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<i>Module Code: SICH6016</i> <i>Module title: Sinological English III: Translation of Confucian and Buddhist Literature</i>	<i>Student number: 2303886</i>
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Resilience in Confucian leadership from three primary virtues

Today, we would like to talk about ‘Resilience in Confucian leadership from three primary virtues.’ This presentation will be divided into three parts: introduction, the three primary virtues and a conclusion.

Abstract

The concept of *resilience* originated as a term in physics, referring specifically to the property of a material to return to its original shape or position after being bent, stretched, or compressed. The meaning of the term has since been extended to the fields of psychology, sociology, and education. In psychology, resilience is defined as the capacity of an individual, when confronted with difficulties, stress, or adversity, to return to one’s prior mental state—or even to achieve growth, thereby attaining a higher degree of resilience.¹

This lecture will explore the ways in which resilience is manifested within Confucian culture. Among the numerous moral virtues articulated by Confucianism, resilience is not explicitly named. Nevertheless, by careful analysis, one can discern the concrete expressions of resilience within the framework of Confucian virtues. Confucian thought places its greatest emphasis on moral cultivation, which is to say, the perfection of human relationships. The essential foundation for such cultivation lies in the ‘Three Primary Virtues’—wisdom (*zhi* 智), benevolence (*ren* 仁), and courage (*yong* 勇).² In this presentation, we define Confucian resilience as follows: in the process of practising the three primary virtues, the sense of mission inherent in benevolence and the exemplary power embodied in wisdom are propelled by courage, enabling the individual to overcome all forms of hardship and adversity, thereby achieving growth. The subsequent discussion will provide a detailed exposition and analysis of this definition.

The textual basis for this lecture rests primarily upon two of the *Four Books*. *Focusing the Familiar* (*Zhongyong* 中庸) is regarded as the core theoretical work of Confucianism, while the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) is viewed as the practical embodiment of those theories. In addition, *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji* 史記) will serve as a supplementary source to provide historical

1 Zeng Jing 曾靜, ‘Kuagnili lilun de yuanqi yu hexin guandian’ 抗逆力理论的缘起与核心观点, *Social Sciences Academic Press (China)*, 社會科學文献出版社, 10(2013), 25-33(p.17~18).

2 Jau-wei Dan 但昭偉, The Three Primary Virtues and Their Relations to Moral Conduct: An Enquiry from the Analysis of the Concept of Courage 智仁勇與道德行為產生的關係: 從勇德概念的分析再出發, *Journal of Education of Taipei Municipal University of Education* 2010, Vol 36 pp. (75-96) p. 77.

context. Among the records of the pre-Qin era, *Records of the Grand Historian* is generally considered to possess the highest degree of reliability, and thus it will be employed to corroborate accounts of Confucius's life.

As for the focus on figures, Confucius himself—being both the founder and the central figure of the Confucian tradition—naturally occupies the most significant position. Throughout his life, he endured countless hardships, including spiritual setbacks and threats to his very existence. Yet he managed not only to persevere, but also to lead his followers through these challenges. That he was ultimately venerated by later generations as 'A Paragon for All Generations' demonstrates the enduring significance of his resilience. Accordingly, this lecture will examine the resilience of Confucius, analysing how he embodied the Three Primary Virtues in practice, guided his followers through adversity, and emerged with even greater steadfastness and fortitude.

Resilience in the three primary virtues

Now, we will offer a brief explanation of the three primary virtues. Wisdom refers to the capacity for cognitive discernment, cultivated through learning and the pursuit of knowledge. Benevolence signifies the ability to empathise with others, approaching it through altruistic conduct. Courage denotes the strength to act upon what is right, serving as a vital force that reinforces the practice of both wisdom and benevolence. In practice, we may employ combinations such as benevolence with courage, wisdom with courage, or both wisdom and benevolence with courage to facilitate the cultivation of moral character.³ Given that courage serves as the driving force for the other two virtues, the following discussion will focus specifically on wisdom and benevolence respectively.

First, in Confucian thought, wisdom means understanding the principles and essence of things and having the ability to judge right from wrong. Professor Jau-wei Dan from Taipei Municipal University of Education explains, 'Wisdom enables us to distinguish virtue from vice, to know how to pursue virtue and avoid immorality, and to act appropriately at the proper time.'⁴ And this wisdom comes from the love of learning. The *Zhongyong* said, 'Being fond of learning is close to acting wisely.'⁵ But it is only a starting point. It just makes one close to

3 Jau-wei Dan 但昭偉, 'The Three Primary Virtues and Their Relations to Moral Conduct: An Enquiry from the Analysis of the Concept of Courage' 智仁勇與道德行為產生的關係: 從勇德概念的分析再出發, 2010 (75-96) pp. 80~81.

4 Jau-wei Dan 但昭偉, 'The Three Primary Virtues and Their Relations to Moral Conduct: An Enquiry from the Analysis of the Concept of Courage' 智仁勇與道德行為產生的關係: 從勇德概念的分析再出發, 2010 (75-96) p. 80.

5 Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Focusing the familiar: a translation and philosophical interpretation of the*

wisdom, but not fully wise. The *Zhongyong* further provides a roadmap, ‘Study the way broadly, ask about it in detail, reflect on it carefully, analyse it clearly, and advance on it with earnestness.’⁶ In other words, wisdom grows gradually: one must first learn widely, then think carefully to discern good from evil, and finally choose the good and hold to it firmly. Confucius himself embodied this process. He once said, ‘In a town of ten families, there will be someone comparable to me in loyalty and trustworthiness, but none will compare with my love of learning.’⁷ And he also emphasises the importance of thinking. He said, ‘If one learns from others but does not think, one will be bewildered.’⁸ In other words, Confucius was a wise man and this wisdom promotes his resilience.

Let’s see a historical record in the *Shi Ji* to further explain.

Confucius and his followers were once trapped between the states of Chen and Chu. Their supplies ran out, leaving them without food for seven days. Most of the followers fell ill and some expressed discontent, but Confucius himself remained unaffected by the harsh environment. His teaching, recitation, and playing of music never ceased. Knowing his followers were in low spirits and suspect of the Way, Confucius used the nobles of the Shang dynasty, Bo Yi, Shu Qi and Bi Gan as the exemplars to encourage disciples. He said, ‘If humanity were always trusted, how do you account for what happened to Bo Yi and Shu Qi, two virtuous nobles of the Shang dynasty who starved to death after its fall? If the intelligent always had their way, how do you explain the case of Prince Bi Gan, a wise noble who was killed due to advising the king by the last king of Shang?’⁹ From here, we can see two contrasting attitudes toward adversity: the disciples’ complaints and Confucius’ positive acceptance, which reveals that Confucius had higher resilience, and this resilience comes from his wisdom. Because Confucius was very familiar with history, he could draw experience from historical events and figures to help him know what to do, like the nobles of the Shang dynasty which was before Confucius’ lifetime, Bo Yi, Shu Qi and Bi Gan.

In other words, these nobles served as exemplars for Confucius, reminding him that adversity was an unavoidable part of life, even for those who pursued virtue and acted rightly. Thus, he could stay calm and reassured and taught his students in adversity. Moreover, he

Zhongyong, trans. by Peng Guoxiang 彭国翔, (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 2011), p. 127.

6 Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Focusing the familiar: a translation and philosophical interpretation of the Zhongyong*, trans. by Peng Guoxiang 彭国翔, p. 130.

7 *The Analects* 2nd edn, translated by Lau, D.C., (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2000), p.14.

8 Joshua Mason, ‘Confucius as an exemplar of intellectual humility’, *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 57(2023), 89-109, (p.93).

9 Szuma Chien 司馬遷, *Selections from records of the historian*, trans. by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang, (Beijing: Foreign languages press, 1979), pp.17-18.

understood that promoting the Way was what must be done, so when facing adversity, he did not retreat or compromise out of fear. It was precisely this courage, working as a driving force behind him, that enabled Confucius, after gaining wisdom through learning from historical experience and discerning right from wrong, to continue teaching and never cease his music. Eventually, through King Zhao of Chu's help, Confucius and his students emerged from the predicament. So, we can see how resilience is promoted by combining wisdom and courage from this example.

Also, as modern leaders, we need to cultivate both wisdom and courage in order to strengthen our resilience as well. In other words, we should learn broadly—whether from the West or the East, from the past or the present. By drawing on these experiences, we can face adversity with better judgment. When adversity arises because we are doing the right thing, we should persist, believing that difficulties will eventually pass, just as Confucius did. Although he didn't achieve all his goals during his lifetime, his teachings achieved great success after his death. On the other hand, when adversity results from our own mistakes, we should engage in honest reflection, identify the problems, and make the necessary adjustments.

Let's move on to the next part.

Benevolence stands at the very core of Confucius's teaching and played a vital role throughout his life. Possessing a benevolent heart meant that he could perceive not only the needs of others but also the greater needs of his age. In a time when ritual and music had declined, he steadfastly upheld his responsibility and mission to spread the Way that the wisdom left behind by our ancestors. This unwavering sense of mission was always present in his mind; even when he encountered mortal danger, he never wavered. From this, there arose the strength to confront adversity with courage.

Let me illustrate this with an example. On one occasion, while leading his followers through a place, Kuang, Confucius and his followers were suddenly surrounded by armed men. The people of Kuang mistook Confucius for Yang Hu, a notorious figure who had once invaded and oppressed their land, and because of this misunderstanding they grew increasingly hostile. The followers were seized with fear, yet Confucius remained calm and reassured them, saying:

‘After the death of King Wen, was not the cause of truth lodged here in me? If Heaven had wished to let this cause of truth perish, then I, a future mortal, should not have got such a relation to that cause. While Heaven does not let the cause of truth perish, what can the people of Kuang do to me?’

文王既沒，文不在茲乎？天之將喪斯文也，後死者不得與於斯文也；天之未喪斯

文也，匡人其如予何？¹⁰

Here, at a moment of grave danger, Confucius never lost confidence in his mission. He firmly believed that the Way he had studied and promoted would benefit all under Heaven. Entrusted with such a mission, he was convinced that he would not perish unjustly at the hands of the Kuang people.

Now, one example alone is not enough to capture Confucius's virtue. On another occasion, when Confucius arrived in the state of Song, he and his followers practised ritual beneath a large tree. Sima Huan Tui, an official of Song who was jealous of Confucius, sought to kill him by cutting down the tree so that it might fall upon him. The followers were alarmed and urged Confucius to flee at once. Yet Confucius, unperturbed, replied, 'Heaven produced the virtue that is in me. What can Huan Tui do to me?'天生德於予，桓魋其如予何！¹¹

Taken together, these episodes show that even when faced with danger, Confucius displayed calm and fearlessness. Such resilience was rooted above all in benevolence. His thoughts were constantly directed toward the welfare of the people under Heaven; he regarded his body merely as a bridge for serving others and transmitting culture. Thus, he felt no terror even before mortal threats.

This quality, in turn, deeply inspired his followers. Many chose to follow him with steadfast loyalty, even when that meant sharing in a life of hardship and exile. As both teacher and leader, Confucius embodied the resilience inherent in benevolence. He not only pointed his followers toward life's mission and responsibility, but also instilled in them the courage and perseverance to overcome adversity. Finally, this resilience did not end with Confucius himself. After his death, it was faithfully carried forward by his followers, who continued his unfinished mission, travelling among the various states to spread their teacher's wisdom and instruction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the resilience of Confucius can be understood through the interplay of wisdom, benevolence, and courage. His wisdom enabled him to discern truth from falsehood, to learn from history, and to understand that adversity is an inevitable part of pursuing the Way. His benevolence gave him an unwavering mission—to care for the people under Heaven and to regard his own life merely as a vessel for cultural transmission. And his courage transformed both wisdom and benevolence into action, enabling him to persist without fear even in times

10 *The Chinese Classics* Vol. 1 中國經典·第一冊, trans. by James Legge (Shanghai: Huadong Normal University of China Press, 2011), p.217.

11 *The Chinese Classics* Vol. 1 中國經典·第一冊, trans. by James Legge, p.202.

of mortal danger.

Confucius' resilience also offers profound lessons for leadership today. A successful leader must have the wisdom to chart the right course, a benevolent heart rooted in a clear sense of mission, and the courage to uphold principles in times of adversity. Only then can one remain steadfast in challenges, guide the team through hardship, and turn adversity into growth. As Confucius has shown us, real leadership does not come from external authority, but from inner resilience and moral responsibility.

This is the end of our presentation. Any comments and suggestions are welcome. Thank you for listening!

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Book

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Journal

Jau-wei Dan 但昭偉, The Three Primary Virtues and Their Relations to Moral Conduct: An Enquiry from the Analysis of the Concept of Courage 智仁勇與道德行為產生的關係: 從勇德概念的分析再出發, *Journal of Education of Taipei Municipal University of Education*, Vol 36 (2010) pp. 75-96

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