

A CONFUCIAN ADAGE FOR LIFE: EMPATHY (*SHU*) IN THE *ANALECTS*

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In Chinese literature the *locus classicus* of what in the West has been called “the golden rule” is a passage from the *Lunyu* 論語 (*Analects*)¹ in which Zigong 子貢, one of Confucius’ favourite disciples asks his Master about a principle that can guide man’s behaviour:

Zigong asked: “Is there an adage that can guide us throughout our life?”

The Master said: “It is *shu*! What you don’t want done to yourself, do not do to others.”²

¹ Considered the main source of the Master’s teachings, for more than two thousand years, the *Analects* have been an essential focal point in the philosophical and political discourse concerning ancient, modern and contemporary China. Several sections were written after Confucius’ death, while about half the text, and in particular the last of the twenty books comprising it, date to a later period. It originally circulated in a fluid form consisting of scattered heterogeneous collections of conversations, aphorisms and anecdotes that, in all likelihood, around the mid 3rd c. B.C., were drawn up in several versions of the work. Side by side with the vulgate, the earliest exemplary manuscript of the work is the text discovered in 1973 in the tomb of Liu Xiu 劉修, Prince Huai 懷 of Zhongshan 中山, who died in the year 55 B.C. at Dingzhou 定州 (in Hebei province). A total of 7576 characters of this manuscript have been identified – about half the text passed down. On the origin and textual narrative of the *Lunyu* passed down and of the Dingzhou manuscript, see, for instance, D.C. Lau (transl.), *Confucius: The Analects (Lun yü)* (Hong Kong 1983), pp. 262-74; Anne Cheng, “Lun yü,” in Michael Loewe (ed.), *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley 1993), pp. 313-323; Ernst Bruce Brooks – A. Taeko Brooks, *The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors* (New York 1998), pp. 1, 201-256; Roger T. Ames – Henry Rosemont (eds.), *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York 1998), pp. 7-10; Hebeisheng Wenwu yanjiusuo Dingzhou Han mu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 河北省文物研究所定州漢墓竹簡整理小組, *Dingzhou Han mu zhujian Lunyu* 定州漢墓竹簡論語 (Beijing 1997).

² 子貢問曰：「有一言而可以終身行之者？」子曰：「其恕乎！」己所不欲，勿施於人。」 *Lunyu* XV, 24. The “golden rule” theme in Chinese tradition has been the subject of numerous comprehensive debates over the past few decades. The most important studies in this regard include: Fung Yu-lan [Feng Youlan], *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York 1948), pp. 42-44; Herbert Fingarette, “Following

In the sentence “What you don’t want done to yourself, do not do to others” (*ji suo bu yu, wu shi yu ren* 己所不欲，勿施於人) Confucius defined *shu* 恕, a character variably translated as “reciprocity,” “consideration of others” or “do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” *Shu* is one of the most widely debated and controversial assertions of Confucian ethics, not only because of the alleged analogy with the biblical “golden rule,” but also because of its semantic richness, as we discover from reading the *Analects* and other Confucian writings.³ Confucius perceived in *shu* a basic requirement for anyone setting out to lead a virtuous life, in conformity with the *mores* of the sages of ancient times, as inherited and elaborated by Confucius and his followers.

Shu recurs again in *Lunyu* IV,15, where it imposes itself with greater force and incisiveness, together with another key concept of Confucian ethics, *zhong* 忠, which contributes to defining the semantic area of both terms. This time, it is the Master who leads off with a statement and one of his disciples, Zengzi 曾子, who offers a plausible interpretation of his laconic statements:

the ‘One Thread’ of the *Analects*,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47 (1979), pp. 373-405; Robert E. Allinson, “On the Negative Version of the Golden Rule as Formulated by Confucius,” *New Asia Academic Bulletin* 3 (1982), pp. 305-315; *id.*, “The Confucian Golden Rule: A Negative Formulation,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 12 (1985) 3, pp. 305-315; Daniel L. Hall – Roger T. Ames, *Thinking through Confucius* (Albany, NY 1987), pp. 283-304; Philip J. Ivanhoe, “Re-weaving the ‘One Thread’ of the *Analects*,” *Philosophy East and West* 40 (1990) 1, pp. 17-30; David S. Nivison, “Golden Rule Arguments in Chinese Moral Philosophy,” in *id.*, *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy* (Chicago *et al.* 1996), pp. 59-76; *id.*, “*Zhong* (*Chung*) and *Shu*: Loyalty and Reciprocity,” in Antonio S. Cua (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy* (New York – London 2003), pp. 882-885; Heiner Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age. A Reconstruction under the Aspect of Breakthrough toward Postconventional Thinking* (Albany, NY 1993), pp. 137-148. Wang Qingjie, “The Golden Rule and Interpersonal Care – From a Confucian Perspective,” *Philosophy East and West* 49 (1999) 4, pp. 415-438; Sin Yee Chan, “Can *Shu* Be the One Word that Serves as the Guiding Principle of Caring Action?” *Philosophy East and West* 50 (2000) 4, pp. 507-524; Bryan W. Van Norden, “Unweaving the ‘One Thread’ of *Analects* 4:15,” in *id.* (ed.), *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays* (Oxford 2002), pp. 216-236; Bo Mou, “A Reexamination of the Structure and Content of Confucius’ Version of the Golden Rule,” *Philosophy East and West* 54 (2004) 2, pp. 218-247.

³ For an excursus of the concept of *shu* in *Hanfeizi* 韓非子, *Guoyu* 國語, *Guanzi* 管子, *Zuozhuan* 佐傳 and *Yanzi chunqiu* 晏子春秋, see H. Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age*, pp. 133-148. For an analysis of *Lunyu* IV,15 see B.W. Van Norden, “Unweaving the ‘One Thread’ of *Analects* 4:15.”

The Master said: “Shen! In my Way there is one thread binding all together.” Zengzi said: “Indeed!” When the Master had left, the disciples asked: “What did he mean?” Zengzi [Shen] replied: “The Master’s Way consists of *zhong* and *shu* and that’s all.”⁴

Zengzi, here interpreter of the Master’s teachings, explains *shu*, which according to Confucius means “what you don’t want done to yourself, do not do to others,” and *zhong* as the unique and indispensable path along the Way (*dao*). *Shu* and *zhong* are inextricably interwoven, aimed at a virtuous and exemplary *modus vivendi* that only a gentleman (*junzi*) is able to achieve.

Ernst Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks maintain that *Lunyu* IV,15 is a later interpolation, subsequent to the rest of Book IV, one of the oldest in the work. Sharing this hypothesis, in a very intriguing article Bryan Van Norden, who ascribes *Lunyu* IV,15 to Zengzi’s followers, has argued that the *terminus a quo* for the interpolation would be Zengzi’s death in 436 BC. He does not deny that the claim expressed in the passage, that is that *zhong* and *shu* constitute the “one thread” that binds together Confucius’ teaching, may be true but, according to him, the assertion that *zhong* and *shu* were two cardinal virtues promoted by Confucius as suggested in *Lunyu* IV,15 is not supported by the rest of the *Analects*.⁵

Zhong versus shu

In order to fully understand Zengzi’s assertion it is advisable to examine the semantic variability of *shu* and *zhong* in other passages in the *Analects* by comparing them with several occurrences of the two terms in other texts of the Confucian tradition. Commenting the practices of *zhong* and *shu*, the *Zhongyong* 中庸 (On the practice of the mean), traditionally ascribed to Zisi 子思, Confucius’ grandson and Zengzi’s disciple, reads:

One who is *zhong* and *shu* will never stray from the Way. What he does not wish done to him he does not do unto others. The way of the true gentleman involves four things, and I, Qiu (Confucius), have so far been incapable of any of them. In serving my father, I have been incapable of doing what is expected of a son; in serving my lord, I have been incapable of doing what is expected of a minister; in serving my older brother, I have been incapable of doing what is expected of a younger brother; in

⁴ 子曰：「參乎！吾道一以貫之。」曾子曰：「唯！」子出，門人問曰：「何謂也？」曾子曰：「夫子之道，忠恕而已矣。」 *Lunyu* IV,15.

⁵ Bruce Brooks and Taeko-Brooks, *The Original Analects*, pp. 136, 149. Van Norden, “Unweaving the ‘One Thread’ of *Analects* 4:15,” pp. 217, 223-224.

reaching out to friends, I have been incapable of doing what is expected of a friend.⁶

Commenting on *Lunyu* IV,15, Huang Kan 皇侃 (488–545) interpreted *zhong* as *jin zhong xin ye* 盡中心也 (to fully focus on one’s heart-and-mind) and *shu* as *cun wo yi duo yu ren ye* 忖我以度於人也 (to ponder on oneself in order to measure the others). According to this interpretation, starting from oneself is the only way to analyse and understand the others, and, in the words of Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249), *zhong* is *qing zhi jin ye* 情之盡也 (to fully realize one’s feelings/emotions), while *shu* is *fan qing yi tong wu ye* 反情以同物也 (to reflect on one’s feelings/emotions in order to have sympathy with other beings).⁷ Xing Bing 邢昺 (931–1010), following Huang Kan, explained *zhong* as *jin zhong xin ye* 盡中心也 (to fully focus on one’s heart-and-mind) and *shu* as *cun ji duo wu ye* 忖己度物也 (pondering on oneself to measure other beings).⁸

Moving from the etymology of *zhong* 忠, which is composed of two words, *zhong* 中 (center) and *xin* 心 (heart-and-mind), Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) explained its meaning with the locution *jinji* 盡己 (to fully exert oneself, to do the utmost), or *jiejìn* 竭盡 (to do one’s best, to exhaust oneself). He explained *shu* 恕, composed of the words *ru* 如 (to follow) and *xin* 心 (heart-and-mind) as *tuiji* 推己 (to extend oneself), in the sense of to be empathetic towards others.⁹ He quoted a commentary and then Master Cheng’s 程 (one of the Cheng brothers) interpretation:

Someone said: “To focus on the heart-and-mind corresponds to *zhong*, to follow the heart-and-mind corresponds to *shu*.” This indeed captures the meaning. Master Cheng said: “Moving from oneself to approach other creatures is *ren* 仁 (benevolence, humanity). Extending oneself to other

⁶ 忠恕違道不遠，施諸己而不願，亦勿施於人。君子之道四，丘未能一焉：所求於子以事父，未能也；所求乎臣以事君，未能也；所求乎弟以事兄，未能也；所求乎朋友先施之，未能也。 *Zhongyong* XIII, in Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注 (Beijing 1983), vol. 2, p. 72; transl. Daniel K. Gardner, *The Four Books: the Basic Teachings of the Later Confucian Tradition, Translations with Introduction and Commentary* (Indianapolis – Cambridge, 2007), p. 117.

⁷ Huang Kan 皇侃, *Lunyu jijie yishu* 論語集解義疏 (Taipei 1968), ch. 4, pp. 31-32; see also E. Slingerland, *Confucius. Analects. With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis – Cambridge 2003), p. 34.

⁸ *Lunyu zhushu* 論語注疏, in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (Taipei 1989), vol. 8, chap. 4, p. 4.

⁹ Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), chap. 2, p. 72.

creatures is *shu* (empathy). This means being ‘not far from the Way’.
[...]”¹⁰

As in the *Analects*, so in the *Zhongyong*, the two virtues are linked. It is worth dwelling first on the assertion *zhong shu wei dao bu yuan* 忠恕違道不遠 (One who is *zhong* and *shu* will never stray from the Way): this sentence echoes what was declared in *Lunyu* IV,15, *wu dao yi yi guan zhi* 吾道一以貫之 (in my Way there is one thread binding all together), namely, in the interpretation by Zengzi, “the Master’s Way consists of *zhong* and *shu*.”¹¹ It is clear how *zhong* and *shu* are two essential conditions regarding the conduct of the gentleman and, however humble Confucius is in admitting he has not yet achieved them, he is nevertheless wholly projected towards them in the desire to attain an exemplary conduct.

But what exactly is meant by *zhong*, and what implications does it have when related to *shu*? According to Xu Shen 許慎 (ca. 55–149), the author of the first systematic dictionary of Chinese characters, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, the meaning of *zhong* 忠 is *jing* 敬 (respect, reverence) and he adds: *jin xin wei zhong* 盡心為忠 (to give full realization to one’s heart-and-mind is what is meant by *zhong*).¹² This amounts to saying that he who is *zhong* shows reverence as he performs his tasks with absolute devotion, dedicating the whole of himself. *Shu* 恕 is instead generically defined by Xu Shen as *ren* 仁 (benevolence, humanity), while Mengzi 孟子 (fourth cent. B.C.) is more precise, claiming that it is something close to benevolence, that is a virtue that must be strengthened in order to attain benevolence.¹³

Whoever wrote *Lunyu* IV,12 and *Zhongyong*, XIV – according to tradition, Zengzi or his followers in one case, Zisi or his followers in the other –

¹⁰ 或曰：「中心為忠，如心為恕。」於義亦通。程子曰：「以己及物，仁也；推己及物，恕也，違道不遠是也。[...]」Zhu Xi, *Sishu zhangju jizhu*, p. 72. See also Daniel K. Gardner, *Zhu Xi’s Reading of the Analects. Canon, Commentary, and the Classical Tradition* (New York 2003), pp. 158-159.

¹¹ *Lunyu* IV,15.

¹² Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注 (Shanghai 1984), chap. 10B, p. 25b. *Jinxin* 盡心 (To give full realization to one’s heart-and-mind) is the title of *Mengzi* VIIA,1. The incipit of the chapter reads: 孟子曰：「盡其心者，知其性，則知天矣。」“For a man to give full realization to his heart-and-mind is for him to understand his own nature, and to understand his own nature is to understand Heaven.” See also D.C. Lau, *Mencius* (Hong Kong 1979, repr. 1984), p. 265 and Bryan W. Van Norden (transl.), *Mengzi. With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis – Cambridge 2008), p. 171.

¹³ 強恕而行，求仁莫近焉。“Strengthen your empathy and you will find that this is the shortest way to benevolence.” *Mengzi* VIIA,4.

it cannot be denied that these texts emphasize a close and essential relation between *zhong* and *shu*.

The primary meaning of *zhong* is loyalty, a cardinal ethical norm in Chinese political culture during the Chunqiu (770–453 BC) and Zhanguo (453–221 BC) periods. Officials and ministers were urged to preserve *zhong* even at the expense of their lives, since without loyal ministers the state would perish. In an illuminating essay, Yuri Pines has analyzed the implications of the concept of *zhong* in the manuscript texts found in the tomb of a high-ranking mid-Zhanguo official at the site of Guodian, in Hubei province, in particular the bamboo slips that contain miscellaneous sayings known as *Yucong* 語叢 (Collected Sayings), *Lu Mugong wen Zisi* 魯穆公問子思 (Duke Mu of Lu asks Zisi) and *Zhongxin zhi dao* 忠信之道 (The Way of loyalty and truthfulness).¹⁴ In *Zhongxin zhi dao* it is stated that *zhong, ren zhi shi ye* 忠, 仁之實也 (loyalty is the essence of benevolence),¹⁵ which denotes the centrality of *zhong* in this text. From the Guodian texts, we may infer a dichotomy between blood ties and ruler-minister ties, in which family ties are favoured over political obligations. Moreover, the ruler-minister relations, as Yuri Pines remarks, are explained in reciprocal, egalitarian terms, rather than hierarchical terms. This has shed a new light on our understanding of *zhong*: a minister should be loyal to his ruler in the sense that he will preserve the paramount position of a ruler as the single source of political authority without renouncing his freedom to leave him if his behaviour is improper. In fact, in *Yucong* 1 we read that *jun chen, peng you, qi ze zhe* 君臣, 朋友, 其擇者 (ruler and minister are like friends: they select each other).¹⁶ And in *Yucong* it is stated that if the ruler and minister are unable to stay together, their relation can be interrupted:

A father is not hated. The ruler is like a father: he is not hated. He is like a flag for the three armies – he [represents] correctness. Yet, he differs from the father: when ruler and minister are unable to stay together, you can sever [these relations]; when you dislike [the ruler], you may leave

¹⁴ For an exhaustive analysis of the concept of *zhong* in the political sphere of pre-imperial China, also in the light of the analysis of recently acquired manuscripts, see Yuri Pines, “Friends or Foes. Changing Concepts of Ruler-Minister Relations and the Notion of Loyalty in Pre-Imperial China,” *Monumenta Serica* 50 (2002), pp. 35–74.

¹⁵ *Zhongxin zhi dao*, slip 8; Jingmen shi bowuguan bian 荊門市博物館編 (ed.), *Guodian Chumu zhujian* 郭店楚墓竹簡 (Beijing 1998), p. 163; see also Li Ling 李零, *Guodian Chu jian jiao duji* 郭店楚簡校讀記 (Beijing 2002), p. 100.

¹⁶ *Yucong* 1, slip 87; Jingmen shi bowuguan bian, *Guodian Chumu zhujian*, p. 197; Li Ling, *Guodian*, p. 160; Pines, “Friends or Foes,” p. 41.

him; when he acts improperly/unrighteously towards you, you should not accept it.¹⁷

Yuri Pines has demonstrated that the concept of loyal minister in the Chunqiu times differed from the subsequent concept in the Zhanguo times. In Chunqiu times, the minister was to be faithful and obedient to his ruler,

with an understanding that the minister's highest goal was to serve the "altars of soil and grain" (*sheji* 社稷), that is the state or the populace in general. Thus, when a minister could claim that his actions were in accord with what he believed to be the state's interests, he had the right to defy the ruler's orders, and even act against the ruler. This notion of loyalty to the altars allowed, as we shall see, considerable freedom of action to the ministers – largely at the expense of the rulers.¹⁸

The minister was to be obedient to his ruler, but he was primarily expected to pursue state interests. This attitude resulted from the balanced combination of two virtues from which the compound *zhongxin* 忠信 derived: *zhong*, loyalty for the sake of the state (represented by the expression "altars of soil and grain"), and *xin* 信, unconditional faithfulness and obedience to the ruler. But there were instances in which a good minister could not obey the ruler's orders, that is, when the ruler's orders were incompatible with the state's interests. In these cases, a good minister was expected to act on behalf of the state and disobey the ruler, being *zhong* rather than *xin*, since the interests of the state clashed with the principle of faithfulness and obedience to the ruler. Thus loyalty prevailed over fidelity as the state interests prevailed over the ruler's interest: *zhong* and *xin* were complementary when the ruler's and the state's interests coincided. The concept of loyalty changed if applied to a lower social level, that is the *shi* 士 stratum, whose position was not hereditary but contractual. Their life depended on the emoluments granted by their superior, therefore their fidelity to and dependence on him were practically absolute. Things changed in the fifth and fourth centuries BC when the hereditary aristocrats lost their power and position and the members of the *shi* could ascend to the higher echelons of the government apparatus. Therefore the *shi* formulated a new concept of loyalty congenial to their new condition: it was no longer loyalty to the state (or altars of soil and grain) nor was it absolute fidelity to their superiors; rather, it was a more abstract concept of loyalty in the name of an ethical principle named

¹⁷ 父亡惡，君猶父也，其弗惡也；猶三軍之（旗）也，正也。所以異於父；君臣不相在也，則可己；不悅，可去也；不義而加諸己，弗受也。 *Yucong* 3, slips 1-5; Pines, "Friends or Foes," p. 41.

¹⁸ Pines, "Friends or Foes," p. 44.

dao. The *shi par excellence*, Confucius, proposed the following definition of “great minister”:

What is called a great minister is one who serves the ruler according to the *dao*, and when he is unable to do so, he stops [serving him].¹⁹

In other words, Confucius and his followers adopted the Chunqiu notion of loyalty to the ruler provided that he was a good ruler. They set a normative ideal of behaviour, the *dao*, which was supposed to be followed both by the ruler and by a good minister. In this way, they established a new order in which the *dao*, which was understood and interpreted by them, was identified with the universal principle – it replaced the Chunqiu “altars of soil and grain” – which governed human relations. Therefore the relation between ruler and minister was the following: the minister owed loyalty to his ruler and the ruler was supposed to treat his minister with propriety, according to the *li* 禮.²⁰

A *shi* wanted to be acknowledged and respected by his ruler, and only then did he show him profound loyalty. “A *shi* would die for the sake of the one who profoundly understands him” (*shi wei zhi ji zhe si* 士為知己者死), we read in *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策:²¹ from this statement it becomes clear that what the *shi* demanded was reciprocity in ruler-minister relations. This concept is expressed also in *Lunyu* II,20, which reads:

Ji Kangzi²² asked: “To make the people be respectful, loyal and zealous, what should one do?” The Master said: “Regard them with dignity, and they will be respectful. Be filial to your elders and caring to your juniors, and they will be loyal. Raise the good and instruct those who are unable, and they will be zealous.”²³

Thus, it was the notion of reciprocity, in the name of the *dao*, that linked the two notions of *zhong* and *shu* in the *Analects*. *Zhong* was not unilateral but, like *shu*, it implied reciprocity.

¹⁹ 所謂大臣者以道事君不可則止。 *Lunyu* XI,24.

²⁰ 君使臣以禮，臣事君以忠 (A ruler should employ a minister according to ritual, the minister should serve the ruler with loyalty). *Lunyu* III,19. Pines, “Friends or Foes,” pp. 53-58.

²¹ He Jianzhang 何建章, *Zhanguo ce zhushi* 戰國策注釋 (Beijing 1991), “Zhao ce” 趙策 1, 18,4:617. Pines, “Friends or Foes,” p. 58.

²² The head of the three most influential families of Lu, who were *de facto* rulers of Lu. He died in 469 BC.

²³ 季康子問：「使民敬，忠以勤，如之何？」子曰：「臨之以莊，則敬；孝慈，則忠；舉善而教不能，則勤。」

More recently, Paul R. Goldin has observed that the term *zhong* in many Eastern Zhou contexts and throughout the imperial period indeed means “loyalty,” but in other contexts it has different meanings. In early Confucian ethics *zhong* should not be rendered as “loyalty” but as “consciousness” or “being honest with oneself in dealing with others.” He argues that the rendering of *zhong* as “doing one’s best” seems to be inspired by the medieval notion of *zhong* as *jinji* 盡己, which he renders as “making the most of himself,” therefore he concludes: “Following such Neo-Confucian usage is anachronistic, to say the least, especially since *zhong* appears in early Confucian (and even pre-Confucian) discourse long before the emergence of the dispute over human nature.”²⁴ In my opinion, the translation of *zhong* as loyalty, intended not as unconditional faithfulness but as honesty to oneself and to the others, a condition the individual achieves by focusing on his heart-and-mind and doing his utmost (as explained before), is not in contradiction with the reading proposed by Goldin. Moreover, both readings require what Goldin calls “to be vigilantly self-aware,” thus imply doing one’s best. *Zhong* is loyalty and absolute dedication which transcends all individualism, the purely personal, in the attempt to achieve completeness, moral integrity and sincerity to oneself and to the others. It is, as Yuri Pines put it, loyalty in the name of an ethical principle, the *dao*.

In the light of its explicit association with *zhong* (in *Lunyu* and in *Zhongyong*), *shu* was interpreted as the negative formula of the “Confucian golden rule,” while *zhong*, symmetrical with and complementary to it, was equated with the positive formula. In reaching this conclusion, Feng Youlan remarks how in the *Zhongyong shu* corresponds precisely to what Confucius defined in *Lunyu* XV,24 with the classical negative formula; indeed, the mention of *zhong* and *shu* in *Zhongyong* is followed by a paraphrase of the negative formula of the golden rule, and shortly after, the implicit precept is “behave towards the others (father, king, elder brother, friend) as befits your role.” And it is in the latter assertion, corresponding, according to Feng Youlan, to the concept of *zhong*, that he perceives the golden rule in its positive formula.²⁵ In other words, *zhong* refers to the actions performed towards the others precisely as one would have them performed towards himself, while *shu* refers to the actions not performed towards the others precisely as one would not have them performed towards himself. *Shu* is arduous to achieve. In fact, when the disciple Zigong expressed to his Master the intention of not doing to the others what he did not want for himself Confucius admonished him: “Zigong, you have not yet reached this

²⁴ Paul R. Goldin, “When Zhong 忠 does not mean loyalty,” *Dao* 2008/7, p. 170.

²⁵ Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, pp. 43-44.

point!”²⁶ Thus, *zhong* and *shu* are two aspects of one and the same principle woven together to produce a “unifying thread” running along the Way indicated by the Master. This interesting, albeit controversial, interpretation is open to further reflections on the meaning of the two terms: the existence of a complementary relation between them cannot be denied as it is already foreshadowed in *Lunyu* IV,15, although the rich underlying implications are much more comprehensive and complex than the simple articulation in positive (*zhong*) or negative terms (*shu*) of the same precept. Moreover, if *zhong* were simply the positive formula and *shu* the negative formula, it would be logical to assume that, since no logical difference exists between the two terms, in some contexts one should exclude the other. In fact, Feng Youlan founds his thesis on two passages from the *Analects* in which the golden rule is set out in negative and positive terms, although in the same passages no mention is made of *shu* or *zhong*. The first passage reads as follows:

Zhonggong asked about *ren*. The Master said: “When you are in public behave as though you were receiving an important guest. When employing the common people behave as if you were conducting a great sacrifice. What you do not want for yourself, do not do to others. In this way you will not encounter resentment in your public or private life.”²⁷

Here, the golden rule is not summed up in the character *shu*, but rather expressed explicitly in the formula: *ji suo bu yu, wu shi yu ren* 己所不欲，勿施於人 (What you do not want for yourself, do not do to others), a precept that, moreover, is defined in the same passage as an essential component of human benevolence (*ren*).

The second passage of the *Analects* mentioned by Feng Youlan is the following:

Zigong asked: “What about him who is broadly generous with the people and is able to help the multitudes? Can we define this *ren*?” The Master said: “Why stop at *ren*? Such a person should surely be called a Sage! Even Yao and Shu would find such a task arduous! The term *ren* means that when you desire to get established yourself, you help others to get established; and when you desire success for yourself you help others to

²⁶ 子貢曰：「我不欲人之加諸我也，吾亦欲無加諸人。」子曰：「賜也，非爾所及也。」 *Lunyu* V,12.

²⁷ 仲弓問仁。子曰：「出門如見大賓，使民如承大祭。己所不欲，勿施於人。在邦無怨，在家無怨。」仲弓曰：「雍雖不敏，請事斯語矣。」 *Lunyu* XII,2.

succeed. The ability to take as analogy what is near at hand can simply be called the method of attaining *ren*.²⁸

Also in this passage, the positive formula, as expressed in the sentence *neng jin qu pi* 能近取譬 (the ability to take as analogy what is near at hand) is not explicitly equated with the term *zhong*.

I shall shortly come back to the two passages cited. For the time being, I shall merely point out that *zhong* or *shu* are not mentioned in them.

Indeed, the two virtues are specific to a morally irreprehensible conduct as far as family and social relations are concerned, but what distinguishes them is not only the type of action they imply, but above all the recipient of this action. Returning to the passage from the *Zhongyong* mentioned above, while in the first assertion, which can presumably be equated with the negative formula of the golden rule, “What he does not wish done to him he does not do unto others” (*shi zhu ji er bu yuan, yi wu shi yu ren* 施諸己而不願, 亦勿施於人), no explicit reference is made to family or social relations, in the second one four fundamental types of relation are explicitly mentioned: between son and father, subject and king, younger brother and elder brother and lastly between friends. The behavioural model described, both in a family setting (son-father, younger-elder brother) and at the social level (subject-king, friend-friend) is the one specific to him who occupies a lower, subordinate, position. Clearly, the precept illustrated here is: “Behave towards your superiors as you would have your subordinates act towards you,” which seems to extend and complement the definition of *zhong* given in *Lunyu* II,20: *xiao ci, ze zhong* 孝慈, 則忠 “Be filial to your elders and caring to your juniors and they will be loyal.”²⁹

From this passage it is clear that *zhong* is the utmost loyalty the ruler will get if he manifests filial love to his elders and care to his subordinates.

The importance of family and social relations in defining the golden rule is further emphasized by a passage from the *Daxue* 大學 (The Great Learning), a text traditionally ascribed to Master Zeng:

²⁸ 子貢曰：「如有博施於民而能濟眾，如何？可謂仁乎？」子曰：「何事於仁！必也聖乎！堯，舜其猶病諸！夫仁者，己欲立而立人，己欲達而達人。能近取譬，可謂仁之方已。」 *Lunyu* VI,30.

²⁹ This is the theory proposed by David Nivison, who states that *zhong* and *shu* are hierarchic opposites. *Shu* normally has a downward direction whereas *zhong* “bids me to be strict with *myself* in dealing with another in an equal or higher position, disregarding my own feelings about myself if I must, and holding myself to at least the same high standard of behavior toward the other that I would expect him to observe toward me if our positions were reversed.” Nivison, “*Zhong (Chung) and Shu: Loyalty and Reciprocity*,” p. 884.

What you dislike in your superior, do not use in employing your inferior; what you dislike in your inferior, do not use in serving your superior; what you dislike in the one who precedes you, do not use in dealing with the one who comes after you; what you dislike in the one who comes after you, do not use in dealing with the one who precedes you. This is what is called the method of the “measuring square.”³⁰

Xieju 絜矩 (measuring-square), is the rule governing human relations.³¹ Zhu Xi glosses *xie* 絜 as *du* 度 (to measure) and *ju* 矩 as *suoyi wei fang* 所以為方 (an instrument for squaring). Elsewhere he explains the concept in these terms:

What is called “measuring square” is [the carpenter’s] square, that is the heart-and-mind. What my heart-and-mind wishes corresponds to what others wish. If I wish to show filial and brotherly love and be caring to the young, I will wish others, like me, show filial and brotherly love and be caring to the young [...]

Therefore the gentleman perceives that the heart-and-mind of others and his own are similar. Hence he always uses his own heart-and-mind to measure the heart-and-mind of others, so that all will become tranquil.³²

A gentleman perceives that the heart-and-mind of others and his own are similar, therefore he considers and understands the feelings and wishes of others starting from his own.

Zhu Xi further comments that “*shu* also corresponds to the meaning of *xieju*” (*shu yi shi xieju zhi yi* 恕, 亦是契矩之意), an equation which he infers from the last sentence of the *Daxue* passage which he comments as follows:

³⁰ 所惡於上，毋以使下；所惡於下，毋以事上；所惡於前，毋以先後；所惡於後，毋以從前；所惡於右，毋以交於左；所惡於左，毋以交於右：此之謂絜矩之道。 *Daxue*, in Zhu Xi, *Sishu zhangju jizhu*, chap. 10, p. 10; transl. D.S. Nivison, “Golden Rule Arguments,” p. 64 (modified), see also Andrew Plaks (transl.), Ta Hsüeh and Chung Yung (*The Highest Order of Cultivation and On the Practice of the Mean*) (London 2003), pp. 15-16.

³¹ Andrew Plaks remarks that the first word in the compound expression *xieju* is an obscure verb meaning “to tie,” possibly a graphic substitute for a near homophone meaning “to grip.” The compound is generally understood in the sense of measuring, in the sense of “taking the moral measure” of one’s proper role in the ordering of the world. Plaks, Ta Hsüeh and Chung Yung, p. 109.

³² 所謂絜矩者，矩者，心也，我心之所欲，即他人之所欲也。我欲孝弟而慈，必欲他人皆如我之孝弟而慈。[...] 是以君子見人之心與己之心同，故必以己度人之心，使皆得其平。” Li Jingde 黎靖德, *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類 (Beijing 1985), ch. 16, p. 361.

If you do not wish your superiors not to observe ritual propriety toward you, considering this you must measure the heart-and-mind of your subordinates and dare not treat them without observing ritual propriety. If you do not wish your subordinates to be disloyal toward you, considering this you must measure the heart-and-mind of your superiors and dare not serve your superiors with disloyalty.³³

In this case, the *Daxue* defines the behavioural model governing the relations between men of different social rank by the term *xieju*, “measuring square,” namely, to take oneself as the model for understanding and assessing the feelings of others, and consequently regulating one’s conduct towards them. Proper conduct towards an inferior is implemented by means of the *li* 禮, the traditional ritual norms of kindness, courtesy and good manners required to win the confidence of the people, while *zhong*, as we have said before, is “to serve with loyalty one’s superiors.”

Unlike the passage cited in *Zhongyong*, where the behavioural model described is that of someone in a subordinate position *vis-à-vis* a superior, the *Daxue* takes both situations into consideration, that of the subordinate towards the superior and vice versa, at the same time respecting their respective roles. The “measuring square” applies in all the situations, even though a hierarchic relation is postulated. One passage from the *Lunyu* definitely supports this interpretation:

Duke Ding asked: “How should a ruler employ his ministers, and how should ministers serve their ruler?” Confucius replied: “A ruler should employ his ministers by observing ritual propriety (*li*) and ministers should serve their ruler by their loyalty (*zhong*).”³⁴

As for the ruler, as Confucius emphasizes, it is through the respect of traditional rules of social conduct, that is, by expressing magnanimity, respect and courtesy to his subjects, that he can exercise a virtuous rule, relying on moral virtue rather than on the coercive power of laws and punishment. In

³³ 如不欲上之無禮於我，則必以此度下之心，而亦不敢以此無禮使之。不欲下之不忠於我，則必以此度上之心，而亦不敢以此不忠事之。Zhu Xi, *Sishu zhangju jizhu*, ch. 10, p. 10.

³⁴ 定公問：「君使臣，臣事君，如之何？」孔子對曰：「君使臣以禮，臣事君以忠。」*Lunyu* III,19. Another definition of *zhong* as the loyal and faithful conduct of a minister towards his king is found in *Lunyu* V,19: 子張問曰：「令尹子文三任為令尹，無喜色；三已之，無慍色。舊令尹之政，必以告新令尹。何如？」子曰：「忠矣。」[...] Zichang asked: “The Prime Minister Ziwen was three times appointed prime minister, and showed no sign of delight. He was three times dismissed and showed no sign of resentment. As outgoing prime minister, he always informed the incoming prime minister on the affairs of state of his office. What do you think of him? The Master said: ‘He doubtless acted with loyalty.’”

these conditions, he is able to give orders to his ministers, who consequently will relate to him with the greatest loyalty and absolute dedication.

Zhong is, above all, that condition of loyalty that inextricably binds the individual to his superior when the latter exercises his power above all in compliance with the ritual norms. In the *Lunyu*, loyalty (*zhong*), respect (*jing* 敬) and zeal/diligence (*qin* 勤) are described as the virtuous modes of people's behaviour.³⁵ Man must therefore nurture filial love (*xiao* 孝) towards his elders and parental love towards his children (*ci* 慈): only then will the maximum loyalty and absolute devotion be obtained from his subordinates. This is what is prescribed by the traditional ritual rules, the *li*: kindness and respect are an integral part of the traditional rules of conduct inherited from the ancient sages and, in the case of the ruler, an essential prerequisite for assuring the loyalty and absolute devotion of the people. In this sense, *li* and *zhong* – one referring to the ruler and the other to the people – are complementary in a relation similar to that linking *shu* and *zhong*.

In the assertion “What you do not want for yourself, do not do to others” – which for Confucius amounts to *shu* – what is expressed by “do” is *shi* 施, a character usually used to indicate actions performed towards one's subordinates or one's peers. Furthermore, the fact that the golden rule expressed by *shu* refers mainly to the individual occupying a higher-ranking position toward an inferior is inferred from the above-mentioned *Lunyu* XII, 2, where it is stated that: “When employing the common people behave as if you were officiating a great sacrifice. What you do not want for yourself, do not do to others.” In this passage, those on the receiving end of the actions are the people, who must not be treated roughly or severely but, on the contrary, politely and with dignity, in accordance with the ritual norms – whence Zhu Xi's interpretation “If you do not wish your superiors to not observe ritual propriety towards you.” It is precisely the respect of the ritual norms that safeguards the respective roles in a family and that guarantees the maintenance of social order.³⁶ Thus, in order to be accepted, the ruler

³⁵ *Lunyu* II,20.

³⁶ These considerations led David S. Nivison to formulate another interpretation of the Confucian golden rule: *zhong*, which he interprets as “doing one's best,” “committing the whole of oneself,” “considering oneself responsible for one's actions” and *shu*, consideration for others, are concretely conceived of in terms of family, social and political relations. *Shu* is always addressed to those who occupy a subordinate position, while *zhong* is the attitude of loyalty towards one's superiors or, at most, towards one's peers (in connection with this, Kant asserted that Confucius was unaware of a genuine morality and that the teachings contained in his works were simply a moral doctrine for rulers). Therefore Nivison concludes that they are universal laws, albeit somewhat attenuated: *shu* is a directive intended to amend or suspend the rules (on the strength of one's own perception and experience) and is therefore asso-

should respect his public function which consists of safeguarding peace and welfare. As Roetz remarks: “Political rule is measured by the standard of a just give and take. [...] Applied to politics, the golden rule may have a moderating and humanizing effect. It helps to remind the powerful that the ruled are human beings with feelings and expectations like themselves, and should be treated as such.”³⁷

The Hypothesis of Herbert Fingarette: The Analogy with the Christian Golden Rule

Before going on to examine the important function of the *li* in the dialectical relation between *zhong* and *shu*, it is worth dwelling for a moment on the hermeneutics of those passages from the *Analects* that traditionally define the Confucian golden rule.

One interesting and appealing interpretation of the relation between the two concepts was proposed by Herbert Fingarette, who remarked on the analogy between the “Confucian golden rule” and Jesus’ words according to Matthew 22:35-4 (repeated in Luke 10:25-27 and Mark 12:28-31):

“Master, which is the greatest commandment in the law?” Jesus answers: “‘Love thy Lord your God, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ That is the greatest commandment. It comes first. The second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ Everything in the Law and the prophets hangs on these two commandments.”

According to Fingarette, *zhong* essentially corresponds to what is stated in the first commandment, while *shu* proposes the content of the second, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Such an assertion does not imply that the amount of love felt for the other, who is near you, is equal to that felt for yourself, nor indeed that this love must be quantitatively similar. Rather, the object of the love ought just to be one: yourself, namely your neighbour, which presupposes that you are “putting yourself in the other’s shoes.”

Shu is intended to cause me to have concern for you, not to impose my tastes and inclinations on you. Therefore, to assess the situation appropriately in deciding what I would want, I must not only imagine being in your place, I must do this in such a way as to see it *through your eyes*.

ciated with ritual norms, flexible human rules, as opposed to laws (*fa*), that are universal and inflexible. *Zhong*, on the other hand, is a rule that governs and regulates behaviour towards a superior, an actual rule for inner cultivation. Nivison, “Golden Rule Arguments,” pp. 64-67. See also *id.*, “*Zhong (Chung) and Shu: Loyalty and Reciprocity*,” pp. 882-885.

³⁷ Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age*, p. 139

To put it in a nutshell I must not imagine *myself* being in your situation; I must imagine *being you*.³⁸

In such circumstances those who successfully “put themselves in others’ shoes” can understand the situation in which the other finds himself and can consequently act. This postulate is clearly expressed in the *Lunyu* VI,30 where the phrase *neng jin qu pi* 能近取譬 (the ability to take as analogy what is near at hand) means, as Fingarette explains, “to be able from what is close, i.e., oneself, to grasp analogy with the other person, and in that light to treat him as you would be treated,” or, in other words, “I must analogize to the other, imagine being in the other person’s place; then, in that status, I am to ask myself what I want or do not want done.”³⁹ This concept refers to a similar process and presupposes a mental exercise: in the instant in which I succeed in imagining myself “in your shoes” and become one with you – what Zhu Xi renders as *tui ji zhi ji ren* 推己之及人 (extending oneself to the others) – not only can I see things as you see them, think like you, perceive like you and appreciate things like you, but, at the same time, I could follow in my imagination everything as if it were my own personal situation, my own experience, my own life. Of course, I am only imagining that I am someone else and might do so incorrectly, incompletely. And the greater the effort I make to put myself in your place, the more this condition belongs to me and becomes an essential part of my inner life while my life view is affected by it, and conforms to it. *Shu* acts not through coercive means but by virtue of my willingness to adapt; it acts on me, *tout court*, and not just by changing some of my convictions. Once I have attained this condition I am able not only to express a desire but also to formulate a judgment as, even imagining with a part of myself to be in your place, to be you, with the other I am judging myself in such a position.

In this sense, *shu* is a moral principle that transcends personal desires and inclinations, similar to *zhong*. It implies that I am not expressing a desire but would like to judge what is right and appropriate. If this were not the case, I would be authorized to express and fulfil my desires and expectations, which might be wicked and corrupt. *Shu* is not only an invitation to grasp the analogy and support the desires of others, but is also an encouragement to express a judgment and to act correctly, for the purpose of doing good.⁴⁰ This, according to Fingarette, is the context in which we should con-

³⁸ Fingarette, “Following the ‘One Thread’ of the *Analects*,” pp. 382-383. Fingarette’s interpretation was probably influenced by the reading of *zhong* and *shu* suggested by Zhu Xi, who interpreted *zhong* as the way of Heaven and *shu* as the way of man.

³⁹ H. Fingarette, “Following the ‘One Thread’ of the *Analects*,” p. 383.

⁴⁰ Analogous considerations led Heiner Roetz to suggest the translation of “fairness” for *shu*, in the sense of renunciation of prerogatives for oneself, and the granting of

sider *zhong*, which comes into play to fill the semantic and conceptual gap left by *shu*: *zhong* is loyalty and absolute dedication which transcends all individualism, the purely personal, and is a spur to achieving completeness and authenticity, that is moral integrity, which designates a psychological effort to be sincere, authentic to oneself and to others.

Fingarette claims that, just as in the teachings of Jesus, the golden rule is made up of two essential components – the love of God and the love of one’s neighbour – in similar fashion, in the teaching of Confucius “the unifying principle” is made up of *zhong*, loyalty, absolute dedication to a transcendent principle (the *dao*, as in the analysis of Yuri Pines) and *shu*, love of one’s fellow man. The basic difference between the Confucian precept and the biblical one lies in the identity of the transcendent principle.⁴¹

Zhong, as we have seen, primarily expresses the concept of absolute loyalty, devotion: it is loyalty defined not as blind obedience to a superior or one’s peer but as an absolute commitment to preserving the integrity of one’s existence, of safeguarding one’s social role. The individual practises this virtue in accordance with the ritual norms, that is, by displaying deference and willingness but also by resisting and remonstrating when the other

everything one thinks appropriate for oneself to the other. Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age*, p. 134.

⁴¹ Fingarette, “Following the ‘One Thread’ of the *Analects*,” p. 388; Nivison (“*Zhong* [*Chung*] and *Shu*: Loyalty and Reciprocity,” p. 883; “*Golden Rule Arguments*,” pp. 72-73), while appreciating H. Fingarette’s interpretation, points out several contradictions in it. Fingarette interprets *zhong* as “loyalty-fidelity” (*zhong-xin*) which he considers to refer to moral rules, to principles of justice dictated by Heaven (which he associates with God); in fact, loyalty and fidelity are primarily displayed towards men, not toward principles. Moreover, Fingarette emphasizes the role of *zhong* and *shu* as criteria for judging what is just. This interpretation, suggested by the passage in the *Daxue* defining the Confucian golden rule in terms of “measuring square,” was developed in the 18th c. by the philosopher Dai Zhen 戴震 (1724–1777), who claimed that the ethical sense belongs to the sage and coincides with his desires. Therefore, genuine moral principles are precisely those that appear such to us. In this sense, the sage is guided by a kind of moral intuition, a theory formulated by Dai Zhen on the basis of the conception of the original goodness of the human nature of Mengzi. *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng* 孟子字義疏證 (An Explication of the Meaning of Terms in the *Mengzi*), *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai 2002), chap. 1, pp. 21-22; P. Ivanhoe (“Reweaving the ‘one thread’ of the *Analects*,” p. 21) observes that, although Fingarette’s analysis reveals important features of the thinking we find in *Lunyu*, it is based on a misunderstanding of the concept of *zhong* which, associated with *xin*, would mean something like “interpersonal good faith and loyalty, mediated by the *li* ‘rituals’.” Instead, according to Ivanhoe, *zhong* in the *Lunyu* means “doing one’s duty in service to others.”

does not behave correctly.⁴² In this way he guarantees a status, a dignity, a role within the community for the superior or for his fellow man.

The Song Confucians, in their attempt to explain the relation between *shu* and *zhong* in *Lunyu* VI,30, interpreted *zhong* as a principle inherent in the heavenly sphere, while *shu* as a principle inherent in the human sphere, thereby endeavouring to emphasize the predominance of *zhong* over *shu*. Zhu Xi, quoting Master Cheng, thus interpreted *Lunyu* IV,15:

Zhong and *shu* are pervaded by a single unifying principle. *Zhong* is the Way of Heaven, *shu* is the Way of man. *Zhong* means absence of hypocrisy, *shu* is how to put *zhong* into practice. *Zhong* is substance, *shu* is function. These are the great root and the realized Way.⁴³

In this way, they enhanced the value of *zhong* as an immanent principle and its fundamental role in producing *shu*, the Way of man. On the basis of the interpretation given by Zhu Xi and the Song era Confucians, Fingarette reiterates the primary value of *zhong* in the Confucian golden rule: *zhong*, which represents the Way of Heaven, transcends the purely personal perspective, the here and now and desires, feelings, attitudes and personal inclinations and completes *shu*, which presupposes the existence of a relation of mutual understanding and love among men.

In this interpretation, what characterizes the “Confucian golden rule,” as expressed in the dialectical relation between the two terms, is essentially the immanent principle.

In actual fact, in Confucius’ teachings there is an almost total absence of any transcendent reality towards which good actions and charitable works tend. The main divine entity of the *Analecets* is Heaven (*tian* 天), which is mentioned only twice in the work – a supernatural entity which promulgates its own decree (*tianming* 天命). Confucius declares he came to understand its meaning at the age of fifty, but man generally is afraid of it.⁴⁴ With the exception of these laconic statements, the Master does not specifically elaborate on the supernatural,⁴⁵ focusing greater attention on man and his

⁴² The Master urges one to remonstrate against one’s superiors if necessary and to give good advice to one’s fellow men: 事父母諫，見志不從，又敬不違，勞而不怨 “In serving your father and mother, a faint protest is allowed, but if you realize that your advice is not accepted, continue to be respectful and do not contradict them. Even if this hurts you, do not hold this against them” (*Lunyu* IV,18).

⁴³ 忠恕一以貫之：「忠者天道，恕者人道；忠者無妄，恕者所以行乎忠也。忠者體，恕者用，大本達道也。Zhu Xi, *Sishu zhangju jizhu*, pp. 72-73. See also Nivison, “Golden Rule Arguments,” p. 69.

⁴⁴ *Lunyu* II,4; *Lunyu* XVI,8.

⁴⁵ *Lunyu* VII,21.

role in the community.⁴⁶ The Master did not reject the existence of the supernatural but toned it down by indicating the exclusive Way to elevate man, namely self-cultivation and the commitment extended to one's fellow man.

Assuming that *zhong*, in harmony with the Way of Heaven, implies full self-realization, the attainment of the right way in one's relations with others, Zhu Xi interpreted *shu* as functional to *zhong*: a virtue requiring an inner discipline, self-cultivation.

As we have said before, Confucius interpreted *dao* as the Way of Man, not of Heaven. Even when he aims at perfection, becoming a true gentleman (*junzi*) or even pursuing the privileged condition of the Sage (*shengren*), man is never the object of worship or devotion: nevertheless, he performs with an intimate religious attitude the ritual acts he has inherited from the past.

It is necessary to be loyal to those occupying a position that is superior to or on a par with your own, sincere with your friends, and scrupulous in observing the ritual norms handed down from ancient times.⁴⁷ The ultimate reality towards which each virtuous act tends is identified with the *dao*. The authenticity and moral integrity (*cheng* 誠) mentioned in the *Zhongyong* in the final analysis reside in the *dao* of man, the Way indicated by the ancient Sages, the Way that runs like a thread through everything, uniting it, the mainstays of which are "to act with the maximum loyalty" and "not to impose on others what you do not want for yourself." As emphasized by the Master, loyalty and fidelity are virtues displayed towards one's peers or superiors. By exercising *shu*, man measures himself with his neighbour, he draws from himself analogies and tries to be empathetic to him: this is to take the path of benevolence.⁴⁸ *Shu* is that attitude that accompanies man throughout his life.⁴⁹ I agree with Nivison when he asserts that:

⁴⁶ When his disciple Fan Chi 樊遲 questions him on the subject of wisdom, he replies: "To devote yourself to what is righteous for the people, to show respect for the gods and spirits while keeping them at a distance, can be called wisdom" 務民之義，敬鬼神而遠之，可謂知。 *Lunyu* VI,22.

⁴⁷ 吾日三省吾身：「為人謀而不忠乎？與朋友交而不信乎？傳不習乎？」 "Every day I examine myself on three questions: In planning for the other was I disloyal? In relations with my friends was I untruthful? Have I not practised what was handed down to me?" *Lunyu* I,4.

⁴⁸ *Lunyu* VI,30. Zhu Xi comments: 近取諸身，以己所欲譬之於他人，知其所欲亦猶是也。然後推其所欲以及於人，則恕之事而仁之術也。 "Near at hand to draw from oneself is to take what one desires oneself and analogize it to others, understanding that what they desire is just the same. Afterwards, one approaches others extending to them what he desires, which is a matter of empathy and the way to be-

[...] it is not really a “rule” at all, but a maxim to guide one in shaping and cultivating a character of ideal human kindness in oneself. That is, it describes a *virtue* in persons rather than a quality of correctness in acts.⁵⁰

It is therefore *shu* that essentially expresses the principle of the “Confucian golden rule,” while *zhong* contributes to defining the terms thereof when it is transferred onto the social sphere.

Shu is a virtue that must constantly be cultivated, while *zhong* completes its meaning, leading man to transfer his natural feelings and attitudes to the community level, pouring his whole self into the relation that identifies him as socially subordinate or similar.

In this view, “do not do to others what you do not want for yourself,” “take as analogy what is near at hand” come to appear as maxims for life, while *zhong* acts as an essential condition, just like other cardinal virtues such as *xin* 信 (fidelity/truthfulness), *xiao* 孝 (filial love), *di* 弟 (brotherly love) and *ci* 慈 (love toward the young).

The ruler earns the respect, loyalty and zeal of his people through kindness, filial love, the promotion of worthy men (*Lunyu* II,20). In that sense, loyalty is not understood as a cardinal principle of Confucian ethics, but as the consequence of virtuous governance, exercised by a ruler who governs by virtue of his own moral strength and a correct application of the ancient ritual norms. The Confucian golden rule equates moral principles with human sensibility, appealing to a series of moral prescriptions (that may be identified with the *li*) that regulate life and guide man towards a sense of what is just.

Empathy (*shu*) as the Way Towards Benevolence

(...) The ability to take as analogy what is near at hand can simply be called the method of attaining benevolence.⁵¹

The true gentleman daily displays benevolence towards others, and is always resolute in curbing his selfish impulses and unfailingly directed by the ancient ritual norms:

Yan Hui asked what benevolence was. The Master said: “Through self-discipline and by turning to the ancient ritual norms one attains benevolence. If for one whole day man succeeded in disciplining himself by

nevolence.” *Sishu jizhu*, p. 92; Daniel Gardner, *Zhu Xi’s Reading of the Analects: Canon, Commentary and the Classical Tradition* (New York 2003), p. 58.

⁴⁹ *Lunyu* XV,24.

⁵⁰ Nivison, “Golden Rule Arguments,” p. 75.

⁵¹ *Lunyu* VI,30.

turning to the ancient ritual norms, the whole world would be led back to benevolence. Attaining benevolence depends on us, how could it depend on others?”⁵²

Benevolence stems from such natural dispositions as love and respect of one's parents and older brothers, love of one's children, which are feelings and attitudes that, when extended to others, reveal a deep sense of human understanding.

The centrality of *ren* in the *Analects* and in Confucian ethics is demonstrated by the large number of times it occurs.⁵³ Benevolence, or humanity, is that virtue *par excellence* to which the gentleman tends, a state of mind that is indicative of generosity, unconditional love and devotion to the good of others. It is not easily attained, and indeed requires a constant exercise of the mind (*si* 思), study (*xue* 學) and overcoming the self (*keji* 克己). Man's goal is to achieve benevolence, and this is a heavy burden!⁵⁴

It is by constant inner cultivation, supported by study, meditation, discipline and religious observance of rules of social conduct inherited from ancient Sages that man is shown the authentic Way, the *dao*. It is not an absolute gift nor a choice, but a rugged path that man naturally follows by means of gradual self-perfection, by pursuing moral integrity, fulfilling his duties to his family and society. And this rugged path leading to the *dao* is constructed by man himself as it is “man who glorifies the Way and not the

⁵² 顏淵問仁。子曰：「克己復禮為仁。一日克己復禮，天下歸仁焉。為仁由己，而由仁乎哉！」 *Lunyu* XII,1.

⁵³ In the *Analects*, the term occurs 105 times; together with *junzi* (gentleman), which occurs 107 times, it is the most widely discussed issue in the work. However, in one of the most controversial passages in the *Analects* it is stated that seldom did the Master express himself on the subjects of profit, destiny and benevolence (*Lunyu* IX,1). Among the various interpretations of the passage, Anne Cheng suggests that the expression *hanyan* 罕言 refers to a type of communication similar to that rendered by the expression *weiyang* 微言 (*parler subtilement*), which does not indicate simply a discursive language but a type of communication made up of allusions, silences, metaphors and gesturalities, of which only the true Master is capable; A. Cheng, “Si s'était à refaire ... ou: de la difficulté de traduire ce que Confucius n'as pas dit,” in Viviane Alleton – Michael Lackner (eds.), *De l'un au multiple. Traductions du chinois vers les langues européennes* (Paris 1999), pp. 205-217. See also Kwong-Loi Shun, “Ren 仁 and li 禮 in the *Analects*,” in Van Norden, *Confucius and the Analects*, pp. 53-72.

⁵⁴ 士不可以不弘毅，任重而道遠。仁以為己任，不亦重乎？ [...] “Scholar-officials cannot but be strong and resolute, for they bear a heavy burden and their way is long. If they take benevolence as their burden, is it not a heavy one? [...]” *Lunyu* VIII,7.

Way that glorifies man.”⁵⁵ However, he does not set off alone along this path; he is always accompanied by someone who provides the example he is to follow in his own conduct or the basis on which to correct it:

When you meet persons who are worthy, think to emulate them; when you meet persons who are unworthy, turn inward and examine yourself.⁵⁶

Thus, it is in the relationship with the other that man’s thought and action are activated. The character *ren* 仁 is a perfect expression of the idea of relating to the other with a loving attitude. The close relationship between *ren* and *shu* is indicated by *Shuowen jiezi*, in which *shu* is defined as *ren*.⁵⁷ The Qing scholar Duan Yucai 段玉裁, precisely in connection with this, quotes the passage from the *Analects* “The ability to take as analogy what is near at hand can simply be called the method of attaining *ren*.”⁵⁸ He also adds a passage from the *Mengzi*:

Mengzi said: “The ten thousand things are all brought to completion by us. There is no greater joy for me than to find, on self-examination, that I am authentic. Strengthen your empathy and you will find that this is the shortest way to benevolence.”⁵⁹

According to Mengzi, benevolence cannot be too distant from *shu*, “not to do to others what you would not want for yourself,” a natural attitude that must be constantly cultivated and strengthened.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ 人能弘道，非道弘人。 *Lunyu* XV,29.

⁵⁶ 子曰：「見賢思齊焉，見不賢而內自省也。」 *Lunyu* IV,17.

⁵⁷ Duan Yucai, *Shuowen jiezi zhu*, ch. 10, p. 28.

⁵⁸ *Lunyu* VI,30.

⁵⁹ 孟子曰：「萬物皆備於我也。反身而誠，樂莫大焉。強恕而行，求仁莫近焉。 This passage is found in the chapter *Jinxin* 盡心 (“To give full realization to one’s heart-and-mind”), *Mengzi* VIIA,4. Zhu Xi glosses *cheng* 誠 as *shi* 實 (reality, sincerity, authenticity, genuineness). Zhu Xi, *Sishu zhangju jizhu*, ch. 13, p. 350. Cf. D.C. Lau (transl.), *Mencius* (Hong Kong 1979, repr. 1984), p. 265; B.W. Van Norden (transl.) *Mengzi, With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis – Cambridge 2008), p. 172.

⁶⁰ In another interpretation, the “golden rule” could stem from a personal interest, thus shedding its moral nature: “Do not do unto others what you would not want for yourself” would, in this sense, correspond to the assumption “If I treat the other decently, the other will treat me decently”: *do ut des*, as suggested, for instance, by Confucius himself when he urges man not to impose on the others what he does not want for himself, “so as not to arouse resentment either in public or in private” (*Lunyu* XI,2). A loving disposition towards the others in this case would not be unconditional but has a definite aim: to safeguard the harmony of family and social relations. Also Xunzi apparently adopts a utilitarian criterion when elaborating the

There is a passage in the *Zhongyong* that reiterates and expresses more clearly by means of a metaphor the idea that the source of benevolence and the quest for the Way are inherent in man himself:

The Master said: “The Way is not far from man. If a person in following the Way distances himself from other men, it cannot be considered the Way. The *Book of Odes* says: “In hewing an axe handle, the pattern is not far away.”⁶¹ We take hold of an axe handle in order to hew another axe handle. Yet if we look at them from far away, the two appear different. Therefore the true gentleman starts from man (i.e., himself) to govern men and, when they are reformed, he stops.

He who is loyal and empathetic is not far from the Way. What you don’t want done to yourself, do not do to others.⁶²

What emerges from the quoted passage? Man’s *dao* stems from what is close to man, from man himself. It gives an analogical description of this model; although the model is not far away, there always remains a difference between it and what is used to model, to forge it. The new axe handle is derived from its archetype, but differs from it; the archetype takes part in the formation of man and, after forming him, is dissolved. Forming a man in relation to another is an act aimed at achieving harmony, not perfect identity.

golden rule, when for instance he warns: “Remember that the others will treat us as we have treated them” (and in another case he declares: “He who does not give when he has possessions will not receive when he falls into poverty.” Wang Xian-qian 王先謙, *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解, *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai 1995), chap. 11, p. 148, chap. 30, p. 353. However, this is an interpretation, as H. Roetz emphasizes, that is relevant to the political and social sphere – as such, the urging is addressed mainly towards rulers and politicians. For further details on this interpretation see Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age*, pp. 143-148.

⁶¹ The Ode, which appears in the *Shijing*, reads as follows: “In hewing [the wood for] an axe-handle, how do you proceed? Without [another] axe it cannot be done [...] In hewing an axe-handle, the pattern is not far off. [...]” James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. IV, *The She King* (London 1871, repr. Hong Kong 1960), Book XV, Ode VI, p. 240.

⁶² 子曰：「道不遠人。人之為道而遠人，不可以為道。詩云：「伐柯伐柯，其則不遠。」執柯以伐柯，睨而視之，猶以為遠。故君子以人治人，改而止。忠恕違道不遠，施諸己而不願，亦勿施於人。 *Zhongyong*, in Zhu Xi, *Sishu zhangju jizhu*, p. 23. My interpretation differs slightly from Daniel K. Gardner’s, *The Four Books: The Basic Teachings of the Later Confucian Tradition, Translation, with Introduction and Commentary* (Indianapolis 2007), pp. 116-117. A similar formula, 己所不欲，勿施於人, occurs in *Lunyu* XV,24 as the explanation of *shu*.

Confucius defined the dialectical relation among men as an initiatic journey to be undertaken in company, in the direction of an inner growth borrowed from the perception of the other, from interaction, from dialogue.

The Master said: “If three of us were walking together I would certainly always have a master beside me: I would draw the good qualities of one to take example from, and the bad qualities of the other to correct myself.”⁶³

Moreover, the true gentleman helps the other in self-consolidation and in cultivating sensitivity towards what is just and appropriate, encouraging him to develop the good in him and not to develop what is bad.⁶⁴

Ren is a benevolent disposition towards others that is gradually cultivated and implemented through a process of inner discipline, by study, meditation, the practice of the ancient ritual norms and the application of the golden rule. It is born of the love and respect for one’s parents, for one’s older brothers and for the family. Confucius claimed that love and the sense of duty towards one’s parents and older brothers was the basis of benevolence.⁶⁵ Affection and respect within the family are primary values for Confucius, the foundations of a feeling that spreads outwards towards one’s fellow men. If an individual wishes to attain benevolence, he can do so at any time of his life as it is not too far away.⁶⁶

Therefore, according to Confucius, man has the potential capacity to develop and achieve benevolence: those who seek it and then cultivate it, perfect it, and develop it through study, reflection and inner discipline, are able to attain it fully. It is born out of natural sentiments such as love for one’s family. Xu Shen, defined the term *ren* as *qin* 親, which expresses parental love, love within the family circle.⁶⁷ Humanity, care of others, both stem from and are sustained by a natural sentiment, namely love for one’s parents and one’s brothers. *Shu* is a component of benevolence, but demands further commitment: to extend to others that loving disposition defined as *qin*, desiring for them what one wants for oneself. This is why the Master, when

⁶³ 子曰：「三人行，必有我師焉，擇其善者而從之，其不善者而改之。」 *Lunyu* VII,22.

⁶⁴ 子曰：「君子成人之美，不成人之惡。小人反是。」 The Master said: “A gentleman helps others to develop the good in them and not to develop the bad. A petty person does the opposite.” *Lunyu* XII,16.

⁶⁵ 孝弟也者，其為仁之本與 [...] “As for filial and fraternal love, they constitute the root of benevolence [...]” *Lunyu* I,2.

⁶⁶ 子曰：「仁遠乎哉？我欲仁，斯仁至矣。」 The Master said: “Is human benevolence far off? You only need to want it and it arrives.” *Lunyu* VII,30.

⁶⁷ Duan Yucai, *Shuowen jiezi zhu*, pp. 365 and 409.

questioned about the definition of “he who works on behalf of others and succeeds in helping people,” answered “Why stop at *ren*? He is certainly a Sage!”⁶⁸

A loving disposition towards one’s family and one’s fellow men forms the basis of *ren*, the greatest Confucian virtue, above which there is only wisdom, a condition that only a few men – in the first instance, the ancient Sages – succeeded in attaining. *Ren* is the virtue that comprises all human virtues, namely, deference, loyalty, tolerance, sincerity, zeal, generosity and is constantly growing and evolving. It is thus not a static concept, but a dynamic one, as its achievement stems from and is nourished by a process of inner enrichment generated by a constant, reciprocal and changing relationship with others. There is thus an initial benevolence (love within the family) and a benevolence towards man in general, the achievement of which represents the fulfilment of all virtues. Love and the sense of family duty represent the foundations of a sentiment that, through the practice of *shu*, reaches out to the others, to one’s fellow man.

⁶⁸ *Lunyu* VI,30.