**debt, human/人情(Rén Qíng)**

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The Chinese phrase of renqing (人情) is composed by two Chinese characters. “人(ren)（human being ; man; person; people）”and “情(qing)（feeling; emotion; sentiment; affection）”. The Chinese character “情（qing）” consists of two radicals. The radical “㣺”on the left side refers to "heart", meaning heartfelt emotion and feeling. The one on the right “青（qing）”denotes its pronunciation in this case.

As a popular discourse in current China, 人情（renqing）actually has a long history. It can be found in《礼记（liji, The book of Rites）》, one of the Classics of Confucianism，which was edited by 戴圣（Daisheng）, an official as well as a scholar specializing in ritual studies during Western Han Dynasty(202B.C.—8A.C.). “What is renqing? Joy, angry, sorrow, fear, love, hate, desire, seven emotions, without learning but innate capability (何谓人情？喜怒哀懼爱恶欲，七者，弗学而能)”(《礼记今注今译（li ji jinzhu jinyi）（The book of Rites, with Contemporary Annotation and Translation）》. Translated by Wang Mengou(王梦鸥），Taibei: Taiwan Shangwu yinshuguan. P.301). Renqing was also occurred in 《（史记Shiji）》，the first history of the Twenty-Four Histories, written by Simaqian（司马迁）. When he discussed about“乐（Yue (music)）”in the preface of Shiji, he wrote: “Being moved by renqing, the other with different customs in afar can be appealed (人情之所感，远俗则怀)”. In one of his poems, Du, Fu (712-770 A.D), a famous poet in Tang Dynasty, wrote a passage“Presenting fine rice cake to fulfill renqing (粔籹作人情)”（《辞海》（合订本）舒新城等编，1947再版，中华书局印行,p.80,子集：“人情”条目）(Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui,1994. Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: the Art of Social Relationships in China, Cornell University Press, Ithaca & London. P.67)

In 《礼记(liji)》，there is a widely known Confucian classical statement:“In the highest antiquity they highly prize good; in the time next to this, giving and repaying (报（bao）)was the thing attended to. And what the rules of propriety(礼(li))value is that reciprocity. If I give a gift and nothing comes in return, that is contrary to propriety; if the thing comes to me, and I give nothing in return, that also is contrary to propriety (太上贵德， 其次务施报。 礼尚往来。 往而不来，非礼也；来而不往，亦非礼也).

Liang, Shuming（梁簌溟）argued “The Ethical relationship is a kind of obligatory relationship; a man does not seem to exist for himself, but as if for others (伦理关系即表示一种义务关系；一个人似不为其自己而存在，乃仿佛互为他人而存在者)”(梁簌溟《中国民族自救运动之最后觉悟》第86页，中华书局出版,1933年4月). He also noted that “In the mutual relationship between the society and the individual, which put the emphasis on the individual, is called as the individual-based; Thus, the Chinese morality focus on the relation between one person and another person, but ignoring the relation between society and individual. …It means: do not fix the emphasis on any one party, but on their relationship, reciprocal exchange with each other; the emphasis is really on relationship. Morality-based one is namely relationship-based one”.

In his book entitled《乡土中国（xiangtu zhongguo）（Folk China）》，Fei, Xiao-tong argued “In a closed community, it is impossible not to owe each other renqing, and it is also most afraid of‘算账(credit clearing)’.‘Credit clearing’or‘清账(debt clearing)’equal to terminate their relationship, thus they don’t need to keep in touch since they are no longer mutually owe renqing to each other”.

In the first paragraph of the introduction of The Gift, Mauss, M. wrote: “In Scandinavian and many other civilizations contracts are fulfilled and exchanges of goods are made by means of gifts. In theory such gifts are voluntary but in fact they are given and repaid under obligation”. Based on the studies carried out by him and his colleagues on archaic forms of contract，Mauss argued “They exchange rather courtesies, entertainments, ritual, military assistance, women, children, dances, and feasts in which the market is but one element and the circulation of wealth but one part of a wide and enduring contract. Finally, although the prestations and counter-prestations take place under a voluntary guise they are in essence strictly obligatory, and their sanction is private or open warfare. We propose to call this the system of total prestations”. He clearly pointed out “The most important of these spiritual mechanisms is clearly the one which obligates us to make return gift for a gift received.” Mauss’s statement is some how such a match with one of the Chinese well known Confucianism statement quoted above.

In the long history of China, although there have been many great changes in the political, economic, social and cultural contexts, the meaning and practice of renqing among the secular society still retain some of its original elements based on Confucian moral and ethical relations to a certain extent, while on the other hand, they are constantly changing along with the changing Chinese history in socio-cultural, political and economic contexts. Due to the different economic modes of production between urban and rural areas, as well as the different socio-cultures between geographical areas, have led to the meaning and practice of renqing, as well as their historical changing processes shown diversity.

After the established of the People Republic of China, the different generations of Chinese people in mainland have been experienced various kinds of social movements launched by the government. Accompany with those movements, the social interpersonal relationships have also been shaped and affected. Since the reform and opening up, the rapid development and changes in social politics and economy, the rapid expansion and development of population mobility between urban and rural areas and between different geographical administrative regions, and the greater diversification of social division of labor and industries have been resulting in dramatic increase in the diversity of interpersonal relationships and their nature. In addition to the relationship based on relatives and fellow villagers, more have been extended to such things as the former classmate relationship, the comrade-in-arms relationship that was formed in the same unit when joining the army, the relationship between urban intellectual youths who have been assigned to the same village, township, state-run or army farm and have experienced a hardship together during the Cultural Revolution etc. These newly formed interpersonal groups tend to consider their relationships just as a “sibling” liked renqing’s one. At the same time, it also leads to the increasing phenomenon of crossover and the hierarchically organized interpersonal relationships, and resulting in more complexity of the codes of renqing relationships. However, the "gift exchange" between these multiple interpersonal interactions is still playing as an important element.

Just as the concept of “debt of gratitude” evolved throughout history and Western languages the concept of 人情 (renqing) underwent transformations in the Chinese speaking world. Without falling into the excesses of any dichotomous appraisal, it is perhaps at this point that a comparison between “debt of gratitude” and renqing can begin to show similarities from a human perspective for we are all under the same Heaven, as well as differences from a cultural perspective due to variations of emphases on ideas of individual right or social obligation. If understood in the sense of mode of relationship that entails 报 and in spite of its formal similarity with the debt of gratitude, the idea and practice of renqing appears to follow a principle of self-interested reciprocities albeit as condition for social harmony – at least in the traditional sense and unlike the notion of 关系（guanxi）that smacks of instrumental reciprocities for mere mutual self-interest in a more contemporary context. The reciprocity is also what makes the notion of “gift” comprehended as mode of payment for which return is expected central to understanding renqing. The “debt of gratitude”in a Western context certainly equally involves a degree of reciprocity insofar as it is a response to what could be tacitly perceived as a gift. But, unlike in the Greco-Roman world which shares much similarities with the traditional Chinese conception of 馈赠（kuizeng（gift））as far as reciprocity and the make-up of society are concerned, the Judeo-Christian tradition – which still colours much of Western cultures – tends to conceive the gift as self-disinterested in intention and this, regardless of its aporiatic dimension and the practical impossibility of any notion of “pure gift” that Mauss highlighted. Disinterestedness, anonymity, and unconditionality become the paradigmatic features of an idealized conception of the gift. In the case of interpersonal relationships, the giver withdraws in the act of giving with no expectation of return as a way of valuing other fellow human beings. As a result, the receiver is never coerced to pay back the giver in the name of social cohesion. This conception of the gift therefore shifts away from the notion of kuizeng within the context of renqing. In a different way the disinterested gift does not fully apply either to the debt of gratitude, for the latter remains a response within a dynamic of reciprocity. However, far from being explicitly formalised and expected, the return crucially rests on a principle of freedom of decision that guaranties that the pledge for social harmony does not transform into social coercion. Perhaps, then, and bearing in mind the limits imposed by cultural and historical differences when comparing and translating the two terms, what brings together semantically and practically “debt of gratitude” and renqing is the element of reciprocity that effects the fabric of society; what sets them apart is that the former is expressed as a free move of natural recognition of values where the latter rests on a ritualistic enaction of a constructed model of propriety.

Over the past four decades, the mobility of urban and rural populations has changed at an unprecedented rate. In the early days of reform and opening up, the population data of the third national census in 1982 showed that the urban population accounted for only 20.6% of the total national population, while the Chinese economic data at the end of 2021 showed that the urban population increased to 64.72% of the total national population. The urban and rural population structure has underwent tremendous changes.

As the rural population flows out and disperses year by year, the communication and maintenance of the previous renqing relationships have been weakened, and the metabolism of such relationships have almost disappeared in many “hollowed-out" villages. On the contrary, the sharp increase in the urban population, the construction and development of rural urbanization, and the continuous expansion of the commercial and industrial economy to the original rural areas have all promoted the blurring of the boundaries of the rural renqing network and the urban guanxi one that were originally established under the huge difference between urban and rural areas, and the emergence of a social picture of the intertwining and integration of the two kinds of interpersonal relationships.