



## Short Paper

### Confucian thought and its implications for Chinese in therapy

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**Abstract.** *Confucian thought is the core of traditional thought for the Chinese. Confucian thought is basically concerned with the philosophy of life and the cultivation of personal maturity. There are many Confucian ideologies that can be applied in psychotherapy for Chinese and other people. They are: establishment of benevolent love toward others; harmony as the principle for interpersonal relations; the golden mean as the principle for dealing with problems; performing proper roles as the basis of stable social order; emphasizing empathy toward others; and self-cultivation as a means for achieving a mature personality.*

**Key words:** Confucian thought, culture, psychotherapy, Chinese.

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**INTRODUCTION** Confucian thought is considered to be at the core of the traditional thought shared for centuries not only by the Chinese, but also by many other people in East Asia. In China, it was regarded as the mainstream of thought that was officially taught through many dynasties, even though a number of people were influenced simultaneously by other systems of thought, such as Daoism and Buddhism.

From a mental health point of view, examining traditional thought will help us gain a basic understanding of the nature of human beings. It will provide a unique view of mental health as well as philosophical thoughts that can be utilized in psychotherapy, the art of healing a person's emotional problems and obtaining a healthy mind.

Several issues need to be clarified. Confucian thought, originally taught by Confucius and his disciples, deals with various issues, including a general philosophy of life, ethics, education, and political philosophy. It is not a religion, as some Western scholars think, even though Confucius has been respected (and even worshipped) by people as a great teacher. The Chinese consider Confucian thought useful for improving human qualities, stabilizing harmonious interpersonal relationships, and cultivating a scholarly manner, particularly when life is going well. However, when a person's life is not successful, the philosophy of Daoism can be helpful, and when he is suffering, Buddhism can be beneficial. Thus, the Chinese mind is characterized by multiple systems of thought, rather than a single way of thinking. Also, due to changes in political background and ideology, the thinking of Confucius has historically gone through stages of vicissitude.

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**CONFUCIAN THOUGHT AND PSYCHOTHERAPY** Confucian thought is basically concerned with the philosophy of life and cultivation for personal maturity. Its major emphasis is on how to systematically and consequentially “cultivate self, to manage family, to regulate country, and to give order to the world.” Many mental health concepts that deserve mention were included among these philosophical teachings.

There are several ways that Confucian thought can be applied in the practice of psychotherapy (Yan, 2005).

#### **Establishment of benevolent love toward others**

*Ren-ai* (仁爱) is the core concept of Confucian thought. *Ren* (仁) in Chinese means benevolence or kindheartedness in human relationships. *Ai* (爱) literally means love. Thus, *ren-ai* basically emphasizes the humanity in interpersonal relationships. Confucius emphasized the proper hierarchy among people in a society, stressed the importance of obedience toward authority, but, at the same time, emphasized the importance of authority to be benevolent and care for its subordinates.

If this concept is applied to the therapist-patient relationship, it is preferable for the patient to cooperate with the therapist, but, at the same time, it is essential for the therapist to be able to demonstrate benevolent love and care toward the patient. Certainly this will improve the quality and effect of psychotherapy.

Mencius said, “To love (someone) without being close affectionately is not *ren*” (Mencius, IV-A, 4). This means that even if you have a good attitude toward others, but they are not close to you, you need to examine your affection toward them; perhaps you have not shown real *ren* (benevolent affection) toward them. This view is very useful when a therapist is relating to a patient in psychotherapy.

The same concept can be utilized in therapy to encourage patients to develop genuine love toward others. This is particularly true, not only with immediate family members and close friends, but also with colleagues, especially in relationships between superiors and subordinates. Developing the capacity for genuine love, learning to be close to people to the extent of one’s goodness, to forgive others for their mistakes, and to accept them unconditionally, without harsh criticism, enables one to maintain desirable interpersonal relationships with family and work colleagues, which is the basis for happy lives for one’s self and others.

#### **“Harmony” as the principle for interpersonal relations**

Tension related to interpersonal relations is often a major cause of psychological distress, which contributes to the need for psychopathology. Helping a patient deal with interpersonal conflicts and adjust to his social environment are among the major tasks in psychotherapy.

The virtues of etiquette (*li*, 礼) and harmony (*he*, 和) are stressed as the basic principles for interpersonal relationships in Confucian thought. This is reflected in the words, “Application of rite for the valuables of harmony” and “Without knowing rite, one will be unable to behave as a person” (Analects, XX, 3). Confucius considered that, through a system of etiquette or rites, humans can regulate their desires and behave properly.

The closely associated concept of “*he*” (harmony) in interpersonal relations is also important in Confucian thought. It is said, “Difference, but harmony.” This implies that, even though there are often differences among people, they do not necessarily prevent people from being able to coexist and strive together toward goals. On the contrary, their differences will allow them to be complementary to each other for their mutual benefit. Furthermore, it was said, “Harmony avoids isolation.” If you know how to relate to others harmoniously, you will not become an isolated

person. Confucius emphasized: “Heaven time is less valuable than earth benefit; earth benefit is less important than human harmony” (Mencius, IIB, 1). Competing with and attacking others for the sake of self-benefit will only end in harming one’s self. This view is still valuable in guiding people, including patients, in how to relate to others.

#### **“The Golden Mean” as the principle for dealing with problems**

The concept of “the Golden Mean” stressed in Confucian thought speaks against both excess and depravity; everything should be balanced. In *The Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhong-Yong*, 中庸) it was said: “The (emotions of) delight, anger, sorrow, and joy, when they are not expressed, are in the middle (without extreme); when they are expressed, manifested in the middle with regulation, they are harmonious (and blended). Maintaining in the middle is the basic rule of the universe, and being harmonious is the fundamental way of functioning. If the mean and harmony can be sustained, then heaven and earth can be stabilized properly and everything in the universe can thrive.”

This view is also true from a psychological perspective. If a person can regulate his emotions in the right way, without being too extreme, it will be beneficial for his health. Expressing emotions of delight, anger, sorrow, and joy in the extreme, without proper control, will cause a disturbance in his mental condition. It is one of the goals of psychotherapy to help a patient manage his emotions properly. It is not merely a matter of regulating emotions, but also dealing with various conflicts and problems. The Confucian concept of the Golden Mean is one of the most useful principles for coping with problems.

#### **Performing your proper role as the base of stable social order**

It is the Confucian goal to establish a stable and happy social order by first establishing proper relationships among men in all aspects of life. Confucius said: “Let the prince be a prince indeed, the minister a minister indeed; let the father be a father indeed, the son be a son indeed” (Analects, XII, 11). It is the Confucian idea to define proper relationships by the five basic interpersonal relationships evident in society (*Doctrine of the Mean*, 20). Although Confucius did not define in detail the proper way for a person to behave in each basic interpersonal relationship, he emphasized that, if a person could behave “properly,” according to the socially defined interpersonal relationships, society could be maintained in order and stability. Mencius later elaborated this concept into five basic, ethical relationships among human beings, namely: “Affection between parents and children; righteousness between sovereign and subordinate; differences between husband and wife; order between the older and the younger; trustworthiness among friends” (Mencius, IIIA, 4). This concept can be applied to the behavior of patients within family and societal settings.

Contemporary family therapists have pointed out that one of the major problems encountered in dysfunctional families is the absence of properly defined and performed roles within the family, preventing appropriate relations to occur between husband and wife, parents and children, and siblings of different ages. The goal of family therapy, therefore, is to ensure that each family member performs his or her proper role. This therapeutic concept is in line with the Confucian emphasis on proper roles and relations among people, starting with the family and extending outside of it to include work and social situations, so that a proper, harmoniously functioning society can be achieved.

#### **Emphasizing empathy toward others**

It is not only important to have genuine love for others, but, as Confucius emphasized, it is essential to be able to empathize with others. Confucius repeatedly indicated: “Never do to others

what you would not like them to do to you” (Analects XV, 23); “You yourself desire rank and standing, then help others to get rank and standing; you want to turn your own merits to account, then help others to turn theirs to account” (Analects VI, 28); or “Take care of your own elderly and others’ elderly; raise your own youngsters and others’ youngsters” (Mencius, IA, 7). From these statements, it is clear that Confucius considered important qualities of mind to be the ability to understand others, to think from the perspective of others, and to do things for the sake of others. These are among the qualities that contemporary psychologists consider to be elements of maturity, allowing a person to move up from a narcissistic perspective to a level at which he is able to show empathy toward others.

Many mental health patients are suffering from narcissistic tendencies. They are concerned only with themselves, are disappointed that they cannot fulfill their own needs, and ignore others’ feelings and needs, and therefore, they find it difficult to relate to others. It is useful to help those kinds of patients learn to leave their self-centered, immature positions, and move up to a more mature level, at which they are able to think, feel, and do things for the sake of others, showing the capacity for empathy toward them.

#### **Self-Cultivation as a Means for Achieving a Mature Personality**

Confucius encouraged people to have active attitudes in life, blaming neither heaven nor others. He encouraged people to concentrate on cultivating themselves, to promote maturity, to cope with reality, and to learn to accept any consequences with calm and ease. Most important, he believed that every person has the potential to live and grow with satisfaction in life, as long as he knows how to pay attention to the psychological life beyond the material life, and how to keep balance and harmony deep in his mind.

The suggestion that obtaining internal satisfaction is the essential way to achieve happiness is one of the most valuable contributions of Confucian thought. As long as a person is diligently making use of his potential to obtain knowledge, develop his talents, cultivate his own personality, be good to others, be good to himself, and “know” how to be satisfied with the condition of striving itself, disregarding the outcome, then he is gaining real happiness in life. If, in spite of his every effort to make use of his potential to improve his life, he fails, then he is advised to accept the result as his fate, without resentment toward others or himself. Confucius proposed the optimistic view that a man contains all that is necessary to govern himself, that he is self-sufficient and has the potential to obtain mental maturity and happiness, even though he must be ready to accept any outcome with equanimity. This view of mental health and personal maturity is attainable, and will be useful in advising patients who are either too anxious to obtain achievement in their lives or are so frustrated with life that they withdraw from reality.

#### **From self, to family, to state, to the world**

Finally, from the standpoint of practice, Confucius drew a guiding map on how to successfully obtain one’s goals in life. He emphasized starting with the cultivation of the “self,” then establishing and maintaining a harmoniously functioning “family,” working toward a desirable “state,” and, finally, learning how to rule the world (Great Learning, 1). Thus, he visualized a certain course in working on one’s life, step by step, systematically, starting with the self, moving outward to the family, the state, and then the world. This is an ambitious and logical mission for a scholar.

Among these steps, besides starting with self-cultivation, Confucius placed a strong emphasis on establishing proper order within the family, with relevant role-playing and genuine affection among family members. Confucius described Five Cardinal Relations (*wu lun*, 五伦): those between sovereign and subject, father and son, elder and younger brother, husband and wife, and friend and friend. Of these five basic dyads, three belong to the family and the other two are based

on the family model, with sovereign and subject as father and son, and friend and friend as brothers. In Confucian social theory, the family occupies a central position; it is not only the primary social group, but the prototype of all social organization.

For those people, whether Chinese or not, who live in contemporary society and face the threat of the disintegration of the family system, it is particularly pertinent to stress the importance of family in our lives. The primary task of every person, beyond the cultivation of the self, is still to learn how to establish and maintain a functional family. Confucius' emphasis on family remains very valuable for those who tend to ignore this important step in the course of their lives.

**EPILOG** It has frequently been pointed out that, when a person is young and successful, Confucian thought is useful, as it provides hope for human nature and the maturity that is obtainable. It promises social order and civilization. Studying Confucian thought is one of the best ways to achieve social success, based, at least, on the official civilian examination system that was observed in the past. However, when a person becomes old, and realizes that life is full of vicissitudes and suffering, unfairness and lack of hope, Daoistic philosophy is beneficial, because it operates according to the rules of nature, coming from nothing and returning to nothing. In other words, Confucian thought, as a system of knowledge and ethics, has both merits and limitations. Its basic views about human nature, desired interpersonal relationships, and social order are useful for certain patients, depending on their stage of life and the nature of their problems.

Obviously, the practice of psychotherapy is influenced by cultural factors. In order to carry out therapy of the mind, the Chinese cannot ignore the Confucian thought that has had such a great and long-lasting impact on the Chinese mind. An important professional task is to learn how to relevantly select and use the concepts rooted in ancient Confucian teachings, in order to conduct appropriate and effective therapy for contemporary Chinese. This opens up the possibility of providing culturally relevant and effective therapy for the Chinese. An important issue facing the contemporary Chinese is how to promote material achievement and catch up with the technology emphasized by modernization.

It is also a challenge to determine to what extent and in what ways basic Confucian thought can be applied in therapy for Asian people as well as people of the West, who tend to ignore the importance of maintaining the integration of their own minds, establishing and maintaining a functional marriage and family, harmony among people, and the value of seeking the Golden Mean in resolving problems in life. Psychotherapy practiced in the West, particularly, individually and analytically oriented dynamic therapy, tends to focus primarily on the activation of the self. Learning how to integrate the interpersonal and social system aspects of Confucian thought into individually focused therapy, to expand the scope of family therapy and produce socially rooted, mature individuals, is a waiting challenge for psychotherapists.

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