



FREEDOM AND CONFUCIANISM

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ABSTRACT

In order to better understand how the question of freedom will affect the future of China, this paper analyzes its relationship to Confucianism. Since freedom can be understood as the normatively desirable expression of self-nature, the paper first examines the concept of human nature in the Mencius and shows that, contrary to the stereotype, Confucianism has the resources for a creative and progressive understanding of personal and political freedom. In the second section, the paper analyzes the question of whether Confucianism has the resources to resist misappropriation by totalitarians. Finding numerous instances of textual support for this, the paper concludes by calling on concerned Western observers to urge the Chinese to use the resources of their own culture to responsibly build a more free society.

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Few concepts are as important for the future of the People's Republic of China as that of freedom. Though the government is still nominally Communist, increasingly Confucianism is also promoted as a uniquely Chinese governing philosophy worthy of the study of party members and intellectuals. Thus, while no one can predict the exact role that freedom will play in the evolution of the self-understanding and governance of the Chinese people, examining concepts in Confucian thought that are analogous to freedom¹ may allow us to better describe the concept as it exists in China today and, through dialogue with Chinese scholars, authorities, and common people, prescribe some of the forms the concept takes in the future.

Before such an examination is possible, it is necessary to briefly note and contrast the variety of roles that freedom plays in Western discourse. For example, there is a certain paradoxical relationship between freedom and responsibility in the West. Sometimes, freedom is associated with freedom from restraint or responsibility. We think of independent individuals making their way in the world free of any external control. Other times, freedom is seen as the basis of moral responsibility itself. We think it is appropriate to punish those whose violations of the law were committed as a matter of free choice. In the first case, having freedom is a consequence of having fewer responsibilities. In the second case, having more responsibility is the consequence of having freedom.

We can partially ease this tension by thinking of freedom as the normatively desirable expression of self-nature —though allowing that the concept of the “nature” of a thing varies wildly from context to context. In the first case, we think of the nature of one's unique individuality being best expressed in the absence of restraints external to the self. In the second case, we think of moral responsibility as arising from the fact that our nature as rational decision makers allows us to choose freely between relative goods. As these examples show, when we employ differing ideas about the nature of the self, our ideas about freedom must change as well.

Thus, the first question we will explore is the role of “human nature” in Confucian thought. With that background in place, we will go on to observe some challenges and difficulties for the preservation of freedom in Confucian context, while also suggesting some means of resolving those difficulties.

1 The contemporary Chinese term for freedom, *zìyóu* 自由, is a modern coinage and does not occur in any of the traditional classic texts of Confucianism. Accordingly, our examination will have to go somewhat further afield to find true analogues of freedom in Confucian thought.

I. THE CONCEPTS OF NATURE IN CONFUCIAN THOUGHT

Since freedom can be usefully seen as the normative expression of nature, to find a Chinese analog of freedom, it is helpful to understand the Chinese analogs of “human nature.” The obvious place to begin is *renxing* 人性, the term most often used to translate “human nature” (“person” *ren* 人 plus “nature” *xing* 性) into Chinese. Looking in the *Analects*, however, the term *xing* only appears twice.² Neither of these references seem to be enough on its own to allow us to reconstruct a Confucian concept of *xing* without turning to other sources.

A more promising avenue is available in the *Mencius*, which both refers to *xing* repeatedly and engages in a philosophical debate about its meaning. Mencius famously takes the position that good (*shan* 善) is for *renxing* what seeking down is for water.³ However, as Roger Ames points out in “The Mencian Conception of *Ren xing* 人性: Does it Mean ‘Human Nature’?” there are reasons why identifying *renxing* too quickly with “human nature” is problematic. First of all, using *renxing* as a substitute for “human nature” in our thinking may cause us to think of it as universal and innate in a way that is not appropriate in a Chinese context. More fundamentally, Ames worries that a too quick association of *xing* with nature conflates the differences between *xing* 性, *xin* 心 (“heart-mind”), *sheng* 生 (“life,” “growth,” or “birth,”), and *ming* 命 (“decree,” “command,” or “destiny”). Graphically, the character for *xing*, 性, is made up of two components: 心, which suggests its meaning, and 生, which suggests its sound. Ames sees 生 as also paronomastically lending to 性 not only a suggest of originating in birth but ongoing vitality and growth.⁴ Western scholars are apt to carelessly attribute Mencius’ “four germs” or “stirrings” of morality (*siduan* 四端) to the “nature” of humankind to be good. In fact, Mencius attributes these initial stirrings of moral sentiment to *xin*, the heart-mind, not *xing*.⁵ As such, it is *xin* which comes closer to being a natural endowment which may or may not be acted upon. This explains why Mencius 7A/1 tells us that “preserving one's heart-mind;

2 Discouragingly, the first reference is, “We can learn from the Master's cultural refinements, but do not hear him discourse on such subjects as our ‘natural disposition (*xing* 性)’ and ‘the way of *tian* (*tiandao* 天道)” (*Analects* 5.13. Ames and Rosemont translation, p. 98). The second is a bit less discouraging but still enigmatically short, “Human beings are similar in their natural tendencies (*xing* 性), but vary greatly by virtue of their habits” (17.2, 203).

3 *Mencius* 6A/2.

4 “Mencian Conception”, 150–1.

5 *Mencius*, 2A/6.

nurturing one's xing — this is doing the affairs of Heaven (tian 天).⁶ “Nurturing one's nature” is nonsensical if “nature” is taken to mean a natural property that is innate and inviolable. For example, conceptually “free will” is born fully grown and needs no nurturing. On the other hand, preserving one's natural properties is a perfectly understandable injunction, since the loss of such entails the loss of personhood through death or severe disability. Hence the heart-mind is less in need of cultivation as it is of preservation. To be sure, the heartmind is still less fixed than, say, freedom of the will: Mencius warns in 6A/10 that selling out one's core values for an increase of wealth “is known as losing one's root heart” (benxin 本心). When the root is chopped off, the plant can no longer grow and begins to wither and die.⁷ In 2A/2, Mencius extolls the benefits of attaining to (as opposed to preserving from birth) what is literally translated “an unmoving heart” budong xin 不動心. Nevertheless, the point is that it is a mistake to allow our usual Western framework to cause us to think of xing as a fixed nature and xin as an ever-changing heart when the opposite is nearer the truth.

Ames' other concern, the difference between xing and ming 命 (“decree,” “command,” or “destiny”), can be seen in most clearly in Mencius 7B/24, which explains that our biological capacities for taste, sight, etc. contain elements of both xing and ming, but are not called xing by the exemplary person (junzi 君子), whereas our moral relationships contain both elements of ming and xing, but are not called by the exemplary person ming. From this, Ames concludes that while there is some space to talk about ming as “basic conditions,” these basic conditions are what we “have in common with animals,” not a uniquely human essence.⁸

Ames' view of renxing in Mencius is not without controversy, however. Irene Bloom in “Mencian Arguments on Human Nature” criticizes Ames by arguing for a reading of xing that is universally held by humankind. On her reading, Mencius' goal is to persuade Legalist-leaning rulers of their own potential for humaneness and to reassure them that humaneness is neither difficult nor impractical. Often he does this by reminding them that their people are much like them, sharing the same joys and the same sorrows.⁹

6 Original translation of “存其心，養性，所以事天也”.

7 Kwong-Loi Shun argues in *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* that the dispute in Mencius 3A/5 is about how Mohism has two roots — first one creates an image of the good (yi 義) and only then does one cultivate one's heart-mind to match that image — whereas Mencian Confucianism has only one root — the cultivation of the predispositions of the heart-mind. See 134–5. Thus, the growth of the heart-mind is the single source of all normativity, and the loss of the root of the heart mentioned in 6A/10 is the loss of the ability to develop ethically.

8 “Mencian Conception”, 158.

9 Bloom, 45.

In particular, Bloom draws attention to Mencius' repeated use of the phrase, “is possessed by all human beings” ren jie you zhi 人皆有之. From it, she concludes that Mencius is drawing our attention to reasoning something like the following, the ancient [sage] kings had this mind; people of the present all have it as well; [...]. We become immediately aware that we have something in common with those ancient kings.¹⁰

As such, Bloom feels that a reading of Mencius that de-emphasizes the universality of xing will also end up implicitly de-emphasizing not only the potential to sagacity, but our common humanity as well. Indeed, for Ames not only xing but being a person (ren 人) is a trait that can be lost: [E]ven with xin (heart-and-mind) — the basic “ground” in which the xing is “rooted” (gen 根) — there are those human beings who, having failed to cultivate what is an incipient and fragile emblem of their humanity, do not qualify as human persons. They are inhuman (fei ren 非人). When Mencius says that “no man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others,” he is also saying “any man who does not have a heart sensitive to the suffering of others is not really human.”¹¹

Bloom also reinterprets passages that we saw as evidence for the Amesian conception of xing in order to support her position, so that in Mencius 7A/1, for example, although it speaks of “nurturing” (yang 養) our xing, “what we refer to as “cultivation” (xiu [修]) or “nurturing” (yang) has as much to do with preservation as with development.”¹² In 6B/2, Mencius explains that:

If you wear the clothes of Yao, speak the words of Yao, and behave the way Yao behaved, then you are a Yao. On the other hand, if you wear the clothes of [Jie], speak the words of [Jie], and behave the way [Jie] behaved, then you are a [Jie]. That is all.¹³

From this, Bloom concludes that, “Becoming the sage entails acting on our shared potential,”¹⁴ and that the tone of the passage is essentially exhortative. Throughout her essay, Bloom repeats the phrase “our common humanity,” to stress what it is that we share with other human beings, especially the most sagely among us. From this same passage, Ames has concluded that there is nothing over and above the actions of the sage which constitutes

10 Ibid, 29.

11 “Mencian Conception”, 162.

12 Bloom, 38.

13 Lau translation, 134.

14 Bloom, 51, n. 53.

a unique nature of sagacity or humanity. As such, there is no need to posit the existence of a “potential” for the common person to live up to.

At this point, the basic exegetical divide between Ames and Bloom may seem on the one hand intractable and on the other hand utterly beside the point in a paper ostensibly about “freedom.” I will argue, however, that this basic divide in the interpretation of xing does have important repercussions for our understanding of freedom. Ames’ larger goal in “The Mencian Conception” and elsewhere is a rehabilitation of our conventional, perhaps vaguely Orientalist notion of Confucianism as a staid (possibly stagnant), conservative view of society. Against this, Ames wants to insist that what constitutes an achievement in Confucianism is open ended and unfixed by inner essences or limitations. This view of Ames’ culminates in his treatment of 誠 cheng:

This term is commonly translated in the early literature as either “integrity” or “sincerity.” In our translation, we have introduced the term “creativity” as the most important meaning of cheng [...].¹⁵

This may seem like a radical reinterpretation of the text. For example where Lau gives Mencius 4A/12 as, “There is a way for [a person] to be true to himself. If he does not understand goodness, he cannot be true to himself,”¹⁶ Ames gives, “There is a way of being creative in one’s person. Persons who do not understand efficacy are not creative in their persons.”¹⁷ The trade of “goodness” for “efficacy” (both 善 shan) seems within the bounds of the translator’s prerogative, but the trade of “being true to one’s self” and “creativity” is a further stretch, the adequacy of which entirely depends on our view of how nature is expressed in Confucianism. Ames’ translation is acceptable if we think that the way to be true to oneself is through creative expression but it fails if we think that the way to be true to the self is through expression of a previous fixed nature. In “The Way is Made in the Walking: Responsibility as Relational Virtuosity,” Ames acknowledges this tension by noting that while we have a high view of creativity in the arts, our view of creativity in other fields is quite low:

15 Ames and Hall, *Focusing the Familiar*, p. 61. Emphasis mine.

16 Lau, 82.

17 *Focusing the Familiar*, 135.

[I]f I were to learn that Eliot Deutsch is morally ‘creative,’ I might properly stand in admiration of his rakish charms, but I would also be concerned about his having anything but a passing acquaintance with my comely wife or my innocent children.¹⁸

The reason for our thinking this way is that in certain fields, we may entertain the notion of progress, but on the whole we still think, “Our unstated responsibility is to discover natural and particularly moral laws, and to do our best to act in accordance with them.”¹⁹ As such, all progress is really progress toward a predetermined goal — exactly the sort thing that Ames insists is lacking in the Mencius and early Confucianism. Instead, they attempt to create a normative ideal for living without thereby constraining our options in advance.²⁰ If this is so, then an Amesian view of “the nature of nature” will have an important impact on the nature of freedom as the expression of nature and whether it is the achievement of a creative novelty or a pre-specified end.

The highest achievement in Confucianism is the achievement of ren 仁, translated as “humaneness,” “benevolence,” “authoritative conduct,” etc. (In part, its multiplicity of possible translations demonstrates the plurality of manners in which it can be concretely realized.) While Confucius never claims to have perfectly attained to ren, perhaps out of modesty, he does allow that at age “seventy I could give my heart-and-mind free reign without overstepping the boundaries.”²¹ Unlike Western notions such as political freedom (which is historically and constitutionally determined) or freedom of the will (which is innate), the Confucian equivalent of freedom is a socially-situated, personal responsiveness in which our own nature (our own hearts) can be expressed without imperiling others and one which is realized only through a lifetime of effort. Like the Western ideal of political freedom, Confucian freedom tends towards the harmonious working together of disparate elements of society by their own accord, and, if Ames is correct, like the ideal of freedom of the will it can be express itself creatively rather than according to a preset pattern.

18 “The Way is Made in the Walking”, 42.

19 Ibid, 43.

20 Cf. *Analects* 18.8, where Confucius says he is different from others, “in that I do not have presuppositions as to what may or may not be done.” Rosemont and Ames, 216.

21 *Analects* 2.4. Ames and Rosemont translation, 77.

II. FREEDOM AND THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PREVENT TYRANNY

With such a notion of Confucian freedom in mind, it is important for us to ask whether its implementation by the Chinese will be robust enough to protect the people from those evils that we believe the Western concepts of freedom serve to protect Americans from: Does Confucianism provide the degree of responsiveness to the people necessary to allow the government to fulfill its responsibilities while upholding freedom? Or does its very creative flexibility make inevitable its perversion into violence against others?

Certainly, there are many anti-fascistic impulses present in Confucian thought. Bloom, for example, draws our attention to the way that going against nature is associated with violence in the Mencius. Thus when Gaozi compares making moral persons to making cups out of willow branches, Mencius asks,

Can you make cups and bowls by following the nature of the willow? [...] If you must mutilate the willow to make it into cups and bowls, must you, then, also mutilate a man to make him moral? Surely it will be these words of yours men will follow in bringing disaster upon morality.²²

From this, Bloom draws the observation that, “while violence may deprive life, arboreal or human, of its resilience and capacity for growth, this must be seen as a despoliation, rather than a description, of the nature of trees or people.”²³

This anti-fascistic note is echoed in the *Analects*, where Confucius says, “If you govern effectively, what need is there for killing?”²⁴ and “To execute a person who has not first been educated is cruel.”²⁵ The Confucian vision culminates with Confucius quoting admiringly, “If truly efficacious people were put in charge of governing for one hundred years, they would be able to overcome violence and dispense with killing all together.”²⁶ Similarly, Confucius tells us that the exemplary person seeks a true social harmony (he 和) not a bland conformity (tong

同),²⁷ and his injunction to “insure that the names are used properly” (zhengming 正名)²⁸ can be nothing but a condemnation of Orwellian newspeak.

That the ideals of Confucianism are anti-fascistic is therefore clear enough. There is, however, still space to doubt how well the practice of Confucianism will be able to embody its ideals and whether they can prevent lapses of responsibility by the rulers towards the ruled if laws and rights are left to the creative interpretation of exemplary persons. For example, we explained before that losing the Mencian germs of morality entails losing not only the possibility of true personality (ren 仁) but possibly even humanity itself (ren 人). Such language, however, is quite literally the language of dehumanization, and it is to counter such a tendency that Bloom, unlike Ames, is so insistent in positing that Mencian renxing is a universally shared and otherwise inalienable common humanity.

The fear is the Han Chinese majority will see the “superiority” of Confucian values as a license to dehumanize those minorities who insist on retaining their cultural distinctiveness. Without meaning to minimize the importance of those fears, it is worthwhile to point out that wondering whether Confucianism, though well-intentioned, is deficient in the resources necessary to successfully combat racism, prejudice, and dehumanization is to pass over all too quickly the blithe assumption that Western democracy has been successful. Such an assumption will serve as news to African-Americans living before the Civil Rights movement (and to a certain extent even today) among other marginalized groups, too numerous to mention. As Rosemont and Ames point out, the historical misuses of the Bible are no more or less damning than the misuses of Confucianism.²⁹ Both the Bible and Confucian texts can be twisted to support tyrants and racists, but what is more important is our pressing to ensure that their noblest aspects are drawn from in order to support the creation of a better future. Ultimately, the only way to create a guarantee of rights for the minority is to instill in the majority a sense of responsibility for the preservation of those rights — a truth that Confucianism is quick to emphasize:

Lead the people with administrative injunctions and keep them orderly with penal law, and they will avoid punishments but will be without a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence (de 德) and keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety (li 禮) and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves.³⁰

²⁷ Ibid, 13.23.

²⁸ Ibid, 13.3, 162.

²⁹ *Chinese Classic*, xiii–xiv.

³⁰ *Analects* 2.3. Ames and Rosemont translation, 76.

²² *Mencius* 6A/1. Lao translation, 122.

²³ Bloom, 37.

²⁴ *Analects* 12.19. Ames and Rosemont translation, 158.

²⁵ Ibid, 20.2, 229.

²⁶ Ibid, 13.11, 164.

We see in this passage that laws, in Confucianism, are merely the final mechanism to preserve the prospering of the people. That they are invoked at all is warning that something has gone amiss.³¹ The key remaining issue for the question of freedom in China is what will be the role of democracy (minzhu 民主) in Chinese government. Confucius is not especially optimistic about the masses (民 min). He remarks that they “can be induced to travel along the way, but they cannot be induced to realize it.”³² Like Plato, most of his instruction is targeted instead at the exemplary persons who are to rule society. Mencius concurs that, “Some labor by their heart-minds; some labor by their strength. The former rule; the latter are ruled.”³³ The degree to which these sentiments are seen as anti-democratic can be somewhat mitigated, however, if we understand that the line between those who use the heart-mind and those who use strength is not drawn at birth as in the *Republic*³⁴ but develops during one’s lifetime. From the time of Plato up to the present day, republics have been specifically designed to deal with the problem that Confucius worried about by keeping the masses out of the finer technical mechanisms of governance through constitutional strictures while maintaining responsiveness through elections and the like. Of course, as the many tin-pot dictators of the world have shown, constitutions and elections do not guarantee rule that is responsive to the people. All of the trappings of a republic can be made into hollow shells if the spirit of the people and those who rule are not truly working in harmony.

Unlike republicanism, Confucianism does not attempt to solve the problem of making government responsive to the masses through the use of foreordained restrictions on possible laws and filtered channels of participation. Rather, from the side of the elites, responsibility to the masses is encouraged by promoting responsiveness to the relationships that constitute one as a person. From side of the masses, their own responsibility grows the more they aspire to ren 仁 “humaneness” and attain mutual regard through the exhortative example of exemplary persons.³⁵ The key consideration is that rule through ren at its best is able to non-coercive lead

the people without doing violence to the possibilities for cultivating human nature. Of course, historically this goal has not always been achieved in China, but neither have the highest ideals of democracy always been achieved in the West. Moving forward, the West can best encourage the growth of freedom in China by pointing out the resources that their own cultural heritage provides them for building a more creative, democratic, and humane future and by modeling these virtues in their own societies.

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31 The sorry state of human rights for enemy combatants during the Bush years confirms the importance of general sentiment over pieces over paper in the preservation of rights. It was because the average American had little concern for accused terrorists like Jose Padilla that it was possible for an American citizen to be held for three and a half years without being given a day in court, to give only one example of the inadequacy of laws to substitute for culture.

32 *Analects* 8.9. Ames and Rosemont translation, p. 122. Ames and Rosemont note that while the received version of the text uses *you* 由, the same morpheme in freedom *ziyou* 自由, more ancient versions of the text use 道 *dao*. Neither variation is especially complementary of the people.

33 *Mencius* 3A/4. My own translation.

34 *Republic* 370a, et al.

35 Cf. *Analects* 8.2.