

## The Concept of 'Li' in Confucius' Social Ethics

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### Abstract

This paper is an attempt to investigate why the concept of *li* in Confucianism plays an important role in Chinese society. The research methods, which will be used, are the descriptive method and the evaluative method. The research finding is that the concept of *li* in Confucianism is a factor that promotes peace in Chinese society. An evaluation will be made in the light of the principle of analogy. This paper will contribute to the knowledge that the practice of *li* plays a significant role in promoting discipline and harmony in society.

**Key words:** *Confucianism, Li, Analogy, Peace*

### Introduction

This paper is an attempt to solve the research problem why the concept of *li* in Confucianism plays an important role in Chinese society.

Confucianism is an important and indigenous philosophy in China. Confucianism is not a religion, but a philosophy and a system of ethics. The greatness of Confucianism is that, though its aim was not religious, it has taken the place of religion. Confucianism is a family religion. The essence of Confucianism is that the filial piety due to parents makes a man good in his relations with his fellow men. Confucianism is the philosophy of social organization, and the philosophy of daily life. Confucianism emphasizes the social responsibilities of man. In Confucianism, human beings are teachable, improvable and perfectible through personal and communal endeavour especially including self-cultivation and self-creation. The main idea of Confucianism is the cultivation of virtue and the development of moral perfection. Confucianism emphasizes human relationships and teaches men how to live in harmony with one another.

Confucianism is a complex system of moral, social, political, philosophical, and religious thought in the culture and history of East Asia. It might be considered a state religion of some East Asian countries, because there is state promotion of Confucian way of thought in all aspects of life.

Confucianism lays great stress on proper relations of rational justification or theoretical expression as characteristic “humanness” or “humanity”. It can be said that man’s personality reflects it-self in his actions and behavior in the five relationships: governmental, parental, conjugal, fraternal, and friendship. Every man must be in his proper place and with his proper responsibilities and duties. Every man in the social relationship has certain responsibilities and duties. Confucian philosophy holds that if every man knows his duty and acts accordingly social order would be secured. In other words, such person fulfills his duty as a human being his relationships: (1) with himself, (2) with his family, (3) with the community, (4) with the nation, and (5) with the world. The relation with the family however is foremost.

It can be said that Confucian philosophy is a set of ethical ideas oriented toward practice. It may be characterized as an ethics of virtue in the light of its conception of virtues: *jen* (human heartedness, goodness, benevolence), *yi* (rightness, righteousness), and *li* (rites, propriety) and *chih* (wisdom). There are also notions of dependent virtues such as filial piety, loyalty, respectfulness and integrity. These basic virtues are considered fundamental, as being leading or action guiding. They are therefore the cardinal virtues. Four key principles are emphasized in Confucianism. These principles are *jen* (human heartedness, goodness, benevolence), *yi* (rightness, righteousness), *li* (rites, propriety), and *chih* (wisdom).

For getting the solution to the problem, the descriptive method and the evaluative method as research methodologies are used. The research problem is described and then the research finding is drowning from the above questions. These questions are tried to answer and the research finding is achieved. The research finding is that the concept of *li* in Confucianism is a factor that promotes peace in Chinese society. This research finding proved and evaluated in the light of the principle of Analogy. This paper will contribute to the knowledge that the practice of *li* plays a significant role in promoting discipline and harmony in society. The key words which will be investigated in this research are Confucianism, *Li*, Analogy, and Peace.

In this paper, it will be discussed the crucial role of *li* in Confucianism and its contribution to human societies in world wide scale.

## The Concept of *Li*

Confucius used the term *li*<sup>1</sup> to stand for the completely conventional and social complex with a moral connotation. The word *li* literally means ceremonies or rituals, propriety or code of proper conduct, and rules of social conduct. It was specially emphasized in ancient Chinese society under the influence of Confucius' teachings.

The first concept of *li* is ceremony or ritual is a religious service which involves a series of actions performed in a fixed order. In other words, ritual is a way of behaving or a series of actions which people regularly carry out in a particular situation because it is a custom to do so. It can describe as a ritual action when it is done in exactly the same way whenever a particular situation occurs. *Li* and Music (harmony) are two important institutions in Confucianism.

The second concept of *li* is propriety or code of proper conduct. Confucius used the term *Li* to stand for the completely conventional and social complex with a moral connotation. It means a system of well-defined special relationships with definite attitudes toward one another, love in the parents, filial piety in the children, respect in the younger brother, friend in the elder brothers, loyalty among friends, and respect for authority among subjects and benevolence in rulers. It means moral discipline in man's personal conduct. It means propriety in everything. From the ethical and religious point of view, *li* means a religious sacrifice but has come to mean ceremony, rituals, decorum, rules of propriety, good form, good custom, etc., and has even been equated with Natural Law. Obviously, the translation "ceremony" is too narrow and misleading. Another meaning of *li* is 'sacrifice', which refers to the ritual used in sacrifice and later, was extended to cover every sort ceremony and 'courtesy'. The conception of *li* was extremely important in Confucius' teaching.

The third notion of *li* refers to rules of social conduct. It means the customary law or common morality. *Li* is a positive law. It does not bring with it automatic punishment. *Li* has the conception of Law: *Li* versus *Fa*. In the ancient Chinese feudalistic society, there were two kinds of codes. One is the code of honor, known as *li*, and the other is the code of

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<sup>1</sup> Ch'u Chai and Winberg Chai .(1962). *The Humanist Way in Ancient China*. New York. The American Library of World Literature, Inc.p.370.

punishments, known as *fa* (laws) or *hsing* (punishments), which governed the conduct of the common people. The *Li Chi*, or *Book of Rites*, says:

*Li* do not go down to the common people; the *hsing* do not go up to the ministers.<sup>1</sup>

Confucius discussed the notion of *li* as a spectrum of rites and rituals, i.e., a code of conduct, that focused on such things as learning, tea drinking, how to dress, mourning, governance, and interaction with humans.

*Li* is what the sage uses to find that which is appropriate; it is both the means, which sets the example for others, and the end, which maximizes understanding, pleasure, and the greater good. In this way, the words and behaviors one uses to show respect for another are contained within the framework of *li*.

As the practice of *Li* was continued through centuries, one central theme began to stand out; the natural tendency to be decent and kind towards ones fellow human beings.

*Li* is a classical Chinese word, which finds its most extensive use in Confucian and post-Confucian Chinese philosophy. *Li* encompasses not a definitive object but rather a somewhat abstract idea; as such, it is translated in a number of different ways. Most often, *li* is described using some form of the word 'ritual' or 'rites' or 'ritual propriety', but it has also been translated as 'customs', 'etiquette', 'morals', and 'rules of proper behavior', among other terms.

### **The Practice of *Li* in Chinese Culture**

The rites of *li* are not rites in the Western conception of religious custom. Rather, *li* embodies the entire spectrum of interaction with humans, nature, and even material objects. Confucius includes in his discussions of *li* such diverse topics as learning, tea drinking, titles, mourning, and governance. Xunzi cites "songs and laughter, weeping and lamentation...rice and millet, fish and meat...the wearing of ceremonial caps, embroidered robes, and patterned silks, or of fasting clothes and mourning clothes...spacious rooms and secluded halls, soft mats, couches and benches" as vital parts of the fabric of *li*.

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<sup>1</sup> Ch'u Chai and Winberg Chai . (1962). *The Changing Society of China*. New York. The American Library of World Literature, Inc,p.101.

*Li* consists of the norms of proper social behavior as taught to others by fathers, village elders and government officials. The teachings of *li* promoted ideals such as filial submission, brotherliness, righteousness, good faith and loyalty. The influence of *li* guided public expectations, such as loyalty to superiors and respect for elders in the community. Continuous with the emphasis on community, following *li* included the internalization of action, which both yields the comforting feeling of tradition and allows one to become "more open to the panoply of sensations of the experience". However, it should also maintain a healthy practice of selflessness, both in the actions themselves and in the proper example, which is set for one's brothers. Approaches in the community, as well as personal approaches together demonstrate how *li* pervades all things, the broad and the detailed, the good and the bad, the form and the formlessness. This is the complete realization of *li*.

The rituals and practices of *li* are dynamic in nature. *Li* practices have been revised and evaluated throughout time to reflect the emerging views and beliefs found in society. Although these practices may change, which happens very slowly over time, the fundamental ideals remain at the core of *li*, which largely relate to social order.

*Li* is a principle of Confucian ideas. Contrary to the inward expression of *jen*, *li* was considered an outward practice, wherein one acts with propriety in society. Acting with *li* and *jen* led to what Confucius called the "superior human" or "the sage". Such a human would use *li* to act with propriety in every social event.

It can be seen that Confucius advocated a genteel manner, where one is aware of their superiors and inferiors. Confucius felt that knowing one's rank in a feudalistic society would lead to the greatest social order. *Li* as described in Confucian classics (The *Book of Rites* and the *Analects*) gave clear instruction on the proper behaviours expected of individuals based on their roles and placement in feudalistic society. Confucius regarded the disorder of his era as society's neglect of *li* and its principles. In the *Analects* Confucius states, "Unless a man has the spirit of the rites, in being respectful he will wear himself out, in being careful he will become timid, in having courage he will become unruly, and in being forthright he will become unrelenting".

*Li* is the appropriate manner of overt behavior needed to express one's inner thoughts or intentions. It includes socially proper ways of acting,

and acting toward others in ways such that they will not mistake your intentions. One's outer expression should reflect one's inner nature, or at least one's intention in this situation. This involves a measure of *chung*, described below. There is considerable subjectivity involved in determining *li*, but *yi*, *jen*, and *shin* (trust) all require *li*.

For Confucius, *li* included proper etiquette or good manners, as agreed on by family and community. One who fails to make use of them is more likely to be misunderstood. However, deceivers can also make use of such rules of etiquette or polite behavior in society, and someone who is taken in by a false use of good etiquette is likely to become mistrustful.

Confucius shows that learning the customary forms of external behavior should not be done blindly, but with an explanation and understanding of their inner significance--why they are important. Formalism occurs when one's external forms do not correctly reveal one's internal attitudes, and this should be avoided.

### **The Role of 'Li' in Chinese Culture**

In this paper, it can be found that *li* comprises the principles of gain, benefit, order, and propriety which are concrete guides to human action. *Li* have two basic meanings. One is concrete guide to human relationships or rules of proper action that genuinely embody *jen* and the other is general principle of the social order or the general ordering of life. Confucius recognized that you need a well-ordered society for *jen* to be expressed. In the first sense, it is the concrete guide to human relationships. It has two ideas. One, the way things should be done or propriety which must be positive rather than negative ("Do's rather than Don'ts) and another main component of *propriety* emphasizes the openness of people to each other. The main components of *propriety* are-

- (1) The rectification of names which is language used in accordance with the truth of things.
- (2) The Doctrine of the Mean which is so important that an entire book is dedicated to it in the Confucian canon, which is the proper action, is the way between the extremes.
- (3) The Five Relationships which are the way things should be done in social life; none of the relationships are transitive. (Note that 3 of the 5 relations involve family; the family is the basic unit of society).

- (a) father and son (loving / reverential)
- (b) elder brother and younger brother (gentle / respectful)
- (c) husband and wife (good / listening)
- (d) older friend and younger friend (considerate/deferential)
- (e) ruler and subject (benevolent / loyal)

(4) Respect for age: age gives all things their worth: objects, institutions, and individual lives.

The second sense of *li* is social order, ritual, ordering of life, conforming to the norms of *jen* (the limits and authenticity of *li*). In this sense, there are four parts. They are;

- a. Every action affects someone else--*there are limits to individuality.*
- b. Confucius sought to order an entire way of life.
- c. You should not be left to improvise your responses because you are at a loss as to how to behave.

d. For well-conducted people, life presents no problems. *Li* is very important and fundamental in social life. Thus, *li* is a factor that promotes peace in Chinese society.

The research finding is that the concept of *li* in Confucianism is a factor that promotes peace in Chinese society because *li* shows men how to establish good relationship with one another and live together in harmony.

The finding it will be evaluated in the light of analogy principle of ethics. Confucius said that *li* is the source of right action in all behavior that living life from a place of respect for all others was at the heart of living a harmonious and worthwhile life. The beneficial consequences of living in accordance with *li* will be demonstrated.

However, *li* does not come to ones consciousness naturally. *Li* has to be cultivated. One must first learn and then practice the art of having integrity, respecting the dignity of every human being and then being committed to, and disciplined in, the practice of *li*.

The practice of *li* runs the gamut from smiling at a co-worker, to holding a door open for another. To serving others, to being self-responsible, to questioning practices that are unethical, corrupt, and disrespectful or demeaning of others, each behavior having a conscious focus and intentionality on working toward and supporting the well-being of the workplace, and those who work there.

*Li* is being natural, honest, sincere, self-responsible and relaxed when we interact with another. Practicing *li* does not mean that men must stop being to believe something strongly and not change people mind and expressing opinions, stops holding others accountable, stop telling the truth, stops telling the bad news, etc.

Confucius believed that in order to truly achieve the principles of consequence and the character of the true person, one must look within oneself. Cultivating the practice of *li* supports men to live their life at work from a place of self-responsibility, honesty, decency, integrity, strength, courage, and humaneness even when it might be inconvenient. Each man is born with *li*.

### Conclusion

As above mentioned factors, the concept of *li* has played as an important role in Chinese culture since early days. To sum up, *li* can be defined as at least three concepts. They are *li* as ceremonies or rituals, *li* as propriety or code of proper conduct, and *li* as rules of social conduct.

By using the principle of analogy, it can be evaluated that the concept of *li* in Confucianism is a factor that promotes peace in Chinese society. The concept of '*li*' means 'to regulate'. If people live in harmony with each other, they live together peacefully. If people live in harmony with *li*, they live together peacefully in daily life. *Li* is a principle of Confucian ideas. *Li* means rites or ritual. The Chinese character for "rites", or "ritual", previously had the religious meaning of "sacrifice". It ranges from politeness and propriety to the understanding of each person's correct place in society. It can therefore be said that they lead to good consequences—the greatest happiness for the greatest number. This is the Utilitarian principle first propounded by John Stuart Mill in the West (1806-73). But here it can be seen that Confucian theory of *li* is its forerunner.



Ritual is extended to include secular ceremonial behavior, and eventually referred to the propriety or politeness that colors everyday life. Rituals are codified and treated as a comprehensive system of norms. It can be found Confucius himself tried to revive the etiquette of earlier dynasties. After Confucius death, people regarded him as a great authority on ritual behaviors.

It is important to note that "ritual" has developed a specialized meaning in Confucianism, as opposed to its usual religious meanings. In Confucianism, it can be found the acts of everyday life are considered ritual. Rituals are not necessarily regimented or arbitrary practices, but the routines that people often engage in, knowingly or unknowingly, during the normal course of their lives. One purpose of Confucian philosophy is shaping the rituals in a way that leads to a contented and healthy society, and to content and healthy people.

Ritual is used to distinguish between people; their usage allows people to know at all times who is the younger and who the elder, who is the guest and who, the host and so forth.

Internalization is the main process in ritual. Formalized behavior becomes progressively internalized, desires are channeled and personal cultivation becomes the mark of social correctness. Though this idea conflicts with the common saying that "the cowl does not make the monk," in Confucianism sincerity is what enables behavior to be absorbed by individuals.

Obedying ritual with sincerity makes ritual the most powerful way to cultivate oneself: Respectfulness, without the Rites, becomes laborious bustle; carefulness, without the Rites, become timidity; boldness, without the Rites, becomes insubordination; straightforwardness, without the Rites, becomes rudeness.

Ritual can be seen as a means to find the balance between opposing qualities that might otherwise lead to conflict. It divides people into categories, and builds hierarchical relationships through protocols and ceremonies, assigning everyone a place in society and a proper form of behavior. Music, which seems to have played a significant role in

Confucius' life, is given as an exception, as it transcends such boundaries and "unifies the hearts".

It can be found that Ritual and filial piety are indeed the ways in which one should act towards others, but from an underlying attitude of humaneness. "Filial piety" is considered among the greatest of virtues and must be shown towards both the living and the dead (including even remote ancestors). The term "filial" (meaning "of a child") characterizes the respect that a child, originally a son, should show to his parents. This relationship was extended by analogy to a series of *five relationships*. The Five Bonds are: Ruler to Ruled, Father to Son, and Husband to Wife, Elder Brother to Younger Brother and Friend to Friend.

Specific duties were prescribed to each of the participants in these sets of relationships. Such duties were also extended to the dead, where the living stood as sons to their deceased family. This led to the veneration of ancestors. The only relationship where respect for elders was not stressed was the Friend-to-Friend relationship. In all other relationships, high reverence was held for elders.

The idea of filial piety influenced the Chinese legal system: a criminal would be punished more harshly if the culprit had committed the crime against a parent, while fathers often exercised enormous power over their children. A similar differentiation was applied to other relationships. At the time, the power was too much on the parent's side. Now filial piety is also built into law. People have the responsibility to provide for their elderly parents according to the law. Filial piety has continued to play a central role in Confucian thinking to the present day.

Relationships are central to Confucianism. Particular duties arise from one's particular situation in relation to others. The individual stands simultaneously in several different relationships with different people: as a junior in relation to parents and elders, and as a senior in relation to younger siblings, students, and others. While juniors are considered in Confucianism to owe their seniors reverence, seniors also have duties of benevolence and concern toward juniors. This theme of mutuality is prevalent in East Asian cultures even to this day.

Social harmony is the great goal of Confucianism. This results in part on every individual knowing his or her place in the social order, and playing his or her part well. When Duke Jing of Qin asked Confucius about government, by which he meant proper administration to bring social harmony, Confucius replied: “There is government, when the prince is prince, and the minister is minister; when the father is father, and the son is son.”

Confucianism exhorts all people to strive for the ideal of a "gentleman" or "perfect man". The great exemplar of the perfect man is Confucius himself. Perhaps the tragedy of his life was that he was never awarded the high official position, which he desired, from which he wished to demonstrate the general well-being that would ensue if humane persons ruled and administered the state.

Therefore, Confucianism is a philosophy and a system of ethics, based on the principle of consequentialism, although it is not stated explicitly. But the *li* of Confucianism is not mere theory. It is a detailed practical guide to establishing a society of human beings where peace and happiness would prevail. Yet its teachings touched the hearts of the Chinese people to such an extent that it has become more of a religion than just a social philosophy.

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