**duty/义(Yì)**

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| Chinese Perspective | ZHAO Tingyang | 02 Apr 2022 |

Confucianism takes it for granted that *Ren* is the core of morality, while *Yi* the code of moral practice. Yi has its meaning stronger than duty, so it might be better understood as “human duties”, which are supposed to define or explain that which a human being is meant to be, that is, a man does not mean a human being if he betrays his human duty (yi). Anyway it is a concept open to interpretations in its practical applications. We had better to discover its genetic code unchanged throughout its changing interpretations and applications.

The pictographic character of *Yi* (義), found an inscription on bones of the early Chinese civilization, is composed of two parts, the top half is the image of a sheep, and the lower half the personal pronoun of me or myself. An interpretation based upon the early Chinese dictionary (Shuo wen chieh tzu) edited by Xu Shen (58-148 AD) says that Yi indicates, by its image, the look of honour or dignity (the sheep marks a “good name”). It seems a vague interpretation. Modern knowledge has proved this famous early dictionary having made mistakes for lack of scientific analysis. From an anthropological point of view, considering the situation of early civilization, I would bet that it is an image of a metaphor that one offers a sacrifice (a sheep carried on one’s head as the sacrifice to gods), so it should more reasonably means the religious duties to the gods at the very beginning, and later extended to the human duties to respect the others.

Yi is usually translated as *justice* or *righteousness*, contextually good but not conceptually so good. Nevertheless, it basically means *duties*, which keeps up to and keeps on its genetic reference to the sacrifice of oneself to gods or other persons. When the religious duties transformed into the moral, Yi explains the contextual understandings of justice or righteousness in moral cases, almost refers to all right things as well as right ways in moral practice. To be noted, there is no fixed rule or definite agenda for “right things or right ways”, so that the righteousness actually means “contextual reasonableness”, that is, being flexibly reasonable and considerate towards the others, while on the other side it definitely requires self-discipline, self-abnegation or selflessness. Obviously, Yi suggest the altruist morality of being lenient to others and strict with oneself.

The following listed interpretations are the useful road signs to Yi:

1. Confucius said: “on the occasion you are capable to do something on your duty (Yi), but you dare not, so you prove a coward”[[1]](#footnote-1). Then Zi-lu, a Confucian student and a swordsman, asked Confucius if bravery is the prime virtue of a decent man, Confucius answered: “the prime virtue of a decent man is his sense of righteous duty (Yi). If a brave man has poor consciousness of righteousness, his courage may lead him to do wrong things. A common man who has no sense of righteousness could be worse, for his courage most likely leads him to commit robbery”[[2]](#footnote-2). Confucius emphasized the distinction between a decent and a common man, in a way as Plato did: “a decent man takes justice (Yi) seriously, whereas a common man only takes interest in self-interest”[[3]](#footnote-3).
2. Mo-zi (476BCE-390BCE), the founder of Mohism, gives the most clarified definitions: “Yi is what is justified”[[4]](#footnote-4), and “Yi means altruism”[[5]](#footnote-5).
3. Zi-si (483BCE-402BCE), a grandson of Confucius, who was the first to define Ren and Yi as the two faces of morality: “Ren is the recognition of humanity, fundamentally the love for family, while Yi means the appropriateness of social order based upon humanity, fundamentally the advantaged positions for the persons of merits”[[6]](#footnote-6).
4. Mencius (372BCE-289BCE), the second most-famous Confucian, explains the correlation of Ren and Yi: “Ren is the home of humanity, and correspondingly Yi is the right way out of humanity” [[7]](#footnote-7). In other words, “Ren is what a human should be, and Yi is what a human should do”[[8]](#footnote-8).
5. Dong Zhongshu (179BCE-104BCE), the founder of Chinese hermeneutics or classical studies, offered new interpretations, considered the most definitive: “The point of Ren is that Ren lives in the love for others rather than in self-love; the point of Yi is that Yi consists of one’s own duties rather than the obligations of others”[[9]](#footnote-9). And a more lucid saying: “Ren builds the human in humanity, and Yi builds the self in self-discipline”[[10]](#footnote-10).
6. Zhang Zai (1020-1077), a distinguished Confucian, gives a political interpretation of Yi as that which accords with “the common or public good for all peoples”[[11]](#footnote-11). So it extends Yi from the moral to the political or social justice, often in terms of the “greater Yi” (大义), referring to the general justice, public responsibility or public good.

Either in terms of the personal virtue or social justice, the concept of Yi has been widely used in social life and popular literature. From the most popular usages and idioms, we see that Yi always relates to unselfishness, helps for no return, offering something for nothing, or, sacrifice of one’s own interest or even life for national honour or public good. For examples: “a broken promise, a betrayal of justice (Yi)” (背信弃义), “ungratefulness discards duty (Yi)” (忘恩负义), “wealth of no justification (Yi)” (不义之财) means the ill-gotten wealth, and “forsake justice (Yi) for sake of money”(见利忘义) to describe an unreliable man, while “to sacrifice one’s love for universal justice (Yi)”(大义灭亲) to highlight the priority of justice above anything. As well Yi is interestingly used as a description for anything that helps. For examples, the artificial limb is named “Yi-limb”, meaning “kindly helping limb”, false tooth is “Yi-tooth” as “kindly helping tooth”, in the same way, charity bazaar is “Yi-sell”, charity performance is “Yi-performance”, and volunteer is “Yi-worker”, etc.

There is a special application of Yi that should be more discussed, which is called the “shared breathing of Yi” (义气), indicating the “reciprocal promises”, or “reciprocal loyalty”, or “moral debt”. This interpretation of Yi is prevailing in the “society of rivers and lakes”, namely, the uncontrolled corners of a society, composed of secret societies, lower classes, swordsmen or gangsters, as well as the grass rooted cultures and something of “Mafia” rules. Interestingly, this culture of moral debt or reciprocal loyalty also goes in the societies of higher classes or the “elites” as an extra “unspoken rule” in addition to laws and public regulations. As the matter of fact, this culture of circular reciprocal loyalty and moral debts functions as the basis of Chinese “communities” ---- considering China has been lack of communities based upon churches. It is the Yi in endless circulation that unites people and develops the trustable “social connections”, for the reason that the repeatable indicates the trustable hearts, supposed of solidarity more than the interest-based contracts. And it practically explains the reality of Chinese societies even better than the Confucian academic doctrines do. A symbol of the “shared breathing of Yi” is General Guan Gong (?-220 AD), whose most known story is that he abandoned the good position and wealth as well as beautiful ladies offered by the most powerful warlord, instead, followed his poor and defeated sworn brother for the “heartedly brotherhood”. He was recognized as the “god of Yi”. The temples for him still standing everywhere. Briefly, the “shared breathing of Yi” is basically composed of promise, trust, friendship and moral debt of gratitude.

All interpretations of Yi have anyway the “family resemblance” (a Wittgensteinian word to describe a set of meanings), especially overlapping on their core code that if no help, or no sacrifice, or no gratitude, then nothing speaks Yi, or something fails Yi. Therefore, Yi approximately means the duty of being a human. Summed up, Yi has been conceptualized into three kinds: (1) the greater justice (大义), which is the public responsibilities rather than personal merits, similar to the common sense of justice everywhere in the world; (2) reciprocal loyalty (义气), which is the interpersonal “shared breathing of Yi” instead of the public. And it might be said a culture of somewhat Chinese characteristics, although similarities are found in other cultures of less modernity; (3) human duties (人义)[[12]](#footnote-12), the most important as I see it, supposed the universal duties of being a human. It claims that human duties better define the concept of human or humanity, more than human rights. It so suggests that the “ought” explains the “is” of a human being, in other words, a man does rather than is.

*Human duties* implies a humanism based upon human duties, distancing from the modern individualism upon human rights. As far as I understand and develop it, a theory of human duties claims, (1) human duties are based upon the ontological condition that everyone is dependent on the others to exist. Therefore, everyone owes his human duties to the others; (2) human duties logically precede human rights, paralleling and underlying human rights, on the reason that, human duties conceptually or transcendentally *entail* human rights, but not vice versa, whereas human rights *imply* human duties only in the sense of the *material implication* by means of truth-values, yet not necessarily entailing human duties by means of conceptual meanings. In other words, human duties automatically enact human rights, but not vice versa, and human duties are the necessary maintenance of the value of human rights, but not vice versa. Practically, the concept of human rights might risk at encouraging the asymmetry or unbalance of more rights over less duties, which is an omen of increasing entropy, or the disorder of a society. So I would say the symmetry or the balance of human duties and human rights could make a better foundation of a society.

1. 《论语·为政》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 《论语·阳货》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 《论语·里仁》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 《墨子·天志下》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 《墨子·经上》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 子思：《中庸》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 《孟子·离娄上》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 《孟子·告子上》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 董仲舒：《春秋繁露·仁义法》 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 同上。 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 张载：《正蒙·大易》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 《礼记·礼运》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)