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THE *JUNZI* AS THE CONFUCIAN TRUSTWORTHY GUARDIAN: THE ULTIMATE AIM OF SELF-CULTIVATION *XIUSHEN* 修身 IN THE FOUR BOOKS

A *junzi* cannot but cultivate himself
君子不可以不修身
(*Zhong Yong* 20)

If a *junzi* abandons *ren* [relations], how can he remain true to his name…
君子去仁，恶乎成名…
(*Analects* 4.5)

A *junzi* must be careful when he is alone and unseen by others
君子戒慎乎其所不睹
(*Zhong Yong* 1)

Abstract. This paper explores the Confucian notions of self-cultivation (*xiushen* 修身) and the exemplary person (*junzi* 君子), as presented in the Four Books, through the lens of Tadeusz Kotarbiński's concept of the trustworthy guardian. Kotarbiński's ideal emphasizes a responsible, morally grounded individual who supports and protects others, often within an asymmetrical master–student relationship. The first part of the paper analyzes the process of Confucian self-cultivation and the ethical character of the junzi as someone who earns this title by cultivating altruistic (ren 仁) relations and embodying a relational ethos. The final section argues that the junzi, as a role model and moral carer motivated by selfless concern for others, aligns closely with Kotarbiński's notion, and may be understood as a distinctly Confucian version of the trustworthy guardian. This interdisciplinary comparison reveals a shared human vocabulary of virtue grounded in responsibility, emotional attunement, and ethical care.

Keywords: *junzi* 君子; *xiushen* 修身; *ren* 仁; Confucian ethics; trustworthy guardian; Tadeusz Kotarbiński; ethos; self-cultivation; Four Books

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JUNZI JAKO KONFUCJAŃSKI OPIEKUN SPOLEGLIWY –
OSTATECZNY CEL SAMODOSKONALENIA (*XIUSHEN* 修身) W CZTEROKSIĘGU

Abstrakt. Artykuł analizuje konfucjańskie pojęcia samodoskonalenia (*xiushen* 修身) oraz wzorca osobowego *junzi* 君子, przedstawione w Czteroksięgu, w świetle koncepcji opiekuna spolegliwego autorstwa Tadeusza Kotarbińskiego. Ideał opiekuna spolegliwego zakłada istnienie jednostki odpowiedzialnej, moralnie ugruntowanej, gotowej do udzielania pomocy i ochrony innym – często w relacji asymetrycznej typu mistrz–uczeń. W pierwszej części tekstu omówiono proces konfucjańskiego samodoskonalenia oraz etos *junzi* jako osoby, która zasługuje na to miano dzięki kultywowaniu altruistycznych relacji (*ren* 仁) i samokształceniu. W części końcowej wykazano, że *junzi* – jako moralny opiekun, kierujący się bezinteresowną troską o innych – pozostaje bliski ideałowi opiekuna spolegliwego u Kotarbińskiego i może być interpretowany jako jego konfucjański odpowiednik. Porównanie to odsłania wspólny, uniwersalny słownik aksjologiczny, oparty na odpowiedzialności, emocjonalnej wrażliwości i etycznej trosce.

Słowa kluczowe: *junzi* 君子; *xiushen* 修身; *ren* 仁; etyka konfucjańska; opiekun spolegliwy; Tadeusz Kotarbiński; etos; samodoskonalenie; Czteroksiąg

INTRODUCTION

The ethics of the trustworthy guardian was formulated by Polish ethicist Tadeusz Kotarbiński. He argued that ethics should remain independent of abstract philosophical systems or metaphysical worldviews, maintaining that the primary and universal objective of all beings is to avoid suffering and protect life. In Kotarbiński's thought, the central role is played by principles of coexistence within the human community, where motivation for ethical behaviour lies in concern for the well-being of "fellow creatures". Norms of conduct are arranged in a hierarchy of values intended to restrain aggressive, self-serving behaviour and to foster attitudes grounded in benevolence. Ethical norms and social life are understood as mutually dependent: regulating interpersonal behaviour is both an ethical imperative and a social necessity. According to Kotarbiński, the only reliable ethics is one not grounded in speculative philosophy. The embodiment of this ethos is the trustworthy guardian – a moral agent whose actions are defined by kindness, responsibility, and care for others (Łagowska 1992, 48).

This paper reconstructs the Confucian role model of the *junzi* through the lens of Kotarbiński's concept of the trustworthy guardian. In Kotarbiński's model, the trustworthy guardian is typically represented by an authoritative individual who assists and protects others within an inherently asymmetrical master–student relationship. The master bears the responsibility to guide, teach, and safeguard the student, while the student is expected to respond with

obedience and trust. On a broader level the guardian–dependent relationship exemplifies a specific ethical relationship in which one party, the caregiver, provides support with sincere kindness but also from a position of superiority, and the other party accepts this care in a spirit of trust and receptiveness.

This dynamic resonates strongly with the relational ethics found in Confucian thought – particularly in Confucius' interactions with his disciples, in the *ren*-based relations cultivated by *junzi* as moral exemplars, and in the Five Relationships (*wulun* 五倫) emphasized by Mencius (Mengzi).

1. CONFUCIAN IMPERATIVE OF SELF-DEVELOPMENT

Confucian thinkers shared a common conviction regarding the necessity of cultivating morally appropriate dispositions – especially through a lifelong process of self-cultivation (*xiushen* 修身). Every individual was seen as obligated to nurture their inherent good nature. As stated in the *Daxue* (*The Great Learning*):

> From the Son of Heaven down to the common people,
> all without exception, take self-cultivation as the root.
> 自天子以至於庶人，壹是皆以修身為本. (*Daxue* 2)

While *junzi* was the central moral role model in Confucian teaching, it was not the only one. *Zhongyong* (Practice of the Middle Way) introduces the figure of the sage (*sheng* 圣), who is described as someone who has attained complete moral integrity (*cheng* 诚) and, as a result, participates in the cosmic transformations (*hua* 化) occurring between sky/heaven and Earth. The sage possesses the capacity to respond with perfect balance (*zhong* 中) to shifting circumstances and demonstrates a form of intuitive insight – akin to foresight – allowing them to interpret both favourable and unfavourable signs.

Such a person appears to transcend ordinary human limitations, acting as an intermediary between society and the natural or spiritual world. A sage can be described as one who, through intellectual cultivation, ethical self-improvement, and conscientious fulfilment of societal duties, achieves the highest ideal of humanity. *Zhongyong* 25 emphasizes that after attaining moral integrity, one becomes comparable to the spirits (*shen* 神) as described in the *Liji* (*Book of Rites*). In this role, the sage functions as a bridge between *tian* 天堂 'sky/heaven' and the human realm, endowed with a spiritual perception

that, as Rudolf Otto argues, allows for an encounter with the numinous – the ineffable, non-rational dimension of the sacred (Otto 1993, 16).

However, Confucian thinkers remained aware that only a rare few would attain the state of sagehood. Therefore, in the *Analects*, a more accessible moral ideal is emphasized: the *junzi* 君子, or a morally perfected person. While not transcendent like the sage, the *junzi* represents a highly attainable model for individuals who seek to learn, internalize, and apply Confucian moral teachings in everyday life.

Confucian philosophy, deeply concerned with the question of how to live properly, posited that a state of harmonious balance was essential – not only at the societal or political level, but also within the emotional life of the individual. The process of *self*-cultivation *xiushen* 修身 thus begins with cultivating the ability to recognize, regulate, and properly express one's emotions, as emotional attunement was seen as fundamental to ethical behaviour and social harmony. It should be emphasized that self-cultivation in the Confucian tradition does not refer to a solitary process of psychological introspection. Instead, it is embedded in ritual (*li* 禮), embodied practice, and sustained ethical relationships. The self is understood not as an autonomous entity, but as relationally constituted through patterned social interactions.[1]

As written in the *Daxue*:

> Concerning the saying "Refining one's person lies in balancing one's mind":
> When one harbors anger or resentment, the mind cannot remain balanced.
> When one is fearful, the mind cannot remain balanced.
> When one indulges in excessive pleasure, the mind cannot remain balanced.
> When one is anxious or troubled, the mind cannot remain balanced.
> When the mind is unsettled, one looks but does not truly see, listens but does not truly hear, eats but does not taste.
> This is what is meant by the phrase "Refining one's person lies in balancing one's mind".
> 所謂修身在正其心者：
> 身有所忿懥，則不得其正；有所恐懼，則不得其正；有所好樂，則不得其正；有所憂患，則不得其正。心不在焉，視而不見，聽而不聞，食而不知其味。
> 此謂修身在正其心。 (*Daxue* 9)

[1] Ames and Rosemont Jr. (1998, 49–55) argue that the Confucian self is always constituted within a nexus of roles and responsibilities, emphasizing processual personhood rather than essential individuality.

The central importance of emotional regulation is also emphasized in the *Zhongyong*:

> When joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure have not yet arisen, they dwell within. When they arise and are all kept in due measure, this is called *harmony*.
>
> The practice of the *Middle* is the great root of the world; *harmony* is the universal path though which all things reach completion.
>
> 喜怒哀樂之未發，謂之中；發而皆中節，謂之和. 中也者，天下之大本也；和也者，天下之達道也。(*Zhongyong* 1)

In a similar tone, Mencius emphasized that the foundation for any moral cultivation is the development of an immovable heart-mind (*budong xin* 不動心). A person lacking a fixed and calm inner disposition is easily swayed by impulses and loses both moral clarity and the capacity for self-reflection. To cultivate one's moral character, it is necessary to maintain not only *budong xin*, but also a persistent heart-mind (*hengxin* 恆心), grounded in vital energy (*qi* 氣) and the will (*zhi* 志), which together provide the basis for moral constancy and ethical focus (Pejda 2020, 110).

Moral self-cultivation should proceed gradually, in stages appropriate to one's age, personal development, and level of social involvement. Confucius himself articulated a lifelong trajectory of self-cultivation, describing the evolving focus of each stage of life. In the *Analects*, he states:

> The Master said:
>
> "At fifteen, I set my heart upon learning.
>
> At thirty, I took my stand.
>
> At forty, I was free from doubts.
>
> At fifty, I understood the Mandate of Heaven.
>
> At sixty, my ear was attuned.
>
> At seventy, I could follow my heart's desires without transgressing the bounds of propriety."
>
> 子曰:「吾十有五而志于學，三十而立，四十而不惑，五十而知天命，六十而耳順，七十而從心所欲，不踰矩。」(*Analects* 2.4)

This famous passage illustrates not only Confucius's own moral journey but also a model of gradual ethical refinement – from early dedication to learning[2] and personal discipline, to internalization of moral principles, and ultimately to the full harmony between desire and right action. It suggests that

[2] "吾十有五而志于学."

self-cultivation is not a one-time transformation but a continuous process that deepens over time, 謂之中 culminating in spontaneous ethical intuition grounded in a lifetime of conscious cultivation. In the *Analects*, the concept of learning is primarily associated with familiarizing oneself with the *dao* 道 – understood here as the transmitted way of the ancient sages and elite scholars (*ru* 儒). This includes engagement with canonical texts such as the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing* 詩經), the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經), and other foundational Confucian classics, as well as the practice of the Six Arts (*liu yi* 六藝): ritual (*li* 禮), music (*yue* 樂), archery (*she* 射), charioteering (*yu* 禦), calligraphy (*shu* 書), and mathematics (*shu* 數).

This early phase of learning was inseparable from ethical behaviour, especially the cultivation of proper attitudes toward family and social superiors. At its foundation stood filial piety – expressed through respectful conduct toward one's parents, elders, and ancestors. Learning, in the Confucian sense, was thus not an abstract intellectual pursuit but a moral and relational practice embedded in tradition, hierarchy, and ritual. A crucial dimension of filial piety in human development is emphasized in the *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing* 孝 經):

> The Master said:
>
> "For teaching the people to be affectionate and loving toward their relatives, there is nothing better than filial piety.
>
> For teaching them the observance of rites and respectful submission, there is nothing better than brotherly deference."
>
> 子曰：
>
> 「教民親愛，莫善於孝。教民禮順，莫善於悌.」(*Xiao Jing, Guangyao dao* 廣要道).

Filial piety and fraternal respect (*di* 弟), as Confucius emphasized, were considered the root of ethical conduct and of proper behaviour towards others (*ren* 仁). Moral development began within the family, where the child learned respect for parents and elders, recognized their place within the social hierarchy, and practiced the duties associated with one's given role (*ming* 命). These familial relations formed the foundation for extending appropriate behaviour outward, to others in society.

Another essential stage in self-cultivation involved internalizing ritual propriety (*li* 禮), understood here as customary moral norms that regulate conduct and emotion. As Karyn Lai (2006) notes, learning to embody *li* unfolds in

three stages, much like the process of mastering a musical instrument: beginning with imitation, then developing fluency, and finally achieving spontaneous expression grounded in internal understanding.

The final stage of self-cultivation involved becoming a *junzi.* Such a person was expected to live by the principles of *dao*, understood as acting in accordance with the natural order and continuing the traditions of the Ancient Rulers. The external attributes of a *junzi* – such as their behaviour, manner of dress, and customs – their overall lifestyle[3] – were attributed to Confucius in chapter 10 of the *Analects*.

Self-cultivation, which begins with personal discipline, the study of Confucian texts, and the fulfilment of family and social duties, was ultimately intended to culminate in working for the benefit of others. The Confucian vision of moral development is thus inherently relational and expansive: the perfected individual does not withdraw from society but becomes a transformative presence within it. This idea is powerfully expressed in the *Zhongyong*:

> Only those of the utmost integrity can fully realize their own nature. Those who can fully realize their own nature can thereby realize the nature of others. Those who can realize the nature of others can thereby realize the nature of all things. Those who can realize the nature of all things can assist in the transforming and nourishing processes of Heaven and Earth. Those who can assist in the transforming and nourishing processes of Heaven and Earth can stand together with Heaven and Earth as their equal.
> 唯天下至誠、爲能盡其性。能盡其性、則能盡人之 性。能盡人之性、則能盡物之性。能盡物之性、則可以贊天地之化育。可以贊天地之化育、則可以與天地參矣. (*Zhong Yong* 23)

Here, moral cultivation reaches its ultimate stage: the *junzi*, through the perfection of his own nature, becomes capable of nurturing the natures of others – humans, animals, and even non-living things – thus contributing to the harmony and creativity of the cosmos. This vision presents the self not as isolated, but as radically interconnected with the natural and moral order of the world.

The ongoing process of moral self-perfection in Confucian thought necessarily included caring for others and actively supporting their development.

[3] The concept of "lifestyle" implies that there is something that connects the actions of a person across different areas of life. This assumption can even be extended to people with similar backgrounds and life paths, who share the same class habitus (Sztandar-Sztanderska 2010, 41).

Self-cultivation was never understood as a solitary or purely inward task, but as a path culminating in ethical responsibility toward others.

In contrast to the *xiaoren* 小人 – the petty person, focused solely on personal gain – the *junzi* realizes his full nature precisely in relationship with others. It is through practicing *ren*, fulfilling social obligations, and responding compassionately to the needs of others that the junzi becomes a trustworthy moral exemplar. His identity is formed not in isolation, but in the dynamic interplay of self and society.

2. THE *JUNZI* AND HIS ETHOS

According to Auguste Comte, altruistic feelings – which early Confucian thinkers conceptualized as *ren* 仁, a relational attitude – could be cultivated through moral education and embedded in social life. Altruism, on this view, develops at the expense of individual self-assertion, requiring the subordination of the self to family roles and, ultimately, to wider social obligations (Hałas 2023, 31). These principles were, at least seemingly, shared by Confucian thinkers.

The necessity for the proper expression and regulation of emotions is emphasized in many ethical frameworks – including virtue ethics – because, as Natasza Szutta has argued, emotions can either hinder moral behaviour or motivate morally positive actions (Szutta 2017, 118). In Confucian ethics, the ideal of *junzi* involves not only cultivating *ren* within the family but expanding altruistic conduct outward, to wider social groups and eventually to the entire state. This outward extension of relational care is essential to fulfilling the Confucian ethos of the *junzi* or the sage.

As Nathan Emmerich (2016) describes, ethos refers to a collective, sociological structure of moral thought, which complements an individual's system of internal dispositions – what Pierre Bourdieu called *habitus*. The ethos forms a subset of the habitus in the sense that, while the habitus encompasses general ways of acting, perceiving, and feeling, moral dispositions specifically comprise the ethos (Matuchniak-Krasuska 2015, 91). Thus, the concept of ethos, alongside the cultural ideal, allows for a sociological analysis of altruism in its culturally embedded forms.

As Hałas notes, relational ethos requires a reflexive adoption of the perspective of the Other:

> The ethos is not shaped exclusively in the ideational sphere. As an axionormative model, it is a model of action – for something and for a purpose. It involves a system of representations of the social world, constituted by actions that express recognition of the Other, as well as help and protection for Others. (Hałas 2023, 339)

The question of morality as an ethos encompasses a wide range of aspects, including issues related to taste, etiquette, and aesthetic disposition – elements often neglected in philosophical discourse but clearly present in early Chinese texts. As Emmerich (2016, 275) points out, ethos refers to a universal form of morality, one that is not only embedded in the habitus but also expressed through social structures and cultural perspectives.

Clifford Geertz (1957, 421) defined ethos as the moral and aesthetic dimension of a given culture, comprising its evaluative elements. It is reflected in the tone, character, and quality of life of a people – their moral style, aesthetic mood, and attitude toward themselves and the world.

Within the ethos of the *junzi*, particular emphasis was placed on the ability to maintain proper relationships and promote social consensus, on non-violence and non-coercion, on the cultivation of soft interpersonal skills, the capacity to act appropriately to context, and, above all, a deep knowledge of the Confucian etiquette and ritual (*li* 禮). In the *Analects*, the *junzi* is consistently portrayed as a person who fosters social harmony by upholding respectful and morally attuned relationships (*ren*) – a commitment considered more valuable than life itself (*Analects* 7.7).

The *junzi* strives to live in accordance with the *dao* 道 and to practise *ren* until death, without interruption. He is expected to adopt a detached attitude toward material goods, whose distribution is determined by fate (*ming* 命) (*Analects* 12.5). He is marked by inner confidence and freedom from persistent doubts (9.28), by a character balanced between innate nature (*zhi* 质) and cultivated refinement (*wen* 文). His speech is cautious and precise; his actions are bold, yet always contextually appropriate (*shizhong* 时中). The *junzi* avoids trivial matters and manual labour; his primary role is to manage others with respect and to earn their trust (19.10). He upholds justice, seeks to foster goodness in others (12.16), learns from his own mistakes (19.21), restrains his desires (16.7), and behaves with dignity in all situations (*Analects* 16.10). Ultimately, the *junzi* is devoted to fulfilling his dao without expectation of reward (Pejda 2015, 118).

3. THE *JUNZI* AS A TRUSTWORTHY GUARDIAN

When discussing dispositions toward altruistic behaviour, their implementation in social relations, and the role of moral education in cultivating them, it becomes relevant to ask whether the Confucian ideal of the morally perfected *junzi*, as portrayed in the Four Books, can be meaningfully compared to Tadeusz Kotarbiński's concept of the trustworthy guardian.

The trustworthy guardian is a noble, courageous, and honourable individual – someone others can rely on in times of hardship, someone who provides care and never abandons those in need. As Miller (2006) notes, this is a clearly idealized figure, one whose many positive attributes can only be approached asymptotically. The trustworthy guardian stands as an aspirational moral model rather than a common social type (141–42).

According to Mirosław Łobocki, Kotarbiński considered the ethics of the trustworthy guardian to be a universal core shared across diverse ethical systems (Łobocki 2004, 67–68).[4] He argued that cultural or historical differences between ethical traditions do not undermine the existence of such a core; rather, they reflect differing emphases on particular aspects of the same overarching ideal. As Kotarbiński himself explained,

> In some places, qualities like benevolence are held in the highest regard, while in others, it might be courage or uncompromising honesty. However, the underlying ethical assessment remains constant, always centring around the ideal of the trustworthy guardian. (Kotarbiński 1987, 195)

For Kotarbiński, the trustworthy guardian represented a synthesis of universal and timeless human values – qualities respected across cultural, ideological, and civilizational boundaries. This archetype, in his view, constituted the highest ethical and educational ideal, embodying the essence of values that

[4] Kotarbiński (1987, 141–42) argued that ethics can and should be independent of any particular worldview, and that constructing a viable ethical system requires an appropriate method. In his view, the answer to the question of what constitutes moral good should be sought empirically. Ethical judgments, he claimed, must be formulated through observation and reflection on experiential data, rather than through speculative reasoning or inherited doctrine. The goal, according to Kotarbiński, is not merely to describe "what was once considered good or bad", but to grasp the essence of moral good and evil as we understand them here and now, bringing to light the voice of our present conscience. He further maintained that empirical moral evaluation is possible because human beings possess a natural sensitivity to moral value – an intuitive recognition of what is honourable and right, comparable to how our sense of taste detects sourness.

are universally recognized as morally positive. These values, in his view, formed the core of the moral worth of human conduct (Kotarbiński 1970, 211).

Kotarbiński identified five key moral qualities of a "decent" person – traits which together define the trustworthy guardian. The individual's trustworthiness was conceived as a specific unity of these virtues: kindness, righteousness, courage, moral dynamism, and self-control. Each of them was contrasted with its opposite: maliciousness as the negation of kindness; unlawfulness as the opposite of righteousness; cowardice versus courage; apathy in place of moral dynamism; and moral weakness or indulgence in contrast to self-control.

Kindness, for Kotarbiński, involved a good heart, generosity toward social causes, and respect for all living beings. Righteousness entailed acting in accordance with the principle of justice, honesty, and the fulfilment of promises. Courage meant both endurance in the face of physical pain and the ability to confront danger. Moral dynamism was defined as perseverance through difficulties, the intelligent selection of means for achieving good ends, and energetic, efficient action. Finally, self-control referred to inner discipline: mastery over oneself, resistance to temptation, and readiness for useful and appropriate behaviour (Łobocki 2004, 68).

Let us now examine the main traits of the ideal figure of the *junzi*, as presented in the Four Books – a figure who, according to the Confucian elite's vision, was intended to govern and guide the people. One of the key moral qualities emphasized in the *Analects* is trustworthiness or reliability (*xin* 信). A person who lacks *xin* is compared to a cart without a shaft – an essential structural element that connects the cart to horses or oxen.[5] Without this part, the vehicle is functionally useless; similarly, a person lacking *xin* is considered morally unreliable and unfit for public responsibility (*Analects* 2.22). Several additional traits associated with proper relational conduct (*ren* 仁) are enumerated by Confucius in the *Analects*. When asked about the qualities that constitute *ren*, the Master replied they are

> respectfulness, tolerance, trustworthiness, diligence, and generosity: the respectful are not treated with contempt, the tolerant win multitude, the trustworthy are relied upon, the diligent achieve results, and the generous are fit to guide.
> 恭、寬、信，敏、惠。恭則不侮，寬則得眾， 信則人任焉，敏則有功，惠則足以使人。(*Analects* 17.6)

[5] "人而無信，不知其可也。大車無輗，小車無軏，其 何以行之哉？" (*Analects* 2.22).

These traits outline the relational ethos of the *junzi* – a person whose moral authority is grounded not in domination, but in personal excellence and relational credibility. One of the key traits among them – trustworthiness – has both moral and epistemic dimensions. Explaining the central role that *xin* occupies in the *Analects*, Karyn Lai highlights its dual function as both a moral and epistemic virtue.

> By translating *xin* as "reliability", I bring out two of its main features. First, I focus on the longer-term consistency in a person's actions and behaviours in different circumstances across time. Second, by saying that reliability is epistemic in nature, we turn our orientation toward knowing how best to act or respond in different circumstances (e.g., to proceed [*xing* 行]). (Lai 2018, 193)

This interpretation aligns closely with the Confucian emphasis on integrity across time and context*: xin* is not merely about keeping one's word, but about cultivating coherent ethical agency. Reliability becomes a dynamic quality, grounded in one's ability to respond appropriately and consistently in varying relational and moral situations. In this sense, *xin* forms a bridge between inner moral disposition and outer social trust, making it a foundational component of both the *junzi*'s ethos and Kotarbiński's notion of trustworthiness.

The Four Books emphasize the importance of soft interpersonal traits – qualities that enable the cultivation of harmonious relationships, even with subordinates and common people. Given the Confucian critique of broadly defined conflict – including physical confrontation and military engagement – traits such as heroism or battlefield bravery were not regarded as essential components of moral excellence.

By contrast, the other qualities associated with Kotarbiński's trustworthy guardian would have been highly valued in Confucian thought. These include: trustworthiness, considered a foundational element of moral character; kindness, comparable to the altruistic orientation expressed through *ren*; self-control, aligned with the Confucian ideal of moderation (*zhong* 中) and the proper regulation of emotion.

While moral dynamism is not explicitly mentioned in the *Analects* 17.6 passage, it does appear elsewhere in the Confucian tradition – particularly in the form of pragmatic resourcefulness (*jie* 節),[6] understood as wise management of one's energy, time, and resources in both personal and public life.

[6] As in the proverb "節用而愛人."

Furthermore, Confucian thinkers emphasized that the morally perfected person – the *junzi* – should remain indifferent to material wealth, particularly if such wealth were acquired through dishonourable means. The junzi served as the positive moral model, explicitly contrasted with the *xiaoren* 小人 – the petty or base person – who was characterized by selfishness, impatience, the pursuit of material gain without concern for others, and a general disregard for social responsibility.

According to both Kotarbiński and the Confucians, social motivation – concern for the well-being of others – should serve as the primary reason for selfless moral action. Ethical behaviour, in this view, arises not from fear of punishment or desire for reward, but from a sincere commitment to the welfare of fellow human beings.

The *junzi's* ultimate goal is to cultivate and maintain Confucian harmony (*he* 和) – a form of social and relational homeostasis – by engaging in altruistic actions that benefit others and, equally importantly, by refraining from causing harm. This echoes the Silver Rule ("Do not do to others what you would not wish done to yourself"), which in Confucian ethics stands as a foundational principle of relational morality.[7]

CONCLUSION

In the Four Books, Confucius is referred to as *zi* 子 – Master. He appears not only as a teacher to his disciples, but also as a moral guide and role model. In reflecting on his own moral development, Confucius shaped his character by following the ideal of *junzi.* [8] To earn his name, the *junzi* had to embody *ren* 仁 – that is, an altruistic, humane disposition toward others. As in Kotarbiński's ethics of the trustworthy guardian, the *junzi*'s ethos was grounded in benevolent, non-coercive relationships. According to Mencius, all individuals occupying higher positions within the Five Relationships are expected to demonstrate this attitude of responsibility and trustworthy moral guidance.[9]

[7] Tadeusz Kotarbiński, by contrast, rejected the exalted notion of universal love as unrealistic, arguing that such attitudes can paradoxically foster hatred toward those not included in their scope. Instead, he advocated a negative interpretation of altruism, inspired by the Christian principle of loving one's neighbour: namely, the rule of not doing to others what one would not want done to oneself (Kotarbiński 1937, 3).

[8] 子曰：「吾十有五而志于學，三十而立，四十而不惑，五十而知天命，六十而耳順，七十而從心所欲，不踰矩。」(*Analects* 2.4)

[9] 教以人倫：父子有親，君臣有義，夫婦有別，長幼有序，朋友有信 (*Mengzi* 3.A.4).

Confucian self-cultivation begins with working on oneself, studying the classical texts, and fulfilling one's familial and social duties. It is ultimately meant to culminate in care for others and the construction of harmonious social order. The *xiushen* complex includes concepts such as: learning, filial obedience to elders and superiors, and ritual propriety understood as moral norms embodied through practice.

The philosophy articulated in the Four Books can thus be understood as a vision of social harmony, where relationships leave no room for egoism – self-centred action or symbolic accumulation – but do not require full self-sacrifice either. Rather, they are shaped through mutual adjustment and moral reciprocity.

In individuals less responsive to internal moral cultivation, Confucianism allows for what Elżbieta Hałas (2023, 34–35) calls "negative altruism" – a moderation of egoism and inhibition of aggression. This behavioural model, based on reciprocal restraint, remains a key element in the functioning of Chinese society. In contemporary sociological terms, the Confucian *junzi* is rooted in a vision of the interdependent self – a self-embedded in a web of relationships. Social exchange mechanisms such as *renqing-bao* 人情报 (reciprocity of human sentiment) continue to manifest Confucian altruism in daily life. These insights reveal the deep sociological foundations of both traditional and modern Chinese society, in which family and kinship ties – *guanxi* 关系 – remain vital.

Ultimately, the comparison between *junzi* and the trustworthy guardian suggests that while moral ideals arise from distinct cultural and philosophical traditions, they may converge in their emphasis on relational ethics, responsibility, and integrity. Such convergence points to the possibility of a shared human vocabulary of virtue – grounded not in doctrine, but in the lived need for mutual care. Thus, the *junzi*, far from being a relic of ancient Chinese thought, continues to resonate as a relational and moral figure – both in classical texts and in the ongoing logic of Chinese sociality.

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