



THE  
JUBILEE CENTRE  
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

## **Understanding Phronesis and Ren: a dialogic exploration of Aristotle's and Confucius' central virtues**

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> – Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> January 2016.  
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*An old black and white photo of May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement is kept well in the exhibition room of the middle school in which I taught for seven years in Beijing, China. Every year, our school principal would proudly show this picture to the newly admitted students and us teachers as an evidence of our school's active participation of this progressive student movement. It seems to me that the moment of history is not frozen in the old picture, rather its advocacy for western ideology of democracy and science and its fierce attack on Chinese tradition especially Confucianism is still lingering around and penetrating our school and far beyond.*

I believe it is a piece of historical evidence of the ideological clashes of the east and the west. Xiong (2008), a contemporary Confucian, suggests: "Chinese tradition is generally concerned about inner cultivation for good; while western tradition is oriented around the pursuit of external knowledge for truth" (p. 7). His comment echoes with Lancashire's (1965) claim that Chinese tradition is about understanding human nature while Greek tradition seeks to know the objective world. Accordingly, literary works reveal the philosophical gulf between the ancient Greeks and Chinese: Greek tragedies are often of great momentum, which is in apparent contrast to Chinese ancient literature exemplified by The book of Poetry (Shi Jing) which is "embedded in everyday life, characterized by harmony and joyfulness, without much perseverance or pain" (Xiong, 2008, p. 5).

I am intrigued by eastern traditional thought embedded in the holistic harmony and deepest caring toward human nature while I also feel attracted by the bright sparks burst out of the western arduous pursuit of the external world and radiant shines of reasoning. Xiong (2008) elaborates: "The fusion of western and eastern traditions should be pursued" (p. 5). I believe the fusion is not assimilation of either one but it is embedded in the generative tension between the two. In the conceptual explorations, I will primarily examine the complex meanings of the two ancient concepts *phronesis* and *ren*. Aristotelian *phronesis* could be interpreted as "central virtue" (MacIntyre, 1984, p.154), while Confucian *ren* could be understood as an "all-encompassing" virtue (Yu, 2007, p. 77) or the "summation of human virtues" (Wong, 2013, p. 75) in their respective traditions. I will firstly approach them through the dichotomized themes of western tension and eastern harmony, as Zhang and Zhong (2003) observe: Confucian approach is oriented towards mean harmony while western discourse is characterized by tensions and conflicts. Then I attempt to reinterpret the tension-harmony, western-eastern dichotomy in the prevalent discourses. I will explore the possibilities of re-conceptualize *phronesis* through Confucius' *ren's* harmonious lens, and examine the creative tension in Confucius' *ren*, hopefully towards a generative "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer, 1989).

MacIntyre (1991) cautions about the incommensurability of Confucian and Aristotelian virtues. Yet, following Bernstein (1983), I believe different ethical traditions may indeed be incompatible and incommensurable, but they are comparable. Aristotelian and Confucian traditions, though embedded in different social and cultural background and unknown to each other at that era, enjoy common ground for comparative conceptual explorations. Van Norden (2007) suggests both of their interests in particulars: "Aristotle is a paradigmatic example of a particularistic. In Chinese tradition...the Ruists (Confucianists) are comparatively particularistic" (p. 36). Liu (2013) also points out: "the Confucian ethical doctrine presents some similar tendencies of thought to the ethics of Aristotle" (p. 66). In the comparative endeavor of the concepts embedded in Aristotelian and Confucian traditions, I would follow Lin Anwu (2009)'s advice of "not mining Chinese tradition in western ways" (p. 152). Eastern and western traditions should "interact, have conversations", which is "multidimensional and will yield all kinds of possibilities" (Lin, 2009, p. 152). I hope to build conversational conceptual explorations between *phronesis* and *ren* with the caution against synthesizing or oversimplifying either of them. In comparison and contrast, the two concepts will be brought to "mutual illumination" (Yu, 1998, p. 323).

## ***Phronesis* in tension**

Aristotle divides virtues into moral virtues and intellectual virtues. Aristotle contends that one cannot attain full virtue without obtaining all of the five intellectual virtues and moral virtues. I understand the Aristotelian virtues as interwoven and inseparable. Dunne (1999) argues, “it (*phronesis*) is not just one virtue among others but is rather a necessary ingredient in all the others” (p. 51). The intellectual virtues are interrelated and are connected by *phronesis* to the moral virtues. It is appropriate to suggest that *phronesis* is a kind of executive and “architectonic” virtue (Reeve, 1992, p. 76), marshaling the requisite intellectual and moral virtues to support and enable right action. In literature, I find *phronesis* as Aristotle’s executive virtue seems to be dwelling in the tensions between abstract theories and concrete particulars with its constant attunement. Theories are tested against practice with its openness and malleability; while practices are informed and structured by previous, present and possible future practical and theoretical dialogue. Also, *phronesis* as good discernment and judgment among many facets of particular contexts is often embedded in weighing different and even conflicting considerations. Just as Nussbaum (2001) claims: “In our deliberations we must balance these competing claims. This balance will never be a tension-free harmony” (p. 372). It is unlikely that we could be free from the risk of contradictories or conflicts. It is the very tension of conflicts and oppositions that allows for the plurality and richness of values. “To unify and harmonize, removing the bases of conflicts, is to remove value as well” (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 353). Besides the inner tension of *phronesis*, I also find its tension with another Aristotelian intellectual virtue of *techne* noticeable. *Phronesis* is correlated to action as “doing well itself serves as end” (1140b8), while *techne* associates itself with production which has a distinct end other than the process.

## **Theory and practice tension**

*Phronesis* builds a dialogic bridge between theory and practice and dwells in its very tension. It is neither an empty and mindless repetition of undergoing circumstances, nor it is absolute conformity to universal rules and principles. Aristotle explains: “Nor is practical wisdom only concerned with universals: to be wise, one must also be familiar with particulars, since wisdom has to do with action, and the sphere of action is constituted by particulars” (1141b15-18). The tension between theory and practice never renders *phronesis* restful. On one hand, principles or universal rules are not sufficient to master the infinite particulars. They should always leave themselves room for changes, revisions, and transformations in the infinite circumstances. Nussbaum (2001) suggests: “General rules are being criticized ... both for lack of concreteness and for lack of flexibility” (p. 301). Lund, Panayotidis, Smits and Towers (2006) identify the insufficiency of universal principles or technical procedures for *phronetic* practices: “from the perspective of practice as *phronesis*, its meaning and understanding cannot be encapsulated in rules, procedures and processes” (p. 2). On the other hand, practical wisdom refuses the temptation to ascend particulars to the universals. Dunne (1993) asserts, “*phronesis* does not ascend to a level of abstraction or generality that leaves experience behind. It arises from experience and returns to experience” (p. 293). *Phronesis* is characterized by subtle responsive and flexible attunement between principles and particulars (Phelan 2005a, 2005b, 2009; Field and Macintyre Latta, 2001). For example, a teacher with *phronesis* would refuse to categorize and label his students as being “misbehaved” students and applying some theories and strategies to correct the “undesirable” behaviors. The *phronetic* teacher would consider complexity in particulars that shakes and renders the labeling of a “mischievous” child loose and theories of treating a misbehaved child slippery. *Phronetic* teachers use rules only as “summaries and guides; it must itself be flexible, ready for

surprise, prepared to see, resourceful at improvisation” (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 305) and “avoid settling into mere routine” (Dunne, 1993, p. 292). The improvising process involved in *phronesis* is a creative and never-ending process embedded in its every encounter with particulars and transformation of the self. Again, *phronesis* neither exhausts itself in universals nor merely repeats itself in particulars. The *phronetic* initiates dialogues among the rules, principles and particulars and linger in the tension.

### **Discernment tension**

*Phronesis*, as a marshaling virtue in Aristotle’s categorization, links intellectual virtues to moral virtues and constantly weighs, balances, discerns among various and even conflicting considerations. Coulter and Wiens (2002) contrast *phronesis* with *episteme* and suggests *phronesis* as a form of judgment rather than knowledge: “*phronesis* is not simply a form of knowledge, but an amalgam of knowledge, virtue, and reason that enables people to decide what they should do” (p. 16). The discernment of particularities requires *phronesis* to “an eye” or “an inner eye” (Dunne, 1993, p. 302; Phelan and Luu, 2004, P. 178), which could perceive and judge the tension in particulars informed by the amalgam of moral and intellectual virtues. The *phronetic* perception of particulars involves perceiving the particulars holistically from a variety of angles and grasps the “circumstances” in their infinite variety (Gadamer, 1989, p. 21). A *phronetic* teacher would look deep into the complexity and tension of the unique situation that particular child resides in, informed by the teacher’s reasoning and moral character. To take student cheating in an exam for example: the pride of the child, the disciplining of his parents, the pressure of the exams, the notion of success, the spirit of persistence and many other considerations juxtapose with a student’s behavior of cheating in exams. The teacher’s perception of competing considerations, the teacher’s reasoning and his moral norms collectively play an important role in his judgment of and action upon the complex situation. The dwelling in the conflicting considerations and informed by a complexity of “rationality and deliberation” tempered by “discernment and situational appreciation” and “moral character and virtue” (Phelan, 2009, pp. 95-98) would provide the *phronetic* teacher rich resources to draw on. A teacher with *phronesis* is not to eliminate the conflicting considerations and assimilate them into a unifying oneness. Rather, a *phronetic* teacher will pay attention to the contextual details, negotiate with his rationality and moral characters in the particularity.

### ***Phronesis* and *techne* tension**

*Phronesis* and *techne* are the two important categories among the five intellectual virtues for Aristotle. *Phronesis* is usually translated into English as practical wisdom, practical judgment, while *techne* is for craft, skill, technical expertise. *Phronesis* enjoys an experiential nature and is usually understood as the capacity to do the right thing the right way in the right context for the right reasons at the right time. In contrast, a common interpretation of *techne* as being detached, separated or transcended from the experiential grounds. Aristotle emphasizes, “*phronesis* is a kind of excellence and not a technical expertise” (1140b25). They are often interpreted as separate or even contradictory concepts from each other. Literature shows that *phronesis* and *techne* are interpreted as belonging to different spheres and bearing different characteristics (Gadamer, 1989, Nussbaum, 2001, Hughes, 2001, Yu, 2007). Nussbaum’s (2001) understandings of *techne* and *phronesis* further set them apart by suggesting the triumph of *techne* is the elimination of contingencies on which *phronesis* relies.

Lund, et al. (2006) link the *phronesis-techne* tension beautifully to teaching: the procedures, steps

and techniques are fragments of practice, while *phronesis* has a constitutive sense (i.e., What does it mean to be a teacher?). This reminds me of the vignettes when teachers teach in the classroom. Teachers with *techne* are primarily concerned with how to realize the pre-set goals for the class. They might use certain technologies to distribute the knowledge effectively and rely on teaching technics to improve efficiency. In contrast, a teacher with *phronesis* “aims at a different kind of end, a good and worthwhile life, where the means are integral to the end” (Coulter and Wiens, 2002, p. 16). The *phronetic* teacher would navigate through the process: he or she would pay attention to uniqueness of the context; take risks of making judgment rather than safely complying with rules at each encounter with the particulars for “the different kind of end”(Coulter and Wiens, 2002, p. 16), a virtuous end. For *phronetic* teachers, there seems to be a constant tension with *techne* oriented approaches.

### ***Ren* in harmony**

Born into a turbulent time in ancient China with deterioration of rituals and collapse of social order, Confucius is reminiscent of the civilization of early Zhou dynasty and upholds the value system of “harmony is most precious” (1.12). Mencius also echoes with Confucius: “opportunities of time vouchsafed by Heaven are not equal to advantages of situation afforded by the Earth, and advantages of situation afforded by the Earth are not equal to the harmony arising from the accord of Men” (Mencius, Gongsunchou). I agree with Yao (1996) that the whole tradition of Confucianism developed out of the deliberations about how to establish or reestablish harmony in conflicts and disorder. It is justifiable to suggest that Confucian philosophy is originated in an interconnected and interdependent co-existing harmony.

As is explicitly and implicitly suggested by the master, harmony is an essential characteristic of Confucian *ren*. In various descriptions we could find the free of tension, restfulness, tranquility and the ease of Confucius *ren* (the Analects, 4.2; 6.23; 14.28). Confucius suggests, “A man with *ren* could rest in his *ren*” (4.2) and “the man of *ren* is free from anxiety” (14:28). Confucius applies metaphor of “the love of hills” to a person with *ren* and describes a person with *ren* as “tranquil” (6.23). *Ren* could be understood as moral foundation that generates harmony and *ren* is characterized by harmony. Chen (2014) captures the inseparable and inter-definable relationship of *ren* and harmony and raises his point that “*ren* is the substance, while harmony is its function... the foundation of harmony is *ren*” (p. 479-492). For Confucian *ren*, there is an emphasis on harmony with oneself, with others, with nature and heaven. I attempt to examine the harmony of *ren* in the three layers: the inner harmony (person making), relational harmony (on human relationship) and the cosmic harmony (self and nature, the earthly and the heavenly). For Confucius, “life becomes artful to the degree that it is responsive to other people, to one’s own potential to grow, and to the good he identifies in nature and the cosmos” (Hansen, 2011, p. 24).

### **Inner harmony**

Hall and Ames (1987) refers to the nature of *ren* as “person making”(p. 17). A person with *ren* is expected to harmonize various elements not only his physical body and thoughts but also his emotions and moral characters into an organic and fluid unity.

There is an inseparable relationship between the mean and harmony for Confucius. In the Mean, it records “prior to the happening of pleasure, anger, sorrow, or joy is called the mean. When those feelings have been stirred, and they act in their due degree according to the mean, there ensues what may be called the state of harmony. The mean is the great root from which grow all the human actions in the world, and this harmony is the universal path which they all should pursue”

(Chapter 1.4). I understand it primarily as an assertion of the intimate relationship between the mean and harmony: harmony thrives on the fundamental mean prior to emotions, while the fundamental mean provides the norms for harmony embedded on emotions. *Ren's* harmony regards mean as its normative framework: "Junzi (the person with virtues) embodies the mean, while Xiaoren (the small person) acts contrary to the mean" (The Mean, Chapter 2). Anchored on the mean, *ren's* harmony involves stirring of emotions and feelings appropriately. Emotions and feelings could not only promote harmony but also constitute harmony. Besides the emphasis on the inner harmony that is rich in emotions, there are intimate connections between inner harmony and moral virtues of the person. Cai (1999) emphasizes: "what Confucius wants his pupils to cultivate... is primarily moral harmony rather than Platonic intellectual harmony" (p. 319). Confucian moral harmony leads one toward the achievement of the supreme moral virtue of *ren*. I believe intellectual harmony demands for theoretical or scientific knowledge, while moral harmony is dependent upon whether the person could nurture moral virtues comprehensively and act accordingly, e.g. the virtue of persistence could be turned into stubbornness if lacking in the virtue of flexibility. We could not suggest an isolated action, for example, a teacher encouraged a student who just failed an exam, is *ren* or not, We need to learn more about the emotions hidden in the action are aroused in their due degree (the teacher could have mixed feelings of empathy, pity and hope for the student); we also need to learn about whether the action is in a harmony with the person's moral character (the teacher is acting out of his moral character rather than contrary to it). Otherwise, the teacher's encouragement could be out of an instrumental purpose and might not be regarded as a manifestation of *ren*. The inner harmony of *ren* involves the spontaneity to act out of inner moral harmony and "practice with vigor" (the Mean).

### **Relational harmony**

Harmonious human relationship is of paramount importance in Confucius' notion of *ren*. The spirit of *ren* highlights the relational harmony, which implies "the intergrowth and co-prosperity in concert" (Qin, 2008, p. 44).

*Ren* is fundamentally a concept of "relationships between self and others" (Chen, 2013, p. 23). *Ren* is actually homophonous with the notion of a human being (人). The Chinese character "*ren*" (仁) consists of two parts: the left part of the word "亻" means human and the right part means two. The Chinese character itself suggests its close relation with humans and its emphasis on the interactions and communications among people. Hansen observes (2012), "Confucius understands the lure of withdrawal, of getting away from the tensions and strife of public affairs. But in his view to be human is not to isolate oneself from others" (p. 23). *Ren* emphasizes fundamentally on the relationship of love, which derives from a harmonious family and being extended to others and to a harmonious society. Yu (1998) captures: "the idea of *ren* as love is the expansion of the roots of filial love" (p. 332). Fan (2010) also explains that loving people does not mean the identical treatment of everyone and compares the practice of *ren* to adopting a family-oriented approach to relationships in civil society. Extended from filial love, different types of relationships such as parents and children; kings and administrators; brothers and sisters; teachers and students should be in harmony and reciprocal.

We need to notice that Confucian relational harmony of *ren* does not imply conformity. In the Analects, Confucius states "Junzi (gentlemen) live in harmony without conforming to same ideas; while Xiaoren (little men) are similar but not live in harmony" (13.23). *Ren's* relational harmony "presupposes the coexistence of different things and implies a certain favorable relationship among them" (Wei & Li, 2013, p. 60). The analogies of one flavor not making the supreme soup

and one note not composing beautiful lyrics in the Book of Poetry (诗经) vividly show that similarity or sameness does not generate Confucian harmony. The harmony of differences is a generating resource for the newness. Embedded in plurality and differences, *ren's* relational harmony is not a stable or final state to achieve but a constant dynamic process which never comes to its ends. To return to teaching, I understand a student's harmonious relationship to a teacher should not be strict complying but thrives on their mutual understanding and on-going conversations he has with his teacher, which the interactions between Confucius and disciples embody very well.

### **Cosmic harmony**

The ideal of the "great unity" or "universal peace" could be found in the Li Yun (Evolution of Rites) chapter of the Li Chi. According to this treatise, the first stage of human history is a stage of "universal disorder", the second of "small tranquility" and the third the "great unity" (Lancashire, 1965, p. 81). I understand the great unity as cosmic harmony between self and the cosmic world, when "the happy order will prevail throughout heaven and earth, and all things will be nourished and flourish" (The Mean, Chapter 1.5). Confucius does not seek unity "between people per se but a kind of unity in flux- a unity without uniformity" (C. Tresch, 2007, p.93, cited by Hansen, 2012, p.24). For Confucius, the unity of self and others, self and "all under heaven" (Sim, 2007, p.103) is fluid and dynamic. And for Confucius, the cosmic order is concerned with morality. The master refrains from talking about miracles; violence; disorder and spirits (7.21). I could tell Confucian unity is not transcendent wholeness but still rooted in the secular human life. Zhang and Zhong (2003) remind us: "cosmic order is moral order... (the person) integrates and internalizes the heaven (tian)" (p. 255) in his very mundane life. Vaguely as cosmic harmony is described in Confucian texts, Wong (2013) appreciates it is characterized as a "selfless world in which everyone contributes his/her best to the community and takes what he or she needs" (p. 79).

### **Could *phronesis* and *ren* be in dialogue?**

*For Chinese and Western traditions, dialogue nourishes both while separation hurts both.*

*-Xiong, 2008, p. 5.*

Having discussed around the tension oriented *phronesis* and harmony focused *ren*, I am questioning about the tension-harmony dichotomy in western and eastern wisdom traditions. I am wondering in what ways Confucian *ren's* harmony might be related to the tension of *phronesis* and vice versa. Building a conversational relationship between *ren* and *phronesis*, harmony and tension might help break through the binary conceptualization and enable better understandings of the two concepts in their dialogic encounter. Slote (2013) reminds me of the impossibility of harmonizing between Aristotelian and Confucian ethical values. He articulates: "the clash of ethical values and the impossibility of attaining perfection better reflects our world than the more harmonious but also simpler picture that the earlier traditions various paint for us" (Slote, 2013, p. 93). By the same token, I do not intend to synthesize them into oneness or harmonizing them to eliminate the complexity or differences in their encounter. Instead, I hope that the concepts of *phronesis* and *ren* rooted in distinct or even incompatible philosophical legacies could offer us a generating space to provide more possibilities of understanding both of them.

In the Doctrine of the Mean, it records: "thousands of things are nourished together without injuring one another. The courses of the seasons, and of the sun and moon, are pursued without any collision among them" (Chapter 30.3). It shows that some things might appear contradictory

or even confrontational, yet they could speak to each other and even thrive on each other. The understandings of either Aristotelian or Confucian philosophical ideas could be broadened and enlarged in their interactions. Xiong (2008) references: "Dao has no fixed forms, ways of understanding it vary infinitely" (p. 23).

### **A dynamic harmony in *phronesis***

*Phronesis* could be understood as "a mean that is relative to us, defined by reason" (1106b36-1170a2). I believe the mean of *phronesis*, as a kind of "intermediate between what exceeds and what falls short" (1106b29), could be linked to the layered notion of *ren's* harmony that has the mean as its fundamental principle. I am wondering whether Aristotelian mean could be associated with harmony as Confucius points out.

Sim (2007) suggests there is an under-emphasis on Aristotelian idea of harmony: "Aristotelians have something like the idea of harmony in virtue's effects on one's internal and external relations" (p. 100). I would reexamine *phronesis* through Confucius' inner harmony and relational harmony, if not cosmic harmony. For the cosmic harmony of *ren*, it emphasizes on "all under heaven" (Sim, 2007, p. 103) which refers not only to human beings but also animals, plants, things. For Confucius, the normative mean is the principle of cosmic harmony, while Aristotle's notion of the mean "is limited to the sphere of human action" (Sim, 2007, p. 103). Aristotle points out the significance of human life: "people like that know things that are exceptional, wonderful, difficult, even superhuman-but useless because what they inquire into are not the goods that are human" (1141b7-9). Having been aware that *phronesis* is solely concerned with human life, while *ren's* harmony has broader connotations related with cosmic orders, I would re-approach *phronesis* through *ren's* inner harmony and relational harmony and examine what the encounters might bring about.

### **Understanding *phronesis* through inner harmony**

As much as Confucian emphasis on holistic inner harmony, Aristotle as well acknowledges the harmony among various virtues to make a whole person virtuous. There is a sense of the "unity of virtues" in both Aristotelian and Confucian traditions which means "at its most extreme... in order to have any one of virtues, it is necessary to have all of them... e.g. without wisdom, courage becomes rashness" (Van Norden, 2007, p. 43). The interconnectedness and interdependence of virtues are manifest in both of the traditions. Generally speaking, there is an organic whole of the virtues in which each part constitutes and correlates to one another.

According to Aristotle, there are basically three things that make someone good and virtuous: nature, habit and reason: "The three things must be in harmony in human individuals for them to be good and virtuous" (1332a39-b10, cited by Kristjansson, 2007, p. 22). Reason, as the distinguished human character, stands out in Aristotelian notion of a *phronetic* person. I understand Aristotelian conception of reason is not about logical or scientific reasoning. Rather, it is more about practical reasoning embedded in human life. Nussbaum (2001) points out "Aristotle's ...conception of practical rationality that will make human beings self-sufficient in an appropriately human way" (p. 8). Nussbaum (2001) approaches *phronesis* as an "improvisatory conjectural use of reason" (p. 303). Having considered that, I wonder whether the improvisation of *phronetic* reasoning could be related to *ren's* inner harmony with emphasis on emotions and feelings. The linkage between *phronesis's* focus on reason and *ren's* emphasis of emotions invites further thoughts on the *phronesis* in dynamic harmony. Aristotle suggests emotions or feelings as the non-rational part of the soul could also participate in reason: "in the moderate and courageous



person it is presumably still readier to listen, for in him it always chimes with reason”(1102b28-29). There seems to be an infiltration and dynamic balance between reason and emotions in the improvising process of *phronesis*. Yu (2007) suggests that Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis* is not limited to reason alone, but involves the “relationship between reason and the emotions/desires” (p. 75). He further argues that the partnership of reason and emotion for *ren* as corresponding mainly to Aristotelian *phronesis* (Yu, 2007). The *phronetic* person flourishes on a dynamic harmonious and balanced relationship between practical reasons and appropriate emotions. We could tell that *phronesis* “also involves feelings and their proper ordering... (it) is like Confucius’ harmony” (Sim, 2007, p. 105). I understand *phronesis*, in its constant search for hitting the target, which implies to do the right thing the right way in the right context for the right reasons at the right time, is largely informed by dynamic balance and harmony between reasons and emotions.

### **Understanding *phronesis* through relational harmony**

Although Aristotle may not pay as much attention as Confucius to familial bond or categorize all types of relationships, yet it seems apparent to me that for Confucius’ *ren* and Aristotle’ *phronesis*, human relationship plays an essential role. Coulter and Wiens (2008) captures: “education for *phronesis* involves a kind of knowing of particulars that is only possible by being in the world with others” (p. 13). In understanding *phronesis* through relational harmony, I would focus on Aristotle and Confucius’ shared emphases on differences and plurality.

As much as Confucius’ relational harmony, which values differences, *phronesis* values the diversity and plurality embedded in human relationships. The human relationships are complex and diverse and they seem to inevitably bring about tensions and conflicts. Yet, being informed by *ren*’s relational harmony, I believe “things that are contrary to each other could be at the same time complementary to each other”(相反相成, Pang, 2009, p. 15). Harmony for Confucius is neither one-noted lyric or one-flavored soup, nor is merely a matter of mixing different sounds or mingling various flavors. The process of dynamic “harmonization” or “harmonizing” (Li, 2006; 2008) is constantly adjusting and co-creating, which invites a mutually enhancing mixture: “different flavors are being mixed to enrich one another, and when various sounds are mixed to complement one another” (Li, 2008, p. 86). Relational tension should not be no solely about unyielding contradictions and tough lines of demarcation, rather it could be creative and generative: differences and even conflicts at the same time informing, enhancing, and transforming one another. Li (2014) captures: “harmony can be achieved by containing conflict without elimination and by turning conflict into creative tension”(p. 13). I think “harmonizing” relational differences does not necessarily mean to eliminate differences and achieve conformity, rather it sets constraints and at the same time allows dialogues in self-other relationships: each of the distinct persons or communities listens to one another, respects without necessarily agreeing with one another, realizes the interdependence of one another. The dynamics of tension and conflicts are constantly changing in their dialogic encounters and in an on-going process of a holistic balance. Kristjansson (2007) reminds us: “Aristotle does not seek conflict resolution and temporizing compromises per se, however; it seeks conflict resolution through recognition of the relevant truth of the matter” (p. 92). Aristotle, as much as Confucius, acknowledges the human beings and their interactions are characterized by differences and conflicts. And I believe the relevant rather than absolute truth of the matter opens up for space of negotiation, accommodation and co-creation among differences and conflicts to reach an organic unity and dynamic harmony. For Aristotle’s relational tension, it could be re-understood more comprehensively through Confucian emphasis on harmony among relations. I sympathize with Pang (2009)’s argument: “search for harmony among conflicts; search for unification among tensions”(p. 14-15).

## A Creative tension in *ren*

The master suggests the rareness of *ren* by commenting on his favorite disciple Yan Hui: “Ah, Yan Hui could only follow *ren* for three consecutive months, whereas the others manage this only now and then” (6.7). While at some other times Confucius boldly argues *ren* is so near to us and could be obtained with our willingness: “Is *ren* out of reach? As soon as I long for *ren*, *ren* is at hand” (7.30). In Confucius’ teaching, he does not present the theory and clarify it through argumentation. According to Li (2008), Confucius’ complicated and indefinite understanding of *ren* embodies the vague, indefinable and even contradictory conceptualizing process. The complex interpretations of *ren* manifest the inherent tension in *ren*’s conceptualization. *Ren*, lacking in fixed definition, not only allows for room to negotiate its meaning, but also reveals its dynamic and flexible characteristic. The meaning of *ren* constantly transforms itself when it is attuned to particular contexts. I understand the indefinite and even contradictory conceptualization of *ren* is closely related to Aristotelian *phronesis* in its very adjustment to the particulars and refusal to generalize. Firstly, I will try to re-understand *ren* informed by *phronesis*’ tension between theory and practice, abstract and concrete. Then, I will re-approach *ren* through the tensionality involved in *phronetic* discernment. Finally, *ren*’s tension with *li* would be compared with *phronesis*’ tension with *techne*.

## Concrete universal

Seeing through the lens of *phronesis*’ tension between theory and practice, universal and particular, we might find that *ren* is also embedded in a similar dynamic tension in-between. Confucius sometimes refers to *ren* as a general virtue which encompasses all other moral characters etc. while he sometimes uses *ren* as a particular virtue which contrasts with *zhi*(wisdom), *yong*(courage), *yi*(propriety) with emphasis on love or affection towards others (Yu, 2007; Feng, 2013; Chen, 2014). The seemingly contradictory definitions (both general and concrete) of *ren* reveal that *ren* is not anchored on the binary conceptualization of the theoretical and the practical, the universal and the particular. Rather, *ren*, in a both similar and different way from *phronesis*, unifies the concepts of universal and particular; theory and practice. *Ren* is an embodied manifestation of truths in our life. Mou (2005) suggests that *ren* is also a form of “concrete universal” (p. 35), which I believe corresponds to Aristotelian *phronesis* as a bridge between the universal and the particular very well. As Sims (2007) captures, “The phronimos act as a kind of concrete universal, exemplifying how the right ends are pursued in particular instances by using the right means” (p. 110). *Xiao* (filial love) could be understood as a manifestation of *ren* which is embedded a concrete parent to child relationship and has various forms of interpretation. Confucius gives distinct understandings with regards to *xiao* (*Analects*, 2.5; 2.6; 2.7; 2.8). As Mou (2005) captures: “the manifestations of *xiao* is endless, it is always in its concreteness. Yet it shows a universal truth (*ren*) in its concreteness” (p. 36). *Ren* is flexible and concrete, while it is at the same time universal and provides guidance. In that sense, *ren* is at the same time concrete and universal, not unlike the *phronetic* dwelling in the tension between concreteness and universality. The inherent tension in *ren* allows for *ren*’s creative manifestations rather than being absolute and rigid.

## Discernment of *ren*

*Ren*’s love is not blind love or universal love (兼爱) which is advocated by Mozi. Mencius criticizes fiercely about Mozi’s universal love that: “Mozi’s universal love does not recognize fathers...

universal love is a kind of beast love” (Mencius, Teng Wen Gong). For Confucius, as we have discussed above, it is important to love people with differentiations. Moreover, literature shows that Confucian *ren*'s love is not only differentiated but also involves discernment and judgment like *phronesis*. When Confucius responds to Fan Chi's question about what is *ren*, Confucius suggests: “being *ren* is to love people”(12.22) and the master also says: “the person with *ren* could love people and dislike people” (4.3; Li Ji. Da Xue). *Ren* at the same time unifies and negotiates between like and dislike in its judgment. Pang (2009) interprets, in a person of *ren*, “to dislike people could be complimentary to loving people”(p. 18). From the comment on the ability to like or dislike people, I understand *ren*, along with *phronesis*, involves discernment and judgment in each particular context: *ren* is not immunized from conflicting considerations in inexhaustible and unpredictable particulars; it involves one's judgment about someone or something in the complex particularity.

I continue to search for what underlies *ren*'s discernment-what might justify its like or dislike in human relationships. I realize its flexibility and openness and also its undergirding moral norms. Li (2008) illuminates on *ren*'s judgment: “ it does not admit a fixed formula and it is open-ended and continuously self-renewing” (p 95). *Ren*'s harmony shares similar characteristics with the tension in *phronesis* in terms of discernment. When people with *ren* or *phronesis* perceive, make judgment and act in particular circumstances, they enter a constant process of balancing and attuning among co-existing differences or even contradictories, rather than applying and measuring according to preset procedures. *Ren*'s dwelling in the tension of different and even conflicting considerations is heavily informed by the moral norms embedded in particular relationships. In Confucian literature, we could find moral perimeters for different social roles: “emperors with humaneness; ministers with loyalty; fathers with love and care; children with filial love; older brothers with friendliness; younger brothers with respects”(Pang, 2009, p. 38). I am not claiming to recover the Confucian moral norms literally: I realize it has its historical limitations and might risk of reproducing the power dynamics in society. However, I would draw your attention to discernment of *ren* is anchored on a variety of moral norms and balancing among diverse relationships.

### ***Ren-li tension***

*Ren*, often interpreted as the general or highest virtue, is unifying and harmonizing other cardinal virtues such as justice, propriety and intelligence. As Li (2008) describes, “for Confucians, it is not just the practice of virtues, but the practice of virtues in harmony, that results in the highest virtue”(p. 95). During the harmonious interactions among virtues, they are not free of tension or constraint. Yu (1998) captures the tension between *ren* and *li*: “*ren* as love is not identical with human goodness, and needs to be constrained by *li*” (p. 324). I will elaborate on tension in the dynamic relationship between *ren* and *li* compared with *phronesis* and *techne*.

As is discussed, there is a tension between *phronesis* and *techne*: *techne* could be understood as to build a tunnel to reach the preset destinations, while *phronesis* is about deliberating, judging and taking actions along the unpredictable way towards the human flourishing. *Techne* does not have an end in itself while *phronesis* does. The tension between *ren* and *li* is similar to that of *phronesis* and *techne* in a way that *ren* is embedded in particulars and has an end itself while *li* aims at habituating people towards an end and does not have an end in itself. Confucius believes that “refrain oneself and restore *li* is to achieve *ren*” (12.1). *Li* “functions as the controlling factor to establish internal constraint within a society with comprehensive standardization, established criteria which are needed to guide behavior in a specific manner” (Chen, 2013, p. 18). I sense there are at least two characteristics that are different from the tension between *phronesis* and *techne*.

For one thing, I find that Confucian *li* has *ren* as its moral end (Yu, 1998) while *techne* does not necessarily have a morally justified purpose. *Li* could be regarded as the instrument to realize *ren* and it could “assist people to dwell morally with one another in a tumultuous, often bewildering world” (Hansen, 2012, p. 23). For another, unlike the often contradictory explanations of *techne* and *phronesis*, *li*, though in tension with *ren*, could simultaneously be considered as the external manifestation of internal *ren* (Li, 2008, p. 37). I believe *ren* and *li*, compared with *phronesis* and *techne*, have more complex connections with each other. I interpret the tension between *ren* and *li* as generative and creative, which encompasses harmony and tension at the same time. The dynamics of *ren-li* tension and *techne-phronesis* tension might contribute to the better understandings of each other. Dunn (1997) in his book *Back to the rough ground: Practical judgment and the lure of technique* begins to recover the experiential ground for *techne* which could address the in-betweenness of the two concepts. I believe the in-between space of *techne* and *phronesis* could be re-investigated through *ren-li* tension in future.

### **Dwelling in the tension-harmony**

Anchoring on Aristotelian and Confucian traditions, I focus on their key concepts of *phronesis* and *ren* around the theme of tension versus harmony. In contrast and comparison of the two concepts, I find that there might be no solid division between Aristotelian *phronesis* and Confucian *ren* as tension versus harmony. I use the phrase dynamic harmony and creative tension as an attempt to re-conceptualize Aristotelian *phronesis* and Confucian *ren* in their dialogues. Tension and harmony could be read as not contrary to each other but mutually inclusive and enhancing.

In the Mean, we could read: “harmony is by no means following the flow” (The Mean, Chapter IX). Li (2008) interprets: “Confucian ideal of harmony... stresses the dynamic nature of tension and diversity within harmony”. I sympathize with his conception of Confucian harmony as a dynamic process and the interaction among co-existing differences. Differences and even conflicts inform people and provide harmony the richest land to flourish. To understand Aristotle’s *phronesis* as characterized by dynamic harmony, we might understand better about the interconnection between reasons and emotions in it and “enable one to reach equilibrium” (Yu, 1998, p. 330). Also, through Confucius’ *ren*, we might come to realize that relational differences and tension as harmonizing and generative rather than confrontational and mutually exclusive. *Phronetic* dwelling “triggers images of a working harmony between one’s unique bent as a person and a strong sense of social connection with others” (Hansen, 2012, p.23). Correspondingly, understanding *ren* through *phronetic* tension contributes to understanding *ren* as a unified concept of the universal and the particular; *ren*’s discernment informed by complex particulars and moral norms. The tension between *ren* and *li* is also highlighted in the comparison.

Coulter and Wiens (2008)’s words linger in my mind: “conflict is endemic to education and can only be avoided when everyone agrees about what constitutes a good and worthwhile life for everyone at all times in all circumstances and then how to foster such a life . . . not likely” (p. 15). It is of great importance for us to make further quest to understand concepts endemic to education, such as difference, conflict, tension, balance, harmony, etc. Again, the dynamic harmony is different from conformity and the creative tension is different from sheer confrontation or negation. With the discussions around the infiltrating and complimentary characteristic of tension and harmony in two ancient concepts, we might open up new space for further investigations. I understand that tension constitutes harmony, while harmony could be embedded in tension. The spontaneous adjustment could keep the organic whole in harmony without eliminating differences or conforming to one principle.

The picture of the May Fourth Movement in my school reveals a pivotal intersecting moment of the eastern and western cultural heritages. If we look hard enough into the picture, we might not simply separate eastern from the western traditions or cultures, we might be surprised by their complexity and richness and their willingness to speak to each other.

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