

A Study on Confucian View of the Superior Man

Han I*

Key Words: Confucianism, humaneness, a superior man, the view of life.

1. Introduction

“He is truly a well-rounded Confucian gentleman.” This is the highest praise to indicate that the man have many noble characters. In China, people are told to qualify for recognition of a gentleman, one has to be a great scholar, an artist and also a very cultured person. He must be full knowledgeable about Chinese history, literature, philosophy, traditions, customs and the arts. Of course, he also must be a person of character.

When Chinese talks about the personality or character of a man, he will quote Confucius (better known as Master Kong, 551–479 BC) from the *Analects (Lun Yu)*, a famous collection of saying of Confucius and incidents from his life, compiled by students of his disciples. The Chinese have always looked back to history, not because they are backward looking or are simply conservative; they do so for concrete evidence and past experience. As a result, they can learn about human nature or the way of life from Confucian classics such as the *Four Books* (the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, the *Great Learning* and the *Mean*), the *Five Classics* (the *Book of Changes*, the *Book of Documents*, the *Book of Poetry*, the *Record of Ritual*, the *Spring and Autumn Annals*) and so on.

As everybody knows, Confucian philosophy has to do primarily with ethics and conduct in actual life, and not to any great degree with abstract questions such as are dealt with in Western metaphysics. Confucius also promoted behavioral standards combined with humanism, thus exerting enormous influence upon Chinese thought and life. This is to say that the Chinese have found the value judgments about human being from Confucianism from ancient times.

Today, the world is getting smaller every day because of improved means of communications and the progress of globalization. Some practices have been lost or forgotten because of changes in human values as a result of changes in environment and social conditions. This does not mean, however, that because of the changes in human values, old values and practices are not good or no longer valid. This may be so in certain cases, but many values are neglected because of insufficient effort made to explain their meaning within the modern context. People do not understand them and

*班 偉: 山陽学園大学総合人間学部言語文化学科

therefore abandon them. It is for this reason that this paper is written.

2. On Adversity and Learning

Needless to say, Confucius was the first philosopher and the greatest teacher in Chinese history. He molded not only the civilization of China, but also the Chinese ideal of life. Confucius has been credited with a number of literary works, but there is no hard evidence that he wrote anything at all. His abiding influence was attained not through books but through his effect upon the students who gathered around him day-to-day. The contents of the Confucian canon varied over time. He is said to have taught his pupils the classics of poetry, history, music and rites. He also used the very concise language to enunciate the main guidelines of a man's life in some informal ways.

Before considering the Confucian view about human virtues, it is necessary to mention his background. Confucius' forefathers were nobles of the state of Song at a time when China was divided into many small states. His great grandfather moved to the state of Lu when his political career failed. Confucius' father became a governor in Zou Country (present-day Qufu in Shandong Province). When Confucius was born, his family's position already declined. As a boy, Confucius worked in a warehouse and tended cows and sheep. He also worked as a helper to a master of funeral ceremonies for the nobles. Recalling his childhood Confucius later said, "I was poor and lowly when young. That's why I can do many humble things." (*Analects*, Book 9—6) Confucius was badly off and had wide experience in life, it became the starting point of his thought.

According to Confucius' account, "A gentleman avoids seeking to satisfy his appetite to the full when he eats and avoids seeking comfort when he is at home. He is diligent in deed and cautious in word, and he associates with possessors of the Way and is put right by them. He may simply be said to be fond of learning." (*Analects*, Book 1—14) Among the group of his disciples, Confucius particularly admired Yan Hui as an ideal man, saying, "A man of quality indeed was Hui! He lived in a squalid alley with a tiny bowlful of rice to eat and a ladleful of water to drink. Other men would not endure such hardships, but Hui did not let his happiness be affected. A man of quality indeed was Hui!" (*Analects*, Book 6—11) He also stated clearly his opinion like this, "A public servant who is intent on the Way, but is ashamed of bad clothes and bad food, is not at all fit to be consulted." (*Analects*, Book 4—9) Although Confucius had fell into adversity, all his life he struggled against it. He is the type that will succeed in life.

In Confucius' view, "The gentleman plans for the Way and does not plan for food. ……He is concerned about the Way and is not concerned about poverty." (*Analects*, Book 15—32) However, this is not to say that Confucius was refusing to accept material comforts. He was just finicky about the proper means to obtain them. What he said was as follows, "Riches and honors—these are what men desire, but if this is not achieved in accordance with the appropriate principles, one does not cling to them. Poverty and obscurity—these are what men hate, but if this is not achieved in accordance with the appropriate principles, one does not avoid them. If a gentleman

abandons humaneness, how does he make a reputation?" (*Analects*, Book 4–5) There is another famous saying, "Even in the midst of eating coarse rice and drinking water and using a bent arm for a pillow happiness is surely to be found; riches and honors acquired by unrighteous means are to me like the floating clouds." (*Analects*, Book 7–16) It can be said that the practice of asceticism will help to form the characters of young people.

Like many other children of ruined families, Confucius suffered many hardships after lost his parents very early in life. But he had a desire to improve himself. As a boy and young man he probably received the elements of education as an apprentice official engaged in clerical work. Ambitious students work hard. His passion for knowledge and aptitude for study made him in the end one of the most accomplished scholars of his day. At last Confucius made his way out of adverse circumstances. He said of himself in his later years, "At fifteen, I set my mind bent on learning. At thirty, I was established. At forty, I had no doubts. At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven. At sixty, my ear was in accord. At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right." (*Analects*, Book 2–4) These are six very relevant instructions to men at different stages of their lives. Confucius' theory of innate goodness had far-reaching implications, for it assumed that it was possible for this goodness to expressed, through education and effort, by all people.

3. On Humanity and Humanism

At fifty-one Confucius became a magistrate, and later minister of justice in his native state of Lu. Failing to carry out his political reforms, he set out to travel from state to state hoping to convert feudal rulers to his ideals. These travels lasted for about fourteen years. Confucius spent much of his life debating with the feudal rulers and trying to win them over to his doctrines, but often to little avail. Ultimately disappointed, he returned home to teach and write. Throughout his experience both joy and sorrow in life, Confucius showed a keen insight into human life.

Confucius, in his reference to conduct and character, uses the term "junzi" (君子) which has been translated into various term such as "superior man", "noble man" or simply "gentleman". This is the difficulty often faced in the translation of a Chinese term into English which does not have all the equivalents of Chinese word. The word appears 107 times in the *Analects*, and usually contrasts with the term "xiaoren" (小人) literally meaning "a small man" or "a petty man". There is no doubt, however, that in the context in which "junzi" is used, it refers to a man of learning and of proper conduct and character. It can therefore be better understood if the word "gentleman" is used for want of a more suitable equivalent. So every Chinese educated person aims at being a "junzi" according to Confucian standards which we must admit are difficult to attain. Even Confucius himself said so. First of all, "junzi" must be a man of great humanity.

It is said that Confucius was very sympathetic towards the others. He often used the term "ren" (仁) to express the perfect virtue of human being, it means humanity or

humaneness. Confucius talked about “ren” more than anything else. The word appears 109 times, more frequently than any other word, in the *Analects*. All his teachings may be said to center on this idea of humanity. When asked about “ren”, Confucius said, “It is to love others.” (*Analects*, Book 12–22) For Confucius, humanity makes a man different from an animal. It is the root of all particular virtues such as filial piety and brotherly respect, loyalty and faithfulness. A man of humanity “loves men”. Negatively, he “does not do to others what he does not want others to do to him” (*Analects*, Book 12–2, Book 15–24); positively, “wishing himself to be established, sees that others are established, and wishing himself to be successful, sees that others are successful.” (*Analects*, Book 6–30) A person who acts up to this ideal is the “superior man”—the “junzi”. Confucius also believed that “The gentleman brings to completion the fine qualities in others and does not bring to completion the bad qualities in others. The small man does the opposite of this.” (*Analects*, Book 12–16) There is no doubt that Confucius placed great emphasis on building character for his disciples.

Before Confucius, “junzi” meant the son of a ruler, the implication being that nobility was a matter of social origin. But for Confucius, the “junzi” is the moral man whose nobility is that of character and not of blood. He is a man who is “wise, humane, and courageous” and who “learns the truth and loves men”. Confucius distinguished sharply between the superior man and the small man, he made some witty remarks as follows, “The superior man is familiar with what is right, just as the small man is familiar with profit” (*Analects*, Book 4–16); “The progress of the superior man is upwards; the progress of the small man is downwards” (*Analects*, Book 14–23); “What the superior man seeks, is in himself. What the small man seeks, is in others.” (*Analects*, Book 15–21) Because anyone can become a superior man and—after that—a sage, the common humanity is indispensable to anyone.

Personal perfection, however, is impossible without a good society. Confucius was therefore always careful to stress his precepts about peace and social harmony. It is significant that the word “ren” means both the individual man and also human relationship, or society. This subject was treated as follows, “The gentleman has universal sympathies and is not partisan. The small man is partisan and does not have universal sympathies.” (*Analects*, Book 2–14) Confucius believed that “The gentleman, although he behaves in a conciliatory manner, does not make his views coincide with those of others; the small man, although he makes his views coincide with those of others, does not behave in a conciliatory manner.” (*Analects*, Book 13–23) According to the Confucianists, the ideal human relationship is, “The gentleman collects friends through culture, and through his friends supports humaneness.” (*Analects*, Book 12–24) In Confucius’ view, “There are three kinds of friendship which are beneficial and three kinds of friendship which are harmful. It is beneficial to make friends with the upright, to make friends with the sincere, and to make friends with those who have heard many things. It is harmful to make friends with the ingratiating, to make friends

with those who are good at seeming pliant, and to make friends with those who have a ready tongue.” (*Analects*, Book 16–4)

When Zizhang, one of Confucius’ disciples, asked about humaneness, Confucius replied, “One who can bring about the practice of five things everywhere under Heaven has achieved humaneness.” He begged to ask what they were, and was told, “Courtesy, tolerance, good faith, diligence, and kindness. If one is courteous, one is not treated with rudeness; if one is tolerant, one wins over the multitude; if one is to good faith, others give one responsibility; if one is diligent, one obtains results; and if one is kind, one is competent to command others.” (*Analects*, Book 17–6)

At the heart of Confucius’ teachings lay a profound sense of humaneness, which means acting with sensitivity to the nuances of human relationships. All his life, Confucius stressed the virtues of humanity, loyalty, righteousness, and sincerity. As a result of his central concern with man and with human relations, Confucius carried Chinese humanism to a climax.

4. Moral Values of the Superior Man

As is generally known, though as a politician Confucius was largely a failure, as a teacher he was a great success. To count the prevailing anarchy, he instilled into his disciples the high moral values which he believed were current in the golden age of the early days of the Zhou Dynasty. He was China’s first full-time, professional teacher, and the first to teach the principles of conduct, loyalty, faithfulness, performance of propriety, that is moral education, instead of purely vocational subjects.

There are many qualities of a gentlemen enunciated by Confucius in his dialogues with his disciples and others. It will be sufficient to quote just a few. Confucius said that there were four of the ways of the gentleman present in Zichan, who was the chief minister of the state of Zheng and a great statesman of the period, “in his conduct of himself he was courteous, in his service of his superiors he showed veneration, in his provision for the needs of the people he was generous, and in his employment of the people he was righteous.” (*Analects*, Book 5–16) Confucius also praised Yan Pingzhong, the chief minister of the state of Qi, for his good personality, “Yan Pingzhong was good at relationships with others; even over a long period he showed respect for them.” (*Analects*, Book 5–17) We can find many qualities in common among Zichan, Yan Pingzhong and Confucius. Zigong, another Confucius’ disciple, enumerated all the personality of Confucius as “warm” (溫), “amiable” (良), “courteous” (恭), “frugal” (儉), “deferential” (讓) (*Analects*, Book 1–10). Strength of character is really strength of the mind, according to the Confucianists. When a man has cultivated these virtues through mental discipline, we say he has developed his character.

It was said that a gentleman has three countenances: “When one sees him from a distance he is rather forbidding, but when one approaches him he is genial, and then when one listens to his words they are strict.” (*Analects*, Book 19–9) He also has nine considerations: “When he looks he is anxious to see clearly. When he listens he wants

to hear clearly. In appearance he wants to be affable. In his demeanor he thinks of modesty. In his speech he thinks of loyalty. In his affairs of business he is anxious that he is reverently respectful. When he is in doubt he asks questions. When he is angry he thinks of the difficulties he might be in. When he sees that there is something to be gained he thinks of what is the right thing to do.”(*Analects*,Book16–10)The gentleman considers righteousness to be essential in everything. Humility is also a characteristic of Chinese behavior. Greatness comes out of humility and not arrogance.

In very concise language enunciated by Confucius, these are the main guidelines of a man’s life. Followers of Confucius developed his teachings in various directions. Zengzi, one of Confucius’ disciples, expressed his own opinion, “The things which the gentleman values in the Way are three: in transforming his demeanor he banishes violence and rudeness, in composing his expression he keeps close to sincerity, and in the style of his utterances he banishes coarseness and impropriety.” (*Analects*, Book 8 –4) Zengzi’s another famous saying is, “Every day I examine myself in three respects: am I disloyal in my designs for others, am I untrustworthy in my dealings with friends, have I failed to practice what has been passed on to me? ” (*Analects*,Book 1–4) Although a Chinese, whether man or woman, may not have studied the *Analects*, these principles are transmitted from generation to generation in the family tradition.

To discuss about the subjects such as “What is the meaning of life?” “What is the purpose of our life?” “What does one live for?” with disciples, Confucius also used the term “zhishi” (志士)or “renren”(仁人) which meaning is just similar to “junzi”. In his view, “The determined public servant and the humane man never seek to preserve life in such a way as to injure humaneness, but they will sometimes even sacrifice their lives in order to achieve humaneness.” (*Analects*, Book 15–9) Zengzi’s thinking was similar to Confucius, “The public servant must be broad-shouldered and stout-hearted. His burden is heavy and his way is long. For humaneness is the burden he has taken on himself; is it not true that it is a heavy one to bear? Only with death does his journey end; is it not true that he has far to go?” (*Analects*,Book8–7) Zizhang had the same opinion, “A public servant who on confronting danger is prepared to lay his life, who on confronting gain concentrates on what is right, who when sacrificing concentrates on reverence, who when mourning concentrates on grief should definitely be all right.” (*Analects*, Book 19–1)

It is the most difficult among the teachings of Confucius. Moral values, which Confucius seldom talked about, are here conceived of as being an endowment from human nature. If a person wants to become a gentleman, he can cultivate his mind by studying Confucian classics. Anyway, Confucius believed that “By nature, men are nearly alike; while by practice, they get to be wide apart.” (*Analects*, Book 17–2)

5. Optimism and Cultural Fulfillment

It is pointed out that Confucius had an optimistic view of life. Actually, the Chinese mind believes that although there are many hardships in life, Heaven does

not interrupt a person's path. The *Analects* begins with a famous saying as this, "To learn something and at times to practice it—surely that is a pleasure? To have friends coming from distant places—surely that is delightful? But not to be resentful at others' failure to appreciate one—surely that is to be a true gentleman?" (*Analects*, Book 1—1) Confucius, as an optimist, made the same kind of proposition repeatedly, "I will not be afflicted at men's not knowing me; I will be afflicted that I do not know men" (*Analects*, Book 1—16); "I will not be concerned at men's not knowing me; I will be concerned at my own want of ability" (*Analects*, Book 14—30); "The superior man is distressed by his want of ability. He is not distressed by men's not knowing him." (*Analects*, Book 15—19). If a man takes a long term view of the future, he may be able to find hope. Therefore, people should do their best in any circumstances.

In this case, Confucius placed some terms such as "renzhe" (仁者), "zhizhe" (知者), "yongzhe" (勇者) on the same level with "junzi", meaning "a humane man", "a wise man", "a courageous man" respectively. What he talked about himself was as follows, "The ways of the gentleman are three but I have no ability in them: the humane do not worry; the wise are not perplexed; and the courageous do not feel fear." (*Analects*, Book 14—28) We can find the same passage in Book 9—29. The comparison between the wise man and the humane man is very interesting, "The wise delight in water; the humane delight in mountains. The wise are active; the humane are tranquil. And although the wise will find joy, the humane will have long life." (*Analects*, Book 6—23) In Confucius' view, "They who know the truth are not equal to those who love it, and they who love it are not equal to those who delight in it." (*Analects*, Book 6—20) A gentleman should take great pleasure in doing learning, because there is no royal road to learning.

Someone asked Zilu, a well-known pupil, about Confucius, but Zilu did not answer him. When Confucius heard this, he informed Zilu saying, "Why did you not say to him, that he is simply a man who gets so worked up that he forgets to eat, is so happy that he forgets sorrows, and is not aware that old age is coming on." (*Analects*, Book 7—19) In his later days, Confucius resigned himself to it as his fate. His sorrow was, "Alas! nobody understands me." Zigong asked him, "What do you mean by thus saying—that no one understands you?" Confucius replied, "I do not feel resentful towards Heaven and I do not put blame on men. Although my studies are of lowly things they reach up above. The one that understands me will be Heaven!" (*Analects*, Book 14—35) After the several ups and downs in life, Confucius reached the state of resignation. He said, "The gentleman is neither worried nor afraid" (*Analects*, Book 12—4), and "The gentleman is calm and peaceful; the small man is always emotional." (*Analects*, Book 7—37) It is difficult to know oneself. Those words reveal clearly the Confucius' view of life.

The Confucian way of producing a rounded person is to provide a general cultural education. There is no need to specialize. To specialize would mean you could only do what you specialized in. Someone estimated Confucius just like this, "Despite his broad

learning there is nothing for which he has made a reputation.” (*Analects*, Book 9–2) But for Confucius, “A gentleman does not behave as an implement.” (*Analects*, Book 2–12) Even today, more than two thousand years after Confucius, educationists and researchers have come to the conclusion that a person who studies humanities makes a better administrator or manager than a person who specialize in only one area of study. According to Confucius a person should study extensively the polite studies, and should have a correct mixture of natural abilities and culture. In other words, education should be a means to developing character and not an end in itself. The aim of Chinese education has always been the cultivation of the reasonable man as the model of Culture. An educated man should, above all, be a reasonable being, who is always characterized by his common sense, his love of moderation and restraint, his hatred of heartless and avarice. Common sense, Of course, is possessed by all common people.

Although Confucius was bringing up his disciples in accordance with his own educational philosophy, the objective of becoming a gentleman, in practice, was rarely achieved. Even Confucius himself recognized that it is the reality of life. He felt sad and saying, “Living in retirement to study their aims, and practicing righteousness to carry out their principles—I have heard such a saying but I have never met such people.” (*Analects*, Book 16–11) He deplored the fact as follows twice, “I have never seen one who loves virtue as much as he loves sexual attraction.” (*Analects*, Book 9–18, Book 15–13) Confucius told his disciple that “Do you be a scholar after the style of the superior man, and not after that of the small man.” (*Analects*, Book 6–13) He also said, “There are people who are not humane although they are gentleman; but there is no such thing as someone who is humane although he is a small man.” (*Analects*, Book 14–6) This is perfectly understandable in a culture that has moral wisdom.

Anyway, in Confucius’ opinion, “It is impossible for those who are not humane to dwell for a long time in adversity and it is also impossible for them to dwell for a long in pleasurable circumstances. Those who are humane rest content with humaneness and those who are wise derive advantage from humaneness.” (*Analects*, Book 4–2) He also said, “The virtuous will be sure to speak correctly, but those whose speech is good may not always be virtuous. Men of principle are sure to be bold, but those who are bold may not always be men of principle.” (*Analects*, Book 14–4) That is all theory he said. Therefore, classical Chinese education in the Confucian style aims at producing a rounded person, and every Chinese scholar aims at complete cultural attainment.

6. Conclusion

For a long time, two dominant notes run through Chinese philosophy and religion, namely Confucian humanism and rationalism. Confucianism insisted that to respond in an appropriately humane way one must study and practice the ultimate human virtues which based on the importance of humanity. Thus Confucius set all these standards for a gentleman and a good example for all Chinese people. He believed that a gentleman were so powerful that the sincere practice of them would bring about a

transformation of the self, which in turn would have a ripple effect that ultimately influenced the others. Confucius was not only a practical man, but also an idealist.

The Chinese tradition has been for every person to try to be a gentleman by acquiring and exhibiting some or all the qualities stated by Confucius. The educated person or scholar aims further for accomplishments to give himself complete cultural satisfaction and in consequence makes himself a truly rounded cultured person. It is a tradition to respect such a person and value him more than a person of high position or wealth. This is the Chinese philosophy of life. The humanism in Chinese culture is that we must all live and behave humanly, not necessarily worldly.

It can be said that Confucian classics revealed to the gentleman a code of ethics and morality that emphasized the complexity of the web of relationships that bound people and the virtue of attending to personal duty for the sake of the common good. In other words, Confucius' thought was grounded in the human realm; nevertheless, he had an abiding sense of faith in Heaven, and in the mission with it had entrusted him—to bring righteousness and kindness to the world.

As mentioned above, with the rapid growth of economy and the decline in concern about morals during the last twenty years, we will not be surprised if the sense of values of Chinese culture accepts serious harmful effects of the make-money view and yet retains its own soul. Each time Confucius and his writings were condemned in history, especially in the period so-called the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution 1966—1976, he and his writings became more valuable when revived. What is important in the case of Confucius is that he and his teachings were based on the humanity. If more things are forgotten, those things will be more interesting when brought back again. It is therefore certain that the Confucian view of superior man will be of greater interest and value in the future than now.

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顧鹿 『註釈校正 華英四書』商務印書館

魚返善雄 『英和対照 論語』原書房 昭和 39 年