

Confucian Universalism and the Chinese Diaspora Experience**

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Abstract

This paper argues that major Confucian thinkers such as Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi all believed in the universality of human nature and therefore were all committed to universal moral values. In this essay, “Confucian Universalism” refers to the Confucian belief in a common human nature and universal moral values. Such Confucian universalism is supported to a great degree by experiences of the Chinese diaspora. This paper also argues that in the contemporary world, the universal values of Confucianism and liberalism can work together and complement each other. They are two parts of the totality of universal values: on the one hand, Confucian virtues and moral principles can be practiced better in a democratic society than in a non-democratic society, and the fuller realization of Confucian universal values presupposes the prevalence of core liberal values such as human rights, democracy, liberty, and equality; on the other hand, Confucian universal values can help overcome excessive individualism in a democratic society and therefore play a positive role in building more balanced and harmonious families and communities there.

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Although this paper considers both of these aspects, its discussion focuses on why the Confucian tradition must incorporate liberal universal values and why the Confucian ideal cannot be realized in a non-democratic society.

Keywords: Confucian, Chinese overseas, human nature, universal values, liberalism

1. Introduction

The existing literature on Confucianism has largely focused on the Confucian view of the relational self and the social roles of human beings,¹ but has rarely discussed universalistic elements in Confucian doctrine. This paper concentrates on Confucian universalism. The term “Confucian Universalism” here refers to Confucian beliefs in a common human nature and universal moral values. This paper argues that major Confucian thinkers such as Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi are all committed to such a Confucian universalism, although what they regard as universal is not the same as what many contemporary thinkers believe. Their universalism, to a great degree, is supported by the experiences of the Chinese diaspora. This paper also shows how universalistic components in Confucianism and liberalism constitute two parts of the totality of universal values that may work together and complement each other in the contemporary world. On the one hand, Confucian virtues and moral principles can be practiced better in a democratic society than in a non-democratic society, and the fuller realization of Confucian universal values presupposes the

1 Among others, Henry Rosemont Jr. and Roger Ames have greatly emphasized such Confucian ideas. They have argued for Confucian relational self in many of their works. For example, Rosemont said: “For the early Confucians there can be no me in isolation, to be considered abstractly: I am the totality of roles I live in relation to specific others.” See Henry Rosemont, *A Chinese Mirror*, La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1991, p. 72. Ames also said: “A human being is not what one is; it is what one does in one’s relations with other doers.” See Roger Ames, “Continuing the Conversation on Chinese Human Rights,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 11.1 (March 1997): 195.

prevalence of core liberal values such as human rights, democracy, liberty, and equality; on the other hand, Confucian universal values can help overcome excessive individualism in a democratic society and therefore play a positive role in building more balanced and harmonious families and communities there. Although this paper considers both of these aspects, it discusses more why the Confucian tradition must incorporate liberal universal values and why the Confucian ideal cannot be realized in a non-democratic society. The paper consists of three main sections, beginning with an investigation of the Confucian belief in the universality of human nature.

2. The Universality of Human Nature

Confucianism is well known for its emphasis on the relatedness of human existence, but it does not deny that human beings share some characteristics and common needs. No matter how many relationships people may participate in and what kinds of role they have to play in family and society, they still share something in common in their nature in terms of which their similar psychological and physical needs can be explained. Therefore, there is no contradiction for Confucians in both emphasizing the social and relational side of human beings while at the same time believing in a common human nature and universal values.

The textual evidence clearly shows that early Confucians, including Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, all held the belief in a common human nature. First of all, Confucius believes that human beings are similar at birth. It was he who said “By nature people are similar, but by habits and practices they become different” (*Analects* 17: 2).² Although Confucius does not elaborate on this saying, his point is clearly made—there is a universal human nature that is shared by all human beings. In his saying, “nature” (*xing* 性) is contrasted with “habit and practice” (*xi*

2 In this paper, the translations of all quotes from Confucius's *Analects* are mine. For the original text, see Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, translated and annotated, *Lunyu yi zhu* 論語譯注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980).

習), therefore it is obvious that “nature” is not formed by later development, but is something inborn or something that occurs at the beginning of one’s life. In addition, Confucius’s principles of *zhong* 忠 and *shu* 恕 presuppose the belief that human beings are alike in terms of basic needs and desires. *Zhong* is about doing to others what one wishes done to oneself: “desiring to sustain yourself, sustain others, and desiring to succeed for yourself, let others succeed” (己欲立而立人, 己欲達而達人) (*Analects* 6: 30);³ *Shu* is about “not doing to others what you do not want done to yourself” (己所不欲, 勿施於人) (*Analects* 12: 2). Both are about “being able to know what to do to others from oneself” (能近取譬) (*Analects* 6: 30). Undoubtedly, the principles of *zhong* and *shu* are based on the belief that all human beings have the same basic needs and feelings. Otherwise, there is no reason why this principle should be practiced. Confucius’s assumption about common human needs and feelings obviously entails a belief in a universal human nature.

As far as Mencius is concerned, his belief in a universal human nature is not only clearly expressed, but also passionately argued and explained. As is well known, Mencius believes that human nature is originally good. For him, all human beings have feelings of commiseration, shame and dislike, deference and compliance, and right and wrong.⁴ He calls them the “four beginnings” (*si duan* 四端), since he thinks that commiseration is the beginning of benevolence, dislike is the beginning of rightness, deference and compliance are the beginnings of propriety, and right and wrong are the beginnings of wisdom.⁵ It seems to him that these

3 Here I have adopted Fung Yu-lan’s interpretation of *zhong*. See Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), p. 43.

4 Here I have adopted Chan Wing-tsit’s translation of *ce-yin zhi xin* (惻隱之心), *xiu-wu zhi xin* (羞惡之心), *ci-rang zhi xin* (辭讓之心), *shi-fei zhi xin* (是非之心). See Wing-tsit Chan, trans. & comp., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 65.

5 I consider the four beginnings to be more fundamental than the four Confucian virtues in the sense that the four virtues are outcomes of the development of the four beginnings, but the four beginnings are not something that comes from the four virtues or the manifestation of the four virtues. Of course, the four beginnings can be considered the four virtues themselves to a certain

four beginnings are so essential to human beings that “human beings have the four beginnings, just as they have four limbs” (*Mencius* 2A: 6).⁶ Furthermore, he argues against the view that human beings may have different natures. Here is what he says:

Now things of the same kind are all alike. Why should we have doubts when it comes to man? The sage and I are of the same kind. Thus Longzi said, “When someone makes a shoe for a foot he has not seen, I am sure he will not produce a basket.” All shoes are alike because all feet are alike. All palates show the same preferences in taste. Yi Ya was simply the man first to discover what would be pleasing to my palate. Were the nature of taste to vary from man to man in the same way as horses and hounds differ from me in kind, then how does it come about that all palates in the world follow the preferences of Yi Ya? The fact that in taste the whole world looks to Yi Ya shows that all palates are alike. It is the same also with the ear. The whole world looks to Shi Kuang, and this shows that all ears are alike. It is the same also with the eye. The whole world appreciates the good looks of Zi Du; whoever does not is blind. Hence it is said: all palates have the same preference in taste; all ears in sound; all eyes in beauty. Should hearts prove to be an exception by possessing nothing in common? What is common to all hearts? Reason and rightness (6A: 7).⁷

This passage obviously shows Mencius’s strong belief in a common human nature, although he seems to under-acknowledge the diversity of people’s opinions on taste, music, and beauty. However, even in today’s culturally-diverse context, Mencius could still argue that a commonality in appreciation for good taste, good music, and beauty still exists among human beings—after all in general what

degree, since the beginning of something is part of something. My view also implies that I do not think that there is something like a metaphysical human nature underlying or behind the four beginnings. For my detailed arguments, see “Mengzi’s Doctrine of the Four Beginnings and the Archimedean Point for Moral Life,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* (forthcoming).

6 My translation. For the original text, see Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, translated and annotated, *Mengzi yi zhu* 孟子譯注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), p. 80. However, book and passage number “2A: 6” here is “3: 6” in Yang’s edition, and the former is consistent with common practice in English translations.

7 D. C. Lau’s translation. See D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 164.

human beings appreciate in taste, sound, and beauty is very different from what other animals appreciate in these aspects, no matter how much diversity exists among human beings in those aspects.

There is no doubt that Mencius greatly emphasizes self-cultivation and self-realization, but this does not entail that he denies the common starting point in human nature for self-cultivation and self-realization. His debate with Gaozi 告子 clearly demonstrates that he insists that there is an inherent disposition toward goodness in human beings. Otherwise he need not oppose Gaozi's view that human nature is neutral with respect to good or evil and that human beings start with no inherent disposition. Below is one of the conversations between Mencius and Gaozi:

Kao Tzu [Gaozi] said, "Man's nature is like whirling water. If a breach in the pool is made to the east it will flow to the east. If a breach is made to the west it will flow to the west. Man's nature is indifferent to good or evil, just as water is indifferent to east and west." Mencius said, "Water, indeed, is indifferent to the east and west, but is it indifferent to high or low? Man's nature is naturally good just as water naturally flows downward. There is no man without this good nature; neither is there water that does not flow downward. Now you can strike water and cause it to splash upward over your forehead, and by damming and leading it, you can force it uphill. Is this the nature of water? It is the forced circumstance that makes it do so. Man can be made to do evil, for his nature can be treated in the same way" (6A: 2).⁸

Mencius's position is clear: there is a certain disposition toward goodness in human beings. One may argue that the dispositions shared by human beings are not the same thing as a common human nature, since such dispositions can be lost in later development and will not necessarily result in the same human beings in society. However, this common human nature does not have to be something accompanying a person for his or her entire life.

Xunzi's belief in a universal human nature is also undeniable. He has taken the universality of human nature for granted when he claims that human nature

8 Chan's translation. See Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 52.

is evil. Despite this, he still makes an argument to show the commonality in people's nature. Interestingly, Xunzi, like Mencius, also argues for this by drawing the logical analogy between what human senses commonly like and what human hearts commonly share, and also firmly asserts that sages and other humans have the same nature. Here is what Xunzi says:

As to the eye desiring color, the ear desiring sound, the mouth desiring flavor, the heart desiring gain, and the body desiring pleasure and ease—all these are products of man's original nature and feelings. They are natural reactions to stimuli and do not require any work to be produced. But if the reaction is not naturally produced by stimulus but requires work before it can be produced, then it is the result of activity. Here lies the evidence of the difference between what is produced by man's nature and what is produced by his effort. Therefore the sages transformed man's nature and aroused him to activity. As activity was aroused, propriety and righteousness were produced, and as propriety and righteousness were produced, laws and systems were instituted. This being the case, propriety, righteousness, laws, and systems are all products of the sages. In his nature, the sage is common with and not different from ordinary people. It is in his effort that he is different from and superior to them (*Hsün Tzu*, ch. 23, "Human Nature is Evil").⁹

What he says above is decisive evidence for his belief in a universal human nature. He unambiguously claims that all human beings, whether they are sages or common people, have the same nature to start with, but their subsequent efforts make them different. He also makes it very clear that human nature is not what one has acquired later on but what one has naturally at birth: "Man's nature is the product of Nature; it cannot be learned and cannot be work for" (*Hsün Tzu*, ch. 23, "Human Nature is Evil").¹⁰ As is well known, Xunzi directly criticizes Mencius's view that human nature is good and insists that human nature is evil. If he did not believe that there is a common human nature which is evil in the sense that it inclines human beings to be immoral, then there would be no need to argue with Mencius at all.

⁹ Chan's translation. See Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 130.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

Although Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi do not hold the exact same view of human nature, and even sometimes hold opposing views (in the case of the disagreement between Mencius and Xunzi), they all agree that human beings share a common nature that makes all members of human species belong to the same kind. Later Confucians, no matter how much they developed or departed from early Confucian ideas, did not give up their belief in a universal human nature. Zhu Xi's 朱熹 *li* (principle 理) and Wang Yangming's 王陽明 *liangzhi* (innate good knowledge 良知) are both illustrations of later Confucian belief in a universal human nature.

However, to assert the existence of a common human nature is not to say that people are the same in real societies. Confucian thinkers such as Mencius realize that the same human nature will manifest differently in different environments. That is why Mencius says:

In good years the young men are mostly lazy, while in bad years they are mostly violent. Heaven has not sent down men whose endowment differs so greatly. The difference is due to what ensnares their hearts. Take barley for example. Sow the seeds and cover them with soil. The place is the same and time of sowing is also the same. The plants shoot up and by the summer solstice they will ripen. If there is any unevenness, it is because the soil varies in richness and there is no uniformity in the fall of rain and dew and the amount of human effort devoted to tending it (6A: 7).¹¹

Although Mencius does not mean that human nature will manifest differently in different types of society, he indeed points out that the same human nature will produce different fruit when it is placed in different circumstances. In principle, he would also definitely agree that in different societies the same human nature will bear different fruit.

The Chinese diaspora experience can, to a great degree, support Confucian universalist views of human nature. Such universalism has great significance to the Chinese diaspora: it reminds us that, first and foremost, we are all human beings, no

11 Lau's translation. See Lau, *Mencius*, p. 164.

matter how differently our nature and basic values may manifest in different cultural contexts. Only when we understand what is underneath different cultural expressions can we truly comprehend cultural differences and communicate well with those who live in cultural backgrounds other than our own. Such comprehension and communication are crucial to successful Chinese diaspora life. To live well overseas, a Chinese must understand that both Chinese and non-Chinese share a common human nature and that special circumstances overseas cause this common human nature to manifest differently. When one works with or interacts with non-Chinese, one first must treat them as human beings just as oneself, and secondly treat them as those who have grown up differently from oneself.

Once one sees others in different cultures through the lens of a common human nature, one will find that the differences between peoples in different cultures are not as big as usually supposed, and that there is almost nothing beyond mutual understanding. For example, if one realizes that feelings of shame and dislike or something similar (e.g., the feeling of self-respect) are shared by all human beings, one will see that “saving face” (*yao mianzi* 要面子) is a universal phenomenon. “Losing face” (*diu mianzi* 丢面子) usually makes one feel shamed or humiliated, while “saving face” is to avoid shame and humiliation. Very often, “saving face” is regarded as a Chinese characteristic. This view misleads many newcomers (from China to the West) to believe that Westerners, especially Americans, do not care much about “saving face.” But, those who have lived in the West for a long time and have made careful observation of Westerners know that Westerners definitely care very much about “saving face.” Let’s take Americans as an example. In order to avoid being humiliated or humiliating others, during discussion or conversation, among friends or colleagues direct confrontation rarely happens. If there is some disagreement over certain issues, very few people will ask questions that would embarrass the questioned party. It is not rare in American universities, especially teaching oriented universities, for professors to refrain from directly pointing out students’ errors in their presentations or during class discussions, even if they are big or obvious, to avoid embarrassing their students and making them lose face. They

have to be very diplomatic and skillful when correcting students' mistakes. They will often say something like "What you have said is very interesting. But have you considered...?" or "Does anyone else have something to say about the issue?" It seems that not wanting to lose face is a part of human nature shared by all humans, no matter whether one is Chinese or American. In both China and the US, making someone lose face is damaging to personal relationships. However, this does not mean that in the two different cultures saving face is achieved in exactly the same way or on exactly the same kinds of occasion. Given the fact that the idea of equality is more prevalent in American society than in Chinese society, saving face in the US is not merely a matter of avoiding the humiliation of oneself and of those who are equal to or above oneself in social status, but also of avoiding shaming children, students, one's subordinates in the workplace or those who serve one, such as home help or gardeners. Although the Chinese are well known for caring about saving face, it is very common for Chinese parents not to consider their child's face when criticizing them, and for Chinese teachers not to care about students' face when teaching them.

To many Chinese, Americans always seem very direct in expressing emotions and thoughts. But if they were to recognize feelings of deference and compliance or feelings of courtesy as something universal to human beings, they would not draw such a conclusion. Their impression that Americans are direct probably comes from the fact that Americans are more direct about things that the Chinese are not. As a matter of fact, Americans are not direct about many other things, including many things about which the Chinese are direct. For example, Americans are direct about saying whether they have eaten enough food at dinner. When asked if they have eaten enough, Americans directly reply "yes" or "no." By contrast, a Chinese will always say "I have had enough," regardless of their true feelings. Americans are more direct than Chinese in such situations, but when an American says to someone "your outfit today looks very nice," he might just be being friendly and not really mean what he says. When he says to someone "your English is very good" or "your paper is very good," he might just be being polite and only mean that one's

English or essay is not bad. After listening to someone's opinion on something, if he says "That's interesting" or "I have not thought about it that way," he probably disagrees with that person's view. In these situations, Americans are not at all direct, and in fact are even less direct than the Chinese. It seems that by nature both the Chinese and Americans are alike: they are direct about some things, but not others. Since the cultures are different, directness and indirectness are shown in different situations. For example, the Chinese indirectness about whether having had enough food at dinner probably has a lot to do with the fact that food shortages were very common in ancient and even recent Chinese history, and so food is valued highly. Therefore, it is polite not to directly indicate a desire for more food at a dinner. For the majority of Americans in general, food shortage has never been a big problem, and in fact today overeating is a more serious issue. Therefore, directly saying how much food one needs is not at all considered impolite. Although Americans and Chinese are indeed different in many respects, their differences are not due to having different natures, but due to the fact that they live in different social environments. If an American were to grow up in a Chinese society he would think and act like a Chinese, just as if a Chinese were to grow up in the US, he would think and act like an American. All the ugly aspects of Chinese character described by Po Yang 柏楊¹² would be applicable to Americans if Americans lived in a society like that of the Chinese. Similarly, the Chinese virtues that have made so many Chinese proud would be American virtues too if Americans lived in a society like that of the Chinese. Clearly, different cultural contexts do not make people different by nature, but do cause their nature to manifest differently.

3. Confucian Universal Values

But what is the significance of the Confucian belief in a common human nature with regard to their universal moral values? To believe in a common human nature is

12 See Po Yang 柏楊, *Ugly Chinese* 醜陋的中國人 (Taipei: Linpai chubanshe, 1985).

the first step in believing in universal moral requirements for human beings. Given that Confucians, from Confucius himself to his many contemporary followers, assert the existence of a common human nature, they necessarily believe that there are some human qualities and behaviors that are good for all human beings. For them, these good human qualities and behaviors are Confucian virtues and their manifestations. They are good in a universal and absolute sense and not relative to particular groups of people or particular individuals. It is true that early Confucians did not acknowledge the diverse cultures outside China, and their universalism has something to do with that. But, philosophically, their belief in a common human nature logically entails their commitment to universal moral values.

For Confucianism, Confucian virtues such as *ren* (仁 humanity), *yi* (義 rightness), *li* (禮 propriety), *zhi* (智 wisdom), and *xiao* (孝 filial piety) are all universally desirable. They have always regarded these virtues as good for all human beings, and not just the Chinese. Confucianism is well known for its emphasis on human relationships and social roles. But that does not contradict its promotion of universal morality. On the one hand, it is true that each person exists within a certain social context in which he or she is inevitably related to specific others and plays certain roles, therefore his or her self is relational and his or her morality cannot be judged outside his or her relationships with others and roles in society. On the other hand, moral judgments about rightness and virtue are still universal and objective, because, given certain relationships that one has with others and particular social roles that one plays, there is a right way for one to act or feel; no other ways are equally right. For example, for Confucians, although one's love of others should be distinguished according to the nature of their relationship to you, loving others with distinctions in itself is a universal moral norm. This means that it is morally wrong not to love all people and not to love them according to the nature of their relationship to you. Filial piety is regarded as the most typical Confucian virtue. Certainly, it exists only within a parent-child relationship, and is absolutely essential in a son or daughter. In the case of son's filial piety to his father, given the father-son relationship, a son must be filial to his father in order to be virtuous. Filial piety

is universally good, regardless of whether the son is a Chinese or not. As long as one is a son, one ought to be filial to his father. In the case of a ruler, given the role of a ruler, a good ruler should be benevolent and just. Therefore, benevolence and justice are universally good. As long as one is a ruler, he or she ought to be benevolent and just.

Similarly, the virtue of propriety (*li*) as appropriateness is always carried out or embodied within relationships; the criterion for appropriateness is always linked to one's role in society and family, but to act appropriately according to one's role and relationship to others is a universal moral requirement. As far as the principles of *zhong* and *shu* are concerned, they must also be practiced within relationships—to put oneself in an other's position means to imagine oneself being in the relationship that the other has and the social role that the other plays. For example, if the other is a father, to know how one ought to behave towards that person, one needs to imagine one is a father and consider how one would like to be treated by others. Doing so does not deny the universality of the principles of *zhong* and *shu*, but only provides a concrete way to practice them. In short, for Confucians, those Confucian virtues or moral principles are absolute and universal requirements and nothing less than that.

Of course, that Confucians themselves believe that their moral values are universal is one thing; whether their moral values are indeed universally valid is quite another. Chinese philosophers have long argued that there really are some universal values in Confucianism. For example, in the 1940s, Fung Yu-lan 馮友蘭 argued that there is something lasting and universal in the Confucian ideal of life. He believed it to be incontrovertible that the ideal life must be lived within the bounds of the five basic human relationships. However, the nature of these human relationships may not be the same under different circumstances.¹³ Later on, in the 1950s and 1960s, he gave even more specific arguments, including his argument that the principles of *zhong* and *shu* are universal.¹⁴ When his arguments first

13 See Fung, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, p. 28.

14 Mainly see his "The Issues of Inheritance of the Heritage of Chinese Philosophy" 中國哲學遺產

appeared in mainland China, they were rejected by the Chinese government, though this no longer the case today. In recent decades, some philosophers in the West have also argued for the universality of Confucianism. For example, Robert Neville has argued that Confucianism is a world philosophy that can be practiced outside East Asia.¹⁵

The Chinese Diaspora experience, to a great extent, may support the claim that some Confucian values are universal and shows that those virtues strongly advocated by Confucians are desirable in Western societies as well. Despite the widely accepted assumption that in Western societies people do not pay much attention to their social roles and relationships, as a matter of fact, Westerners do play roles in society and family, and do live in the context of relationships with others. Therefore, they also agree with Confucians that people should love and respect their parents, though they may not talk much about filial piety; they do also believe and follow a certain set of rules of conduct that can be included in the concept of Confucian *li*; they do also admit that there are certain duties that are derived from their position in family and society and it is right to fulfill such duties; they also accept the principles of *zhong* and *shu*, although they call it “the golden rule.” In American classrooms, when Confucian virtues are discussed, American students usually respond with consensus; even if in the beginning the concept of the relational self sounds foreign to them, after careful consideration they very often end up in agreement.

The Confucian emphasis on relationships has necessarily led to its advocacy of familial and social responsibility. The belief in one’s responsibility for his or her family, nation, and the entire world is not only an important component of Confucianism but also an aspect of universal Confucian values. No matter how individualistic a society may be, its people must share responsibility for their

底繼承問題, *Guangmin Daily* 光明日報, Jan. 8, 1957, and “On the Issues of Inheritance of the Heritage of Chinese Philosophy Again” 再論中國哲學遺產底繼承問題, *People’s Daily* 人民日報, March 29-30, 1957.

15 See Robert Neville, “Confucianism as a World Philosophy,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 21 (1994): 5-25.

families and communities, otherwise society cannot continue to flourish. However, the individual's familial and social responsibilities are not emphasized in mainstream Western philosophical traditions as much as in Confucianism. To a certain degree, excessive individualism ought to be blamed for some social problems in the West such as the large number of broken families. To advocate Confucian ideas of the relational self and familial and social responsibility may help to balance individual rights and duties and improve some situations in Western societies. As a matter of fact, in recent decades, Western feminist philosophers and communitarian thinkers have increasingly addressed the significance of responsibilities and relationships. In that respect, their ideas are totally consistent with Confucianism.

Nevertheless, Confucian virtues and principles cannot be applied in exactly the same way in Chinese and Western cultures. The practice of Confucian ethics may vary from one culture to another. For example, given a democratic social context, filial respect or love in the West implies more equality between children and parents than in China; a daughter-in-law in the West is expected to do much less for her parents-in-law than in China; rules of conduct such as those that concern how students behave in front of their teachers are less hierarchal in formality than in China. Westerners do play roles and have relationships with specific others, but relatively speaking, they have more freedom and less obligations in their relationships and roles. For overseas Chinese, it is important to know that some Confucian values are applicable outside China but they are practiced in different forms and to different degrees in other cultures.

4. Confucian Universal Values and Democratic Society

What is worth noting is that Confucian virtues and moral principles can be practiced better in a democratic society than in a non-democratic society, although this does not mean that all democratic societies have actually practiced Confucian ethics well. Whether people can live up to a certain moral ideal is greatly determined by the social environment in which they live. Ironically, the social structure and

political system that ancient Confucians took for granted created an environment that made the realization of the Confucian ideal almost impossible. As Alasdair MacIntyre has pointed out, accepting those hierarchical structures that Confucian moral teachings had presupposed is “deeply incompatible with a genuinely Confucian view of human nature.”¹⁶ This is because such hierarchical structures of Confucian society “involved a practical denial of the capacity for reflective self-direction of the vast majority of those whose work sustained them: women, farmers and fishing crews, more generally those engaged in productive manual labor, most of those to whom the military and civil security of society was entrusted.”¹⁷ In short, the majority of people in that kind of society were deprived of the opportunity for moral development. Worse, in a society with the social structures that Confucians approved of, the majority of the population had no control over their destiny and even their lives, and their well-being was basically dependent on the mercy of rulers and officials. The Confucian emphasis on social roles is not in itself wrong, and even very insightful, but, given its presupposition of the existing hierarchical and labor divisions in traditional Chinese society, it actually helped to justify and promote oppression and exploitation.¹⁸ Therefore, it is not surprising that although the ideal Confucian society is one in which all members of society care for each other within relationships and all those in different social positions work together for the common good, Confucian society through history, however, has always been one in which oppression and exploitation were prevalent. Ancient Confucians always advocated benevolent government and taught rulers to be virtuous, but there has almost never been a benevolent government or virtuous ruler in Chinese history,¹⁹ because there

16 Alasdair MacIntyre, “Questions for Confucians,” in Kwong-loi Shun and David Wong, eds., *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy, and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 210.

17 Ibid.

18 For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see my “Confucianism, Women, and Social Contexts,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 36.2 (June 2009): 228-242.

19 There were some very able rulers (e.g., Emperor Wu of the Han and Emperor T'ai-tsung of the Tang) in Chinese history, but none of them was regarded as truly benevolent and virtuous

was no mechanism in the political system to restrict and check the power of the ruler and his government. In contrast, in democratic societies, governments and their leaders have behaved much better than ancient Chinese governments or their rulers.

Some may argue that in non-democratic China, *li* (propriety) has been better practiced than in democratic societies. But such a claim does not match up with the facts either. Although in a non-democratic Chinese society people might be more polite to their superiors (e.g., teachers, supervisors, bosses, or government officials) and more polite to their elders than they are in a democratic society, people in general are less polite to strangers, their subordinates, and younger persons than in a democratic society. Therefore, as a whole, in such a society people are less polite and civil than in a democratic society. Without the democratic system, the rule of *li* can be easily used to better benefit those who rank above ordinary people, but not the whole of society and the majority of the population. That may at least partly explain why at the macro level there are more respectful manners and behaviors in the democratic United States than in mainland China. Of those overseas Chinese who originally come from mainland China and emigrate to the United States, many have experiences that testify to a better practice of propriety in their second homeland. When they first arrive in the United States, they are impressed by people's good manners in public and their respectful attitude toward each other. "Thank you" and "sorry" are often to be heard almost everywhere; people line up in an orderly fashion when they have to wait for service or transportation; there are no quarrels or fights in public; no loud voices in public; rule and order are followed in traffic jams and crowded streets, etc. After a while, they have gotten used to these and taken them for granted, and when they go back to mainland China for a visit, they are frustrated and saddened by rude behavior and chaotic traffic. Some of them even have difficulty walking along a busy street, crossing a busy intersection (because rules are often not followed and situations are unpredictable), getting on a bus or paying for their

by Confucians. Although, for Confucians, Yao, Shun, and Yu were ideal rulers, they were all legendary figures whose moral perfection cannot be historically verified.

purchase if there are a number of people waiting (because people do not form or respect lines). No matter how much they love their motherland, they have to admit that there, *li* (propriety) is not observed as well as in the United States.

The change for the better in people's attitude toward *li* that occurred in Taiwan after a democratic system was established, is also good evidence for democratic society's promotion of *li* in general. Some of the rude or uncivilized behaviors described by Po Yang²⁰ were common in Taiwan, and very similar to those seen in mainland China today (unfortunately, there are worse behaviors than those there). In present day Taiwan where a democratic system has been used for over two decades, they are no longer common at all.²¹ Such a change in Taiwan can, to a great degree, be explained in terms of more prevalent universal values such as human rights and equality under a democratic system.

Cardinal Confucian virtues themselves are valuable and universally valid, but they cannot be practiced well in a society that encourages corruption, disrespect, and distrust, etc. Mainland China is where Confucianism was born over 2500 years ago and where the government is now spending a huge amount of money to promote Confucianism, but is now probably one of the places where Confucian virtues are practiced the least. Although respect for elders and filial piety are core Confucian values, mainland China is now a place where old people cannot be helped if they fall in the street because people are afraid of being falsely accused for causing the fall.²²

20 See Po Yang, *Ugly Chinese*. The most infamous rude and uncivilized behaviors described by him include not lining up for transportation or shopping, hostile and harsh words spoken when two strangers accidentally bump into each other, no gratitude but a suspicious look after getting help from a stranger, speaking loudly in public, and making public places dirty, etc.

21 Here I do not mean that rude and uncivilized behaviors are no longer seen in Taiwan, but that the most infamous ones mentioned above (see note 20) are no longer common in Taiwan today. This conclusion is based on my and some others' personal observations.

22 Several cases of false accusations made by elders who were helped have been revealed by the Chinese media. Those who were framed suffered greatly. The negative impact of such incidents is tremendous. When I gave lectures about Mencius' view of human nature in Shanghai last summer, many students expressed their worry. They made it very clear that they definitely want to be benevolent, but, given those incidents in which helping an old person get up from ground

Although it was the Chinese sage Mencius who argued that all human beings feel commiseration—unbearable mind (*bu ren zhi xin* 不忍之心)—and described how every person would feel alarmed upon seeing a young child about to fall into a well, it was in mainland China where a two year old girl (named Yue Yue) was run over by two vans and ignored by many passers-by until a good hearted trash collector picked her up and carried her to the side of the road.²³ It seems that either those passers-by did not feel any commiseration, or that any such feelings they may have had were overridden by the fear of possibly being falsely accused. *Xin* (信 trust) is one of the major Confucian virtues, yet food and medicine safety has become a major issue in mainland China due to merchants' dishonesty and greed for profits. To be sure, Mencius would not say that it is Mainland Chinese people's nature to be bad, but that their good nature has been destroyed by their environment, just as the Niu mountain lost its beauty due to external forces imposed upon it (*Mencius* 6A: 8). It is not that people in mainland China have a worse nature and worse national character than other peoples, but that their social conditions force them to suppress their good nature and causes their bad side to dominate. Since ancient times, in mainland China most Confucian virtues have generally never been well practiced, because there have never been social conditions that enable people to do so. No matter how many Chinese scholars and government officials promote Confucianism in mainland China, as long as social conditions there are not improved, Confucian virtues will not prevail. To change current social conditions, democracy, equality, liberty, and human rights must be allowed to materialize there to a significant degree. The better practice of Confucian virtues in democratic Taiwan shows not only that the universal

caused one great trouble, including law suits, they would not dare to help elders and others.

- 23 For details of this case, see Xu Feng, "Xiao Yue Yue can ju ying chu fa 'leng mo zhi wo' zi xing" 小悅悅慘劇應觸發“冷漠之我”自省, *Guangzhou Daily* 廣州日報, A2, Oct. 17, 2011, http://gzdaily.dayoo.com/html/2011-10/17/content_1502109.htm (accessed October 28, 2012); CNN News Stream, "China Shock: Bystanders caught on tape ignoring 2-year-old accident victim," Oct. 17, 2011, <http://newsstream.blogs.cnn.com/2011/10/17/china-shock-bystanders-caught-on-tape-ignoring-2-year-old-accident-victim/> (accessed October 28, 2012).

components of Confucianism can work together with liberal universal values, but also that respecting liberal universal values is a precondition for the true realization of Confucian universal values.

Although in ancient Chinese traditions such as Confucianism there is no notion of human rights, liberty, equality, and democracy, as understood in the West,²⁴ this does not mean that the Chinese should not accept these values. The descriptive statement that tradition A does not have moral value x does not entail the normative statement that the tradition A ought not to have value x. “Historical contingency and cultural diversity are facts, not answers to the problems of cross-cultural analysis and judgment.”²⁵ As Chad Hansen has argued in his discussion of human rights, “Whether Chinese morality itself justifies such a conception is technically irrelevant to the first-order normative issue.”²⁶ This means that whether or not Chinese moral traditions in fact argue for human rights is not logically relevant to whether the Chinese should have human rights, since the former does not have any normative significance.²⁷ If the Chinese ought to have liberal values such as democracy, liberty,

24 Although there are some scholars who have argued that in Confucianism there are ideas that are close to the concepts of democracy, liberty, and human rights as understood in the Western liberal tradition, I do not think that such arguments are convincing. Furthermore, it is an undeniable fact that modern Western thinkers were the ones who articulated these values most clearly and best. These values are modern Western tradition's great contribution to humanity. To compare Confucianism with Western traditions in terms of the core liberal values is to compare the weak point of Confucianism with the strong point of Western philosophy. Doing so cannot show the strengths and merits of Confucianism, and only makes it look like a low-level Western liberalism. For my critique of such an approach, see “The Study of Chinese Philosophy in the English Speaking World,” *Philosophy Compass* 6.3 (March 2011): 168-178.

25 Jack Donnelly, “Human Rights and Asian Values: A defense of ‘Western’ Universalism,” in Joanne R. Bauer and Daniel A. Bell, eds., *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 69.

26 Chad Hansen, “The Normative Impact of Comparative Ethics,” in Kwong-loi Shun and David Wong, eds., *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy, and Community*, p. 75.

27 For a detailed explanation of why factual cultural differences in moral beliefs do not entail that different moral beliefs in different cultures are equally right, see James Rachels, “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism,” in Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau, eds., *Reason*

equality, and human rights, then they ought to adopt them regardless of whether these values have already existed in Chinese tradition. Any idea, no matter how universal it might be, must emerge in a particular place and a particular time. All ideas are historical and cultural products, but it does not follow that all ideas are only valid to a given time and culture.²⁸ For example, Newtonian and quantum physics are not only applicable to the West but are universally valid. Similarly, the concept of human rights may be universally applicable, despite its Western origin.²⁹ If we regard all universal values as a whole, different cultures can contribute different parts. It is because there might be some universal values in each culture that we ought to learn from other cultures.³⁰ Just as Confucianism reveals some universal truths such as human interrelatedness and interdependence and some universal virtues such as *ren*, *yi*, and *li*, core values of Western liberalism such as democracy, liberty, equality, and human rights provide a different part of universal truth and morality. The combination of Confucian virtues and liberal values is not a matter of combining Chinese and Western values, but a matter of combining two parts of the set of universal values.

As a matter of fact, the Chinese have been very receptive to those universal values originating in the West. The concepts of democracy, liberty, equality and human rights were first introduced to China in the late 19th century.³¹ Since then,

and Responsibility, 10th edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 527-528.

28 I first expressed these ideas in "Human Rights and the Chinese Context" (paper presented at Eastern Division Meeting, the American Philosophical Association, Washington, D.C., December 29, 1998).

29 Both examples are Jack Donnelly's. See Donnelly, "Human Rights and Asian Values," p. 69.

30 I first talked about this idea in my paper "Human Rights and the Chinese Context." The idea was inspired by Fung Yu-lan's view that in each nation's philosophy there are some lasting values. He said, "In the philosophy of any people or any time, there is always a part that possesses value only in relation to the economic conditions of that people or of that time, but there is always another part that is more than this. That which is not relative has lasting value" (see Fung, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, p. 27).

31 For a detailed discussion of 19th century enlightenment thinkers, see Xinyan Jiang,

these ideas have been gradually incorporated into Chinese discourse and moral traditions. “It is no longer possible to accept the myth that the Chinese have no desire for individual rights.”³² For over a century, many Chinese have shown great enthusiasm for the core values of liberalism and great courage in putting them into practice in China. It is because of the acceptance of such values in present-day China that some of the old ideas in Chinese tradition have been overturned. For example, in ancient China, it was morally acceptable to make women subordinate to men, but today it is no longer. Although there is still sexual discrimination in present-day China, it is seen as morally unacceptable. At present it is hard to find any contemporary Confucian in China who denies human rights, democracy, equality and liberty as universal values. Of course, it has taken a long time for Chinese values to change.³³ If we may say that Chinese tradition was greatly enriched by Indian Buddhism, then we may also say that the Chinese philosophical traditions are made richer by absorbing modern liberal values from the West. Any respectable moral tradition is a dynamic system that has experienced changes over time and will continue to evolve in the future. Chinese moral traditions, including Confucianism, are such dynamic systems. Therefore, they have constantly abandoned old ideas and absorbed many new ones.

However, to incorporate liberal universal values into Chinese traditions does not mean to simply incorporate them into Chinese thought without any revision. Obviously, to make foreign ideas work in a given tradition requires finding

“Enlightenment Movement,” in Bo Mou, ed., *History of Chinese Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 476-511.

32 Andrew J. Nathan, “Sources of Chinese Rights Thinking,” in R. Randle Edwards and Andrew J. Nathan, eds., *Human Rights in Contemporary China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 160.

33 The similar idea first was expressed in my “Comments on Chad Hansen’s ‘The Asian Values Debate and the Moral Synthesis Goals of Comparative Philosophy,’” comments presented in a session entitled “Human Rights and the Role of Comparative Philosophy” at the Eastern Division Meeting, the American Philosophical Association, Philadelphia, December 27-30, 1997.

something that can combine imported and native ideas and modifying those imported ideas according to the particular context of the given culture. For example, to make the idea of human rights work in the Confucian tradition, the idea of human rights must be interpreted in a way in which Chinese who have been educated in Confucianism can accept and serve the goals for which they have striven. Contemporary Confucians and many of their modern predecessors of the late 19th and early 20th centuries have actually synthesized universal Confucian values with universal liberal values to a certain degree. That was why from the very beginning, the idea of human rights in China has had distinctively Chinese characteristics, especially features of Confucianism. It has been a combination of respecting individual rights and taking responsibility for society.

Deeply influenced by Confucianism, since ancient times Chinese intellectuals have always had a strong sense of responsibility. Fan Zhongyan's 范仲淹 saying, "To be the first to be concerned about one's country and one's people and to be the last to enjoy comforts," has been a motto for Chinese intellectuals for generations. "The responsibility is heavy and the road is long" (*Analects* 8: 7).³⁴ This ancient Confucian saying is still inspiring Chinese intellectuals to take responsibility for the world today. In the Chinese context, the sense of social responsibility has often been interwoven with patriotism. That is why even today many Chinese intellectuals still regard bringing happiness to their people and glory to the Chinese nation as their duty. For many Chinese, individuals' interests are generally consistent with national interests. From first-hand experience, the Chinese know that when their country was very weak and oppressed, individual Chinese suffered a great deal. In China's recent history, the Chinese experienced a period of about a hundred years of constant oppression and invasion from the outside. Such experience has enforced the traditional Chinese view that one's own well being cannot be separated from the development of one's nation. Even overseas Chinese also believe the general

34 My translation. For the original text, see Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, translated and annotated, *Lunyu yi zhu* 論語譯注, p. 80.

connection between an individual's interests and interests of her nation. However, when a conflict between individuals' interests and national interests occurs, if necessary, self-sacrifice is morally required. Many heroic Chinese have not only shown great courage to fight for China when the nation suffered from foreign invasion but also risked their lives to protest against unjust rulers for the sake of the Chinese people and Chinese nation. Historically, no matter how much the Chinese have demanded human rights and democracy, they have always put China's prosperity before everything else. From the reformers of the late 19th century to students in the 1989 pro-democracy movement, saving and strengthening the Chinese nation has always been the main theme. From Liang Qichao's 梁啟超 "Young China" to students' "Hunger Strike Declaration," patriotism has been the dominant tone.³⁵ Clearly, communitarian values cherished by Chinese philosophical traditions, especially by Confucianism, have greatly helped to hold China together and ensure the longevity of Chinese culture. Those values are themselves definitely not liberal ones, but they have been incorporated into modern Chinese liberalism, of which they have become important components.

It was the strong sense of responsibility and national feeling that made many Chinese intellectuals bring core liberal values such as democracy, liberty and equality to China in the first place. It is a well known fact that when Yan Fu 嚴復 first advocated liberty in China, he was strongly motivated to strengthen the nation. For him, the lack of liberty made China weak, therefore China needed liberty.³⁶ As Andrew Nathan has observed, when the idea of human rights was first introduced to China in the late 19th century, most Chinese intellectuals valued it just as an instrumental good and a means to save the nation. These Chinese intellectuals believed that Western countries were stronger than China because individuals in Western countries had rights. So, they reasoned, Chinese citizens should have rights

35 The main ideas expressed here and in the previous paragraph were first mentioned in my "Human Rights and the Chinese Context" (1998).

36 For a more detailed discussion of Yan Fu's view on liberty, see Xinyan Jiang, "Enlightenment Movement," pp. 476-477.

in order to make China a strong country.³⁷ The realization of the idea of human rights has not only been regarded as something necessary for promoting human dignity but also as something closely connected with China's national prosperity. Human rights advocated by such liberalism may well fit what David Wong calls "communally grounded" rights.³⁸

It is hard to say whether all Chinese intellectuals today still advocate human rights merely for its instrumental function. At least many of them believe that human rights must be respected for their own sake, and that a society in which human rights are highly respected is in itself morally better and more civilized than a society in which human rights are not respected. But, they do still believe that individuals' rights can be restricted when doing so will protect more people's interests and rights. This might explain why many Chinese intellectuals constantly demand political reform and struggle for the freedom of speech in China but do not protest against the Chinese government's population control policy.

Since the early 1980s, a "one-child" policy has been enforced in China. Under this policy, each married couple is only allowed to have one child. In recent years, the Chinese government has begun to allow couples in rural areas to have two children if their first child is not a boy. But in urban areas the policy remains the same as before. This one child policy has been severely criticized by many Westerners and regarded as a clear example of the violation of human rights in China. However, a great number of Chinese intellectuals support the policy, although personally they wish they could have more than one child. The main resistance to the policy has been from less educated Chinese—the rural population. Many Chinese peasants are against the policy not because they think that the policy violates human rights but because they see that the policy threatens their having male heirs in their families. Although sexism is publicly criticized

37 Nathan, "Sources of Chinese Rights Thinking," p. 139.

38 David Wong, "Rights and Community in Confucianism," in Kwong-loi Shun and David Wong, eds., *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy, and Community*, pp. 34-35.

in China, it is still strong in many places, especially in the countryside. Those who strongly prefer boys to girls feel that they will not have any descendants if they do not have a male child. If there were no population control policy, they would have kept having children until they had a boy. But given the huge Chinese population, not restricting the number of births would be disastrous for the nation. China has the biggest population in the world. Even with the one-child population control policy, China currently has over 1.3 billion people, representing more than a fifth (about 22%) of the total population of the world.³⁹ But China possesses just 7% of the world's total farm land.⁴⁰ If the Chinese population were to grow unchecked, not only would it be impossible to significantly improve the quality of Chinese people's lives, meeting the basic needs of the majority of Chinese people alone would be a serious problem. It seems that population control is absolutely necessary, although the one-child policy may not necessarily be the best way to achieve it. But as long as population control is in effect, certain restrictions on individual choices will be imposed. It seems that such restrictions on individual rights in China today are a necessary price to pay for the survival of the nation and the long-term happiness of the Chinese people. The better one understands the significance of the population control policy, the less one objects to it.

It has been argued that both community and rights are indispensable for adequate moral traditions.⁴¹ It seems that the responsibility-oriented Confucian tradition has greatly helped bind together community development and individual rights in Chinese liberalism. On the one hand, Chinese liberals hold that individual rights must be respected, while on the other hand, they are

39 By the end of 2012, the total population of mainland China was 1.35404 billion. See National Bureau of Statistics of China, "China's Economy Achieved a Stabilized and Accelerated Development in the Year of 2012," January 18 2013, <http://society.people.com.cn/GB/14521694.html> (accessed February 28, 2013).

40 Jeffrey Hays, "Agriculture in China: Challenges, Shortages, Imports and Organic Farming," <http://factsanddetails.com/china.php?itemid=348#04> (accessed March 1, 2013).

41 Wong, "Rights and Community in Confucianism," p. 42.

still deeply committed to their mission of building a thriving and prosperous China. Such Chinese liberalism has always been intertwined with Confucianism without exception. This clearly shows that to democratize China and improve the human rights of the Chinese people does not require the elimination of Confucianism but the better utilization of the universal components of Confucianism. As has been noted, many ideas in ancient Chinese tradition could serve as building blocks of a Chinese democratic political culture. "They include such ideals as the morally autonomous individual, the absolutely just ruler, the responsibility to protest against injustices at any personal cost, the responsibility of the government for the people's welfare, and the ordinary person's responsibility for the fate of the nation."⁴² These ideas are all Confucian. When these Confucian values and Western liberal values are synthesized, a Chinese liberalism with Confucian characteristics is produced.

5. Conclusion

This paper concludes that there is a Confucian universalism that recognizes a common human nature and embraces universal moral values. Confucian virtues are embodiments of such values. However, Confucian universal values cannot be well established without liberal universalism, in the sense that Confucian virtues cannot be truly practiced in a non-democratic society where democratic values such as human rights are not respected. However, incorporating some Confucian values into Western culture and placing more emphasis on the interdependence of individuals may promote the well-being of all citizens and better live up to the democratic values of liberalism. To a certain degree, the experiences of Chinese diaspora verifies not only the truths of Confucian universalism, but also the advantages of synthesizing the core values of Confucianism and of the Western liberal tradition.

42 Andrew J. Nathan, "The Place of Values in Cross-Cultural Studies: The Example of Democracy and China," in Paul A. Cohen and Merle Goldman, eds., *Ideas Across Cultures* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1990), p. 308.

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儒家普遍主義與海外華人經驗

姜 新 艷*

摘 要

本文所要論證的是儒家思想家（孔子、孟子、荀子）都相信普遍人性，並因而信奉某些普遍道德價值。本文中的「儒家普遍主義」指的就是儒家贊同普遍人性和普遍道德價值的思想，而海外華人的生活經歷大抵支持了儒家的這種普遍主義。本文同時論證儒家的普遍價值和自由主義的普遍價值構成了普世價值整體的兩個不同部分。面對當今世界，它們可以互相合作、互相補充。一方面，儒家所提倡的德性和道德原則在一個民主社會中得以更好踐行，儒家普遍價值之充分實現以自由主義的核心價值（人權、民主、自由、平等）之通行為前提；另一方面，儒家所提倡的普遍價值有助於糾正民主社會中過度的個人主義，因而對於建立更平衡、和諧的家庭與社區產生積極作用。不過，本文在考慮這兩方面時，更多地討論了為何儒家傳統必須吸收自由主義的普遍價值、為何在非民主社會儒家理想不可能實現。

關鍵詞：儒家、海外華人、人性、普遍價值、自由主義

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