

REV. SŁAWOMIR NOWOSAD

## BASIC ETHICAL TERMS OF CONFUCIANISM

**Abstract.** Confucianism has been a leading Chinese philosophical and ethical tradition for a long time. Not just Confucius himself but also Mencius and Xunzi contributed to its development over the centuries. In this paper the principal ethical notions of Confucianism—*junzi*, *dao*, *ren* and *li* – are characterized in their rich essence and unique context. Though ostensibly having much in common, those concepts can be paralleled to the Western ones only with difficulty and to a limited extent.

**Key words:** Confucianism; Confucian ethics; *junzi*; *dao*; *ren*; *li*.

Among the philosophical systems of Chinese antiquity, Confucianism appears to be the most common one, permanently shaping mentality and customs of many societies.<sup>1</sup> Despite many years of efforts to introduce atheism to Chinese society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and despite attempts to eradicate Confucian values and norms of life, Confucian system has, to some extent, remained present as a philosophy of thinking and ethics of acting. Confucius (551–479 BC), who gave name and started this system, lived in the final stage of the restless Spring and Autumn period (8<sup>th</sup>—5<sup>th</sup> century BC), during the reign of the Zhou dynasty.<sup>2</sup> He was a teacher and educator, a philosopher and publisher. He was also engaged in politics, performing the function of the Minister of Crime. He was familiar with music and poetry. Confucius

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Rev. Dr hab. SŁAWOMIR NOWOSAD, prof. KUL—dean of the Faculty of Theology at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin; Department of Fundamental and Ecumenical Moral Theology; mailing address: Al. Raławickie 14, 20–950 Lublin; e-mail: xsn@kul.pl

<sup>1</sup> For other ancient Chinese traditions, in particular of ethical character, see: S. NOWOSAD, “Główne nurty w starożytnej etyce chińskiej,” *Roczniki Teologiczne* 63 (2016), 3: 67–76.

<sup>2</sup> “Confucius” is a Latinized (by the 16<sup>th</sup>—century Jesuit missionaries) form of his Chinese name Kong Qiu. He was also known as Kongzi, Kong Zhongni, and especially as Kongfuzi, or (Grand) Master Kong. Cf. R.L. LITTLEJOHN, *Confucianism: An Introduction* (London—New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), XIX.

perceived himself not as a creator or author of an original system, later called Confucianism, but rather as its communicator and interpreter.<sup>3</sup> The main book of Confucianism, *The Analects of Confucius*, contains, above all, but not exclusively, the sayings and teachings attributed to Confucius. *Analects* were written by successive generations of Confucius's disciples, and their final origin is estimated by some scholars to date back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, and thus to the Han dynasty.<sup>4</sup> Confucius had many continuators, and some of them modified, reinterpreted and supplemented the existing Confucian teachings. Among them, there were two particularly distinguishing figures: Mencius (Mengzi, Meng Ke, 372–289 BC) and Xunzi (Xun Kuang, ca. 310–220 BC). They are considered, besides Confucius, the most important co-founders of this tradition.<sup>5</sup> Confucianism, as a Chinese philosophical and ethical system, spread far beyond the borders of China and took root especially in Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and to a lesser extent also in other Asian countries.

Considering contemporary Confucianism, three different meanings can be distinguished. First, Confucianism is a philosophy whose representatives include three thinkers mentioned above, and whose vision is recalled and reinterpreted also in contemporary times. Confucianism in the second sense is a political vision, which served as an ideology, especially to the rulers from the Han dynasty, and which contains many Daoist elements. Finally, in the third sense, one can speak of popular Confucianism, in which attention is paid particularly to family values, upbringing, filial submission and respect for power. This people's Confucianism, more than others, assimilated certain elements of Buddhism and native Daoism over time.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> "Confucius apparently did not intend to start an intellectual 'school' or 'movement.' He said: 'I transmit but do not innovate; I am truthful in what I say and devoted to antiquity' (Lau 7: 1)." B.W. van NORDEN, "Introduction," *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays*, ed. B.W. van NORDEN (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 12. Cf. R.K. DOUGLAS, *Confucianism and Taoism* (London: SPCK, 1889), 65 ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Dialogi konfucjańskie*, transl. K. Czyżewska-Madajewicz, M.J. Künstler, Z. Tłumski (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1976). Known in English as *The Analects (The Analects of Confucius or The Confucian Analects)* had many editions, including: CONFUCIUS, *The Analects*, transl. R. Dawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). On the creation of *The Analects* during the Han dynasty, see: M. CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, "Confucius and the Analects in the Han," *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays*, 134–162.

<sup>5</sup> It is also worth mentioning that more recent development and changes in this philosophical ethics and social thought are usually considered neo-Confucianism, and they refer to the period from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century AD.

<sup>6</sup> B. MOU, *Chinese Philosophy A–Z* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 31. The so-called Five Classics of Confucianism are: *Book of Changes*, *Classic of Poetry*, *Book of Rites*,

Despite the similarities of at least some terms, concepts and ethical norms of the Confucian and Western thought, one must be aware of the significant differences in understanding these realities. In this sense, the notions of Western philosophy and ethics can be used only to a limited extent and with caution to explain and describe Chinese concepts. This confirms the important principle that terms, concepts and problems should be understood in the context of their relevant tradition. In the case of Confucianism, it is important to assume that this tradition has its base in moral psychology. Therefore, the similarity between Confucianism and Western ethics in terms of the notion of virtue, which is particularly important in ethics, is limited. For example, human nature is seen in its fullness only when it is governed by practicing the virtues understood in a Confucian way and when it is managed in social relations by rules understood also in a Confucian way. Alasdair MacIntyre emphasized that in fact Confucianism cannot be reconciled with Western concepts of virtue ethics, Western deontology or utilitarianism. This obviously does not exclude the need for reflection and dialogue between different traditions, but a lot of caution and attention is required. For instance, Western concept of rights might be an important concept for social rules in Confucian tradition, but both their content and justification will be specific to this tradition.<sup>7</sup> Also, we cannot omit the fact that Chinese ethics as such does not present an elaborate and finite or complete system. Its issues and norms should be read from its holistic statements, usually written in a very metaphorical and ambiguous language, for example, in the form of questions and answers in a dialogue between a student and a master.<sup>8</sup>

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*Book of Documents (Book of History)* and *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Particularly important are *Analects* of Confucius and *The Mencius*. Sometimes *Classic of Music* is also mentioned, but the book is lost and its contents are little known today. In addition, there is *Doctrine of the Mean* and *Great Learning* as two of the so-called Four Books, beside *Analects* and *Mencius*. The former are chapters from *Book of Rites*. Cf. R.L. LITTLEJOHN, *Confucianism: An Introduction*, 6–11.

<sup>7</sup> A. MACINTYRE, "Questions for Confucians: Reflections on the Essays in Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy and Community," in: *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy and Community*, ed. K.-L. Shun, D.B. Wong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 203–218. At the same time, it must be remembered that from the point of view of Confucianism, the notion of rights is often rejected as a foreign problem and incompatible with the Chinese culture.

<sup>8</sup> "In the case of Wang Yang-ming, for example, one need work (one needs to work) through the entire labyrinth of his recorded dialogues, letters and poetry to arrive at an understanding of his very organic philosophy." J. CHING, "Chinese Ethics and Kant," *Philosophy East and West* 28 (1978), 2: 170.

Confucian understanding of moral issues is practical. This can be seen many times in the *Analects*, where Confucius gives particular, practical answers, frequently related to relationships within family, especially between father and son. At the same time, a few specific terms that are fundamental to this ethical concept should be taken into account. These include *junzi* (*chun tzu*) *dao* (*tao*) and *ren* (*yen*), and in a slightly different sense *li*. At the core of the Confucian vision there is always a belief in the basic precedence of morality—a political order depends on a social order and the latter has its source in human self-perfection. Ethical character of social rules and a political shape of the state are visible here. When one strives for perfection by cleansing one's heart, it leads first to order in the family, which, in turn, contributes to social order, resulting in peace and happiness of the entire kingdom.<sup>9</sup> There is no division into private and public sphere in Confucianism. The same principles of moral behaviour apply first to the family, and then to the entire society understood by Confucius as a large family. Just like the family is managed by the father, the society (kingdom) is governed by the ruler. When the ruler becomes *junzi*, his bearing, which is worth imitating and following, will be beneficial to all his subjects. There is therefore no room for individually understood rights and self-improvement for one's sake, because morality is about performing one's role in society as a son, brother, father, and later as a ruler or ruler's subject.<sup>10</sup>

### 1. *Junzi*

In the centre of Confucian understanding of ethics there is the moral character of man and (good) features of his character, i.e. his virtues, which are expressed by the term *junzi*. Originally, the word referred to the “son of a prince,” which, according to Confucian thought, indicated an ethically no-

<sup>9</sup> “Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their States were rightly governed. Their States being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was tranquil and happy.” Quote from *The Great Learning* in: D.F.–C. TSAI, “The Bioethical Principles and Confucius’ Moral Philosophy”, *Journal of Medical Ethics* 31 (2005): 159.

<sup>10</sup> C. LI, “The Confucian Concept of Ren and the Feminist Ethics of Care: A Comparative Study,” in: *Confucian Political Ethics*, ed. D.A. Bell (Princeton–Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 176. “The ruler who is an exemplary person can affect the entire kingdom with appropriateness and moral excellence, like the wind that blows over the grass (12.19), while the petty ruler is no different than the grass.” R.L. LITTLEJOHN, *Confucianism: An Introduction*, 34.

ble or exemplary person (hence *junzi* is usually translated into English as *gentleman*). The notion's main features include filial devotion, willingness to preserve traditional forms of behaviour, as well as the ability to pass moral judgment and to distinguish good from evil in a specific situation. Only a gentleman is able to choose social (civic) good against his own desire, and behave in a just and righteous way. Such a man is experienced in righteousness and does not act for his own profit. He is cheerful and peaceful. He loves others, and he is always free from fears and worries, because he does not feel guilty thanks to his righteousness.<sup>11</sup> Because external behaviour should be consistent with the internal attitude, *gentleman* will be a model of proper behaviour when behind his external gestures, showing respect for others, there will be accordant moral attitude.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. *Dao*

To a large extent, similarly to the ancient Greek conviction of the human pursuit of happiness, in Confucian ethics *dao* has a significant meaning, but in many aspects it is understood in a different way than in Daoism. This rich notion contains the belief that there is a way which man should follow undeterred in his life.<sup>13</sup> It is also often described as mother, because *dao* gives birth to (all) things, and so everything in its existence depends on *dao*. *Dao*

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<sup>11</sup> C. HUANG, "East Asian Conceptions of the Public and Private Realms," in: *Taking Confucian Ethics Seriously: Contemporary Theories and Applications*, ed. K. Yu, J. Tao, P.J. Ivanhoe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 78; S. LUO, "A Defense of Ren-Based Interpretation of Early Confucian Ethics," in: *Taking Confucian Ethics Seriously*, 136–139. When describing such a man, it is often possible to encounter expressions with clear psychological and emotional coloring, and not only a moral one: "It seems that Kongzi is more concerned with the gentleman's emotional attitudes than with any other aspect of his life: the gentleman *loves* others; he feels neither *fear* nor *worry*; he feels no guilt; he would feel *ashamed* (*chi*) if he were to prosper as a result of participating in a corrupt regime [...]. It should be noted that the emotional attributes mentioned by Kongzi are characteristic of the ideal Confucian gentleman". S. LUO, "A Defense of Ren-Based Interpretation of Early Confucian Ethics," 139.

<sup>12</sup> L.D. RAINEY, *Decoding Dao: Reading the Dao de Jing (Tao Te Ching) and the Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu)* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 9–10.

<sup>13</sup> "One important aspect of traditional Chinese humanistic thought is to observe the Way firmly and persistently without yielding [...]. Confucius always attached importance to the Way. In his mind, the Way was uppermost and must be observed unswervingly." L. ZONGGUI, *Between Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the Modernization of Chinese Culture* (Oxford: Chartridge Books Oxford, 2014), 97. For different possibilities of understanding *dao*, see: L.D. RAINEY, *Decoding Dao*, 49ff.

contains the whole truth not only about the universe, but about human nature. Hence, there is a requirement to always act in accordance with *dao*, i.e. according to the requirements of humanity (humanism). By analogy to the (Western) concept of truth, knowledge and achievement of *dao* is made through learning, study and self-improvement. That is why, according to Confucianism, Daoist calling for abandoning learning and following undetermined spontaneity would be destructive for man and the entire society.<sup>14</sup> The way is described at the same time in a very practical way, not in a theoretical or mystical manner. It is also close to the concept of reciprocity because it requires one to put oneself in another's place and to act as one would want others to act towards him or her. Therefore, *dao* is an ethical guide through life.<sup>15</sup> Importance of *dao* is always significant, because even in the face of death it boosts kind of self-confidence and contentment in a virtuous man.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. *Ren*

*Ren* is another notion that takes central place in the ethical vision of Confucianism. It can be considered as unifying and inclusive concept, which is indicated by the numerous statements of Confucius in the *Analects*. *Ren* contains the highest moral ideal, which most often has been described as "virtue," but also "humanity" (humanism), "care," "compassion" or "benevolence."<sup>17</sup> Like with other Confucian terms, it is difficult to find one equivalent for *ren* in Western ethics. In any case, *ren* was subject to semantic changes in the development of the Confucian ideas, for example, when

<sup>14</sup> R.L. LITTLEJOHN, *Confucianism: An Introduction*, 130–131.

<sup>15</sup> L.-H. LIN, Y.-L. HO, "Confucian Dynamism, Culture and Ethical Changes in Chinese Societies—a Comparative Study of China, Taiwan and Hong Kong," *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 20 (2009). 11: 2404; R.L. LITTLEJOHN, *Confucianism: An Introduction*, 40–41. "Just as I might be loyal to my lord, I am loyal to the Way. Both my lord and the Way are, metaphorically, my 'superiors.'" B.W. van NORDEN, "Unweaving the 'One Thread' of *Analects* 4:15," *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays*, 230. The concept of *dao* is close to the concept of *te* which denotes an honest heart that guides behaviour. Hence *dao te* means ethics.

<sup>16</sup> L.H. YEARLEY, "An Existentialist Reading of Book 4 of the *Analects*," *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays*, 265–266.

<sup>17</sup> "Anyone who is adequately conversant with the *Analects* cannot help but be impressed by the centrality of *ren* in Kongzi's ethical teachings. Kongzi declares that once we set our hearts on *ren*, we will be free from immorality (*Analects* 4.4)." S. LUO, "A Defense of Ren-Based Interpretation of Early Confucian Ethics," 124. Cf. R.L. LITTLEJOHN, *Confucianism: An Introduction*, 28–30.

Confucius' thought was developed by Mencius. Due to the central importance of *ren*, Confucianism is sometimes called "philosophy of *ren*." In the *Analects*, Confucius mentions *ren* more than a hundred times, but does not provide its definition. However, it is possible to see at least a twofold distinction of *ren*: as a virtue and as a feeling (especially of sympathy). When *ren* as a virtue denotes a person who is morally perfect or good, *ren* as a feeling points to the affective aspect of caring for others or compassion, especially—as written by Mencius—in the face of the suffering of others. In fact, *ren* is a whole, for a man with *ren* as a virtue cannot be deprived of a heart, which is sensitive to others.<sup>18</sup>

From the point of view of personal ethics, *ren* covers ethically mature humanity, while from the point of view of official authority and government, *ren* most frequently involves benevolence or generosity, which, however, is a certain reductionism. Because ordinary people are often unable to take care of the entirety of their development and good life, the role of the ruler is to provide them with protection and support in physical life and even in moral upbringing.<sup>19</sup> For Confucius, *ren* contains the highest ethical perfection which a man is able to achieve. Consequently, in the *Analects*, *ren* is sometimes identified with *junzi*. This is not about a single virtue, but rather about all the virtues together (goodness). In the same texts of Confucius, however, *ren* is about a particular virtue of concern for others, which then can be attributed the meaning of benevolence.<sup>20</sup>

Like in the whole Confucian ethics, the family is the place where *ren* finds its expression and where man learns to live in a way that will be then transferred to relations outside the family. It is filial piety of a son to a father and a fraternal relationship between the siblings that can be called the root of *ren*. In the primary sense *ren* refers to inter-human relations, especially family ones, but sometimes Confucius says that "*ren* can be expressed also through a harmonious relationship between human beings and nature."<sup>21</sup> This attitude (virtue) contains in itself a call to cross the borders, first the borders

<sup>18</sup> "In the English world, scholars have translated *Ren* by many terms—benevolence, love, altruism, kindness, charity, compassion, magnanimity, human-heartedness, humaneness, humanity, perfect virtue, goodness, and so on." C. LI, "The Confucian Concept of *Ren* and the Feminist Ethics of Care: A Comparative Study", 177. See more on pp. 177–180.

<sup>19</sup> See the whole chapter by Q. ZHANG, "Humanity or Benevolence? The Interpretation of Confucian *Ren* and Its Modern Implications," in: *Taking Confucian Ethics Seriously*, 53–72.

<sup>20</sup> D. WONG, "Chinese Ethics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2013), www.plato.stanford.edu (access: 20.02.2016).

<sup>21</sup> J. CHAN, "Territorial Boundaries and Confucianism," *Confucian Political Ethics*, 64.

of one's own family, and to go out to others, to all people, and, ultimately, even to the entire nature. In this sense, *ren*, due to the lack of any restrictions, connects people both vertically (son with father and ancestors) and horizontally (the relationship between siblings and then with other people).<sup>22</sup>

Some authors see in *ren* certain affinity with Kant's categorical imperative, distinguishing, of course, between Western rationalism and an empirical-intuitive approach of Confucian ethics. Confucius and Mencius, as well as Kant, attributed to everyone the freedom of choice on the way to obtain (accomplish) *ren*, which is why everyone is responsible for their moral development. However, this is not arbitrary, since everyone is obliged to *ren*, i.e. kindness, compassion or love, towards other people. For every person has in oneself (in the heart and mind) moral character received from Heaven, which distinguishes him from animals. Developing *ren* in themselves and recognizing it in others, man pursues *ren* and becomes *junzi*. It is possible to recognize the equivalent of the Western notion of dignity here, which is vested in every human person and which demands that everyone should be treated as an end goal and not as a means. Recognition of this particular value in oneself and in others in the Kantian vision takes place on the rational path, whereas in Confucianism, especially in Mencius, it happens through experience and affection (compassion).<sup>23</sup>

#### 4. *Li*

The Chinese concept of *li* (ritual, rite, custom) is close to the reality of virtue. It covers a set of prescribed behaviours in various social situations.

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<sup>22</sup> "Even though *ren* always begins in familial relationships, and one's attention and care should naturally be directed more to one's close partners such as family members than to strangers, Confucianism insists that the practice of *ren* has no outer limits, and its principles like *shu*, filial piety, and brotherhood have no outer limits as well. *Ren* implies the cultivation of oneself in relation to others, beginning with the family and friends, and ultimately, to the whole world." J. CHAN, *Territorial Boundaries and Confucianism*, 66.

<sup>23</sup> "Mengzi assumes that everyone is born with the noble body together with the capacity to develop it. Thus, everyone possesses in himself the noble value' (Mengzi 6A17). True nobility lies in humanity and justice, which is endowed by Heaven and cannot be substituted by human nobility (such as high social status and a comfortable material life). While human nobility is contingent on human fortune and limited to a few, the nobility of Heaven is absolute and universal to all human beings." Q. ZHANG, "Humanity or Benevolence?", 60. A different and broader analogy between Kant and Chinese ethics is discussed by Julia Ching. She is fully aware that in his lectures on Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism, Kant assessed these concepts critically and even rejected them. Cf. J. CHING, "Chinese Ethics and Kant," 167–170.

As claimed by Confucius alone, practicing *li* efficiently leads to the achievement of *ren*, so moral perfection expressed in the efficiencies and attitudes permanently present in human life. Also, a person who has already achieved *ren* must practice performing *li*, just like an accomplished musician must constantly practice playing an instrument. In this sense, *ren* is an end the goal, and *li* a means to this goal.<sup>24</sup> It is important that performing appropriate rituals be accompanied by internal conviction, because their repetition alone will not lead one to achieving moral perfection. One must, therefore, keep both the form and the spirit of the rituals so that they lead to an authentic spiritual transformation.<sup>25</sup>

Confucius adopted rituals and ceremonies that had already existed in Chinese society and which were shaped during the early Zhou dynasty, ruling from the 12<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century BC. These rituals shaped multiple social, family and non-family relationships in a particular permanent way. The main principle guiding these rituals called for respect and obedience to those who were higher in the structure of society (e.g. a lord or an emperor), as well as to a filial obedience of parents, to respect family elders and to maintain the distinction between men and women. According to Confucius, these rules constitute the basis of human life and should never change, while other less important social customs are subject to changes. Without these rules people would not be able to distinguish a ruler from a subject, the old from the young, a woman from a man or a father from a son. They also guard the necessary intimacy and healthy distance in interpersonal relations.<sup>26</sup> This Confucian vision of rituals and customs is not reduced to rules of external behaviour, but belongs to the personal ideal, which is *ren*. Thanks to the necessary dependence of *li* on *ren*, multiple relations of superiority and subjection re-

<sup>24</sup> S. LUO, "A Defense of Ren-Based Interpretation of Early Confucian Ethics," 127–129. There is a dispute among the interpreters of Confucianism over the primacy of *ren* before *li* and the other way around.

<sup>25</sup> P.J. IVANHOE, "The Values of Spontaneity," in: *Taking Confucian Ethics Seriously*, 189–190. "For Confucius, observing the rites was a way to develop humaneness (*ren*). [...] [D]isciplining oneself by the rites will bring spiritual transformation. Observing the rites is not merely about the superficial, such as giving gifts of jade and silk or about when to play the bells and drums; it was about changing one's inner being in a fundamental sense." R.L. LITTLEJOHN, *Confucianism: An Introduction*, 27.

<sup>26</sup> "The *Book of Rituals* says that whereas many social conventions and norms can and should change, these basic principles of human relationship should never change. These principles were endorsed by Confucius, as well as by Mencius, Xunzi, and the later generations of Confucians". J. CHAN, "Confucian Attitudes toward Ethical Pluralism," in: *Confucian Political Ethics*, 116.

tain a valuable and lasting harmony in the community and in the entire state. Hence, they are not only moral, but also social and political rules, thanks to which it is possible to differentiate between various social roles and positions, and “to maintain a hierarchical system of human relationships in the spirit of reciprocity and harmony.”<sup>27</sup> This again confirms that Confucianism does not know the distinction between private and social morality. At the same time, Confucian values and ethical norms shaped both family life and political life of Chinese society in a persistent manner.

*Translated by Dominika Bugno-Narecka*

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<sup>27</sup> J. CHAN, “Confucian Attitudes,” 120. The concept of harmony is particularly important in the Chinese thought. Doctrine of the mean describes it as a state where “all co-exists and does not harm one another, and all the ways co-exist and do not interfere with one another.” This is the highest harmony (J. CHAN, “Confucian Attitudes,” 102). Harmony refers to balance and its effect, and “balance is the embodiment of harmony and the way it is achieved.” In a state of moderation and harmony, “everything and everyone in the universe would be in their place and they would co-exist in peace.” Cf. L. ZONGGUI, *Between Tradition and Modernity*, 102–113.

*Taking Confucian Ethics Seriously: Contemporary Theories and Applications.* Ed. Kam-por Yu, Julia Tao, Philip J. Ivanhoe. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010.

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