

**An Interpretation of Confucian *Ren*
(仁 humanness) Through A Case Study
of the Divergent Attitudes
in the Preventative Measures
of Covid-19 Pandemic in China and the US**

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Abstract

This paper intends to investigate how much philosophical ideas influence human behavior, using the example of the differing reactions between the Americans and the Chinese toward mask-wearing during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The example is philosophically significant because we are facing with a situation where both sides had their good reasons for wearing, or not wearing, protective masks, although the scientific data seem to mandate that everyone should react with an undivided voice. The paper therefore focuses on the cultural influences of these behaviors and argues that the Chinese emphasis of communal good is conceptually and practically a legacy of the Confucian idea of *ren* (humaneness). The paper considers issues relating to

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methodology, Chinese philosophy of *ren*, and Chinese political philosophy based on the concept of *ren* and concludes that the divergent attitudes regarding mandatory mask-wearing were reflections of cultural implants which deserve further study.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, Confucian *ren* (humaneness)¹, scientific methodology, Chinese philosophy, Chinese political philosophy.

¹ There are many ways to translate into English the Confucian idea of *ren* which is a rich and complicated idea (Chan, 1995: 295). We here use “humaneness” as the word that best captures the array of meanings and implications of *ren*.
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An Interpretation of Confucian *Ren* (仁 = humanness) Through A Case Study of the Divergent Attitudes in the Preventative Measures of Covid-19 Pandemic in China and the US

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I. Introduction

This paper analyzes the contrast between the Chinese and the Western populations regarding mandatory mask-wearing as a preventive requirement in the prevention of the spread of Covid-19 pandemic. It also argues that the difference in attitude exposed certain philosophical issues relating to scientific methodology, Chinese philosophy, values and how people are culturally shaped to behave in accordance with the cultures that they belong to. During the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Chinese people's compliance to the mandatory mask-wearing requirement created a disparity to that of the Western people. The difference in complying the requirement led us to think that the cultural influences in general and the inherent traditions in particular might be essential clues explaining such divergent behavior.

Though we commonly perceive that cultures do influence our behavior, there are no explicit measurements to distinguish what sorts of behavior are results of cultural influences. To this problem, we adopt both the historical and scientific methodology to reveal the significance of the example. After discussing the methodological issues, I hypothesize and argue that the philosophical ideals lying behind the traditions are essential in illustrating the different attitudes of the Chinese and the Western peoples.

II. The Contrast in Mask-Wearing

The unexpected outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic at the end of 2019 was truly a test of humanity. Fortunately, modern advancement of science and technology was able to cope with the challenge at an early stage as the virus was quickly identified. However, no matter how developed the science is, our understanding of the mechanism of the virus is still limited. The application of corrective diagnosis, improvement of the vaccines, and discovery of new drugs are an ongoing task.

Despite the advancement of science, information circulating among the general public was frequently untrue and misguided sometimes. What was most unfortunate is that many people created self-made facts about the pandemic and those who received this misinformation, rather than discontinuing them, transmitted, broadcasted and at times imposed those facts on others, creating unnecessary confusion (Banerjee, et al., 2022: 21).

For example, BBC made a special report about the effectiveness of mask-wearing. The report discussed a research result published by a global

medical journal and made public by *The Guardian* saying “Mask-wearing is the single most effective public health measure at tackling Covid, according to the first global study of its kind, which found that the measure was linked to a 53% fall in the incidence of the disease” (*The Guardian*, 18 Nov. 2021). A BBC journalist adopted an open stance and regarded this statement “too good to be true!”² He interviewed several academics who questioned the methodologies of the study that supported the 53% figure and argued that other studies had shown a figure closer to 20% or less. These controversies, combined with the government officially announcing mask mandates, led to tensions among the people escalating immediately.

Admittedly, people refusing to comply remained a minority, yet their voices were strong enough to raise attention. What happened interestingly was the fact that their rejection of wearing masks was founded on one sound reason: personal freedom which is the inalienable right of all humankind in the West. Through EU, UK, Canada, US, all their citizens hold individual freedom firmly as the most essential part of their lives. This fact has great deal to do with their values, beliefs, emotional attitudes, and ethical ideals. All shaped the cultures of similar origin. In the case of the US, the issue went deeper as it referred to the Constitution, philosophy, and religion. Joan Chittister says,

But [the issue] leads to what may be the fundamental question: On what grounds beyond the Constitution of the United States of America

² Harford, Tim (2021). “Does wearing a mask halve your chances of getting Covid-19?” 5 Dec. 2021. More or Less: Behind the Stats, Tim Harford, BBC Radio 4. 1 Oct. 2022, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0b7zzdr>>.

shall we accept masks and get vaccinated? Answer: On the law above the law — the moral codes the philosophers talk about that guide our care for one another, and that all the great religions teach. They leave no doubt (Chittister, 2021).

Indeed, as mask-wearing is good for the self and the others, there should be no rejection of it. However, to some people of Western society, it is not about the compliance to wear masks, but the concession of fundamental rights. To those people, the concession of freedom is unimaginable. Though they might know that the state introduced compulsory mask-wearing in public spaces was reasonable, yet the measure should not be compulsory as something more fundamental is at stake. Such resistance to mask-wearing was very problematic for elderly and vulnerable people because the transmission of the virus would not cease by some others' insistence on the personal freedom.

Nevertheless, by contrast, if you look at the other part of the world, you would see a somewhat different picture in China. Some researchers found that with regard to the mandated mask-wearing and a selected group of people from various Chinese provinces, the result was nearly all people (99%) wore masks in the context of COVID-19 (Tan, et al., 2021: 1). They concluded:

Our results revealed that, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in China, nearly all people wore face mask and most of them used it properly; however, there remain some aspects that require further promotion... Taking measures to inform as many people as possible plays a critical role in promoting public mask-wearing behaviors (Tan, et al., 2021: 8).

Differing from the US, there were almost no reports of a public demonstration of refusing to wear masks in China. We intend to ask why there was such a marked difference.

III. Revealing Problems by Historical and Scientific Methodology

In the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic, mandatory mask-wearing was the core of its prevention by countries around the world. The implementation of this mandate came with people accepting it differently and the results have shown that some people in the West were against the mandate but nearly all people in China would comply. The outcomes were in sharp divergence.

Western culture with its institutions, values, beliefs, etc., has long been the paradigmatic model to learn, follow, and imitate by the Chinese. However, the results of mask-wearing caused many Chinese to be skeptical about the previous approach of learning everything from the West. The skeptical attitude got stronger when the images of news media and visual reports demonstrated some people's behavior being unreasonable. These scenes were astonishing facts for many Chinese to witness and could usher in an in-depth reflection on their self-consciousness because, in the modern era the Chinese people has gone through a long period of anti-traditionalism in order to learn everything from the West. The anti-traditionalism was so strong that it was called "a crisis of Chinese consciousness" (Lin, 1979: 7). Lin describes the anti-traditionalism as follows:

It was a revolt that reflected a profound crisis of cultural identity in the consciousness of the twentieth-century Chinese intelligentsia.

And it was the harbinger of later cultural and intellectual developments (Lin, 1979: 6).

Although there have been times when either individuals or groups have believed that everything in the past was useless or worthless, in the history of no other society has there occurred a movement of totalistic iconoclasm [anti-traditionalism] which proved so lasting and exerted so profound a historical impact (Lin, 1979: 7).

This “crisis of Chinese consciousness” was not limited within the intelligentsia as it was widespread and lasted more than one hundred years. The crisis concentrated not merely on the repudiation of anything traditional, but also to learn and imitate from the West, which is, even today, considered modern, progressive and developed. Now, with the case of Covid-19, many people begin to wonder if the anti-traditionalist movement was too hasty. Most importantly is the Chinese case of mask-wearing characterized by the peculiarly successful results of compliance which immediately offer examples of a pointed contrast with the West.

Some may ask, “why do these examples deserve to be examined in depth?” And the answer is that from a methodological perspective it singles out a historical “change” in Chinese consciousness. As the historian Leonard Krieger once said,

An “event” for him [the historian] now usually means an event that manifests change. Paradoxical as it may sound, change itself has come to supply the historian with discontinuity with his continuity;

for insofar as there has been no change there is no past and it is through change that the past is connected with the present. Change can fulfill such a function only if it is given a particular definition (Krieger, 1957:70).

We see the mask-wearing case as the beginning of such a “change.” The Chinese people likely to change from anti-traditionalism to traditionalism and shift from the crisis of consciousness to the assurance of consciousness. Moreover, we may also examine this case by the methodological ideas of Karl Popper, the philosopher of critical rationalism.

Popper's scientific methodology in general, and his falsificationism in particular, match our intentions that they play roles of demonstrating the importance of the Covid-19 example regarding the mask-wearing situation. The importance refers to “negation” which constitutes the essential part of falsificationism. Popper's methodology is known for its idea of falsification which comprises three procedures: testability, empiricism, and problem-solving (Popper, 1963: 196-199). A theory, whatever it may be, has to defend its validity by being testable. Without satisfying this requirement, a theory is irrefutable. Whatever is irrefutable is something of metaphysical nature which holds its truth as a dogma. A dogma would not add anything to our knowledge.

In order to be testable, the theory concerned has to be empirical. Without being empirical, there is no test possible at all. Therefore, a theory needs to be both refutable and empirical and its tenacity does not need to be highly universal; yet it has to be a solution to a problem. A problem-solving theory

is well intensive and focused that it opens to empirical refutation if its hypotheses are explicitly set. Once the theory is refuted, then we learn from this refutation and the contents of knowledge is therefore added. (Popper, 1970:57).

The Chinese generally have the “impression” that science of the West is much more developed. The impression originates from the centuries-long development of science in the West and the humiliations caused by the imperial and colonial West on China since the mid-nineteenth century. This impression solidified itself gradually by three kinds of people: 1) the leading figures of the May Fourth new cultural movement, taking place in 1919; 2) the first generations of Chinese students studying abroad, in the US especially; and 3) the younger generations who deeply believed that learning from advanced Western science is a “must” for cultural resuscitation (Chou, 1974: 23).

To most Chinese people, the advancement of the well-developed countries, particularly that of the US, is based on the rapid development of science, including medicine. Undoubtedly, the advancement of science solves problems that we humankind confront and by nature it is empirical. Therefore, according to Popper’s methodology, we may reformulate the impression as “Chinese people believe that the Western countries are universally more advanced than the other countries by the researches of science including the Covid-19 pandemic.” Is this reformulated statement universal enough for Popper’s methodological requirement? We think so, as Popper says:

The falsifying hypothesis can be a very low level of universality. Even though it is to be intersubjectively testable, it need not in fact

be a strictly universal statement. Thus to falsify the statement “all ravens are black” the inter-subjectively testable statement that there is a family of white ravens in the zoo at New York would suffice (Popper, 1959: 87).

Based on Popper’s words, this reformulated statement is universal enough in the sense that it is empirical and refutable. And the most important thing is that the refutation of the statement is exploratory. The contrastive reactions by the Westerners and the Chinese led us to contemplate that the reactions were more than individual decisions. All individuals, regardless where they from, love their lives, so when there is massive pandemic occurred, they follow governmental guidelines based on scientific researches. White House health advisor and the director of Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Dr. Anthony Fauci said, “I have ‘no doubt’ that Americans who aren’t wearing face masks, especially in large crowds, are increasing the risk of spreading the coronavirus.” However, the announcement raised doubts not only from the public, but also from President Donald Trump himself, who denounced Fauci for making contradictory statements, since Fauci had once said mask-wearing was not necessary.³ The disagreement went on and on.

We now see that the results of Covid-19 prevention did not work well in the US not because of scientific researches (they remain the most advanced), but because the attitudes of the people conflicted with the requirement to comply with the mask mandate. This case catches our attention because the

³ Lovelace Jr., Berkeley and Noah Higgins-Dunn (2020). “Dr. Anthony Fauci says Americans who don’t wear masks may ‘propagate the further spread of infection’” 5 Jun. 2020. CNBC. 1 Oct. 2022, <<https://www.cnbc.com/2020/06/05/dr-anthony-fauci-says-americans-who-dont-wear-masks-may-propagate-the-spread-of-infection.html>>.

advancement of science needs ordinary people to cooperate, otherwise the “advancement” is limited to only the experts. Nevertheless, the “impression” was empirically and factually falsified by the case of mask-wearing. The falsification does not confirm anything definitely, but it motivates us to seek an alternative interpretation because “in science, as distinct from theology, a critical comparison of the competing theories, of the competing frameworks, is always possible” (Popper, 1970: 57).

According to Popper, methodologically speaking, problems should lead us from falsification to generating another hypothesis, which attempts to explain the facts. The problem of failing to comply with the mask mandate lies in the reality that the prevention of the pandemic is an intertwined combination of scientific knowledge and cultural reactions. In what follows, I will argue that the scientific part of the West remains universally advanced, but the divergence of the culturally constructed behavior between the Americans and the Chinese worlds is a key to explain this phenomenon. In order to see the causes of the different behavior among the Chinese people, we will focus our argument on the Chinese philosophy-characterized culture in general that that of the Confucian idea of *ren* in particular.

IV. *Ren* and Its Function in Chinese Philosophy

The mask-wearing case revealed a critical contrast between individual practices in the US and China. Yet, this contrast does not imply a hierarchical comparison. In fact, American people who refused to wear masks were somehow reasonable in the sense of never yielding personal freedom. The motto of the

American spirit, "Give me liberty, or give me death!"⁴ is revived again. Even before the US has been founded, freedom was one among the American's most cherished values. Milton Rokeach in his research found that freedom was America's most important political value, ranked behind only world peace and familial security in the nation's hierarchy of values (Rokeach, 1989: 778).

In China, there was an entirely different story. What the Covid-19 pandemic brought was its fatal power exerted on the infected individuals. Moreover, the pandemic led to the proliferation of variants of the virus, some more contagious, and others more fatal. Preventions were the best ways to protect the community, and among the measures, wearing masks was a most convenient and efficient method. In the Q&A correspondence, the World Health Organization announced that "Masks are a key measure to reduce transmission and save lives."⁵ From the Centers for Disease Control of the US, the webpage contains the statement: "Masking is a critical public health tool and it is important to remember that any mask is better than no mask."⁶

Nonetheless, some people, most notably in the US, refused this recommendation and instead thought that the mandate would damage their

⁴ " 'Give me liberty, or give me death!' is a quotation attributed to American politician and orator Patrick Henry from a speech he made to the Second Virginia Convention on March 23, 1775, at St. John's Church in Richmond, Virginia. Henry is credited with having swung the balance in convincing the convention to pass a resolution delivering Virginian troops for the Revolutionary War." <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Give_me_liberty,_or_give_me_death!>.

⁵ World Health Organization (2022). "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Masks." 5 Jun. 2022. World Health Organization. 1 Oct. 2022, <<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/question-and-answers-hub/q-a-detail/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-masks>>.

⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022). "Masks." 12 Aug. 2021. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 1 Oct. 2022, <<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/masks.html>>.

most-treasured personal freedom.⁷ Therefore, the resistance to wear masks caused massive demonstrations, rejection of governmental guidelines, and public discontent in many places. In China, people did not understand why such drastic measures occurred in the US, as most of the Chinese people were willing to comply.

We admit that the public discontent also existed in China. Several citizens especially those of the big cities opposed China's "Zero-Covid" strategies and thought the measures were too strict to be followed.⁸ Still, most people complied. Some people might think the overwhelming compliance of Chinese citizens was coerced, that in China, with an authoritarian system, nothing is impossible including forcing people to wear masks. However, this opinion is simply false as I am writing this paper in Taiwan, the place happens to share the same culture with China and it is known for its democratic system, accepted by the West. With my personal experiences in both Taiwan and China, the situations and effects of preventing Covid-19 pandemic were nearly the same. Naturally, this phenomenon raises an interesting question with which I am dealing in this paper, that political systems aside, cultural values considerably impact citizens' behavior. Our question is: What values made the Chinese compliance overwhelmingly possible?

The Covid-19 pandemic outbreak took place in China in the beginning of 2020. At that point, people did not even know whether or not this disease

⁷ Chittister, Joan (2021). "Masks, vaccines and rights in the land of freedom and liberty." 29 Jul. 2021. National Catholic Reporter. 1 Oct. 2022, <<https://www.ncronline.org/news/coronavirus/where-i-stand/masks-vaccines-and-rights-land-freedom-and-liberty>>.

⁸ Yang, William (2022). "COVID: Why is discontent growing over Shanghai's lockdown?" 18 Apr. 2022. Deutsche Welle. 1 Oct. 2022, <<https://www.dw.com/en/china-why-is-public-discontent-growing-over-shanghais-covid-lockdown/a-61504275>>.

was contagious, and gradually the fear among the people followed. Uncertainty was widespread that the government had to take swift actions in order to calm the people down. Then, the Chinese government with the assistance of its experts of public health decided to lock down cities where viruses were seriously transmitted. There were several measures to curb the pandemic and their effect would come out after 6-8 weeks.⁹ What astonished the people inside and outside China was the government's quick responses and people's cooperation (Tang, 2021: 2806). People were willing to cooperate because they believe that a full implementation of these measures was required for both the good of self and the good of the others around them.¹⁰ Why did the Chinese think this way? We assume that "mutual care" has something to do with the tradition which is deeply influenced by the Confucian idea of *ren*. We begin our analysis of *ren* as defined by Chan,

The concept of [*ren*] is one of the most important in Chinese thought. The very fact that [*ren*] has been translated into many English terms--benevolence, love, altruism, kindness, charity, compassion, magnanimity, perfect virtue, goodness, true manhood, manhood at its best, human-heartedness, humaneness, humanity, "hominity," man-to-manness--shows that it is an exceedingly complicated concept (Chan, 1955: 295).

⁹ Wikipedia, "Statistics of the COVID-19 pandemic in mainland China." 1 Oct. 2022, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Statistics_of_the_COVID-19_pandemic_in_mainland_China>.

¹⁰ There are numerous papers recording the Chinese experiences of swiftly and effectively curbing and preventing the Covid-19 pandemic. See Gao, et al. (2021); Jin-Ling Tang and Li-Ming Li (2021); Feng, et al. (2021); Wang, et al. (2021); Jiang, et al. (2021); Li, et al. (2021); Song, et al. (2021); Chen, et al. (2021); Du, et al. (2021). See The BMJ (2021). "China's response to Covid-19." 2 Dec. 2021. The BMJ. 1 Oct. 2022, <<https://www.bmj.com/how-china-responded-to-covid-19>>.

Generally speaking, *ren* reflects the Confucian philosophical anthropology as a philosophical reflection on human nature. However, Confucius (551-479 BCE) was not the first who defined the word *ren* because the word originally meant the aesthetic excellence of the aristocrats. He was the one who transformed *ren* from its aesthetic aspect into that of morality (Yang, 2019: 245). And this transformation contains one of the most significant impacts on Chinese minds as well as practices.

Ren was the goal of aristocrats to pursue, yet when it was transformed by Confucius, it refers to the uprightness of the *junzi* (gentlemen, 君子), who influences others with his exemplary behaviors (*de* 德), and his actions embodies goodness in one's relationships with others. Therefore, *ren* is not merely an ethical concept but also good actions in practice. Despite an abstract term, *ren* reveals emotional insinuations since its original meaning implies the "openness of heart" (*gantong* 感通).¹¹ With *gantong*, everyone can feel all things surrounding them, including natural and supernatural objects. These feelings shed light on the propriety (*li* 禮) and filial piety (*xiao* 孝) in the Chinese tradition.

Li and *xiao* are the most concrete ideas in Chinese culture. *Li* signifies a set of ritual rules practiced in everyday life, whereas *xiao* is a natural feeling of being kind towards one's parents. According to Confucius, these two ideas are essentially related to the idea of *ren*. Confucius describes their relations clearly in *Analects*,

¹¹ Wang explains *gantong* as follows: "The original meaning of *ren* lies in the sense of *gantong*, which describes the very manner in which sky and earth, the human and the divine, are brought together in a harmonious conjunction. *Gantong* refers at once to the reciprocal influences between humans and gods, the open comportment of a human self with things and events in the surrounding world, and the intercourse between the cosmic forces of *yin* and *yang* (Wang, 2012: 482-3).

Yu Tzu said, “Few of those who are filial sons and respectful brothers will show disrespect to superiors, and there has never been a man who is not disrespectful to superiors and yet creates disorder. A superior man is devoted to the fundamentals (the root). When the root is firmly established, the moral law (Tao) will grow. Filial piety and brotherly respect are the root of humanity [*ren*]” (*Analects* 1:2).¹²

Yen Yüan asked about humanity. Confucius said, “To master oneself and return to propriety [*li*] is humanity [*ren*]. If a man (the ruler) can for one day master himself and return to propriety [*li*], all under heaven will return to humanity [*ren*]. To practice humanity [*ren*] depends on oneself. Does it depend on others?” Yen Yüan said, “May I ask for the detailed items?” Confucius said, “Do not look at what is contrary to propriety [*li*], do not listen to what is contrary to propriety [*li*], do not speak what is contrary to propriety [*li*], and do not make any movement which is contrary to propriety [*li*].” Yen Yuan said, “Although I am not intelligent, may I put your saying into practice” (*Analects* 12:1).¹³

These two paragraphs are especially significant to our concerns, as *xiao* (respecting parents) is innate in everyone, and *li* (propriety or rituals) requires individual compliance. They are different as all people have natural feelings of *xiao*, whereas *li* is the manifestation of *ren*. Therefore, *ren* and *li* have an interwoven relationship as “the society cultivates its members through *li*

¹² All quotations of the Chinese classics with their numbers of books and chapters are that of *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Translated and Compiled by Wing-Tsit Chan, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963).

¹³ For reasons of consistency I replace here all romanized spelling of 仁 with *ren* which is used by some scholars in this paper as “*jen*”.

toward the goal of *ren*, and persons of *ren* manifest their human excellence through the practice of *li*" (Li, 2007: 311). Nevertheless, comparing to *li*, *ren* remains situated in a higher level as Shun reiterates,

The ideal of *ren* is shaped by the actually existing *li* practices in that it is not intelligible and cannot be shown to have a validity independent of *li*. However, it is not totally determined by *li* because advocacy of the ideal allows room for departing from or revising an existing rule of *li*. (Shun, 2002: 67).

Ren is the ultimate ideal in Confucius's philosophy, and for our purposes, its functions are twofold: conceptual and practical. *Ren*, as a concept, is empty if it does not incorporate the observance of *li* into its practical part. As participating in ritual activities is necessarily a public affair (in the sense that it involves more than one person), *li*, an act of relating to others in society, presupposes both a community and people in relationships. "A private *li* that is in principle inaccessible to other people is not real" (Li, 2007: 318). Therefore, the contents of *Analects* is not individualistic at all and would take "the Westerner into an utterly different human world" because "the individual is neither the ultimate unit of true humanity nor the ultimate ground of human worth" (Fingarette, 1983: 331-2).

Being the most fundamental idea of Confucius philosophy, *ren* needs to be cultivated by all individuals in the "fiduciary community which is realized by a tradition of selves in continuous interaction with selves" (Tu, 1981: 51). Hence, *ren* and its cultivation in everyone turn out to be a "common property" which is by nature non-individualistic. In the fiduciary community, everyone

knows that the public's cooperation is essential for the success of the preventive measures of Covid-19. Doing so would be beneficial for the self and the others. That's the cultural reason why most people in China were cooperative because they were fully aware that these measures must be strictly implemented not because they were coerced by the government, but because doing so saved lives in the spirit of *ren*. People's cooperation reflected the ethical implications of *ren*. The idea of *ren* is so engrained in the Chinese mind that even today its ethical and political influences are vividly accepted by many. Fraser explains that:

Ren is central to the ethics of the Confucian *Analects*, which depicts it as among the distinctive traits of the *junzi* 君子 (gentleman), for Confucians, the morally exemplary person... In China, both academics and the general public have been self-consciously looking to their own early ethical tradition for resources on which to draw in shaping China's twenty-first-century ethical and political culture (Fraser, 2011: 1).

The Chinese are willing to comply with the preventive measures of Covid-19 and the tentative answer lies in the fact that the Chinese are influenced in depth by the Confucian idea *ren*, which is essentially altruistic. The influence of *ren* did not stop at the ethical system but extended into the realm of politics.

V. The Extension of *Ren* in Chinese Political Philosophy

The idea of *ren* is not just the core of the Confucian philosophy, but also the basis of Chinese society. Moreover, it has been broadly practiced as the

ethical principle of Chinese people's mode of thinking, politics included. The conceptual and practical functions of *ren* exert a deep influence on the Chinese mind, notably from family, through society, to that of politics. So, when Pang-White says that "care" is an inherent element of Confucian *ren*, she points out that Confucianism contains the following principles:

It examines three essential principles that can be extracted from philosophical classical Confucianism: (1) an affectionate and particularistic approach to persons, (2) the mutual conditioning of the two prominent Confucian virtues -- humaneness (*ren*) and ritual propriety (*li*), and (3) the inseparability of the familial and the political self (Pang-White, 2009: 219).

The first two principles refer to the familial self, treating all people as members of a big family exactly like what Mencius says.¹⁴ The third principle is the focus of this section which deals with the link between ethics and politics in the Chinese mind. Our example of explaining why many Chinese people are willing to cooperate with the official mandate of wearing masks would not be coherent unless we can argue that the governmental measures of preventing Covid-19 pandemic are perceived as being good for the people. Otherwise, the case would not be a sound example. For this part, I would like to argue that there was a line of thinking running through not only the people, but also those who hold power to govern. Moreover, we intend to argue that *ren* as a concept also influenced the political culture.

¹⁴ "Treat with respect the elders in my family, and then extend that respect to include the elders in other families. Treat with tenderness the young in my own family, and then extend that tenderness to include the young in other families" in *Meng Zi*, 1A:7 (Chan, 1963: 61).

“The inseparability of the familial and the political self” gives us a sound thread to think that *ren* can be expanded from the ordinary people to those who govern. The expansion is reasonable as *ren* literally implies the relationship between two persons,¹⁵ the same thing applied to ethics and politics. “The two persons” are the form referring to all ethical relationships, including that of politics. These relationships are called Wu lun (五倫 the five ethical relationships) recorded by *The Doctrine of the Mean* (Zhong Yong 中庸),

There are five universal ways [in human relations]. The five are those governing the relationship between ruler and minister, between father and son, between husband and wife, between elder and younger brothers, and those in the intercourse between friends. These five are universal paths in the world (Chan, 1963: 105).

These relationships are the extensions of *ren* and they serve the roles of maintaining social stability. In fact, *ren*, as a core idea of the Chinese philosophy, is closely linked to ethics, society, and politics. The link has its long tradition and is found in the contents of *Great Learning* (*Da Xue*, 大學), one of the four classics (*Si Shu* 四書) selected by Zhu Xi (1130-1200).¹⁶ *Si Shu* were honored as official classics, and from 1313 till 1905, they were the basis of civil service examinations. The contents of the *Great Learning* “give the

¹⁵ *Ren* in Chinese character is 仁, which is the combination of two parts: 人 (also sounded *ren*) and 二 (sounded *Er*, meaning two).

¹⁶ Zhu Xi further took *Da Xue* out of the *Li Ji* (*Book of Rites*) and divided the work into one “text” with ten “chapters of commentary,” and contended that the former was Confucius's own words handed down by his pupil Tseng Tzu (505-c.436 B.C.). Zhu Xi made the text together with the *Analects*, the *Book of Mencius* (Mengzi 孟子), and the *Doctrine of the Mean* (Zhong Yong 中庸) as the “Four Books” which were honored as Classics replacing the other Classics in importance and influence (Chan, 1963: 85).

Confucian educational, moral, and political programs in a nutshell, demonstrating the clear character of man, loving the people, and abiding in the highest good.” *Da Xue* is “the central Confucian doctrine of humanity (*ren*) in application” (Chan, 1963: 84). In order to be an exemplar person of *ren*, or *junzi*, one is required to engage in the “eight steps” recorded in *Da Xue*,¹⁷

The ancients who wished to [1] manifest their clear character to the world would first bring order to their states. Those who wished to [2] bring order to their states would first regulate their families. Those who wished to [3] regulate their families would first cultivate their personal lives. Those who wished to [4] cultivate their personal lives would first rectify their minds. Those who wished to [5] rectify their minds would first make their wills sincere. Those who wished to [6] make their wills sincere would first [7] extend their knowledge. The extension of knowledge consists in [8] the investigation of things (Chan, 1963: 86).

The eight steps are the roadmaps for bringing humanity into a flourishing life, maintaining the harmony of the individual on the one side and society on the other. The link between ethics and politics is clear and as the steps were resources of civil service examinations for nearly 800 years, the Chinese people would certainly keep these in their minds as well in practices. Confucius confirms this link between the personal and the political with several paragraphs in the *Analects*,

¹⁷ I note these 8 steps with a numerical order put in the [] sign.

Someone once asked Confucius, “Why do you not take part in government?” Confucius replied: *The Book of Documents* mentions filial piety, doesn’t it? “Only be dutiful towards your parents and friendly towards your brothers, and you will be contributing to the existence of government.” These virtues surely constitute taking part in government, so why should only that particular activity be regarded as taking part in government? (*Analects* 2.21) (Chan, 1963: 37).

Duke Ching of Ch’i asked Confucius about government. Confucius replied, “Let the ruler be a ruler, the minister be a minister, the father be a father, and the son be a son.” (*Analects* 12.11) (Chan, 1963: 39).

Chi K’ang Tzu asked Confucius about government. Confucius replied, “To govern (*cheng*) is to rectify (*cheng*). If you lead the people by being rectified yourself, who will dare not be rectified?” (*Analects* 12.17) (Chan, 1963: 40).

The link between ethics and politics originates from familial virtues in which filial piety and fraternal duty are foundations. Confucius considers these two virtues “roots” and he even implies that whoever takes a good care of the family would do good in the state. He says, in *Analects* 1.2, “The gentleman concerns himself with the root; and if the root is firmly planted, the Way grows.” Therefore, Pang-White writes clearly that “familial virtues not only prepare individuals for social-political virtues, but they are also a constituent part and the foundation for the latter” (Pang-White, 2009: 219).

As a consequence, *ren* applies universally to all people, including the emperors and/or the monarchs. In governing, they should exert their power of *ren* and love their subjects. In other words, *ren* is a universal value which should help all people in the state to establish their interactive relationship. *Ren* in the political sense ideally requires impartiality, and yet the sovereigns will nonetheless indispensably bear the well-being of all the people in mind. This regime or system in China's imperial dynastic history, for many, is by no means democratic at all, yet the *ren*-influenced sovereigns do need to win the heart of the people in order to consolidate their power and maintain stability.

China is certainly not a democratic state in the Western style, yet it has its own style to rule grounded in its own philosophical tradition. Just like the Western liberal tradition of political philosophy which offers inspirations and ideas of political system for later generations, there was a tradition in China dealing with the ways through which the political leaders should treat the people. The Chinese style of democracy is understood by Ketcham, in the understanding of and rationale for democracy, as "a third modernity" after "the first modernity" of "the study and collection of particular facts and observations" and "the second modernity" of a "calculus of the greatest good of the majority of all the people" (Ketcham, 2004: 1-2).

China in the late nineteenth century led toward an altered rationale for democracy. Yet, that rationale was still sufficiently grounded in the Confucian thought to be significantly different: a "third modernity" understanding of democracy. Theories and forms of government took on a different flavor in response to essentially Confucian concepts of the importance of the state in a flourishing human society, of the requirement that government rests on

time-honored principles and rituals (“the mandate of heaven”), and of the need for wise and firm leadership (Ketcham, 2004: 2).

Admittedly, this Confucian understanding of democracy still belittles some styles of life, but more fundamentally, it provides a pervasive, relational morality appropriate for the biological center of life — how it ought to be experienced to be fully human (Ketcham, 2004: 13). This alternative kind of democracy adheres to the fundamental principle of democracy: take care of its people.

The Confucian understanding of *ren* in political field places an attitude of moral sensibility at the center of everything. All people in the society, both the upper and the lower parts, regardless how much power they hold, were expected at all times to exhibit *jen* [*ren*] i.e., benevolence. In political relationships, for example, that of sovereign-subject, the upper part must discern and respond to the needs of the people and be guided by the common good. “The mandate of heaven as explained by the tradition had to act always exuding benevolence” (Ketcham, 2004: 15). This principle of being benevolent to the people was further interpreted by Mencius:

Mencius said, “[In a state] the people are the most important; the spirits of the land and grain (guardians of territory) are the next; the ruler is of slight importance. Therefore to gain [the hearts of] the peasantry is the way to become an emperor. (*Mengzi* 7B:14) (Chan, 1963: 81).

Mencius’ words were vividly right for all the rulers who had to be benevolent to the people in order to win their trust in return. In the contemporary world,

when rulers are in the mixture caught in the crossroad of tradition and democracy, some of them gradually realized that they need to adopt the system of democracy and implement it according to the context of the tradition. In the case of China, the combination of the two parts turns out to be a mixture of the democratic system with the Confucian tradition of *ren ai* (仁愛 the universal love of humanness).

In building up its own democracy, China is particular in the sense of attempting to establish the form of democracy with its own tradition. As China constantly claims its political system is that of “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” the country endeavors to achieve its modern form of political system by incorporating the “Chinese characteristics” into its approach of setting up a modern state. In the Twentieth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, the secretary-general declares the “loving” relationship between the state and its people as one of the foundations of the “modernization of socialism with Chinese characteristics”, saying:

We have implemented a people-centered philosophy of development.

We have worked continuously to ensure people’s access to childcare, education, employment, medical services, elderly care, housing, and social assistance, thus bringing about an all-around improvement in people’s lives.¹⁸

This “people-centered philosophy of development” is central to our concerns as it reflects both the tradition of Chinese philosophy and the essentials of

¹⁸ Xi, Jinping (2022). “Transcript: President Xi Jinping’s report to China’s 2022 party congress.” 18 Oct. 2022. Nikkei Asia. 18 Oct. 2022, <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/China-s-party-congress/Transcript-President-Xi-Jinping-s-report-to-China-s-2022-party-congress>>.

being a democratic state. What is at stake here is the relationship of mutual trust between the state and its people. The Covid-19 Pandemic offers a good opportunity for the Chinese people to establish their trust in government which arguably (though not without controversy) implemented its benevolent measures for dealing with the pandemic. This political stance confirms the traditional ideal derived from Confucian *ren* that all the political leaders should love the people. Again, this “trust” is not merely a top-down relationship but a relationship of reciprocity. The leaders need to exert the influence of *ren* towards their people and the people need to have the deep faith that the leaders will do all things possible in order to maintain the public good.

VI. Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic is a naturally contagious disease which needs to be dealt with by contemporary medical science. And, as a matter of consequence, the measures of preventing and limiting it should be in line with that of science. There should not be too many controversies taking place throughout the implementation of these preventative measures. Yet, the results of implementing the mandatory mask-wearing demonstrated that the situations were complicated, especially viewing from the different results occurring in China and the US. In China, the mandatory mask-wearing is well received by the public, but for some people in the US, it was the worst case of government intrusion to personal space.

This paper intends to explore this divergence from a philosophical point of view. The example is more profound than its surface impression between

either the rejection of, or the compliance with, wearing masks. The determined attitude of defending freedom for those who refused wearing masks and the equally determined attitude of wearing masks among the Chinese reveal a contrast which could not be coherently explained unless a philosophical and cultural investigation is engaged. We begin this research from a methodological point of view, and then move to an investigation of the Chinese ideal of *ren* in theory and in practice in order to show that given the access to scientific data being equal, the divergence in the mask-wearing attitude may well be a result of cultural embeddedness, a topic that deserves to be further researched.

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**Comments on Jeu-Jenq Yuann’s
“An Interpretation of Confucian *Ren*
(仁 humanness) Through A Case Study
of the Divergent Attitudes
in the Preventative Measures
of Covid-19 Pandemic in China and the US”**

Matthew Shea*

I enjoyed Professor Yuann’s paper and learned a lot from it. The part I found the most fascinating was his discussion of the concept of *Ren* and its importance for Confucian anthropology and ethics. Commenting on the influence of both nature and culture on individuals and societies, Yuann suggests that “the individualistic spirit running through the West belongs to their cultural parts, whereas the communitarian spirit exhibited clearly in the case of China proves that human beings by nature need community” (p. 4).¹ To support this claim, he brings in the Confucian philosophy of human nature,

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¹ The quotations and page numbers cited in this paragraph refer to an earlier draft of Professor Yuann’s paper rather than the published version contained in this issue.

centered on the idea of *Ren*. According to Yuann, “*Ren*, literally meaning humaneness, is the core idea of the Confucian philosophy” (p. 5). On this view, the human person is seen “not merely as an individual isolated without links to the others, but more as a social being whose identity is derived from his interaction within the community” (p. 6). The kind of sociality at issue here is stronger than mere membership in a community, and it also involves personal relations, for “*Ren* literally implies the relationship between two persons” (p. 7). Yuann explains that on the Confucian approach, *Ren* is the “core of ethics” and the supreme principle of morality; and “we are obliged to practice *Ren* in all circumstances towards all people” (p. 7). Intriguingly, he suggests that “the best equivalent word to the Westerners in understanding *Ren* is ‘love’ despite the truth it talks more about the natural love of our species rather than that existing in the Christian tradition” (p. 6).

I’m sympathetic to some of the major aspects of the Confucian philosophy that Yuann describes. I too favor an account of human nature and ethics that’s less individualistic and more communal, focuses on sociality and relationships, and makes love the supreme moral value. Since I find the Confucian approach appealing, I want to ask a few brief questions about the view Yuann is recommending for the sake of understanding it better.

First, I’d like to hear more about the Confucian conception of human nature. *Ren* is supposed to be natural to human beings in some sense. But it’s not clear to me exactly how this is meant to be understood. Is it “natural” in the sense that we have natural instincts, inclinations, or desires for relationship and community (something like “fellow-feeling”), similar to the way we instinctively pursue food when we’re hungry or self-preservation when we’re

in danger? Or is it “natural” in the sense that human beings have natural social capacities, and this part of our nature is fulfilled through relationship and community? Is it a biological conception of human nature or a metaphysical one? With respect to the idea of what’s “natural,” is it a descriptive notion (what we’re like) or an evaluative one (what’s good for us)? Or is it a combination of all these things?

Second, I’m interested to hear more about the Confucian account of love and how it relates to the Christian one. To make the question clearer and more specific, we can take Thomas Aquinas’s account of love as a representative example. For Aquinas, love (considered as a virtue) is willing the good of the other and union with the other (*Summa theologiae* II-II.27.2, I-II.26.4, II-II.25.3). Love involves both beneficence toward the beloved and a personal relation to the beloved. On Aquinas’s ethics—and Christian ethics more generally—love is the heart of morality and is the supreme virtue and obligation; and we are required to be loving toward everyone at all times. Now, Yuann only mentions the Christian tradition in order to contrast it with the Confucian tradition, and the similarities he notes are between Chinese thinkers and Aristotle. But I think the view he’s proposing might be closer to that of some Christian philosophers, like Aquinas, than it is to Aristotle’s. So, I’d like to ask Yuann if he can say more about the Confucian understanding of love and how it compares to the Christian one.

Reply to Professor Shea's Comments

Jeu-Jenq Yuann

I am deeply grateful for professor Shea's comments on my paper. I am also extremely thankful for his brief summary of my paper, which accurately unveils the basic ideas of my paper. At the end of his comments, professor Shea proposes two questions. I find them challenging and helpful to my paper as a whole.

The first question asks a metaphysical question concerning the idea of *ren* (仁 = humaneness) in Confucian philosophy and the second question is a comparison of *ren* in the tradition of China with love in the Christian tradition in general and in Aquinas's philosophical theology in particular. Both questions are challenging as they consider the metaphysical nature of philosophical arguments and touch upon deep questions in comparative philosophy. The first one is about the human conditions and the second refers to the two most fundamental ideas in both the Christian and Chinese traditions. I begin with the response to the first question.

From the Confucian point of view, is *ren*, a moral ideal prescribes all human behavior, a part of natural instinct? If yes, then what is the point of talking about the idea which belongs to everybody naturally? Or, put the question

differently, is the idea of *ren* a descriptive idea or a normative idea? If it is the former, then as a matter of fact we all have it even without efforts. Or, if the latter, then what are the efforts we need in order to accomplish the virtue that we desire to have?

Professor Shea's question pinpoints the essential parts of philosophical anthropology that concerns human nature in general.

All Confucians, regardless of which school they belong to, stress not just instinctive nature in human beings but also their moral nature. The difference of them is considerable and yet related. The instinctive human nature and the moral nature are different in the sense that the former needs the latter in order to fulfill the obligations of being a person. Without this fulfillment, a human is not complete. Human's moral capability needs to be further developed, and moral education of every person is not merely a part of life but also a fully required duty. Among the many items of moral education, the cultivation of *ren* is the most essential one for the Confucians.

For all humans, if self-preservation is fully protected, then we have the moral obligation to cultivate our moral nature. However, Confucius's idea of *ren* took one step further because he considers morality to be superior to that of mere physical existence. Confucius stresses very much that all humans are by nature moral beings and therefore we should strive for a higher moral standard, even though the needed efforts appear endless. After all, we have the potential to be further cultivated for the full development of our moral nature.

So, we have two different natures: one is our instinctive nature which is based on self-interest and we have the second nature which is our moral nature. These two natures are connected, but the instinctive nature subjects to

the command of the moral nature. According to Confucius, they co-exist in the same person, yet the instinctive one must bow to the moral nature. We all got the potential, but in order to be a moral person equipped with the quality of *ren*, we need to be educated, developed and many times instructed.

About the second question, it's much more difficult as it touched upon the nature of religion which is somehow lacking in the Confucian tradition. When we talk about the idea of Confucian *ren* and the idea of Christian love we need to be extremely careful, otherwise we might be examining things decontextualized. I begin with Aquinas's idea of love.

Admittedly, in my paper, I compare the idea of *ren* with love which is the most essential idea of Christianity. With my very limited knowledge about the Christian theology, I have to acknowledge my ignorance of this misguided comparison. I have to stress that my comparison does not touch the deep nature of the idea of love as I mention it rather casually for the understanding the idea of *ren* in the Confucian context. The way I mention it is indeed like what Aquinas says, love is "willing the good of the other," even "union with the other." But the part of "union with the other" seems to me to be divergent from the Confucian idea of *ren*.

To Christians, love is the heart of morality, and to Confucians, *ren* is the heart of morality. However, Confucian *ren* is different from Christian love in their respective contexts. I personally hold that Christian love as the willing good for the others is a much stronger passion comparing to that of *ren* which is more of a personal cultivation than following a passion. Why is the Confucian *ren* less passionate than Christian? The answer lies in the very nature of religion.

In the Christian tradition, God's love creates everything, including human beings in particular. Analogically, the Confucian tradition talks about *ren*, as being kind towards others or loving the others is a natural part of being human. Here we see the difference immediately. While Christianity regards love as imitation of God (the divine creator), the Chinese people holds *Tian*, which means the heavens, as an impersonal supreme ontological principle. The divergence between a *Creator-God* and an impersonal *principle* tells us precisely that the Christian tradition values a personal relationship with God, while the Chinese tradition holds that *ren* as an essential part of moral virtue that needs to be guided and cultivated, it does not refer to personal bond with God. In Christianity, love originates from God who creates us, yet in the Chinese tradition, we are moral beings because of *Tian* which only exerts its power ontologically as a law of nature.

For the above-mentioned reasons, in my view even though *ren* and love are somehow similar, yet they are not the same. Though they can be compared, the divergence remains crucial to understanding these ideas from their respective contexts.