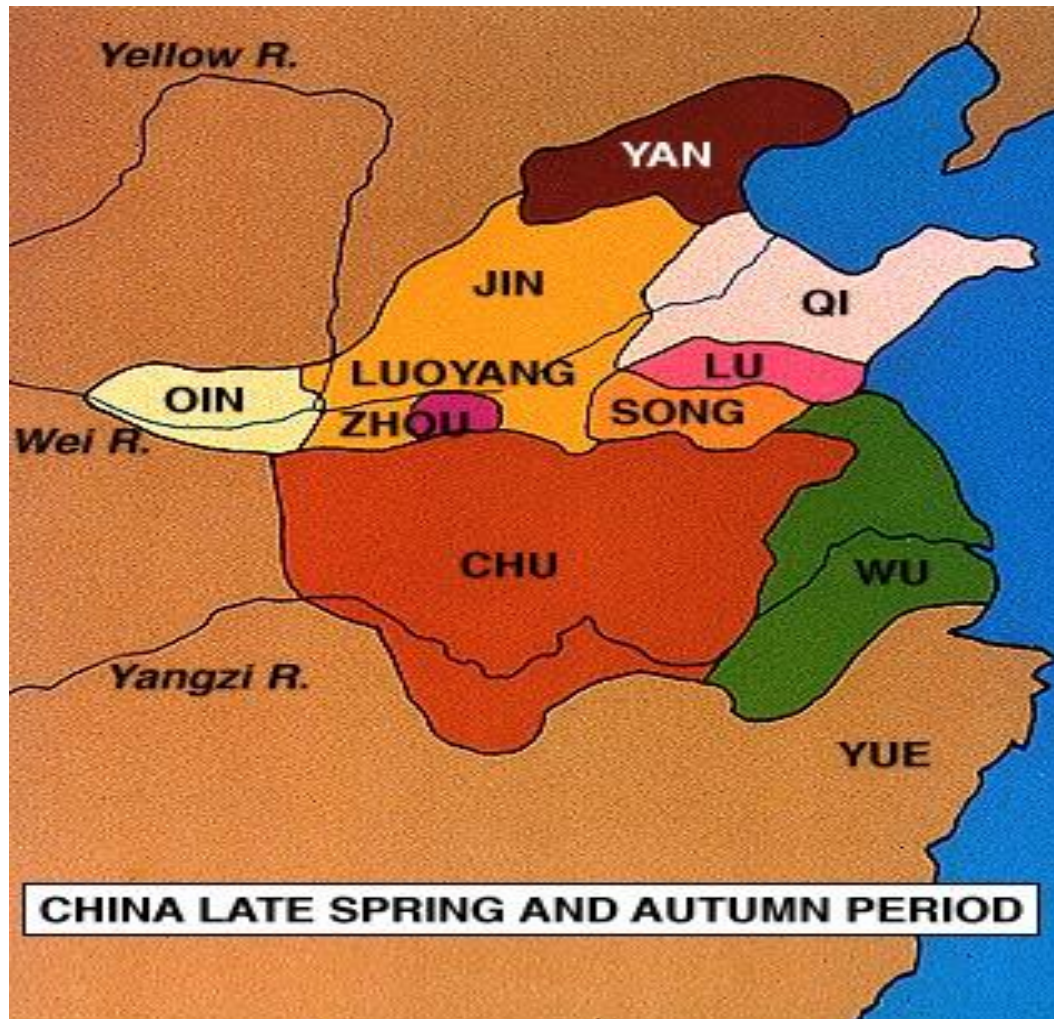


## CONFUCIUS PHILOSOPHY AND MASONIC IDEALS – UNIVERSAL VALUES? RONALD PAUL NG

Confucius (551 – 479 BCE) lived during the Spring and Autumn period of Chinese history. It was a time when China was not a united country, but was divided into various kingdoms. It was a time of wars, chaos and unrest. Confucius was born in the Kingdom of Lu 魯, in the city of Qufu 曲阜.



In this chaotic and turbulent period, the rulers of the various kingdoms needed wise men to help them rule and survive, and Confucius spent the large parts of his life teaching and acting as administrators in various kingdoms.

There is a great emphasis on *harmony* (和) in Chinese philosophy, even before Confucius time.

In the Shi Jing (詩經), that section known as Xiao Ya (小雅), this is what it says of harmony:

*Enjoying fine dishes and wines with all your brothers,*

*There are harmony and joy like playful children.*

*Enjoying the union with wife and children,*

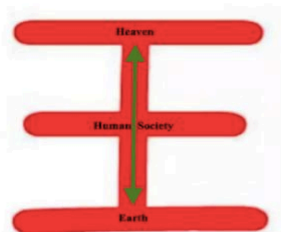
*It is like the mingling of drums and strings.*

*With brothers in concord there are profound harmony and joy.* (Li, 2008)

Thus from the importance of keeping harmony in society, flows many of the concepts in Confucianism.

Take this character for King:

Uniting human society with heaven  
and earth



The traditional interpretation is that the three horizontal strokes represent Heaven, Man and Earth. The vertical stroke is the king, the one who connects them together. (Wang 2019). His duties are not just to rule the kingdom, but to preserve the harmony of the kingdom by ensuring heaven, earth and human society all act in harmony with each other.

During the Shang Dynasty, which preceded Confucius, the practice of ancestors worship in Chinese culture was already well established. “The ancestor worship cult is still an important part of the belief system of the Chinese people. It is based on the belief of reciprocity between the living and the dead. The living needs to sustain their ancestors as the ancestors were able to influence the gods to bring them good fortune.” (British Museum – Ancient China).

Any form of worship requires rituals or Li (礼). The word Li (礼) also means manners or proper behavior. Confucian philosophy emphasises the ethical transformation of the concept of Li from that of being the proper way to behave in ritual ceremonies to that of proper conduct in general. It also requires that the performance of rituals must not only be done in the right way, but must be done with the proper attitude and understanding. There is no place for a simple performance of the rituals by just parroting the words and gestures. Thus the original concept of the importance of rituals was expanded in Confucian philosophy into correct behavior. In a similar manner ancestor worships of old was expanded into filial piety, Xiao 孝.

A very important concept in Confucian ideas is that of Junzi (君子). The first character, 君, means ruler, and the second, 子, means son. So originally, Junzi means son(s) of a ruler or noble lord (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2008). In Confucian philosophy, only a man who is a Junzi, who is in harmony with the Dao (道) is fit to rule and lead. This obviously leads to the question of what or who is a Junzi, and following that, the expansion of that concept to describe anyone who fits those criteria. With that, the term is no longer a title to be inherited, but is used to describe individuals who have the qualities of a Junzi.

The word Junzi has variously been translated into English as “Gentleman”, “Superior Man”, “Exemplary Person”, ‘Noble Man”, and “Perfected Person”. All of them carry connotations beyond what Confucius has meant that term to be. For that reason, I shall not use any of the English translations, but continue to use the word Junzi.

What or who is a Junzi? A Junzi is someone who practices Li, “*In the practice of li, Harmony is the key.*” (Analects 1:12). Here again, one sees the importance of Harmony. He also said, “If one is straight forward without Li, one causes affront” (Analects 8:2). For Confucius, the ideal society should be guided by Li, because a good society cannot rely on laws and punishments alone. “Guide them with policies and align them with punishments, and the people will evade them and have no shame. Guide them with virtue and align them with Li, and the people will have a sense of shame and fulfil their roles.” (Analects 2:3). Think of the way how many people game the system without due thoughts for the immorality lying behind their actions. Think of leaders of society who do not understand the concept of “Noblesse Oblige”. If Li is properly taught, it is not only regulative, in that it tells us what we should not do, it is constitutive, in that it makes us do what is proper without even thinking about it. It sets boundaries beyond which we cannot cross, and therefore do not err.



Compasses 圓規

Carpenter's Square 矩

規矩 to behave properly, within the bounds of rectitude

A Junzi must not only understand and act according to Li, he must also have Ren 仁, “If a man is not Ren, what can he do with Li?” (Analects 3:3). What is Ren? It has been defined as “benevolence”, “goodness”, and “humaneness” (Matt Stefon, 2019) Further, in Analects 15.9, he says, a Junzi “does not seek to live on at the expense of Ren, and there are times when he will sacrifice his life to complete Ren”. Closely related to this is that famous Silver Rule: “What you yourself do not desire – do not impose on (or do to) others.” (Analects 12:2), and compare this with the Golden Rule from Matthew 7:12, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Ren also requires this of the Junzi, “He perfects what is beautiful in people, he does not perfect what is ugly. The small man does just the opposite.” (Analects 12:16) This means that a Junzi brings out what is good in another person, and does not bring out the bad qualities in other people.

It is central to Confucian philosophy that **Li without Ren, is incomplete.** (Analects 3.3). What does that imply? Ren is the outward expression of a genuine feeling and affection from the heart. It is not a matter of just being “nice”. The specific expression of Li need not be rigidly followed as long as it conforms with Ren, and is not an artificial or contrived expression.

What are other additional qualities that a Junzi should have, beside Ren and Li? Yi (righteousness 義), Zhi (Wisdom 智) Shin (Trustworthy 信), Xiao (Filial Piety 孝) and Zhong (Loyalty 忠)

Yi (義) has been variously translated as rightness or what is morally correct. “The Junzi comprehends according to [what is] right, the small man comprehends according to profit.” (Analects 4:16). Just as important, “The Junzi’s stance towards the world is this; there is

nothing he insists on, nothing he refuses, he simply aligns himself beside right.” (Analects 4:10) In other words, he is not dogmatic. Is Yi an abstract universal moral principle? Is it akin to Kant’s categorical imperative or to Bentham’s utilitarianism? Though Yi implies one has to do things according to the right way, it has to be the right thing as well, but as said, Yi is not dogmatic, which means what’s done must be appropriate to the situation. Appropriateness is measured by many factors, and cannot be determined from our own perspective alone. It must take into account the perspectives of other people, and this requires wisdom (智). In order to acquire wisdom (智), learning (学) and reflection are necessary. To Confucius, learning does not mean mental acquisition of facts. In Confucian times, an educated person should be familiar with the six arts (六藝), which are: 礼 rites, 樂 music, 射 archery, 御 charioteering, 書 writing, and 數 mathematics, and be proficient in the playing of the zither 琴, (music), chess 棋 (logic), calligraphy 書, and painting 畫. The reason for the emphasis of the study of those subjects is they would impart culture (文化). But on top of all that, genuine learning is also a process of ethical self-cultivation. “If you study but don’t reflect you’ll be lost. If you reflect but don’t study you’ll get into trouble.” (Analects 2:15) . That gives a very general and broad idea of what the acquisition of wisdom involves.

The cultivation of Xiao or filial piety from young, is the root and start of the other qualities. The whole hierarchical system of Confucian society, with heaven above requires that each party in that hierarchy behave accordingly. The King must behave like a king, the subject like a subject; the father like a father, and the son, like a son. When a king does not behave like a king, his mandate to rule, that mandate from heaven (天命) to rule, will be lost. The idea of the mandate from heaven should not be read as mandate from a personal god. Confucius once said, “敬鬼神而遠之” or in English, “Be respectful towards ghosts and spirits but keep them at a distance .” More interestingly, that was said in the context of answering a question regarding what is knowledge. “To concentrate on what is right for the people; to be attentively respectful towards ghosts and spirits but keep them at a distance – this may be called knowledge.” (Analects 6:22)

Why is it necessary for a Junzi to develop those qualities? The answer is that that is the only means by which he can follow the Dao (道) or the Way, and to make it grow. The *Junzi* is the ethical exemplar with the virtues making it possible to follow the *Dao*. (Wong, David, “Chinese Ethics”, 2018). What is the Dao? Here is one explanation: “Confucians used the term Dao to speak of the way human beings ought to behave in society. In other words, Dao, for them, is an ethical or moral way.” (Bloom, I. 2009). One can detect a sense of circular argument here. At the philosophical level, it could be defined as “the organic order that governs the universe,” organic in the sense that it is not wilful. It is not a conscious, active creator, not a personal entity, but rather an organic process that just moves along. It is mysterious in its depth and unfathomable in its essence.” (Schwartz, B., 1985). It is that ineffable way of life, pattern of the world, source of all that is (and is not). (Bockover, M.I. 2016). The way to achieve Harmony, in society, between heaven and earth, is by following the Dao. There is in addition the teaching of the “Doctrine of the Mean” or *Zhōngyōng zhī dào* (中庸之道).

Summarizing the main concepts of Confucian philosophy here, they are: Junzi (君子). Ren (benevolence 仁), Yi (righteousness 義), Xiao (Filial Piety 孝), Li (rituals, rites and manner 礼), Zhi (Wisdom 智) Xin (Trustworthy 信), Zhong (Loyalty 忠) Xue (learning), Dao (Way 道), and He (Harmony 和). Perhaps you can already see the many parallels between the ideals of Freemasonry and Confucian philosophy.

A mason is expected to behave with benevolence and do the right thing. He is expected, being a Lewis, to have filial piety and look after his parents. The rituals that he performs in lodge is to teach him lessons which he is to take to heart, and together with the understanding of which, guides his behavior. He is courteous, and trustworthy. He is loyal to his sovereign. He is urged to study the masonic arts. Harmony is emphasized in all his undertakings. A mason is therefore seen as having all the qualities of a Junzi who is following the Dao or way, which in the masonic context means to behave in a masonic manner. The seven liberal arts to a certain extent reflect the six arts that were being promoted in Confucius's time. The Doctrine of the Mean reminds us the Centre, and the exhortation "not to be an enthusiast, persecutor, or slanderer of religion" reminds us of the saying "... to be attentive and respectful of the spirits (god), but to keep them at a distance ..."

I hope you will all agree with me that many of the ideals required of a Junzi are the same ideals required of a mason, however, there is one big difference and that is the requirement to believe in a Supreme Being. This big difference reflects one of the major differences between the Confucian civilization in China and that in the West and perhaps even account for the major difference between the world views of China and the West.

The development of speculative masonry was very much a product of the Age of Enlightenment, a pivotal point in European history that brought about great advances in science and technology. As Joseph Needham has observed, science and technology in China was more advanced than in Europe prior to the European Age of Enlightenment. Indeed, as an example, he noted that the first iron suspension bridge, the Luding Bridge, was built in China in 1706, some 36 years before the first of such bridge was built in England. We all know that China invented the printing press, gun powder and the compass. He then asked this question, which has since been phrased as the Needham Question, which in his own words, he wrote, "Why did modern science, the mathematization of hypotheses about Nature, with all its implications for advanced technology, take its meteoric rise only in the West at the time of Galileo [but] had not developed in Chinese civilisation or Indian civilisation? ... between the first century B.C. and the fifteenth century A.D., Chinese civilization was much more efficient than occidental in applying human natural knowledge to practical human needs." (Needham, J. 1969), or phrased another way, ... "the essential problem [is] why modern science had not developed in Chinese civilization but only in Europe." (Olerich, R.L. 2017)

Liu and Liu (Liu, Y. and Liu, C. 2007) offered the following reasons:

- Lack of property rights
- Science and technology were subjugated to the needs of the feudal families
- New Discoveries were sequestered by the government for its use.

While Justin Lin (Lin, J. 1995) offered the following:

China did not make the shift from an experience-based technological invention process to an experiment-based innovation process.

- The sociopolitical institution inhibited intellectual creativity, but more importantly, it diverted this creativity away from scientific endeavours
- Civil service was deemed the most rewarding and honourable work in pre-modern China.

Perhaps I am allowed to offer my opinion. I think we will all agree that Western civilization is built on the bedrock of Greco-Judeo-Christianity with a firm belief in a God who is rational. That belief is so strong that even as late as the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Einstein who discovered the Laws of Relativity, could say, "I, at any rate, am convinced that [God] does not throw dice" [*Jedenfalls bin ich überzeugt, daß der nicht würfelt.*] (Einstein 1926)



By that he implies the belief in a world that has rules that govern its running, and randomness has no place in it. Mirroring that ethos, our ceremony says this, “you are expected to make the liberal Arts and Sciences your future study, that you may the better be enabled to discharge your duties as a Mason **and estimate the wonderful works of the Almighty.**” In the Confucian world, the main aim of learning is to improve oneself on the path to becoming a Junzi. This sentiment is reflected in that Masonic admonition as well in the first part of that statement – “that you may the better be enabled to discharge your duties as a Mason.” However, in the Confucian world, the second part is lacking, whereas in the West, the belief in a Supreme Being, who is rational, leads to a belief that by discovering the rational laws that underly the running of the universe, we can better understand that Supreme Being, and “estimate the wonderful works of the Almighty.” In addition, that God also said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.” (Genesis 1:26) In Psalms we were told, “What is man that You are mindful of him ...? For You have made him a little lower than the angels and You have crowned him with glory and honour.” (Psalm 8:4-5) From the Hellenistic tradition, we have the saying of Protagorus, “Man is the measure of all things.” (Kattsoff, L.O. 1953). Underpinned by those two traditions, the Humanism of the Greeks, and the Biblical world view, the study of science, the discovery of those rules, is then used to dominate nature. Whereas the Confucian philosophy in China leads to a dominant idea that “the cosmos is in spontaneous harmony and the regularity of phenomena is not due to any external authority. On the contrary, this harmony in nature, society, and the heavens originates from the equilibrium among these processes. Stable and interdependent, they resonate with each other in a kind of nonconcerted harmony. If any law were involved, it would be a law that no one, neither God nor man, had ever conceived of. Such a law would also have to be expressed in a language undecipherable by man and not be a law established by a creator conceived in our own image.” (Prigogine, Ilya. 2017)

As if to underscore the difference between the two world views, even in the translation of the Bible. The implied meanings of the words used in Europe and in China are different. Let us look at St. John 1:1. It was written in Greek, the original language used in writing St. John:

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ **λόγος**, καὶ ὁ **λόγος** ἦν πρὸς τὸν **θεόν**, καὶ **θεὸς** ἦν ὁ **λόγος**.

In English:

In the beginning was the **Word**, the **Word** was with **God** and the **Word** was **God**.

In German:

Im Anfang war das **Wort**, und das **Wort** war bei **Gott**, und **Gott** war das **Wort**.

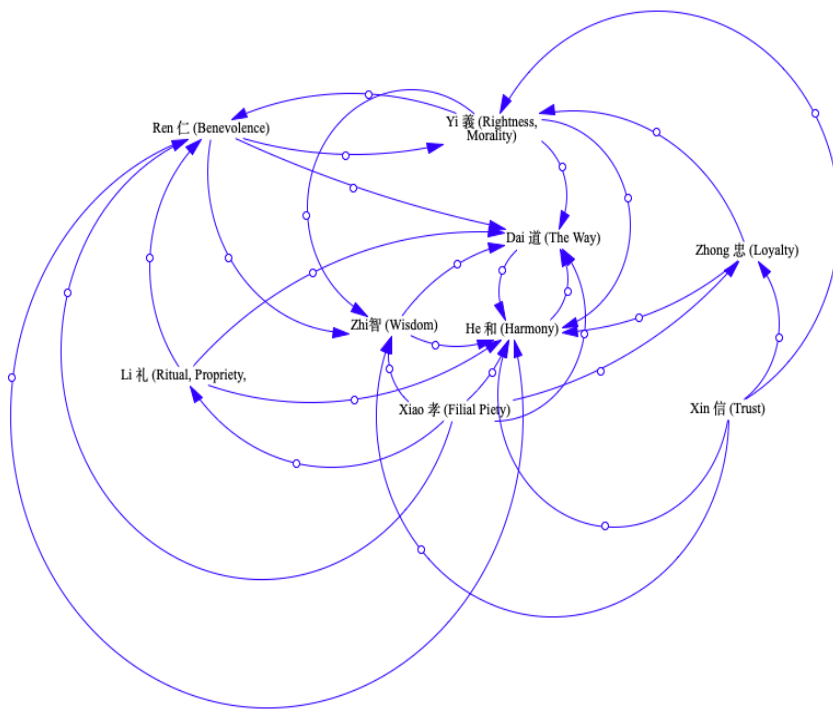
In French:

Au commencement était la **Parole**, et la **Parole** était avec **Dieu**, et la **Parole** était **Dieu**

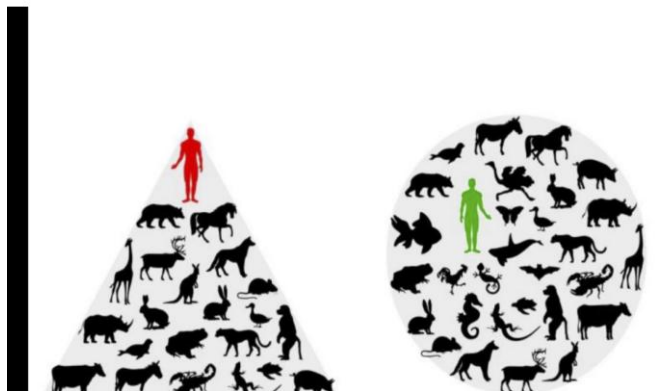
In Chinese:

太初有**道**，**道**與**神**同在，**道**就是**神** (In the beginning was the Dao, and the Dao was with God and the Dao was God.)

The figure below shows how the various qualities a Junzi has to cultivate forms a web, an interconnected web. There is no Lawgiver in the form of a Supreme Being. The Dao and the other virtues are an interconnected web.



One system of thoughts places man as an observer of nature and hence the ability to dissect out the rules that govern the workings of nature, and use that knowledge to exploit nature for his own pleasure. The other requires man to be a part of nature, and hence the requirement to live in harmony with nature. Could that be the reason for the failure to be interested in dissecting out the rules of nature?



Perhaps the future requires Homo sapiens to somehow unify the two world views, that man, with our intellect and knowledge of science, is just a steward charged with looking after this planet, all the time, conscious of the need to be harmonious with not only other human beings, but with the whole of the universe in general, and this planet in particular.

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