



Trinity Saint David

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Selecting a Virtuous Neighbourhood

Introduction

Today, I will be presenting on “Virtue in a Neighbourhood” 「里仁」 from the fourth book of the Analects.

“Confucius said, ‘It is goodness and virtue that give a neighbourhood its beauty and excellence. One who is free to choose, but does not dwell among the good and virtuous, how can this person be wise?’”^{1,2}

In Mr Li Bing-Nan’s *Lecture Notes on the Analects*, he said that “to live in a neighbourhood or village where there are people of virtue is a beautiful and excellent thing. To not choose to live where there are people of virtue, but instead carelessly selecting a residence, how can this be the act of someone wise?”³ Mr Li’s *Lecture Notes* also expands on this teaching to include choosing friends who are virtuous. This chapter is about the importance of choosing a virtuous neighbourhood to reside in and also choosing virtuous people as friends.

Interpretation

To understand this passage, we must first understand what the characters mean.

Li 里 in this chapter, is referring to a certain size of settlement. In ancient times, this term referred to twenty-five families;⁴ so, a village. Nowadays, many people do not live in villages, so we can also think of it as a neighbourhood.

Ren 仁, as Mr Li Bing-Nan said, is a concept that is more difficult to understand. Mr Li BN said, “Ren is a person’s attitude towards others. Although Ren is cannot be seen, an attitude of Ren can be shown in a person’s words and actions. A person who is learning Ren cannot separate their words and actions from it. For example, when speaking, they do so not only for themselves but also not to hurt others. When doing things, they also do it for others, and not only one person and not the other. People should be treated equally and the same goes for good people and bad people.”⁵ Ren

¹ *The Chinese Classics*, trans. by James Legge, 3rd edn, 5 vols (repr. Taipei: SMC Publishing, 2016), I: *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean*, p. 165

² *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. by Arthur Waley ([London: G Allen and Unwin], 1938; repr. Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2005), p. 102

³ Li Bingnan 李炳南, *Lunyu Jiangyao 論語講要* [Lecture Notes on the Analects], ed. by Xu Xingmin 徐醒民 (Taizhong: Fuojiiao Lianshe, 2016), p. 143

⁴ *The Chinese Classics*, trans. by James Legge, 3rd edn, 5 vols (repr. Taipei: SMC Publishing, 2016), I: *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean*, p. 165

⁵ Li Bingnan 李炳南, *Lunyu Jiangji 論語講記* [Lecture Notes on the Analects] <<https://tw3.amtb.de/fabo/pdf/HZ17-006-01a.pdf>> p.246

仁 has varying translations by different translators. The character is often translated as “benevolence” but here the term “benevolence” does not seem sufficient. James Legge translates it as “virtue”⁶ and Arthur Waley, in his translation, uses “goodness”.⁷ In this presentation, I will use “virtue”.

With a better understanding of the characters, we can better understand the text. So the first half of this chapter means “It is goodness and virtue that give a neighbourhood its beauty and excellence.” Whether we are choosing a neighbourhood, or even an organization at which to work, we should first look at the people there, whether they are people of virtue. If there are people of virtue at a place, this place will be beneficial to improving ourselves and our own virtue. The foundation of a life of quality is virtue and morals. There is a saying in Chinese which says 「千金買房，萬金買鄰」 and it means a house is worth a thousand gold, but good neighbours are worth ten times that.⁸ It is saying that good neighbours are worth much more than a good house. This shows us the importance of virtuous neighbours.

“One who is free to choose, but does not dwell among the good and virtuous, how can this person be wise?” This means, to choose carelessly, or to not choose a neighbourhood where there are people of virtue, is not the action of a wise person. We should use wisdom when choosing a place of residence.

Mr Li Bing-Nan mentioned the story of Mencius’ mother 「孟母三遷」. There is a story of when Mencius was still a child, his mother moved three times, trying to find the best place for raising her son. At first, they lived near a graveyard, and mourners often came to mourn and weep for their loved ones. Young Mencius began to copy their behaviour. His mother knew this was unacceptable and moved in the town. There, Mencius copied the behaviour of the merchants and the butchers at the slaughterhouse. Mencius’ mother found to be unacceptable, and moved again, settling at a place near a school.⁹ She knew that in such an environment, her child would be around people who studied the ancient saints and sages’ teachings. And indeed, she found that living near the school, Young Mencius would imitate the behaviour of the teachers. And we all know, Mencius became a great sage.

⁶ *The Chinese Classics*, trans. by James Legge, 3rd edn, 5 vols (repr. Taipei: SMC Publishing, 2016), I: *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean*, p. 165

⁷ *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. by Arthur Waley ([London: G Allen and Unwin], 1938; repr. Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2005), p. 102

⁸ Li Bingnan 李炳南, Lunyu Jiangji 論語講記 [Lecture Notes on the Analects] <<https://tw3.amtb.de/fabo/pdf/HZ17-006-01a.pdf>> p.249

⁹ Joshua J. Mark, "Mencius", *World History Encyclopedia* (2020) <<https://www.worldhistory.org/Mencius/>> [accessed 28 March 2022]

Why are virtuous neighbours so important? In *Dizigui, The Guidelines of Being a Good Person*, a classic for children, it says: “If we associate with and learn from people of great virtue, we will benefit greatly. Day by day, our own virtues will grow, and our faults will lessen.” 「能親仁，無限好，德日進，過日少。」 “If we do not associate with and learn from these people, we will suffer a great loss. We will attract people without virtue, and nothing we do will succeed.”¹⁰ 「不親仁，無限害，小人進，百事壞。」

This also applies to making friends. The Bible says, “Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.”¹¹ (Proverbs 13:20)

In Book XV, chapter 9 of the *Analects*, Zi Gong asked about the practice of virtue 仁 and Confucius said in his reply, “make friends of the virtuous among [a state’s] scholars.”¹²

In Book XII, chapter 24, Zengzi said: “A Junzi meets his friends through culture, and through these friends, promote the practice of virtue.”¹³ Here, culture refers to poetry, the study of classics, ceremonies, and music.¹⁴

So, we need to be careful when making friends and choosing neighbours. We must choose to befriend and reside among virtuous people.

Story: The Donkey and His Purchaser (Aesop)

A man was looking to purchase a donkey. He found one that he liked but wanted to see if the donkey would be useful. So, he made an agreement with its owner. They agreed that the purchaser could try out the donkey before he bought it. He took the donkey home and put him in the stable, together with his other donkeys. The new donkey immediately walked past all the other donkeys and joined the laziest donkey, who also ate the most. When the man saw this, he took the donkey straight back to his owner. When the owner asked why he was back so soon, and how he could have tried out the donkey in such a short time, he answered, “I do not need a trial; I know that he’ll be just the same as the one he chose for his companion.”¹⁵

¹⁰ *Guidelines for Being a Good Person*, trans. by Pure Land Translation Team (Toowoomba: Pure Land College Press, 2009), p. 27

¹¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, Proverbs 13. 20

¹² *The Chinese Classics*, trans. by James Legge, 3rd edn, 5 vols (repr. Taipei: SMC Publishing, 2016), I: *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean*, p. 297

¹³ *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. by Arthur Waley ([London: G Allen and Unwin], 1938; repr. Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2005), p. 170

¹⁴ Li Bingnan 李炳南, *Lunyu Jiangyao 論語講要* [Lecture Notes on the Analects], ed. by Xu Xingmin 徐醒民 (Taizhong: Fuojiang Lianshe, 2016), p. 514

¹⁵ Aesop, “The Ass and His Purchaser”, *Aesop’s Fables* <<https://fablesaesop.com/the-ass-and-his-purchaser.html>> [accessed 25 March 2022]

“A man is known by the company he keeps.”

This fable teaches us that who we associate with shows what we seek. The donkey chose a lazy companion who ate the most, meaning he must also be a lazy donkey who eats a lot. And of course, no one wants a donkey who eats a lot but works very little.

Conclusion

In choosing our friends, our company, and when the time comes, our neighbourhood, we must be careful and choose wisely. We must choose people of virtue as our friends and a neighbourhood where there are people of virtue. When we surround ourselves with people of virtue, we will improve, and our own virtues will grow.

This concludes my presentation. Thank you for listening. Any feedback and suggestions would be appreciated.

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