

## Sources of Confucius' Thought and His "Humanity" and "Rite"

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### I. Social Background

Since the latter part of Western Zhou, about 9th century B.C., owing to the development of the productive force by making use of the iron tools for production, such as iron hoe, iron ploughshare, etc., the society was undergoing a radical change from the slave-owing system which maintained close ties of clan members as the ruling tribe began to destroy. The clan member were freemen. Under the system of city and wild country of Zhou Dynasty, they lived in the city and the suburbs around the city and were called in a special appellation as "member of the city"(國人) or "multitude"(衆) which implied that they were the members of the ruling tribe. On account of the rise of private ownership of lands and the development of commodity economy at that time members of the city or multitudes were divided into classes. There

appeared the new landowners who were the predecessors of feudal lords, rich merchants, masters of handicraft and rich peasants, etc. On the other hand, the vast members of agricultural laborers who were called also in a special appellation as "Shuren"(庶人) or "ming"(民) lived in the remote outskirts of the city as to what is meant by Shuren or ming, I shall discuss it in the following. Under the "well-field system" of Zhou Dynasty, they first and chiefly went to cultivate collectively the vast expanse of farmlands, so-called "public land" of the aristocrats, while they themselves had but a little bit shares of land to be cultivated. They were always lack in food, and lived in a poor, miserable condition. They were in reality a special kind of agricultural slaves, somewhat like Heilotes the state owned slaves of ancient Sparta.

With the development of productive force, the agricultural slaves now capable of cultivating more and more lands independently for themselves went slow to cultivate the large scale "public lands" of the aristocrats, and thus caused heavy reduction of output and poor harvest as annotated in Gong Yang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals.

The aristocrats then found that few profits could be grabbed

from the agricultural slaves, the vast expanse of farmlands were now gradually cut apart and distributed to each agricultural slave who now possessed their sufficient own shares of land and set up their own individual economy. The well-field system now collapsed. The vast number of agricultural slaves, *shuren* or *shuming* thus gradually became the "serf".

Confronting this vital social change among the aristocrats and the freemen there were divergent in views as to how to rule the state. They were divided into two groups: one is "Group for members of kinsfolk" which upheld to preserve the original clan system and the slave owning system so as to safeguard the interests of the old aristocrats and their kinsfolks. The other is "Group for city" which upheld to seek for the interests of the whole people, in particular, the new social system, namely feudalism. They were the earliest feudal revolutionaries in ancient China.

The two groups explained "Humanity" (仁) in entirely opposite meaning. "Humanity", of which the original meaning is "to love kinsfolk", as annotated in the authoritative book "Exposition Writings and Explanation of Characters" (說文解字) by Xu Sheng in

Hang Dynasty. Humanity as the traditional dominant ideology of Zhou Dynasty maintained the social order of clan system and defended the interests of the aristocrats. Group for members of kinsfolk carrying on as before maintained that to love kinsfolk is the so-called "humanity". While group for city explained it in an entirely new sense, they maintained that to benefit the city is the so-called "humanity".

During the early and middle stage of the spring and Autumn Period, the predominant representative of the "group for city", Guan Zhong(管仲) who helped Duke Huan of Qi(齊桓公) to seized the state power through severe struggles and was then the premier of Qi opposed to throw aside the people and simply love kinsfolk, advocated to treat people with tolerance and generosity. Son of Duke Sheng-shen(公子申生), the eldest son of Duke Xian of Jin(晉獻公) died by hanging himself, in reality, he failed in his political struggle. Son of Duke Sheng shen highly favored humanity and was unyielding to others on this point and was so tolerant and kind to the people.

Grandson of Duke Zhou(公孫周), the descendant of the aristocratic clan of Jin, his ancestors fled from the home state to

other state after their defeat in the severe political struggle. Grandson of Duke Zhou declared that "one who loves human being is capable of being humanity". "One who speaks of humanity ought to proceed from oneself to others (here, Chinese character "人" can also be translated into "human being")". This is the first formulation of "love human being" in Chinese ancient literatures which was recorded in the book "Narration of States" and was earlier than Confucius for nearly one hundred years. Grandson of Duke Zhou also maintained that one is capable of doing generosity through kindness and harmony. In the meantime he stood for that "one who speaks of righteousness must do good to people".

All These new ideas and thoughts reflected the advanced and progressive social and political demands of that time, namely, to abandon the out-of-date clan system and slaveowing system and adopt the new system, feudalism.

The group for city in Qi, Jin and Chu took a lot of excellent statesmen as representatives, such as Guan Zhong(country folk), Bao Shu-ya(鮑叔牙 merchant), Zhao Tsui(趙衰, junior official), Pan Chong(潘崇, senior official), Shun shu-ao(孫叔敖, country folk),etc., and the aristocrates such as son of duke Xiao-bai(公子小白, later

Duke Huan of Qi), Son of Duke Chong-er(公子重耳, later Duke Wen of Jin 晉文公), Grandson of Duke Zhou(公孫周 later Duke Dao of Jin 晉悼公) who all had fled from their own home states for quite a long time, son of duke Chong-er even as long as nineteen years and Prince Shang Cheng(太子商臣, later King Mo of Zhu 楚穆王), etc. After arduous and severe struggles against the old aristocrats and groups for folkskin, they finally defeated them and seized the political power in Qi, Jin and Chu states respectively and thus established the feudal reign. A series of new feudal policy were carried out by them, such as recognized the occupation of the shares by the serf and levied taxes in light of the fertility and barrenness of them, reduced the corvees, employed the agricultural labourers only in the right season, so as to help them to cultivate their shares in time and develop their own individual economy, appointed men of talent as officials regardless of their blood relationship and rank, etc., and thus made their states prosperous and strong. Most of them became the powerful chief of the princes of the Spring and Autumn Period.

Confucius born in 551 B.C., died in 479 B.C., living in the latter part of Spring and Autumn Period is the great thinker of rising feudal lords. He carried on the progressive social and political

thought of the group for city, the feudal revolutionist and further developed them to a new comprehensive ideological system with his own distinctive feature.

Confucius thought as a whole reflects the progressive ideological and political demands of the rising feudal lords, though conservative and backward aspects exist(present). *It is the first comprehensive theoretical generalization and summation of the thoughts of the rising feudal lords which continues in reflecting the progressive demands to develop feudal economy and society.*

## II. Confucius' "Humanity " and "Rite" and the Relationship between Them

"Humanity"(or "benevolence", "Charity", etc.) is the kernel of Confucius' thought which runs through all his thoughts. Confucius had explained his "humanity" in various ways, of which two main sayings are of special significance.

One is "love human being", the other is "to return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self constitutes humanity".

First we discuss "love human being" in detail:

The "Analects" says,

"Fan Chih asked about humanity, the Master said 'Love human being(some books translated into 'love your fellow men) (Book VII). Confucius' "love human being" expresses the thought of "universal love"(or fraternity).

It implies the following three important contents:

Firstly to Confucius, one should love the slaves. As it was recorded in "Mencius" Book 1. Part A.

"Confucius said, 'the inventor of burial figures in human form deserves not to have any progeny,' he was condemning him for the use of something modelled after the human form."

During Shang dynasty(from about 16th century B.C. to 11th century B.C.) and West Zhou Dynasty(from about 16th century B.C. to 771 year B.C.), slaves and girl slaves were buried alive with their deceased masters, the inventor of burial slaves, though

took a step forward, what they did still recalled the slave-owning system. Confucius condemned them for doing so. This shows that Confucius held the savage slave-owning system in deep abomination.

The "Analects" runs

"The stable caught fire. The master on returning from court, asked, 'Was anyone hurt'"(Book X). According to Zuo Commentary on Spring and Autumn Annuals, those who served in the stable at that time were slaves, called Yu(圉). Confucius looked upon them higher and more valuable than the animal, horse, so he first asked about them, rather than the horses. Confucius began to look upon slaves truly as a "human". This is the advanced thought of "human being honorable" which started from the Spring and Autumn Period, was now advocated by Confucius and his school, and then flooded in the Warning State Period later on.

Secondly, Confucius extended his thought of "love human being" to the agricultural labourers, so called "Ming"(民) or "Shu Ming"(庶民) who were originally agricultural slaves and were now gradually becoming the feudal serfs possessing their own individual economy. Confucius advocated that the government should implement the

policy of kindness, tolerance and generosity, etc. toward them.

The "Analects" runs:

"Chi Kang Zu(季康子) asked, 'How can one inculcate in ming agricultural laborer) the virtue of reverence, of doing their best and of enthusiasm?'

The Master said, 'Rule over them with diggity and they will be reverent, treat them with kindness and they will do their best, raise the good and instruct those who are backward and they will be imbued with enthusiasm'"(Book II).

In particular, Confucius held that the governer should not indulge in luxury and extravagance but love all the people, and lighten the burden on them. As the "Analects" goes, "The master said, 'In guiding a state of a thousand chariots,...avoid excesses in expenditure and love all the people, employ 'Ming'(most translated it as common people) only in the right season.'" Here, Confucius laid stress upon that the government should not impose heavy taxes and corvees on "Ming", the serfs, not employ them frequently to serve the government and aristocrates in building courts, walls, digging trenches and other corvees so as to help them to cultivate and manage their own shares of land in time, thus promoting them to consolidate and develop their own economy.

All these progressive thoughts and policies were formulated and had been pursued by the former advanced thinkers and statesmen of Qi, Jin and Chu states, such as Guan Zhong, Duke Dao of Jin, Zhao Tsui etc. what Confucius did was to embrace them into the thought of "humanity"--"love human being" and further to expound their effects in governing the people. This constitutes a distinctive features of his doctrine.

Thirdly, an essential content of Confucius' "humanity" is to love the multitude living in the city, namely the freeman or "Shi"("士" translated as gentleman, or "literati" in some English books'), a social stratum between aristocrates, senior officials(大夫) and the lower labouring people, such as serfs(shuren, min), handicraftmen, merchants and slaves, etc. Mao Zi in his article "Honoring the Worthy"(Part I) says, "so the vassals of distant and outlying areas, as well as the nobleman's sons serving in the palace the multitudes of the city(Burton Watson translated Chinese character "國" here as "capital"), and the peasants of four borders, in time came to hear of this and all strove to become righteous." It shows that "multitude" is a specified term to name the people living in the city cleanly distinguishing them from other stratu and classes.

"Shi" and "Shuren" originally belonged to same tribe, both of them were multitudes constituting the tribe, "Shu"(庶) in Chinese means "multitude".

Since the period of transition from patriarchal family commune stage, the latter part of the primitive commune society, to class society, owing to the primitive commune society, to class society, owing to the development of the private ownership and the proliferation of the population which caused the destruction of the patriarchal clan system. Then the multitudes of estranged blood relationship, generally speaking, the descendants after fine generations ceased to be the member of the ruling clan. They were expelled out of the patriarchal clan system, reduced to the lower rank and to live in the remote outskirts of the city. However, under the fraudulence of being the member of the same tribe which was full of tender feeling, they were both deceived and compelled to cultivate the "public land", formerly public-owned by the commune, now possessed by the aristocrates privately. And thus they becoming agricultural slaves, cruelly exploited by the ruling class, aristocrates. Besides "Shuren", there were "ming"(民) who were the members of the conquered tribes, because the conqueror did not damage, rather, made use of the commune

remnants of the conquered tribe, "ming" were ruled over in the same way as shuren by the conqueror, the new ruling class. Up to Confucius' time, "ming" was usually used to indicate the original two parts: shuren and ming in the "Analects". And sometimes in Chinese ancient literatures, these two parts combined together constituting a new term "Shumin"(庶民), which shows that these two parts were of the same status and conditions. The development of China's slavery is different from that of Greece and Rome, preserving the severe remnants of primitive community and patriarchal system, both in the ruling class and the ruled class.

Confucius laid stress on that to love the multitude living in the city.

"The Analects" says,

"The Master said, 'A young man should be a good son at home and an obedient younger brother abroad...and should love the multitude extensively and be friends with the humane.'"(Book I)

And "The Analects" says,

Tzu-Kong(子貢) said, 'If there were a man who gave extensively to "ming"(serfs) and brought help to the multitude, what would you think of him? Could he be called humane?'

The Master said, 'It is no longer a matter of humanity with such a man. If you must describe him, "sage" is, perhaps the right word.'"(Book VI) For Confucius, "love the multitude extensively" means that one should not love his kinsfolk only, but should love the multitude, the freeman extensively, and bring help to them. Owing to the social changes and the destruction of the clan system, quite a number of multitude was then in straitened circumstances. It was imperative to bring help to them. Giving aims to them was a popular way adopted by the progressive "groups for the city". Duke Huan of Qi was benefited by pursuing the policy to bring help to the multitude that he obtained support from the multitude, thus becoming the chief of the princes of his time, as recorded in Zuo commentary.

"To promote men of talent" is also a main content of "love multitude extensively".

"The Analects" says,

"...Chung-kung(仲弓) asked about government. The Master said, '...promote men of talent.'"(Book XIII) This means that the governor must appoint the officials according to their talents, rather than kinsfolk. Obviously, Confucius was on the side of group for the city. He carried on the progressive thought of that

"benefit the city is the so-called humanity" and expounded his "humanity" as such.

By the speech "love human being", Confucius expressed the thought that one should love slaves, serfs and the multitude simultaneously, so he loved the people of the society at large. Indeed, he is a great humanist in the ancient time. This is one side of his proposition. And the other side is that, he maintained, there is divergence in love towards people of different relationships and ranks. To the intimate or the distant and estranged, honorable or humble, love is in divergence. Just as Mao Zi pointed out, "The Confucius say: 'There are degree to be observed in treating relatives as relatives, and gradations to be observed in honouring the Worthy. 'They prescribe differences to be observed between the honoured and the humble.'"(Against Confucians I Mao Zi) Actually, to Confucius, love towards slave, serfs, freemen and aristocrates is different and the treatment to each of them is also in diversity. So Confucius' thought of "love human being" is indeed a kind of universal love(fraternity), yet is characterized in the form of difference in love towards different relationships and grades of people. This is a very important aspect which characterizes the doctrine of Confucianism.

Confucius' social and political thought carrying on the progressive elements of the group for city played an active role in his time. Viewing Confucius as a conservative and as some Chinese scholars held before, a few even today, does not correspond with the historical facts, so is open to question.

Another important saying Confucius made to explain his "humanity" is "to return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self-constitutes humanity."

The "Analects" says,

"Yen Yuan asked about humanity. The Master said, 'To return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self-constitute humanity. If for a single day a man could return to the observance of the rites through overcoming himself, then the whole empire would consider humanity to be his. However, the practice of humanity depends on oneself alone, and not on others'"(Book X II)

"To return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self constitutes humanity.", this thought originated from the ancient annals. Zuou Commentary on Spring and Autumn Annals Duke Zhao 12th year runs:

"Zhong Ni(仲尼 The Master) said, "There were the annals in ancient time. "To return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self constitutes humanity." Truly it is correct! If King Lin of Chu(楚靈王) could act like this, how would he be disgraced in Qian-qi(乾谿)."

The "rites", Confucius preserved and sustained followed the codes and institutions of Zhou Dynasty which were the well-balanced admixture of native-substance and acquired refinement. However, to some extent were reformed, added and omitted by his precursors, mainly groups for city, during the initial and middle stage of Spring and Autumn Period as recorded in Zuo Commentary.

Confucius himself agreed with the reformation, the addition and omittance of the traditional rite, the Analects goes:

"Tzu-Chang(子張) asked, 'Can ten generations hence be known?'

The Master said, 'The Yin built the rites of the Hsia. What was added and what was omitted can be known. The Chou built on the rites of the Yin. What was added and what was omitted can be known. Should there be a succееeor to the Chou, even a

hundred generations hence can be known."(Book II)

So the rites Confucius followed were indeed a new type of rite containing the new elements of feudalism which I made a detail proof in my book. On Pre-Qin Society and the various schools of thoughts("先秦社會和諸子思想新探") Chapter Four. I would not argue it here. Holding that to return to the observance of the rites advocated by Confucius is the very restoration of the rites of Zhou wholly is not in accordance with Confucius' thought stated above and the historical facts.

"Overcoming the self" namely is that "do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire", so-called "reciprocity". In Confucius' opinion, if members of all classes and social strata could overcome themselves and return to the contemporary feudal rites, which were now recognized by the whole society, it would coordinate and harmonize various social contradictions and stabilize the society and thus would be in furtherance of the production of that time.

For example, King Lin of Chu indulged in sexual pleasures, abused his power to indiscriminately employ the labour of the

people cruelly. He was unable to overcome himself and was thus killed by the people. So on one hand, Confucius stressed that the rulers should return to the observance of the rites through overcoming themselves. This was characterized by "righteousness", as Confucius maintained to make profits to the people and help them to find means of livelihood.

On the other hand, Confucius maintained that the subjects could not overstep their authorities to commit regicide. He safeguarded and consolidated the social order established after the feudal revolution accomplished by the groups for city. Evidently such order was embodied in the contemporary feudal rite.

Another example, in giving aims to the freemen, the rich aristocrats should not be "arrogant and miserly"(Book VIII). And better still, "wealthy yet observant of the rites"(Book I). Here the rites embraced the contents of "avoid excesses in expenditure, and love the others (your fellow men)", so they were of feudal character.

On the other hand, the poor freemen should be "poor without being observous" and better still "poor yet delighting in the way"(Book I). Because "Being fond of courage while detesting

poverty will lead men to unruly behaviour."(Book Ⅵ) Here Confucius safeguarded the status quo and the benefits of the contemporary ruling class.

One more example, it is the most important and essential content of his thought of "rite". For Confucius, rite is the best way to practice reign over the people. On one hand, for the rulers, Confucius pointed out that "When those above are given to the observance of the rites, ming(the common people) will be easy to command", "When those above love the rites, none of ming will dare be irreverent".

On the other hand, for the common people, Confucius expounded this view: "Giude them by edicts, keep them in line with punishments, and the ming will stay out of troubles but will have no sense of shame. Guide them by virtue, keep them in line with rites, and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves".(Book II)

Under the big society changes and new circumstances, how to rule over the new exploited labourers, serfs who possessed their own self-surporting economy and whose appendance to the feudal

lords was relatively reduced than the former agricultural slaves is an important problem confronting the feudal thinkers. Confucius stressed the reign on rite and virtue rather than edicts and punishments which paid attention to the inspiration of the serfs to raise the productive effectiveness and obey the rule of the ruling class, consensuously. Without a doubt, it is of great significance and has its superiority. This is Confucius' creative theoretical development which distinguishes him from the former "groups for city", of which certain representatives such as Guan Zhon, etc. were named as the legalist of the earliest stage, displays an important characteristic of the doctrine, and also is an important element supporting him to found a new school, Confucianism.

"Love human being" being not an inner abstract and unpredicable psychological state, Confucius summed up and expressed them in two outward, concrete and normal forms. One is "helps others to take their stand in so far as he himself wishes to take his stand, and gets others there in so far as he himself wished to get there". It is on the rites that one take one's stand, just as Confucius said, "Take your stand on the rites".(Book VII) "Unless you study the rites you will not be able to take your stand"(Book XVI). To get oneself and others there both are on the

rites. For Confucius, to love others is in light of the rites, differentiating people from one another in close and distant relationships, honorable and humble gradations. Here, the norm is "rites". This is so-called "loyalty" which means doing one's best on rites.

Another form is "do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire". This is so-called "reciprocity"(or "shu" in Chinese) which means using oneself as a measure in gauging the wishes of others. "To return to the observance of the rights through overcoming the self" is the concrete application of reciprocity, that one must not impose on others what he himself does not desire, so he must overcome his improper and evil desires in light of the rites.

"Loyalty" and "reciprocity" both are the important methods to practise "humanity". This is so-called the teaching of loyalty and reciprocity, which constitutes the sole principle running through all Confucius' teachings.

"Love human being" and "to return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self" are two different aspects of

Confucius' humanity. The former is the preposition, and the latter is the end. The theoretical basis is humanity, to love human being, yet it is characterized in the form of rites, which differentiated "love" in light of different relationships and gradations. So "humanity" and "rites" in Confucius' ideological system and identical, they supplement and complement each other and unite into one harmonized system.

"To love human being" and "to return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self" are just speaking of one thing, but from two different angles. Their contents are entirely the same.

The New Encyclopedia Britannica fourteenth edition(1929-1973) in the item Chinese Philosophy goes:

"According to jen, for example, a person should love all men, as Confucian had taught; but according to righteousness; love should be applied differently in different human relations, each with its specific appropriateness. This is the Confucian doctrine of love with distinction, often misrepresented in the west as love with degree".

It is correct in pointing out that appropriateness is a very

important character of Confucius' rite (or righteousness) in applying love to people in different relations. But Confucius' rite (or righteousness) fitting the needs of feudal hierarchy also reflects the gradation of the different people. It simultaneously expresses the idea to love with degree. "Hence, if saying so, it is not entirely misrepresented.

Just as Jia Yi(賈誼), an important philosopher of western Han Dynasty said, "The rite" makes the rulers be rulers, subjects subjects, there are gradations between the high and the low, and it also makes father and son, six kinsfolks(relatives) each deals with other appropriately". ("New Book" Shu Ji 俗激) Appropriateness and degradation are two essential characters of Confucius' rite, and also his jen (humanity). Viewing only from either point, it will not catch the original idea of Confucius. This is why various disputes arised in studying Confucius' "humanity" and "rite".

In current China scholars who affirmed Confucius as a progressive thinker, usually looked upon his humanity as active and progressive element, and rite as the backward and reactionary system humanity and rite and organically united as a whole, they are identical, supplement and complement each other.

Confucius' theory of "humanity" and "rite" both attach importance to the sense of collectivity which lays stress on the adjustment, coordination and harmonization among oneself and others and the society as a whole. It plays an important role in conforming the whole society. It was under the major influence of Confucianism that a state of propriety and righteousness emerged in East Asia, China was well known as a country with ancient civilization throughout the world in the Medieval Age.

"To return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self", on one hand, certainly restricted to certain extent, the luxury and extravagance of the ruling class, however, it was in greater degree directed against the common people by the ruling class. "rite" advocated by primitive Confucianism gradually became the feudal ethical code which was mainly the strong shackle of the common people in later period. It severely obstructed the development of China's society.

Just on account of "love with degree" and that the inherent character of rite is to preserve the status quo of the social estate system. The upper-class and old forces took advantage of this. Confucianism was usually made use of by the ruling class and old

forces to safeguard their positions and interests. With inclined more and more to be conservative, even reactionary, especially during Min and Qin Dynasties. This is why the advanced precursors of May 4th New cultural movement raised the clarion call " Down with the Confucian Shop!" and apposed the cannibalistic feudal ethic code! Surely there existed the deficiency of metaphics and one-sidedness toward Confucianism and Chinese traditional culture!.