Abstract - This paper explores Confucius’ concept of virtues. This is achieved by analyzing his thoughts on Ren, Zhong, Shu, Yi, Li, and Xiao. The paper seeks to apply Confucius’s thoughts on these virtues as a paradigm for a transformed social and moral order. The paper argues that if Confucius’ ideas on these virtues are applied, the world will be transformed into a more decent, just, and humane locus for all human beings to dwell. Ren, as human-heartedness, Zhong and Shu as the two ways through which Ren can be practiced, while Yi as rectitude or righteousness, with Li as propriety, and finally, with Xiao as devotion and respect to parents, there is no doubt that there will be no more chaos, disorder, conflict, and antagonism, but peace and harmony in the whole world.
INTRODUCTION


This paper attempts to present and apply Confucius’ concept of virtues. It answers these questions: How does Confucius view virtue? Can these virtues be used as paradigms for a renewed social and moral order?

VIRTUE

De (virtue) in Confucian thought can be acquired through learning (Co, 1992:105). To be virtuous, one lives in a virtuous life. Education is indispensable for one to develop a virtuous life (Laquian in http://www.bilkent.edu.tr/~cci/confucius glossary).” Confucius puts emphasis on the cultivation, study, and development of virtue in order that one could live a virtuous life. He taught numerous kinds of virtues like Ren, Zhong and Shu, Yi, Li, and Xiao.

REN

Confucius takes Ren as “the essence of all virtues and the ground of human dignity. Ren is the ultimate foundation of Confucianism (Hansen, 1992:71).”


In morality, Ren has universal and particular perspectives (Co, 1992:106; Wu, 1986:16). In the former, “Ren is the primary principle of human action (File:///C/My Documents/confuci.htm).” In the latter, “Ren is used as a principle of moral justification (Co, 1992:107).”

In Lun Yu, Confucius argues that *Ren* means just right here at the very nature of man. One, however, needs to strive hard without disappointment for one to attain *Ren* (7:33). *It* means kindness (8:2). To attain *Ren* may be burdensome (8:7) and actualizing it is difficult (12:3).

*Ren* means loving others or that principle which makes one naturally courteous, respectful to superiors, and sincere to people. When one is firm, strong, simple, and cautious in speaking, one is close to *Ren* (13:27).

*Ren* also “mean(s) consciousness-of-human-others (Co, 1992:107).” It is a basic virtue that ought to be nurtured. It can help man develop his social concerns. It is rooted in the principle: “What you don’t want done to yourself, don’t do to others…(12:2).” In the Doctrine of the Mean, Confucius remarks: “What you do not like when done to yourself do not do unto others (Co, 1992:107).”

**ZHONG AND SHU**

*Zhong* means “doing one’s best, loyalty, and conscientiousness (Co, 1992:107).”

Although *Ren* is the most fundamental virtue, Confucius is also aware that *Ren* needs *Zhong* and *Shu* for its praxis. *Zhong* and *Shu* are “two ways of practicing *Ren*,” one is positive, the other negative (Wu, 1986:17). “*Zhong*…is the positive aspect of the practice of *Ren* (Co, 1992:107).” It represents the positive saying of the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would like others do unto you (Co, 1992:107).”


*Zhong*’s positive dimension is correlated with *Shu’s* prohibitive principle: “Do not do unto others what you do not want others do unto you (Confucius, The Analects (12:2) in http://plato.standford.edu/entries/confucius.hftra).” This makes *Zhong* and *Shu* indispensable virtues for the praxis of *Ren*. 


**YI**

*Yi* means rectitude, duty, obligation, righteousness (Wu, 1986:19), “what one ought to do,” “what is reasonable,” and “duty according to context (Co, 1992:108).” This paper underscores righteousness as the meaning of *Yi*. It is “…the principle of conscience as well as the just relationship of human beings (Co, 1992:108; http://www.humantoyogakuen-u.ac.jp/~acmuffer/contao/analects.htm and *The Doctrine of the Mean* in http://www.sacred-texts.com/cfu/conf3./htm).

“The superior Man is aware of Righteousness (*Yi*), the inferior man is aware of profit,” Confucius says (Co, 1992). Further he asserts: “In a state, gain is not to be considered prosperity, but its prosperity will be found in righteousness (File:///C//My Documents/confuci.htm & Wu, 1986).”

Hence, Confucius maintains: “… motives of an action are more important than results. Intentions have intrinsic values (Co, 1992). The Superior Man is motivated by righteousness, the inferior man by profit.

**LI**


This paper takes “propriety” as the meaning of *Li*. “Propriety is the English rendition of … *li* (Confucius, *The Doctrine of the Mean* in http://www.sacred-texts.com/cfu/conf3.htm).” It sets the “form of moral life (Co, 1992).” It “is the proper ritual of a civilized life (Co, 1992:109; see Jiyuan Yu, 1998: 331 ff).”

As propriety, *Li* pertains to the “rule of conduct that reflects a person’s good will (http://www.bilkent.edu.tr/~cci/~Confucius/glossary).” It means doing things the right way. It is a virtue that forms man’s conduct. “*Li* dictates the proper decorum befitting a man of moral rectitude (Lacquian in http://www.iar.ubc.ca/choibuilding/elaquian.html).”

*Li* includes rites as it is aided by *Ren* for one to show concern for others (Co, 1992).
If Ren is considered as the supreme virtue of all the sum of all virtues (Co, 1992), Xiao “is the cardinal virtue of the… Confucian virtues (Co, 1992).” Xiao means filial piety. It is “an attitude of respect and concern toward parents and superiors (Co, 1992).” It is “the virtue where the son serves his parents and the ancestral spirits (Co, 1992).”

Children should show love, devotion, and respect to their parents. Confucius opines:

When your parents are alive, serve them with propriety, when they die, bury them with propriety, and then worship them with propriety (Co, 1992).

Confucius outlines five fundamental relationships in society: (1) between state and citizen; (2) between father and son; (3) between husband and wife; (4) between elder brother and younger brother; and (5) between friends (Wu, 1986:18). It is remarkable that he qualifies father and son relationship as the most important, because in it the order of society and government is rooted (http://www.bilkent.edu.tr/~cci.confucius/glossary).

He maintains that family is the training ground for the development of Xiao, since all moral teachings should be first of all practiced in the family. Confucius says:

The ancients, who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulate their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons…. In order rightly to govern the state, it is necessary first to regulate the family…. Therefore, the ruler, without going beyond his family, completes the lesson for the state. There is filial piety (Wu, 1986)….

VIRTUES AS PARADIGM OF SOCIAL AND MORAL ORDER

Confucian virtues are excellent models for a good social and moral order. They are like gems that glitter in the “darkened” fate of the contemporary human civilization. Through the Analects that gives us a direct window into Confucian thought (Confucius, The Analects in http://www.human.toyogakuen-u.acip/~acmullercontao/analects.htm), we find these gems which Confucius inexhaustibly preached during his life time.

It is evident that “… Confucius himself … had little influence on the events of his own day…. [He] did not seem to have written down any of
his teachings (Confucius, *The Great Learning* in http://www.sacred-texts.com/efu/conf2.htm)….” However, scholars maintain that Christ, Socrates, among others are his equal. “He, is not a common sense moralist (Wu, 1986).” Thus, “Confucianism has been said to be a hundred times rationalistic than the Western philosophy (Confucius, *The Analects* in http://www.human.toyogakeun-uc.jp/~acmuller/contao/analects.htm).”

Confucius is a sage whose teachings deserve emulation. His teachings on virtues are excellent models of reconstructing a good social and moral order.

Confucius has been variably characterized, positively, as a Sage, the teacher…. When a person is seen as a Sage in the context of Chinese culture, he is (considered as a) ‘profoundly wise person (Co, 1992:110-111)’…. Confucius is not an armchair thinker, but a man of action, a great reformer, not only in the political setup in China, but also in the moral environment that seemed to have degenerated. “Confucius was such a man … and he was profoundly disturbed. He dedicated his life to … make a better world (http://www.bilkent.edu.tr/~cci/confucius/glossary; see Jiyuan Yu, 1998: 326-327).”

However, “… it is difficult to institute (a) true moral and social reform in any society. The reformer has to be some kind of superman to accomplish his job of achieving significant social change in his country (http://www.iar.ubc.ca/choibuilding/elaquian.html),” and perhaps, the whole global moral milieu.

“Confucius stresses the moral motivation of people, because for him, what is morally significant is the cultivation of moral lives and virtues as a whole and not merely the performance of right acts (http://www.human.toyogakuen-uc.ac.jp/~acmuller/contao/analects.htm).” The cultivation of Ren, Zhong, Shu, Yi, Li, and Xiao could help people come to terms with sound moral lives. Ren is a virtue that helps one morally upright. A person of Ren attains success with due consideration to others. Ren is an antidote to the so-called “crab mentality” among Filipinos and rugged individuals of other peoples in a global scale. A person whose life is permeated by Ren “finds in the desires of his own heart the rule by which he relates himself to others (Gier, 2001:286).” Thus, a Ren man has “… a built-in standard for dealing with others…. The measure of his good is the very measure of the good which he must accord to others (Confucius, *The Analects* in http://www.human.toyogakuen-uc.ac.jp/~acmuller/contao/analects.htm).”
Through Ren, “one need not resort to any external standard … other than what one finds in one’s heart (Wu, 1986:21).” In Ren, one’s actions are ruled by the rules of the heart. “(T)he man of Ren is the truly virtuous man (http://www.human.toyogakuen-u.ac.jp/~acmuller.contao/analects.htm),” says Confucius.

The combination of Zhong and Shu to praxis Ren is a powerful push to fully stretch one’s moral responsibility of oneself and others. “Zhong gives … the positive version of Ren, while Shu … the negative (Wu, 1986).” Guided by the principles of Zhong (Co, 1992:111) and Shu (Wu, 1986), the Ren man is always cautious of his actions.

Through Ren, Zhong, and Shu society will have equity, justice, respect, love, pity, compassion, kindness, and charity resulting to peace, tranquility, and progress. Evil will be totally annihilated. One will not cheat, steal, kill, and molest others since its members love others. Thus:

Today, we are asked to reflect upon the world that we have inherited – the values that our civilization have bestowed upon us… and the visions that sustain our hopes (Co, 1992)….

But not only can the Chinese benefit from the merits of these Confucian virtues but all peoples throughout the world.

In the case of Yi where one “does something because it is the right thing to do regardless of whether it is personally profitable to do or not (Chan, 2002:287)” human society could be morally ordered. If all members of society are permeated by Yi, everyone will uphold the rule of law and be committed to uphold order eradicating chaos, violence, corruption, and apathy. Thus,

We act from when we do not drive through a red traffic light … when we keep our place in a queue, when we refrain and refuse to cheat (Chan, 2002:287)….

Confucius is unquestionably “the model of courtliness and personal decorum for countless generations of Chinese officials (http://www.bilkent.edutr/~confucius/glossary).” To him, Li is a virtue that can help one attain self-discipline (http://www.uwec.edu/greider/Chinese.Ja...erals/filial%20piety/index.bridget; see Jiyuan Yu, 1998:33-1 & 326). The exercise of Li is indispensable in intersubjectivity. Through Li, one can learn “how to reconcile one’s own desires with the needs of one’s family and community (http://www.uwec.edu/greider/Chinese.Ja...erals/filial%20piety/index.bridget)…. “ So, “… rites should not be regarded as mere forms, but… they should be practiced with complete devotion and … sincerity (http://www.
Finally, *Xiao* is a good paradigm of a well-ordered relationship. Many scholars note that *Xiao*, or Filial Piety, has variations of six relations. “These ‘Six Relations’ … are the basis of all social connections between persons, and all six are based on the fundamental relationship between children and parents (Confucius, *The Analects* in http://www.human.toyogakuen.u.ac.jp~acmulleer/contro/analects.htm).” This makes Confucian scholars claim that in the “Confucian tradition… (it is) strongly stressed that all of society, including the government, could be run according to the principles of the family. The family was the moral and political model for all organizations (Confucius, *The Analects* in http://www.human.toyogakuen.u.ac.jp~acmulleer/contro/analects.htm).” Indeed, Confucius sees the familial relationship as the ultimate model for all forms of relationships. “He regards devotion to parents and older siblings as the most basic form of promoting the interests of others before one’s own and teachers that such altruism can be practiced only by those who have learned self discipline (Confucius, *The Analects* in http://www.human.toyogakuen.u.ac.jp~acmulleer/contro/analects.htm).”

However, in order to apply *Xiao* as a paradigm of human relations, which for Confucius takes its roots in the family, a modification of its strict adherence to authority should be entertained. This is because the underlying principles of these Six Relationships “…might easily be made to serve authoritarian purpose, if they are embedded in a culture that does not recognize human rights or basic human equality (Confucius, *The Analects* in http://www.human.toyogakuen.u.ac.jp~acmulleer/contro/analects.htm).” A Confucian scholar remarks:

Let us take the family as an example. In the past, Confucian filial piety was used to support a patriarchal society in which the father held enormous power over the family. Individual freedom and welfare of the wife and children could easily be sacrificed to satisfy the father’s unreasonable wants. In this situation, the ideal of *ren* and the mutual concern and reciprocity between family members, would surely be difficult to realize (Confucius, *The Analects* in http://www.human.toyogakuen.u.ac.jp~acmulleer/contro/analects.htm).

Based on the above quotation, a modification should be applied on *Xiao* in order that it will work justly and fairly with all the members of society. Thus, there should be a “…vibrant and transformed Confucianism (so that it) could supply rich ethical norms and virtues that would supplement
human rights to guide people’s behavior, thereby tempering a rights-based culture and preventing abuses of rights (Wu, 1986:22)."

In the light of this modified understanding of Xiao, fathers would amiably and cordially respect the rights of their children and vice-versa, just as the former would also, in love and admiration, respect the rights of their wives and vice-versa. In this situation, filial piety would find its significance and relevance in the families of our time. In a theoretical setting, we may contend that with this virtue called Xiao, evils that wreck families like: divorce, adultery, concubinage, spousal rape, incest, parricide, infanticide, abortion, among others, could not have successfully encroached into the sanctity of marriage and the sacredness of the family. Xiao, therefore, is another virtue that could spare the families from moral devastation.

Confucius is right. The family, the familial relationship, is the heart of all forms of interpersonal relationships. Thus, as the family is broken, society also corrodes. The evils in the family find their fullest expressions in society. The kind of families we have reflects the kind of society we have formed.

CONCLUSION

Confucius's philosophy is undoubtedly a cure to the fatal disease that had eaten up humanity ravaged by utter individualism. With his views on Ren, Zhong, Shu, Yi, Li, and Xiao, humanity will be fostered and understood in the context of a family and community, extending from a parochial to a global perspective.

Through Confucius's concept of virtues, our world will become more decent, just, humane, and human for all. Nobody will be afraid of criminals, terrorists, rascals in uniform, hoodlums in robes, and many other hideous personages common in today's society. Nobody will be engulfed by fear of murderers, robbers, thieves, rapists, swindlers, pirates, and terrorists. Couples will not be threatened by divorce, adultery, concubinage, just as children will never be scared by abandonment and the blatant irresponsibility of their parents because every person – a citizen, a government official, a legislator, an executive, a law enforcer, a son, a daughter, a father, a mother, a professional – will be inspired by Ren, Zhong, Yi, Li, and Xiao.

Yes, human-heartedness, righteousness, conscientiousness, altruism, propriety, and filial piety are virtues that can surely transform humanity towards a community of persons who show concern and love for others; a community of persons that respect each other’s rights, duties, and
obligations. These Confucian virtues are bodies of truth that cut across race, religion, culture, and civilization. The intrinsic human propensity to be good, to be benevolent, to be compassionate, to be permeated by pity and love, to live a morally upright life, to sincerely do one’s duties and obligations, to be polite, civil, orderly in one’s actions, and to be loving and respectful to one’s parents and elders are indubitably ingrained deeply right into the core of every human person’s soul.

Therefore, one does not need to be a Chinese in order for him/her to heed the call of Confucius to be truly human. Regardless of one’s race, religion, or culture, one can actualize himself/herself in the surge of the spirit of Ren through the application of Zhong, Shu, Yi, Li, and Xiao. These virtues, beyond any cloud of doubt, can radically transform our society to be a better place to live in.

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