The Ideal of *Junzi* Leadership and Education for the Common Good

“君子”领导理想与为了公益的教育

Yang Hengda 杨恒达 and Dennis P. McCann 丹宁思

Abstract

The concept of the common good in both Western and Confucian philosophy presupposes a specific practical approach to moral education roughly identified as “virtue ethics”. This paper will attempt to outline this approach as proposed in the Confucian classics, by focusing on the ideal of Junzi (君子) leadership—that is, the personal embodiment of moral excellence—and its relationship to the Grand Union (Datong, 大同), Confucius’ symbol of the common good. Our focus will be on the practice of moral leadership—represented by the Junzi—describing how in Confucius’ Analects (Lunyu, 論語) it unfolds in a process of self-cultivation whose goal is specified in the Golden Rule (Analects 15:24). Its outcome is a form of moral leadership capable of sustaining common good, inasmuch as the proper ordering of personal and social relationships becomes as natural as breathing. The concentric circles of responsibility, extending from personal to social—inclusive of care for family (jiā, 家), country (guó, 国), and the whole world (tiān xià, 天下)—provide a basis for envisioning an educational practice intending the common good What takes root in the individual person naturally has social consequences.

The *Junzi* as Student and Teacher of Virtue

Can virtue be taught? Confucian ethics does not answer this question directly or in abstract philosophical terms. Its focus is practical, and therefore it demonstrates how virtue can be taught by actually teaching it. The *Analects* (*Lunyu*, 論語) is a collection of mostly aphorisms and a few extended narratives attributed to Confucius (551– 479 BCE), China's universally acknowledged moral authority. The *Analects*, as well as the other Chinese classics attributed to Confucius, are meant to teach a Way of living that is consistent with human nature, the mandate of Heaven, and the testimony of one's venerable ancestors. Though the examples discussed in the *Analects* exhibit a specific concern for training Chinese elites in the art of governing well, Confucius makes clear that the Way forward is open to anyone who is willing to study hard and practice the art of self-cultivation.

The *Analects* do not present a systematic summary of Confucius' teaching. Such a summary might actually be counterproductive pedagogically, since the point of Confucian study—which consists primarily of conversations with the Master among his students—is to learn from concrete examples of how and how not to behave, think and feel, consistent with becoming genuinely human. Education in the Confucian Way, therefore, is not about memorising a series of basic principles and concepts. While Confucian tradition, like all moral traditions, has tended to prioritise among the Master's sayings, as if his teaching could be captured in a single aphorism, or list of virtues, what these actually mean can only be learned through the practice of self-cultivation. The sayings presented in the *Analects* are to be savoured, explored through meditation, through repeated attempts to reflect deeply on experience over a lifetime, the results of which should be shared with one's teacher and explored in common with his or her other students.

This much we can infer from the narratives of the *Analects*. Occasionally, however, the *Analects* offers a concise statement of principle that unlocks the meaning of the collected narratives. One such statement is the so-called Golden Rule, so readily used to summarise Confucius' teaching.

> Zi Gong asked, saying, 'Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life?' The Master said, 'Is not RECIPROCITY (*shu* 恕) such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.' (*Analects* 15-24, Kindle Locations 2847-2849).

Reciprocity is best understood by considering the parent-child relationship, and the ideal of filial piety (*xiào,* 孝). The parent nurtures the child for three years, and the child eventually mourns the parent for three years. Note, however, that reciprocity occurs within a relationship that unfolds over time; it cannot be experienced except in a relationship that is inevitably asymmetrical. At the end of three years nurturing at its mother's breast, a child is not expected to start supporting its parents. Over time it will learn what is expected by way of filial piety, and those expectations will change as the child eventually becomes responsible for its parents. Fulfilling the meaning of the "one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life" will evolve as relationships change. What may not change is the common desire to be treated as a human being, and the common aversion to all things that detract from our humanity: "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others".

Even today, though the contexts in which filial piety and reciprocity may have changed, the ideal of *Junzi* leadership is still informed by these constants. A leader following the *Junzi* ideal will start with a core assumption about his rivals, his employees, and all the stakeholders based on what he knows about himself. For example, since he does not expect hate from others, so he should be inclined toward benevolence (*jen*, 仁) and righteousness (*yi*, 義) in his relations with others. A *Junzi* leader must love all people and be just and fair to them. The attitude to oneself and to others should be equally the same.

How one learns to live by the Golden

Rule is not a spontaneous result of experience. The education of anyone becoming fully human must proceed through the study and practice of ritual propriety (*li*, 禮). The proper rituals communicate who we are—that is, the objective nature of the relationships in which we find ourselves—and what we must do to achieve harmony with Heaven, Earth, and Humanity as a whole. What is accomplished through such practices Confucian tradition remembers as "the rectifications of names" (*zhèngmíng*, 正名). This is a hallmark of *Junzi* leadership, insofar as good governance depends on calling things by their proper names and acting accordingly.

> The Junzi's moral leadership is to be exercised in social organizations, starting with the family, and expanding outward in his business or profession, whether for-profit or not-for-profit, whether in the agencies of government or social services.

> The duke Jing, of Qi, asked Confucius about government. 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.' 'Good!' said the duke; 'if, indeed, the prince be not prince, the minister not minister, the father not father, and the son not son, although I have my revenue, can I enjoy it?' (*Analects* 8:2; Kindle Locations 2083-2087).

The rules of propriety (*li*) provide us with the proper understanding of the roles and situations in which a person must act virtuously. To rectify names, for example, the role of husband in relation to wife, or parent in relation to child, one must correct one's way of thinking and acting by narrowing the distance between one's actual practices and the ideal expressed in the rules of propriety and their concrete realization in the moral leadership of a *Junzi*. If the prince is truly a prince and therefore known for his exemplary virtue, his ministers and the families they rule will be virtuous as well.

Where to begin, then, in achieving the harmonious relationships that Confucius thinks are possible? The answer is the ultimate in ritual propriety, namely, the practice of self-cultivation. How can a leader reach the point of always keeping *ren*, *yi* and *shu* in mind, and responding to others through *li*? The ever-expanding virtuous circle depends upon universalising the practice of self-cultivation "from the Son of Heaven down to the mass of the people."

The *Analects* provide a number of insights into the practice of self-cultivation. Achieving such a state of personal equilibrium or tranquility requires more than study in the conventional sense. Apparently, maintaining ritual propriety requires some form of meditation or personal reflection, beyond what is normally associated with acquiring knowledge through mastering facts and theories:

> Zi Lu asked what constituted the superior man. The Master said, 'The cultivation of himself in reverential carefulness.' 'And is this all?' said Zi Lu. 'He cultivates himself so as to give rest to others,' was the reply. (*Analects* 14:42; Kindle Locations 2690-2693)

Reverential carefulness is a habit of mind, the fruit of the practice of self-cultivation, which enables persons to detach themselves from the ways of the world and its all-too-human striving for pleasure, recognition, and power over others. Without such detachment, any claim to moral leadership is spurious, as Confucius points out in the *Analects*' occasional comments on the attitudes of disciples who are not quite *Junzi* yet. The *Analects* do not describe in detail how the state of reverential carefulness is to be achieved; but its possession is clearly recognisable in the ways of the *Junzi*. Major clues for recognising

the *Junzi* are scattered throughout the *Analects* in the form of aphorisms contrasting the *Junzi* with small-minded people—or as Legge would have it, "the mean man" (*xiaoren*, 小人). Here are two memorable examples:

> The Master said, 'The superior man thinks of virtue; the small man thinks of comfort. The superior man thinks of the sanctions of law; the small man thinks of favours which he may receive.' (*Analects* 4:11) (Kindle Locations 538-543)

> The Master said, 'The mind of the superior man is conversant with righteousness; the mind of the mean man is conversant with gain.' (*Analects* 4:16) (Kindle Locations 569-571)

The Social Implications of *Junzi* Leadership

Although Confucius commends the *Junzi* as the embodiment of human benevolence and righteousness, this ideal is not an unattainable state of perfection symbolised in the legendary figure of the sage (*shengren*, 圣人). The *Junzi* is meant to convey a live option for all people who aspire to moral leadership. A leader must know very clearly his or her responsibility as a member of society, the moral equal of all other members of society. Confucius summarises four of the characteristics of the *Junzi*—"in his conduct of himself, he was humble; in serving his superiors, he was respectful; in nourishing the people, he was kind; in ordering the people, he was just" (*Analects* 5:16)—indicating that the virtues aspired to are inherently social. The *Junzi's* moral leadership is to be exercised in social organizations, starting with the family, and expanding outward in his business or profession, whether for-profit or not-for-profit, whether in the agencies of government or social services. The *Junzi* defines a moral ideal that transcends the institutional limits of the Warring States period in which Confucius lived, answering the question of how the common good is to be achieved in any social setting.

The Confucian classics contain a vision of the common good that could be realised were the *Junzi* ideal to animate the efforts of leadership in all walks of life. It is evident in the discussion of the Grand Union (*Datong*, 大同) presented in the Book of Rites (*Liji*, 礼记). When the Grand Union was observed, "a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky" in which all leaders strove for "harmony" based on "sincere words." Their spontaneous aspiration was toward a universal love, reminiscent of the teachings of Mozi:

> Thus men did not love their parents only, nor treat as children only their own sons. A competent provision was secured for the aged till their death, employment for the able-bodied, and the means of growing up to the young. They showed kindness and compassion to widows, orphans, childless men, and those who were disabled by disease, so that they were all sufficiently maintained. (Book of Rites 9 禮運,Kindle Locations 5636-5639).

Full employment, apparently, was the aim of public policy, and all members of society contributed their labour toward the common good. "In this way (selfish) schemings were repressed and found no development. Robbers, filchers, and rebellious traitors did not show themselves, and hence the outer doors remained open, and were not shut." (Book of Rites 9 *禮運*, Kindle Locations 5641-5643) Confucian social philosophy starts with the assumption that working for the common good is natural, and that a society focused on the common good will expand naturally through its attraction for others. Thus "outer doors remained open, and were not shut." One can imagine how immigrants might be treated in such an open society. All are welcome who are willing to contribute to the common good.

But Confucius recognises that the Grand Union is a legendary dream. While the *Datong* is not likely, what can be achieved is an approximation of the common good described as the Small Tranquility (*Xiaokang*, 小康). Unlike the Grand Union, the *Xiaokang* is characterised by an overriding loyalty to one's own family.

> Great men imagine it is the rule that their states should descend in their own families…The rules of propriety and of what is right are regarded as the threads by which they seek to maintain in its correctness the relation between ruler and minister; in its generous regard that between father and son; in its harmony that between elder brother and younger; and in a community of sentiment that between husband and wife; and in accordance with them they frame buildings and measures; lay out the fields and hamlets (for the dwellings of the husbandmen); adjudge the superiority to men of valour and knowledge; and regulate their achievements with a view to their own advantage. Thus it is that (selfish) schemes and enterprises are constantly taking their rise, and recourse is had to arms; and thus it was (also) that Yu, Tang, Wen and Wu, king Cheng, and the duke of Zhou obtained their distinction. (Book of Rites 9 禮運, Kindle Locations 5654-5663).

Clearly, the *Xiaokang* is not Confucius' ideal of the common good fully realised, but it may be as much of the common good as can be achieved in history as we know it. Instead of the spontaneous benevolence toward all people envisioned in the great Way (*Dadao*, 大道), everyone favours their own families. Even "the kingdom is a family inheritance." Given society's commitment to family as its organising principle, achieving the common good consists in practicing filial piety (*xiào,* 孝), the rules of propriety establishing the proper norms for all social relationships. Moral leadership in a *Xiaokang* society, inspired by the example of the sage kings "Yu, Tang, Wen and Wu, king Cheng, and the duke of Zhou"—is exercised by *Junzi* who observe the rules of propriety, providing good example whenever possible, and sufficient law enforcement whenever necessary:

> Of these six great men every one was very attentive to the rules of propriety, thus to secure the display of righteousness, the realisation of sincerity, the exhibition of errors, the exemplification of benevolence, and the discussion of courtesy, showing the people all the normal virtues. Any rulers who did not follow this course were driven away by those who possessed power and position, and all regarded them as pests. (Book of Rites 9 禮運, Kindle Locations 5663-5666)

The challenge facing anyone who aspires to Junzi leadership is to live within a tension between the Grand Union—which may animate his or her deepest moral ideals—and the never finished business of maintaining and improving the Small Tranquility in which our lives unfold.

The common good achievable in a *Xiaokang* is a realistic possibility so long as those who aspire to become *Junzi* are properly educated. Confucius' destiny is to show how this might be done, through his words and his actions.

We have seen that the challenge facing anyone who aspires to *Junzi* leadership is to live within a tension between the Grand Union—which may animate his or her deepest moral ideals—and the never finished business of maintaining and improving the Small Tranquility in which our lives unfold. Of course, Confucius and his disciples knew that even the *Xiaokang* is but a hope for the best; if the morality defining the *Xiaokang* is ignored or perverted, an "Infirm State" (*Ci Guó*, 疵國) is the likely outcome, as society descends into "a state of darkness" characterised by war and poverty, while leaders become usurpers, bent on nothing higher than their own immediate advantage. Avoiding "the

Infirm State" can happen only if society as a whole, and its leaders, embrace the morality embodied in the practices of the *Xiaokang*, which themselves imperfectly reflect the ideals of the *Dadao*. Understanding the *Junzi's* role in avoiding disaster and guiding everyone toward the harmony achievable in a Small Tranquility is central to any Confucian vision of education for the common good.

Junzi Leadership Intending the Common Good

What we all may yet learn from this Confucian perspective should include the following elements:

- First, the pursuit of the common good requires education, even more fundamentally than legislation or public policy reform.
- Second, education for the common good must reflect sound moral values, substantively embedded in wisdom traditions like the Confucian classics.
- Third, if it is to be pedagogically effective, education for the common good must focus on training in moral leadership. It cannot simply be a recital of general concepts reflecting moral ideals and aspirations, detached from a concern for the responsibilities of those who are capable of exercising leadership.
- Fourth, within such a focus on developing moral leadership, the emphasis must be practical, that is, it will investigate and propose the rules of propriety—or moral norms and virtues—that must be internalised by anyone claiming a leadership role.
- Fifth, this practical focus on cultivating a capacity for leadership must be grounded spiritually, that is, like the Confucian practice of self-cultivation which is central to *Junzi* leadership development, education for the common good will bear fruit or will wither on the vine depending on whether students master a technique of self-reflection or meditation that will create an habitual attitude of "reverential carefulness."
- Sixth, while making no claim to be a sage, the person trying to exercise moral leadership, must seek to acquire virtues conducive toward inner harmony and personal tranquility, such as those that Confucius taught were characteristic of the *Junzi*: Humility, Filial Piety, Benevolence, and Righteousness (*Analects* 5:16).
- Seventh, an authentic *Junzi*—that is, one who sincerely practices these virtues—will be recognised on account of them. A *Junzi's* goodness will inspire goodness in others, who will naturally trust and cooperate with him or her in the pursuit of the common good.
- Eighth, the common good, if it is to be truly common, must emerge from the interaction of moral leaders with their followers, who will associate freely because of their mutual interest in achieving a truly common good.

In Confucius' own time—which is remembered as the close of the relatively peaceful Spring and Autumn period and the onslaught of the chaotic Warring States period—the ideal of the *Junzi* was proposed as a model for political leadership, for training rulers, ministers, and heads of families in their responsibilities for the common good. In our own day, in China's period of economic and social reform, this same idea should challenge us as a model for leadership in business and the professions, the need for which is just as pressing as the need for a recovery of moral responsibility among all who would take up leadership roles. As we have indicated, *Junzi* leadership always demonstrates care for family (*jiā*, 家), country (*guó*, 国), and the whole world (*tiān xià*, 天下).

Yang Hengda, Professor of Comparative Linguistic Studies, Renmin University of China, Beijing. Dennis McCann, Director of Research, Rothlin Ltd., Beijing and Hong Kong.

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