [*li* 禮], they will have the sense of shame, and moreover will become good."[14]

The discourse on correct names is therefore not a rigid, Legalist discourse, but a vital and living philosophical discussion and a call to virtue. In connection with the *Dao* Confucius talks of the notion of virtues (*de* 德), which in the Confucian tradition is the object of many discussions – both about their number as well as their ontological status. In any case, it is worth mentioning here a remark made by Ames and Rosemont – i.e. that the Confucian virtues (or excellences) cannot be understood as psychologized, as if they are conditioned by reason or as belonging to the individual. They have to be understood relationally (Ames & Rosemont 2016, 112).

In this sense, the concept of authority is in Confucianism also linked to the relations that are cultivated by virtuous rulers, not the absolute position of a ruler.

> The Master said, "He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn towards it."[15]

The Way connects the people, and though it differentiates between the positions that the people occupy in the given moment, in all their roles and in every moment it demands from people a virtuous and active (co)operation. The Confucian principle of the King's way (*wangdao* 王道) also functions on the basis of this same demand. The ruler is someone, who must rule through virtue, not through tyrannical laws. Mencius even says that the people, when

14 子曰：「道之以政，齊之以刑，民免而無恥；道之以德，齊之以禮，有恥且格。」(*Lunyu*, 2.3).

15 子曰：「為政以德，譬如北辰，居其所而眾星共之。」(*Lunyu*, 2.1).

they are led by bad rulers, can depose said rulers.[16] In its political ideas the Confucian tradition thus stringently opposes the rulers' autocratic character that as a historical reality sadly again and again took hold under the influence of the more institutionalized Confucian ideology.

The exemplary person is a notion that originally meant a prince or the son of a noble family. However, in the Confucian context this nobility becomes metaphorical and came to denote a person who achieved a certain level of self-cultivation. In line with the presentation of virtue set out above, the exemplary person is not someone who merely bathes in virtue, but rather someone who builds nobility on the basis of the relational excellences discussed earlier: a person who actively actualizes themselves through perfected relationships that they nurture as a member of the wider community.

With regard to the exemplary person the *Analects* also say the following:

> The Master said, "The mind of the exemplary person is conversant with appropriateness [*yi* 義]; the mind of the mean person is conversant with gain [*li* 利]."[17]

The exemplary person therefore takes what is appropriate (or "appropriateness") for their guiding principle and does not try to achieve personal gain at the expense of others. Furthermore, these concepts – both "appropriateness" and "personal gain" – are again a pair that deeply marks East Asian ethical traditions.[18]

Appropriateness (often translated as rightness) is a notion that once more demonstrates the nature of the Confucian ethical trends. The character – *yi* 義 – is made up of representations of a "sheep" and a "weapon" – and in this sense its meaning is probably derived from the proper way of conducting a sacrificial offering. This points to, among other things, the fact that Confucian ethics is not an ethics that is derived from abstract ideals of good and evil in relation to any sort of absolute – it is rather pragmatic and deeply aesthetically minded. With Confucian appropriateness it is therefore more about what is "appropriate" and what is "right" in the given situation – for a person to be able to recognize this "right", they have to always develop their virtuous relations.

16 See e.g. Mengzi 2.15.

17 子曰：「君子喻於義，小人喻於利。」(*Lunyu*, 4.16).

18 Mencius even discusses this at the very beginning of the work that bears his name (see *Mengzi,* 1.1).

> The Master said, "The exemplary person seeks to perfect the admirable qualities of people, and does not seek to perfect their bad qualities. The mean person does the opposite of this."[19]

The exemplary person is therefore the opposite of the mean person. It is someone who cultivates humaneness, wisdom and courage (*Lunyu*, 14.28). It is someone who puts effort into being humble, respectful, kind and just (*Lunyu*, 5.16). It is someone who follows virtue – and such a person is also liberated from the numerous anxieties of life. The idea that virtue brings quality into a person's life is present in the different parts of the *Analects.* An exemplary person raises themselves up, but also raises up those around them. The Confucian tradition does not ascribe value to a person simply rising above others – a person has to do what in the given situation is in accordance with virtue, for themselves and others.

Through this, the basic human relations are also posited. Mencius described them in line with the following virtues:

> [B]etween father and son, there should be affection [*qin* 親]; between sovereign and minister, righteousness [*yi* 義]; between husband and wife, difference [*bie* 別]; between old and young, a proper order [*xu* 序]; and between friends, fidelity [*xin* 信].[20]

What is "appropriate" or "right" is always actualized within interpersonal relations and social roles. Rosemont and Ames thus claim that the Confucian ethical system can be understood as a sort of "role ethics".[21]

Appropriateness and the exemplary person are further connected by two important notions that represent the basis of learning and cultivation:

> The Master said, "The exemplary person, learns broadly [*xue* 學] of culture [*wen* 文], and keeping themselves under the restraint of the rules of ritual propriety [*li* 禮], may thus likewise not overstep what is right."[22]

Learning (or education) is something pleasant and a goal in itself – it is not meant to be something a person celebrates themselves for (*Lunyu* 1.1) – and it also brings a person to virtue. In this sense, when it comes to learning Confucius does not recognize any differences when it comes to social class (*Lunyu* 15.39). The concept of the cultural, which is also contained in the no-

19 子曰：「君子成人之美，不成人之惡。小人反是。」(*Lunyu*, 12.16).

20 父子有親，君臣有義，夫婦有別，長幼有序，朋友有信. (*Mengzi,* 5.4).

21 For the different aspects of the argument that supports this thesis, see e.g. Rosemont & Ames (2016).

22 子曰：「君子博學於文，約之以禮，亦可以弗畔矣夫！」(*Lunyu*, 6.27).

tions of rites and music, is again one of the foundations of ethical education – a person cannot step out of these contexts, since they mark every aspect of their life.

Confucius' own teachings are in the *Analects* described as follows:

> There were four things which the Master taught: culture [*wen* 文], proper action [*xing* 行], doing to one's utmost [*zhong* 忠], and keeping one's word [*xin* 信].[23]

The Master thought aspects of culture and ethics, but also taught that a person must always do for others to their utmost and to keep their word. The language of Confucius' discussions is again deceptively simple – the Way is not really hidden. But if Confucius in his teachings did not like to give lengthy definitions of the presented concepts, he nevertheless called upon his disciples to put in their own effort and to cultivate a practical understanding and real capabilities.

The main virtue, presented in the *Analects* but nowhere within it actually concretely defined, is the fundamental virtue of humaneness (*ren* 仁). Humaneness is the key notion of virtue in Confucian ethics and its character is made up of the component representing a "person" and the one representing the "number two". Humaneness is a complex and multifaceted concept, which combines the different ideas of the virtue of human affection and love, benevolence and open-heartedness, but also consummate action and even proper rule. Humaneness in a way represents the complex effort of harmonic coexistence – a project that all people take part in.

Nevertheless, the following is written in the *Analects*:

> The Master said, "I have not seen a person who loved humaneness, or one who hated what was not humane. They, who loved humaneness, would esteem nothing above it. They, who hated what is not humane, would practice humaneness in such a way that they would not allow anything that is not humane to approach their person. Is anyone able for one day to apply their strength to humaneness? I have not seen the case in which their strength would be insufficient. Should there possibly be any such case, I have not seen it."[24]

23 子以四教：文，行，忠，信。(*Lunyu*, 7.25).

24 子曰：「我未見好仁者，惡不仁者。好仁者，無以尚之；惡不仁者，其為仁矣，不使不仁者加乎其身。有能一日用其力於仁矣乎？我未見力不足者。蓋有之矣，我未之見也。」(*Lunyu*, 4.6).

Humaneness is thus a notion Confucius advocated to his disciples again and again, but at the same time a virtue that demands inexhaustible effort. It is not an abstract concept of virtue, but a call to the fundamental effort of a person living among people – such an effort is never truly exhausted, but is at the same time the only real way for a person to actualize themselves as a person.

Humaneness is also in the end seen as a practical virtue and is closely tied to other key values of the Confucian tradition. In one passage Master You (not Confucius this time) says:

> The superior person bends their attention to the roots. That being established, all practical courses naturally grow up. Filial piety [*xiao* 孝] and fraternal submission [*ti* 悌]! – are they not the roots of all humane actions?[25]

Filial piety is another of the key practical values of the Confucian tradition and is often seen as the basis of humaneness. It plays an important role both in the *Analects*[26] as well as *Mencius*, while it also possesses its own dedicated classic, the *Xiaojing*孝經 (*Classic of Filial Piety*). Rosemont and Ames point to the key role of family in the understanding Confucian ethics. In their translation of the *Classic of Filial Piety* they discuss the meaning that the metaphor of the family brings to Confucian ethics. They believe that it is precisely in this place that Confucian ethics again fundamentally diverges from the ethical systems developed in Europe: while all traditional European ethical systems took as their starting ground the individual, in Confucian ethics the relations that are first and foremost represented by the family, are even more fundamental (Rosemont & Ames 2009, 1–6).

Humaneness is thus the effort of harmonic coexistence that begins with the family and is as such the central effort of the Confucian project. But if this notion is in the *Analects* still used as a general and all-encompassing virtue, then in the *Mencius* humaneness is already much more systematically defined – i.e. as one of the four universal virtues on the basis of which Mencius builds his famous theory of "humanness as good" (*xingshan* 性善).

As written in the *Mencius*:

> Mencius said, "From the feelings proper to it, it is constituted for the practice of what is good. This is what I mean in saying that humanness [*xing* 性] is good. If people do what is not good, the blame cannot be

25 君子務本，本立而道生。孝弟也者，其為仁之本與！(*Lunyu*, 1.2).

26 See also *Lunyu,* 1.11, 2.5; *Mengzi,* 8.58 etc.

imputed to their inborn powers. All people possess in their heart [*xin* 心] the feeling of commiseration; all people possess the feeling of shame and dislike; and that of reverence and respect; and that of approving and disapproving. The feeling of commiseration implies the principle of humaneness; that of shame and dislike, the principle of appropriateness; that of reverence and respect, the principle of ritual propriety; and that of approving and disapproving, the principle of wisdom. Humaneness, appropriateness, ritual propriety, and wisdom are not infused into us from without. We are certainly furnished with them. And a different view is simply owing to want of reflection. Hence it is said, 'Seek and you will find them. Neglect and you will lose them.' People differ from one another in regard to them – some as much again as others, some five times as much, and some to an incalculable amount – it is because they cannot carry out fully their inborn powers."[27]

The Mencian theory of humanness as good received many critiques (e.g. from Xunzi 荀子 (313–238 BCE), yet still exerted an extraordinary influence upon the development of Confucian thought. It represents the systematization of the ideas of Confucian virtues and one of the key ideas of the Confucian tradition. The cited passage furthermore describes the two key concepts that within the Confucian tradition are inextricably linked – "humanness" (*xing* 性) and the "heart" or "heart-mind" (*xin* 心).

The character for humanness (*xing* 性) is made up of a component representing the "heart" and one representing "a growing plant". Mencius claims that in their humanness all people are endowed with the four sprouts (*siduan* 四端) of universal virtues – these are humaneness, appropriateness, ritual propriety and wisdom – all based on the inner situational feeling and awareness of the human heart;[28] humanness is what defines a person as human, and also possesses a certain normative character, and is a notion that again demands effort.

The character for "heart" (*xin* 心) is a pictogram depicting the shape of the veins in the heart and at first represented the organ itself. This notion then went through an important evolution and is now commonly translated with

27 孟子曰：「乃若其情，則可以為善矣，乃所謂善也。若夫為不善，非才之罪也。惻隱之心，人皆有之；羞惡之心，人皆有之；恭敬之心，人皆有之；是非之心，人皆有之。惻隱之心，仁也；羞惡之心，義也；恭敬之心，禮也；是非之心，智也。仁義禮智，非由外鑠我也，我固有之也，弗思耳矣。故曰：『求則得之，舍則失之。』或相倍蓰而無算者，不能盡其才者也。(*Mengzi*, 11.6).

28 As an example, Mencius points to the feeling of discomfort that supposedly all people feel when faced with the image of a child about to fall into a well (*Mengzi,* 3.6).

the much more culturally specific term, i.e. the "heart-mind". Within this concept is contained the intertwined nature of feelings, desires, thought, will and intuition, which are here not differentiated in the same way as in the European philosophical tradition, while at the same time the "heart-mind" is in its basic make-up bound in relation with the universal virtues.

Finally, it seems this is also a good place to discuss the Confucian notion of good (*shan* 善). Ames and Rosemont again note that in the Confucian tradition the notion of "good" was originally never used in an abstract sense. *Shan* is always good in the sense of "good for something" or "good for someone" (Ames & Rosemont 1998). It is a principle that is again and again derived from the practical situations of life and is not bound to anything absolute. When speaking of good within the frame of Confucian thought, it is therefore important to always understand "good" in the above-presented context – in the context of a teaching that is built on the effort towards a life in which people perfect themselves as part of a harmonic community: first within the family, then within the wider society. And finally, this also expresses itself culturally-historically.

5 Questioning the boundaries of the philosophical approach

Once the foundations of the Confucian ethical system as presented in the canonical texts are laid out, we nevertheless have to call attention to certain specific features that such an approach brings with it. The study of canonical texts is philosophically interesting. In this way Confucianism as a commentarial and interpretative tradition represents an open and evolving dialogue about humanity and its life; and yet, as already emphasized, it is also a dialogue which is about 2,600 years old and which proceeded throughout different contexts. That is why we should also show on the level of its philosophical features how terms that might at first glance be the same can lead to different systems of thought. At the same time it is important to also note other factors that have had an influence on the development of Confucianism in different areas.

> Among the virtues that are advocated by Confucianism, viewed from the value orientation of social life, we can say that Chinese Confucianism emphasizes consummate persons/conduct (*ren* 仁), while it is appropriateness (or *yi* 义) that is emphasized in Korean Confucianism and doing one's utmost or showing loyalty (*zhong* 忠) in Japanese Confucianism. Or, taking a closer look, we can say that Chinese Confucianism emphasiz-

> es putting oneself in the other's place (*ren* and *shu* 恕), while it is appropriateness and temperance (*jie* 节) in Korean Confucianism and loyalty (*zhong* 忠) and bravery (*yong* 勇) in Japanese Confucianism. These differences in emphasis in the different countries are not only axiological but also cultural. (Chen 2018, 102–103)

Chen Lai emphasizes the need for a multidisciplinary approach to the study of Confucianism, yet does not deny the privileged status of philosophy, as the one able to approach the Confucian dialogue on ethics in a special way. However, it also seems that with the study of Confucianism intellectual history and comparative philosophy, between which there often exists a certain tension, should not stand in each other's way – they should work hand in hand.

For a more detailed overview of certain particularities of the transmission of the teaching from one cultural environment into another, it is perhaps useful to take a closer look at the example of Japan, which is among the Confucian countries geographically the most removed from China and her traditions. At the same time, the time window of the development of Confucianism is much narrower in Japan than with the above-described history of Chinese Confucianism. Confucianism did not achieve the peak of its growth in Japan until the 17th and 18th centuries, when it blossomed during the Edo 江戸 period (1600–1867).

This era truly begins in the year 1603, when Tokugawa Ieyasu 徳川家康 (1543–1616) united Japan and established his Shogunate. This also caused a need for a new civil ideology that could help preserve stability and peace in the newly arisen state. The one ideology that in this period gained a leading position is Confucianism, inspired by the Chinese thinkers of the Song 宋 (960–1867) and Ming 明 (1368–1644) dynasties. This represented a new wave of Confucianism in Japan, brought over from Korea by the returning conquerors and in many ways befitting the new political reality in Japan. Such Confucianism then colours the different aspects of daily life and brings about different movements – while through the process of naturalization it itself also becomes imbued with elements of Japanese society and culture.[29]

This new movement in Japan also had its special features. If in China the teaching was preserved through the aid of a centralized educational system, then the Confucians in Japan were mostly private teachers (de Bary 2005, 69), and their thought also aimed to adapt to the social realities that marked the Edo period Japan. It is therefore not odd that within a soci-

29 For a more detailed description of the process of naturalization of Confucianism in Japan, see Nakai (1980).

ety that glorified loyalty to one's master and courage on the battlefield, this would also be reflected in the Confucian ideas that the Japanese were adapting – in which "loyalty" and "courage" moved to the top of the value hierarchy. It is also not odd that in a strictly hierarchical society with its own autochthonous religion there arose special interests that were specific to Japanese Confucianism:

> More immediately, however, it was expressed in a typical Confucian concern for the study of human history as revealing the constant laws of human behaviour and political morality. As applied to Japan, this study took forms that had no precedent in China's experience. For instance, it focused on the question of legitimate shogunal and imperial rule and on the unbroken succession of the reigning house which later fed into the imperial restoration movement. This, in turn, abetted the rise of a new nativism: the National Learning movement, which contributed to the study of Japanese literature and the revival of Shinto. In time, both these trends fused into an intense nationalism, which consciously rejected Chinese influences while incorporating essential elements from the great residue of Confucian intellectual and moral cultivation. (de Bary 2005, 5)

As a tradition that offers a wide and well-made conceptual apparatus, Confucianism was flexible enough in Japan to become the basis for distinctly Japanese studies. The diversity of its expressions – religious, literary, political-scientific, even medicinal – is, as mentioned already, no less vibrant in Japan: to the degree that it would be difficult to reduce it to its philosophical foundations. Yet at the same time it is also impossible to separate it entirely from its philosophical roots. It is therefore possible to also demonstrate a critical development that Confucianism went through in this new environment in the field of philosophy as well.

Many Japanese Confucians were critical of Zhu Xi's system of thought. Among them were, for example, the influential teachers Itō Jinsai 伊藤仁斎 (1627–1705) and Ogyū Sorai 荻生徂徠 (1666–1728). The first advocated for the ethics of the everyday and the secular, and the abandonment of any practices of self-cultivation that did not accord with the everyday life of the people (many of which, according to him, were planted within Zhu Xi's system by Buddhism), while the other used his stringent analysis of the classical Confucian notions to develop a teaching that can be considered a proper political science.

Between their teachings we can again see the breadth of particular concepts that the tradition possesses even within its unified frame of reference. Jinsai and Sorai both discuss "humaneness". But while Jinsai sees it as affection and love, Sorai sees it as the key virtue that allows rulers to pacify "all under Heaven". Both discuss "appropriateness". But while for Jinsai the latter forms a complementary pair with humaneness as the basis of the "Way of Humanity" (*rendao* 人道), for Sorai it is simply the basis of the prescribed rites. Both discuss the theory of "humanness as good". But while for Jinsai this represents the fundamental potential of people to act in line with their virtues and cultivate the self through everyday ethical practice, for Sorai it is a moot discussion, started by Mencius because he liked to argue. The conclusions reached by Jinsai and Sorai are very different, but they both belong to the Japanese Confucian philosophical tradition.[30]

Japanese thinkers also developed the notions they adapted from the Chinese philosophical traditions and leaned on the works of their predecessors – they were also themselves involved in the tradition that stretched from China, through Korea to Japan. If it is therefore possible to say that while the mere knowledge of canonical texts does not offer a sufficiently deep understanding of the wide Confucian tradition, the project of Confucian ethics and philosophical discourse still seems like a project that cannot be neglected. The proper philosophical approach thus describes both the development of thought in the particular countries as well as Confucian ethics as a connected whole.

Confucianism as such offers a rich ethical teaching that is turned towards the concrete, but also possesses the power to preserve a living dialogue about the universal. Each new story in which this dialogue is played out between the different cultural contexts and within them enriches this dynamic and vital process. The study of the different Confucianisms thus also operates in the context of the study of cultural factors – a context that seems of key importance to Confucianism, even in its philosophical foundations – as well as in the context of the philosophical study of Confucian ethics as such.

Both approaches again go hand in hand.

30 I further discuss the differences between Jinsai and Sorai in my article Ogrizek (2016).

6 Conclusion

If Confucianism in China, Japan, Vietnam and Korea is also bound to the study of the cultural, historical and local contexts, it still seems that the study of Confucian philosophy, especially in the context of today's comparative-philosophical studies, does not lose its power and can, by drawing from the deep well of Confucian tradition, contribute to philosophical discussions in a time when the renewed global ethical discourse seems of key importance. At the same time even the discourse now being held about Confucianism on a global level can again be seen as a new and exciting form of Confucianism.

If the different expressions of Confucianism together make up a tradition that is rich and complex, but also able to open up the dialogue about the values that, on the basis of their understanding of their cultural heritage, were advocated for by Confucius and his successors – those values that for two millennia and a half contributed to the development of intellectual traditions in East Asia – then the study of Confucianism in all forms, including the comparative-philosophical one, is an important project.

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