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The Conception of Ren in Daodejing

Poduo Wang

ABSTRACT
The conception of ren is rarely mentioned in Laozi’s theory, people easily explained Daodejing as an instance of Laozi’s objection to ren. This paper explored the Laozi’s unique conception in Daodejing with different contexts in early Daoist literature. However, Laozi’s understanding of ren is different and wider; it not only relies on morality, but also extends to be natural order. The great ren, which is admired by the Daodejing and Laozi, came from our nature and it should be expressed without motives or intention. It is an absolute universal benevolence among all creatures, and harmony interaction with the rest of the world.

In its ordinary sense, ren, which is regularly translated as benevolence or humanity. The common conceptualization of ren in ancient China is basically grounded in Confucius’ Analects. Confucius used this moral principle to set a standard of junzi and of goodness. The literal senses show that ren is irrelevant to Laozi’s theory, because chapter nineteen in Daodejing says: “Cut off benevolence (ren), abandon righteousness, and the people will return to being filial and kind.” It could be literally explained this chapter as an instance of Laozi’s objection to ren, and the conception of ren is rarely mentioned in Laozi’s theory. However, it does not mean that ren is abandoned in Daodejing. Laozi’s understanding of ren is different and wider than that of Confucius; it not only relies on morality, but also extends to the natural order. The viewpoints of ren in Daodejing could be divided as three main parts. Firstly, Daodejing does not reject the value of ren, but it rejects a utilitarian account of the value of ren. Secondly, there is a conception of ren in Daodejing: giving all creatures chances to choose and grow naturally is the best way to be benevolent to them. Thirdly, some people believe that Confucius builds the conception of ren, and Laozi rejects ren. Actually, compared with Confucius, Laozi made the standard of ren higher than him. In a way, his view of ren is more or less established on his
critiques of Confucius’ philosophy. Yet Laozi’s way of thinking is wise, the greatest ren is benevolence without motives or intentions.

To clarify the conception of ren, it is necessary to discover its original meaning in the history of Chinese scripts. In the earliest Chinese scripts, which are called oracle bone scripts, there is the similar written word 仁 (written like 行) but with a different meaning. The philologists and archaeologists think it is not the original meaning of 仁; it is a character for divining and does not have the meaning relating to morality. Some scholars say that the meaning of the character is related to yi, which means to use a human corpse to sacrifice to ancestors and show sincerity to them, before Spring and Autumn period, in Zhou Dynasty, the character ren was an “adjective referring to the appearance of a handsome, strong, aristocratic man”. A part of Shu Yu Tian in The Book of Odes says:

    Shu is away in the hunting-fields,  
    There is no one living in our lane.  
    Of course there are people living in our lane;  
    But they are not like Shu,  
    So beautiful, so good (ren).

The main content conveyed by this ode is admiring Shu, a Chinese man who has a handsome appearance and strong body. This ode helps people realize that ren in a pre-Confucian text is used to describe a person’s good appearance rather than personality; the conception of ren as moral goodness had not been formed yet. Anyhow, it was still a positive way to describe someone.

The clearly moral conception of ren was established in the Spring and Autumn Period. Confucius used ren as one of his moral principles. In his Analects, ren is usually translated as
goodness, humanity or benevolence. Gentlemen should practice *ren* constantly in both political and private life. There are numerous chapters which convey the view of *ren* as moral cultivation: “To live in the neighborhood of the Good (*ren*) is fine” (4.1); “The gentleman applies himself to the root. ‘Once the roots are firmly established, the Way will grow.’ Might we not say that filial piety and respect for elders constitute the root of Goodness (*ren*)?” (1.2). Confucius considered *ren* as his highest moral principle. In the first Chinese dictionary *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字, which was finished in the East Han Dynasty and analyzed the structures behind the characters, *ren* can be found in the radical of *ren* 人. There is an etymological evolution of the character; the author Xu Shen gives us three different characters of *ren* during history. From the oracle bone scripts and Jinwen, *ren* was written as (a way of sacrifice); from Guodian Chu Slips (in Warring States Period, different countries had different language and scripts), it was written as (meaning “benevolence” but with a different character). Most records used the character 仁, so this script of *ren* has been kept and has evolved into 仁. According to *Shuowen Jiezi*: 善者, 从人从二. *Ren* 仁 is composed of 人 “human being” and 二 “two”. The literal meaning is the relationship between two people. Xu Shen’s explanation of *ren* 仁 is *qin*親, which means relatives, favored or intimate. This explanation is built on numerous pre-Han documents; it defined the individual meaning (without context) of the character *ren* 仁, which is care among people. Therefore, the original meaning of *ren* can be explained as the intimate sentiment among human beings (especially among relatives).

The concept of *ren* appealed to people’s attention because of Confucius in the Spring and Autumn Period. Confucius contributed to the conception of *ren* as a moral principle; he added
many more ethical factors in it. In contrast, although Laozi did not state directly in *Daodejing* about his conception of *ren*, we can conclude from some specific chapters to define its meaning.

The character of *ren* appears in five different chapters of *Daodejing*. Instead of accepting and defining it, *Daodejing* seems to use more chapters to deny the general moral conception of it. In chapter five it says:

- Heaven and Earth are not benevolent (*ren*);
- They treat the myriad creature as straw dogs.
- Sages are not benevolent (*ren*);
- They treat the people as straw dogs.

This is the first part of chapter five, regularly quoted as Laozi’s view of *ren*. People at that time suffered chaos caused by war and famine. Because they had a long history of worship of Heaven (going back to Shang Dynasty), they easily blamed their failure or misfortune on Heaven and Earth, and complained why Heaven and Earth made them suffer a lot. In Confucius’ *Analects*, chapter 14.35 says: “I am not bitter toward Heaven, nor do I blame others. ...If there is anyone who could understand me, perhaps it is Heaven.” It indicates the phenomenon of human connection with Heaven. People in ancient China considered Heaven as the sky god; they believed that Heaven would take care of them or felt sympathy about people. Yet Laozi did not agree with this view. Heaven and Earth have no humaneness or consciousness for things in the world. Even ancient people thought that Heaven and Earth produced the myriad creatures, but since everything in the world is changing from moment to moment and nothing will last forever, Heaven and Earth do not have the ability to control myriad things. The condition and creatures themselves should take responsibility. Wang Pi’s commentary says: “But the Earth has not produced the grass for the beasts and yet the beasts feed on the grass; it has not produced the
dogs for humans and yet humans feed on the dogs. “1 Heaven and Earth don’t have the ren of sympathy or morality; things govern themselves. The phrase “straw dogs” refers to ceremonial offerings. They were protected before the ceremony and after that they were discarded. The process of discarding is similar with the way of non-attachment; they were not putting emotions in ceremonial offerings, which is the same as how people treat straw dogs. Heaven and Earth do not put any judgments or emotions into any process, because they treat everything including them at the same stage. Chapter seven says: “Heaven is able to be long lasting and Earth is able to endure, because they do not live for themselves.” It also means that they do not act with any purpose even for themselves. Heaven and Earth give beings a way to grow naturally, from birth to death. The myriad creatures govern themselves to be suitable with nature, and Heaven and Earth would not disturb them. They do not force some animals to become extinct, the animals became extinct because they could not adapt to the environment. Heaven never let the ten suns appear in the sky at the same time in real life as the Chinese mythology of Houyi says. 2 Actually, different from this myth, Heaven and Earth do nothing with deeds on ten thousands things and things all find their right position. Heaven and Earth have a vast power of creating, but they never correct things in the world with this power; all the misfortunes are caused by human beings themselves, and they have their results depending on their previous actions. Heaven and Earth give people space to live and opportunity to destroy, they are not benevolent

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Myth of Houyi: In this ancient Chinese myth, there are ten sun-birds, and they symbolizes ten suns in Heaven. One day, all of them decided to have a rest at the same time while traveling, as a result, ten suns appeared in the sky. The weather became extremely hot, lakes and rivers were dried up and both humans and animals suffered drought and hydropenia. Dijun, who owns the ten sun-birds, knew this situation and felt regretful about his fault. Then he sent Houyi, the God of Archery, to kill the nine of them and keep one sun in the sky. Then the temperature remains normal.
in the sense of discriminating favorites or directing nature to an established end. This nonintervention is benevolence and natural liberation are the greater benevolence (ren) in the world.

Chapter five says that everything should obey the law of nature, the physical world has no compassion, and will not be changed by people’s will. Another interpretation of this chapter is related to chapter thirteen “The Way of Heaven” in the Outer Chapters of Zhuangzi. This chapter uses eight different stories to indicate that natural laws are irresistible and unchangeable. The fifth part records a made-up story that Lao Dan (Laozi) discussed ren with Confucius. Laozi criticizes him: “‘To be seeking to allow no selfish thoughts!’ - that is selfishness! If you, Master, wish men not to be without their (proper) shepherding, think of Heaven and Earth, which certainly pursue their invariable course....Why must you further be vehement in putting forward your Benevolence (ren) and Righteousness (yi), as if you were beating a drum to seek a fugitive son, only making him run away more. Ah! Master, you are introducing disorder into the nature of man!” Whether the story is true or not, it could be another testimony from an early Daoist source that gives insight into the conception of Heaven and Earth and ren, which it seems to share with the Daodejing. We can compare this chapter to Confucius’ theory. In the age of chaos, fewer and fewer people would be willing to care about others so Confucius’ theory about benevolence was necessary at that time. In Analects, he gave various conceptions of ren to his students. For example, restraining yourself and returning to the rites for Yan Hui (12.1), comporting yourself in public for Zhonggong (12.2) and being hesitant to speak for Sima Niu (12.3) etc. Although the answers are different in words, the meaning of them has similarity: to encourage them to be a gentleman (junzi), and gentlemen is the highest stage of ren. However, if all people attain the realm of ren and have no difference, the influence of benevolence (ren)
would be useless. In chapter two of *Daodejing*, it says: “Everyone in the world knows that when the beautiful strives to be beautiful, it is repulsive. Everyone knows that when the good strives to be good, it is no good.” If one stresses moral cultivation too much, it would spoil the balance of nature and lead to unintended consequence. Things will develop in the opposite direction when they become extreme; *Daodejing* indicates that the world is born with inherent goodness and people should keep the balance. To tell people not to do this but to do that would build a conception of good deeds and define some deeds as evil at the same time. Judgments and contradictions grow in this definition. Telling people that something is right indicates that the opposite action is not right, and it is unfair to judge others this criterion. For instance, a person with five virtues should not tell lies to others, but sometimes his white lies are necessary to comfort some emotional people; they are useful in some specific situations. The world is well-ordered naturally, hyper-consciousness of people could only harm its harmony and tranquillization; the culture of civilization intervenes natural selections. In the traditional Confucian theory of value, one should donate his filial piety to his family, and donate loyalty to his country as well. However, the armguards in ancient China usually force male family members to leave their families and show their allegiances to the country. Before Fubing system in Tang Dynasty, there is a similar conscription in ancient China. The people are in the age range of 15-60 years old must perform military service. Usually they have to make the difficult decisions between families and countries. According to five virtues and five great relationships

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Fubing System: a local militia system existing in China between 6th century and 8th century. It was subsequently used in the Sui and Tang dynasties. The system involved a system of militia who were assigned tracts of land. Men between 21 and 60 years of age were eligible. Officers received permanent commissions, but regular troops reported for duty, at the province capital on a rotation system that varied upon living distance.
in Confucius’ theory, actually choosing either way is un-benevolent in ritual and violates dao. This is the cruelty of non-spontaneous virtues. Heaven and earth cover everything in the world without prejudice, including goodness and harmfulness. This kind of benevolence embodies the gentleman’s benevolence and the freedom given by nature.

As for sages, they are the followers of Heaven and Earth. Therefore, they neither completely disregard others nor unconditionally care about them. However, unlike Heaven and Earth, sages do not have the power of nature to give everything birth, they take care for people spontaneously without asking repayment or for the purpose of composing a universal society. Sages could not ignore the human survival like throwing straw dogs, they govern the country with dao. As chapter three says: “sages bring things to order by opening people’s hearts and filling their bellies, they weaken the people’s commitments and strengthen their bones...enact nonaction and everything becomes well ordered.” They protect the dao and integrity of his people, maintain the spontaneous harmony among society; they never strengthen their existences by promoting ritual or laws, the wise rulers let his people provide happiness for themselves. They use dao to maintain the social order. Heaven and Earth do not have actual actions among people, while sages represent them and caring people with natural actions. Hence, sages’ ren is the benevolence which is found within spontaneous actions.

In chapter eighteen and chapter nineteen, Laozi presents more points about abandoned benevolence, which is the narrow sense of ren. Chapter eighteen says:

When the greatest Way is abandoned, there are benevolence and righteousness.
When wisdom and intelligence come forth, there is great hypocrisy.
When the six familial relationships are out of balance, there are kind parents and filial children.
When the state is in turmoil and chaos, there are loyal ministers. In this chapter, “benevolence and righteousness” is settled in a parallel way with “great hypocrisy”, “kind parents and filial children” and “loyal ministers”. The *Daodejing* considers these pairs as having the same feature of artificiality. *Dao* represents nature and natural wisdom, inherent good humanity. The *Daodejing* believes that humans are born as naturally good without the diversity of good or evil in morality. Their condition is pre-moral.

It is similar and different from Mencius’ theory that human nature is basically good. From the conversation between Mencius and Gongsun Qiu, we could conclude that Mencius believes people have four inherent seeds: seed of benevolence, seed of righteousness, seed of propriety and seed of wisdom. From Mencius’ perspective, the best way of nourishing the seeds of goodness is education and self-cultivation, which seems to be a type of “artificiality” from Laozi’s view. In addition, Mencius’ doctrine of human nature emphasizes on goodness side; he judged goodness on the scale of morality. Whereas, Laozi did not say directly that human nature is good or not, but in the *Daodejing* we can figure that he believed that humans are born with integrity and good in completion. Probably this integrity with nature includes both sides of goodness and self-interest, uncontrolled instincts and necessary desires (such as for basic living and lazy relaxing). Chapter sixteen says: “Attain extreme tenuousness; preserve quiet integrity...The myriad creatures are all in motion, I watched as they turn back... This is known as returning to one’s destiny; and returning to one’s destiny is known as constancy. To know constancy is called ‘enlightenment’.” To return the root is to preserve the integrity of nature. Rituals, laws and civil culture will separate humans from their nature, and they will lead to unnecessary chaos caused by the desire for gaining more. About how artificialness caused
desires and how hyper-developed societies ruined human nature, other chapters also indicated that: “Not paying honor to the worthy leads the people to avoid contention” (3), “Precious goods impede our activities” (12). Benevolence here is a narrow, social sense of ren, meaning caring for other people for their own motivations and donating their goodness to build a moral example. It is bundled with other artificial virtues like righteousness (yi). They are the causes and results of “The greatest way is abandoned”. Unlike Mencius’ theory about goodness (shan) or Confucius’ view of learning, Laozi encourages people to return to their natural state, instead of gaining outside knowledge to become a bright or brilliant person (20, “The common folk are bright and brilliant”). If a person insists on learning, his knowledge (including culture, ritual, senses of law) are gaining day by day, but his desires are therefore increasing as well (48). Both Han Fei and Li Si are the students of Xunzi, and all of them possess perfect intelligence and knowledge. After Li Si had position in government, he was afraid that Han Fei will take his position so he used a trick to force Han Fei to commit suicide. Even Confucius was cultivating ritual and virtue in his whole life, his goal is to create more gentlemen and a better society. He appeals to benevolence and righteousness for his goals of great unity. However, Laozi states that people are born with great benevolence and wisdom, there is no need for people to learn more knowledge, to trouble their heart and grow more desires. That’s why he emphasizes in chapter twenty: “Cut off learning and be without worry!” In another story of Zhuangzi, Laozi said to Confucius: “Learning does not necessarily make one knowledgeable, and skill in debate does not necessarily make one wise.” If people want to find true benevolence and wisdom, the only thing they should do is dropping knowledge and deliberate self-cultivation and then preserving natural integrity. This view of benevolence (ren) has more inclusiveness and extensibilities than others. As chapter seven says: “sages put themselves last and yet come first, treat themselves as
unimportant and yet are preserved. Is it not because they have no thought of themselves, that they are able to perfect themselves?” Different from setting a moral model in Confucian way, it covers not only caring for other people but also caring for all people including themselves. It denies self-conscious ren and develops spontaneous ren.

To clarify how to build benevolence (ren) through abandoning benevolence, Chapter nineteen has a corresponding relationship with Chapter eighteen. It says:

Cut off sageliness, abandon wisdom, and the people will benefit one hundred fold.
Cut off benevolence, abandon righteousness, and people will return to being filial and kind.
Cut off cleverness, abandon profit, and robbers and thieves will be no more.
This might leave the people lacking in culture;
So give them something with which to identify:
   Manifest plainness.
   Embrace simplicity.
   Do not think just of yourself.
   Make few your desires.

This chapter has a strong connection with Chapter Eighteen. Again, it regards “sageliness and wisdom”, “benevolence and righteousness” and “cleverness and profit” as civilization’s cultured achievements. These two chapters develop a new explanation of ren depending on a critique of Confucius’ understanding of ren. In the state of chaos, sages like Confucius were appealing to a return of ren. Once ren becomes a formalization or slogan, it will lose its natural meaning. This is another chapter that encourages people, especially governors, to preserve the nature of humans and not to compel ritual or hyper-consciousness among people. People are born with “filiality and kindness”, through the process of dropping knowledge they could return to their unaffected status. “Embrace simplicity” refers to unhewn wood (put), a symbol for anything in its unadulterated natural state.
Even so, is ren completely rejected by Daodejing? In fact it is not like what we see in Chapter eighteen and nineteen. On the contrary, Laozi praises highest ren. Chapter thirty-eight says (in part):

Those of highest Virtue do not strive for Virtue and so they have it.
Those of lowest Virtue never stray from Virtue and so they lack it.

...  
Those of highest benevolence (ren) act, but without ulterior motives. 
Those of highest righteousness (yi) act, but with ulterior motives. 
Those who are ritually correct act, but if others do not respond,
They roll up their sleeves and resort to force.
And so,
When the Way was lost there was Virtue;
When Virtue was lost there was benevolence;
When righteousness was lost there were the rites.

This chapter belongs to the de book, which explains the relationship between ren, de and action. 

In Laozi’s view, benevolence which is not expressed naturally from our hearts can be seen as a loss of benevolence. Ren is derived from dao and de. The dao, de and ren, but the same traits of them are ineffable and undescribed. Any kind of name is a limitation of the dao, similarly any benevolent action with ulterior motives is not a true instance of ren. People are unable to describe dao in a certain language, and they could not use deliberate actions or set a standard to formulate ren. If a gentlemen is being kind to others because he thinks it will be helpful in setting a moral example, his motive already shows selfishness. In Wang Pi’s commentary, ren in its high form is universal benevolence, all-loving, impartial and selfless; ren transcends itself to reach the freedom of de. To explain it, the dao is a symbol of the creative power behind nature, de has the power of nurturing creatures, and ren is derived from both of them. The highest ren is universal without any form or ritual.
Confucius and Neo-Confucian philosophers like Dong Zhongshu and Zhu Xi pursued a series of feudal ethics and rites because they were in a society which had a lack of ethics; so they used feudal ethics to protect the standard social order and feudalism, and it was indeed effective. A number of gentlemen of benevolence (ren) and righteousness (yi) emerged to protect their rulers even though they did wrong things. According to Laozi’s critique of Confucius, “to be seeking to allow no selfish thoughts” is selfishness. Because depriving people’s right of freely choosing to achieve the great unity is selfishness. In the beginning of the universe, there are no rites and people’s goodwill to others are emerged from their own heart and instincts. Confucianism and his conception of great unity is good, but that is the product of human civilization. It could be considered as the restriction of human beings. In ancient China, after a parent's death, the custom is his children have to spend at least three years on mourning. If a person mourned for less than three years, he would be considered a sinner and an unfilial member of his family. Su Tungpo was a famous poet in the Song Dynasty, to pass the government entrance exam and to achieve his political dream, he was extremely hardworking when he was young. Unfortunately, when he has just received the good news that he passed the exam, he learned his mother’s death as well. Then he gave up the chance. After mourning, he could get chance to attend the exam again. Because of his talents, he still passed the exam fortunately. Besides Su Tongpo, there were numerous unknown people who lost opportunities and broke engagements because of the three-year mourning. The true benevolence should return people’s rights of choosing freely on things like mourning, based on natural love and condition like timing and environment. Ren beneath rites, doctrine or fear could never be described as the real ren.
In Laozi’s view, if the *dao* had not declined, society would be perfectly good and people would live naturally without comparison to others, the great ren can be found from that; like the Peach Spring Village in Tao Yuanming’s fable, everyone enjoys himself/herself and is hospitable to others unrequitedly. The story begins with a fisherman. He accidentally enters a secluded mountain village, where the residents lived utopian life there. They did not have the concepts of dynasties, nor the chaos of war and participation to outside. Both men and women, young and old were living a salubrious and ethereal lifestyle. There is no special contact between families, but each family was very hospitable and they treated the fisherman warmly. This story illustrates the ideal society in *Daodejing*, a small country with few people, and all of them feel comfortable there. Great ren, which is admired by *Daodejing*, comes from human nature rather than action with motives.

*Dao*, with the nature of humans, is intact before human beings begin to carve it. In the beginning of the West Han Dynasty, to rehabilitate from Qin Dynasty’s remnant troubles, Emperor Gao started to use Huang-Lao (Huangdi and Laozi) philosophy as the dominant idea in his policy of “wu-wei”(effortless action) for his government and people. The series of policies like reducing taxes and punishments made great effects on recovering the economy and retrieving the great trust from his people. Because of this success, Emperor Gao was regarded as a sage at that time. This is an example of returning the integrity of people. In these two chapters, character ren refers to the narrow sense of benevolence. *Daodejing* suggests people return to the inherent kindness through dropping the artificial conception of ren.
Even after having analyzed ren in Daodejing carefully, it is still widely held that Laozi denied ren in the Daodejing. One may say that even Laozi used the character of ren several times in Daodejing, but the meaning of each is slightly different and confused. He made objections to ren, but this can not be used as the example of his suggested view of ren. Anyhow, it may also be objected that ren is not an important concept of Laozi. He just used it as an example to explain dao. Hence, ren is insignificant to discuss. To respond to this objection, we have to clear up the different conceptions of ren in the texts. Ren in chapter five, eighteen and nineteen refers to narrow senses of ren, similar to Confucius’ view of humanity and simply caring people with ulterior motives. This idea of ren is derived from broken society and feudal ethics. Ren in chapter thirty-eight and chapter eight refers to the great ren, the universal benevolence without motives. This conception of ren born from the dao, we differ them rely on the Confucius’ theory. Chapter eight says: “The highest good is like water. Water is good at benefiting the myriad creatures, while not contending with them. ...In interactions with others, the good lies in benevolence (ren).” Laozi here suggests the standard of the highest good, and ren is one of the constituents of that. Even more, this idea of ren has great connection with the original meaning of ren: the relationship and interactions with others. As a result, even though the term ‘ren’ appears only a few times in the Daodejing, Laozi’s conception of ren is derived from de and the dao, and thus plays a pivotal role in his thought.

Daodejing never refuses ren directly; it considers ren transcendentally among the moral scale and raises a new conception of ren. Primarily, it clarified the general view of ren, corrected its superstitious expression about Heaven and earth. Afterwards, human beings should rebuild the conception of benevolence (ren) through the process of dropping knowledge and benevolence
beneath rites and social order. Finally the conception of great *ren* had been put forward. The great *ren* which is admired by the *Daodejing* and Laozi, comes from our nature and it should be expressed without motives or intention. It is an absolute universal benevolence among all creatures, a harmonious interaction with the rest of the world.
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