

# The five virtues of china

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China's long history resulted in the creation of unique identities and philosophies such as Confucianism. It is, in essence, a moral code that has played a critical role in the development of Chinese society. The evolution of the Chinese moral code has resulted in them being referred to as traditional virtues (Bary & Bloom, 1999). These traditions have continued to play a critical even in contemporary China. Even more is the fact that these values are recognized as being integral to the development of the human civilization as well. The five virtues of China include benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity (LecW1Mon). The virtues are considered to be critical to traditional China even though they all came from Confucianism. The basic cultural mindset that springs from this philosophy are that one has to embrace morality which is not only beneficial for the development of a person but also the larger community and Chinese society as a whole (Yao, 2000).

### **Benevolence (ren)**

The first and most important virtue based on this philosophy is Benevolence (ren). It is a virtue that is manifested in the inner mind and is reflected through love and compassion for other people (LecW1Mon). A benevolent person is one who avoids inflicting harm to another person and is not envious of other people as well. The behavioral implication of this virtue is that a person is required to be amicable in conduct. He should not seek wrangles with other people nor aspire to do evil deeds (Yu, 2013).

Benevolence is closely associated with another Confucian principle referred to as the "Golden Rule." According to this principle, what one does not wish

for them, they ought not to do to others. On the flip side of the coin, what one sees as being desirable for oneself, he should be willing to extend the courtesy and grant it to others (Qingping, 2007). The Golden Rule is not only unique to Chinese culture as it is also reflected in other major religions such as Christianity and Islam. In the Chinese context, it is developed through Confucianism with the primary aim of cultivating harmony with other people. As a result of this form of ethical practice, benevolence tends to lead to the identification of the interests of oneself vis-à-vis those of others (LecW1Mon).

A good example of benevolence is reflected in the life of Han Xin who would later become a general of the Han Dynasty approximately 2, 000 years ago. Han Xin lived in poverty so much so that he could not afford to eat. One day, he was offered food by an old woman who was washing her clothes besides a river (Yao, 2000). Han Xin was very grateful for this act of kindness. He promised to reciprocate her acts of kindness in the future. However, the old woman reiterated that she did not offer him food so as to obtain his repayment. In fact, she did not even offer to tell Han Xin her name. However, her virtue that showcased her readiness to help others has been used as an example to show the true expression of benevolence in the generations that came to be in China (Qingping, 2007).

While Ren is traditionally translated to mean “benevolence” as a Confucian virtue, it is also used to mean love, goodwill, and perfected moral character. The central idea is that one should have the readiness and willingness to do that which is righteous (Yu, 2013). A person is encouraged to that which is called for by the moral nature of that particular event or situation. In Chinese

culture and Confucian ideals, ren is often related with other terms that can be used as examples of benevolence such as filial piety (xiao) as well as loyalty (Zhong) (Yao, 2000).

As such, benevolence as a virtue is deeply rooted in familial structures and is emphasized in the relationships between parents and children. The expression of filial piety (xiao) in China assumes the shape of the total submission of a child to a parent and forms the basis of the Confucian model of human relationships; these relationships are inherently hierarchical in nature which also results in critiques against Confucianism for being totalitarian and oppressive in nature (Yu, 2013). However, just as in other societies and civilizations, the Chinese do believe that the family is the cornerstone of the society. As such, the development of harmony at the family level is critical to the attainment of social stability (Qingping, 2007).

Ren also has a political dimension and is the basis of Confucian political theory. Based on this virtue, leaders are encouraged to refrain from treating their subjects in an inhumane manner. Inhumane treatment of subjects may result in a leader losing the right to rule. According to Confucius, the benevolence of a leader is a good indicator that one has been mandated by heaven to rule (Yu, 2013). In Chinese political and religious doctrine, the Mandate of Heaven is a phrase used to justify the rule of the King. While Confucius did not expound on the role of the active will of people in political discourse, he still believed that rulers should pay attention to the wants and needs of their subjects. Mencius, a strong proponent of Confucianism, added

that the state should poll the people's opinion on certain weighty matters (Yao, 2000).

## **Righteousness (Yi)**

Righteousness (Yi) is another virtue of Confucianism and involves thinking and acting from one's point of view. As such, it is a contrast to benevolence and demands rational action. One needs to apply self-restraint so as to resist temptation as well as to develop the fortitude to accomplish one's tasks and duties. The virtue of righteousness is about the preservation of one's integrity (LecW1Mon). A critical element of Yi involves the possession of the moral disposition to do good and to do it competently. It is a complex principle that requires one to have the skill in crafting actions which are morally fit based on a specific set of variables. A good example of this virtue is reflected in the life of Bao Zheng. He was an official who served during the reign of Emperor Renzong of Song and was known for his competency in dispensing justice and fighting corruption in China's bureaucracy. He was known for his wit both as a detective and judge (Yao, 2000).

## **Propriety**

The virtue of propriety is based on ancient sacrificial rites and is concerned with the behavioral norms used to maintain the hierarchy. It has elements that overlap with other virtues such as benevolence. Some of the defining features of propriety include fraternal duty, loyalty, chastity, filial piety, respect, and so forth. Ancient China developed a set of relationships that were deemed as crucial to the development of its society (Yu, 2013). Aside from the relationship that exists between a monarch and its subjects, there

was also an emphasis in developing proper codes of conduct between fathers and sons, the elders and the young, the husband the wife, teachers, and students, and so forth. While these relationships differed in their expression and functionality, they all demanded respect which is akin to some of the principles fronted by the virtue of benevolence (Bary & Bloom, 1999). The spirit of equality occupies a central role in this virtue especially when it comes to relations between unfamiliar entities. In present China, the 10th of September is designated as The Teachers' Day in celebration of teachers. Teachers have always been honored by both the emperors as well as the masses (Qingping, 2007).

### **Wisdom (Zhi)**

The virtue of wisdom (Zhi) refers to the innate knowledge that one uses to judge and distinguish right from wrong; good from evil. It is acknowledged that true wisdom comes from the Buddha Nature and is necessary for the practice and expression of morality. Without wisdom and knowledge, it is impossible for one to become a person of virtue (Yu, 2013). Confucius reiterated that the wise are devoid of perplexities thus emphasizing the act of knowing. He warned people of the danger of just accumulating knowledge for the sake of it and made it clear that this virtue has to do with experiencing things. As such, wisdom is an expression of the individual expression as one matures. It is a virtue that requires one to be self-aware and resourceful (LecW1Mon).

## **Fidelity**

The fifth virtue is known as fidelity. It is also referred to as integrity, sincerity, faith, and trust. It is central to all the five virtues as it allows the other virtues to be manifested. In the external sense, it means that one's actions must match his words. Internally, it points to the need for one's words and mind to operate in unison (Yao, 2000). Fidelity is seen as being central to the perfection of human nature since, without it, the other virtues lose their authenticity. While this virtue is inherent in a child, it stands the risk of being lost due to external factors and influences. When teaching his students, Confucius taught his disciples to be honest about their learning process (LecW1Mon).

In contemporary China, these virtues are used to supplement the law. The law serves to restrain people and does not teach a man to move towards perfection. These virtues attempt to feed the conscience with principles that lead to holistic development (Yao, 2000). Additionally, they are useful in the development of a stable society that has a clear identity on the roles of leaders, subjects, and institutions.