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# Chinese philosophy of life, relational ethics and the COVID-19 pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the relation between different models of ethics and their impact upon crises solution strategies. Here, it is important to consider knowledge and ethical theories from different cultures. The paper describes some alternative ethical models from the perspective of the Chinese, particularly Confucian, philosophies. This perspective is meaningful because in the Sinitic areas the pandemic has been brought under control much more effectively than in other regions of the world. First, the paper introduces the Chinese philosophy of life and highlights its current relevance; then, it presents traditional Chinese models of relational and anti-essentialist concepts of the self and investigates their impact to the Confucian models of social ethics. On this basis, it illuminates some new ways of understanding interpersonal and intercultural interactions that might help us develop new strategies against current and future pandemics.

## KEYWORDS

COVID-19; pandemic; Chinese ethics; Confucian ethics; relational self; role ethics; relationalism

## 1. Introduction

Philosophy and philosophical ethics in particular play a crucial role in any time of crisis and transition, and in this regard the COVID-19 pandemic is definitely no exception. In the face of such a crisis, ethical decision-making becomes crucial, because science alone cannot tell us what values we should prioritize. The important decisions in this context are clearly ethical and not scientific. Questions regarding the problems of how we should act during such critical times are of utmost importance and we need—perhaps more than ever—to comprehensively articulate, discuss and investigate the ethical roles of ourselves and others.

As we all know, human beings tend to be self-interested and guided by immediate goals. Concerns about the risks of community infection seem to be abstract and less important than preserving individual liberties. If we want to develop different principles, and embrace the values of cooperation and solidarity, we need to modify our thinking and transform it in a way that it can proceed from a communal or social perspective rather than a self-centred one. The COVID-19 pandemic has thus shown that we have to put our moral theories into action in order to change our individual actions.

Currently, much of our lives are on hold, and our mutual responsibilities demand that we act in ways that are uncomfortable or even painful. Although we cannot know when all this will stop or what the ‘new normal’ after the pandemic might look like, philosophy can change the ways we respond to the situation in which we are trapped. It can show us

how to use this crisis as an opportunity to cultivate our sense of togetherness and mutual help. Besides, in these uncertain times philosophy can nurture in us a consciousness of our individual mortality and moral responsibility. Knowledge and thoughts from other cultures and times can certainly prove themselves to be helpful in such conditions.

Faced with the global spread of the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 induced COVID-19 pandemic, we therefore need to understand the importance of intercultural cooperation. Intercultural dialogue needs to play an important role in cultivating a new transcultural agreement, which might enable us to form new models of social cooperation and connections not only within particular societies and cultures, but also across national, ethnic, and civilizational lines (Mansouri, 2020, p. 4). As such, it is by no means coincidental that the need for such a cross-cultural dialogue has become even more pronounced during the global COVID-19 pandemic. This emergency demonstrates that we live in an extremely interdependent world. A thorough recognition of our vital mutual connections and common threats can certainly help us to find a way out of the global crisis. On the other hand, a failure to value our tight interconnections may even prolong its dangers instead of eliminating them.

Connecting knowledge and wisdom from different philosophical traditions can certainly help us to establish such a productive appreciation of our common humanity. Moreover, it can also help us to elaborate upon new strategies of social cooperation. I will therefore try to outline some basic theoretical groundworks for possible alternative models of social ethics from an intercultural perspective. As a specialist in Chinese philosophy, I will naturally focus on models that have emerged in the Chinese tradition of ideas, in the hope of identifying some possible frameworks for a new mode of solidarity and cooperation that is crucial for the resolution of such crises. This task seems to me a meaningful one, especially in the light of the fact that in most areas of the so-called Sinitic region, i.e. the region which was traditionally strongly influenced by the Chinese, especially classical Confucian ethics, the pandemic has so far been brought under control much quicker and much more effectively than in other regions of the world. Many authors have attributed the reasons for the high degree of cooperation required in these processes to traditional Sinitic obedience and collectivism (Escobar, 2020b, p. 3), and associated them with the autocratic structures of societies. Both of these phenomena are said to belong to the common, Confucian-based political ideological heritage of East Asian societies (see, e.g., Han, 2020, p. 4; Oviedo, 2020, p. 4; Escobar, 2020a, p. 2, etc.). Such views are superficial and generalizing, however, especially when we recall the fact that containment measures have been most successful in those East Asian countries that are not autocratic, but rather progressive and democratic. To better understand this issue, I will also introduce different culturally conditioned models of the relationship between the individual and society in later parts of this article. In this context, intercultural dialogues in ethics and political philosophy are also of special importance, for we need to know in the present moment what to value most: the strictness of individual liberties and rights, or the reduction of the number of avoidable deaths to a minimum?

But before going into such—albeit significant—details, I would like to begin with a more general debate by presenting the Chinese philosophy of life and highlighting its current relevance; in the following section, I will thus critically introduce the classical Chinese models of the relational self and its embeddedness into the traditional Confucian role-ethics. In the following, I will illuminate some crucial differences between different

models of social cooperation, such as collectivism, individuation<sup>1</sup> and relationalism. These models can help us to better understand different modes of the structuring of the relation between the individual and community or society. On this basis, I will combine the characteristics typical of the traditional Chinese philosophy of life and Confucian ethics in order to shed light on some new ways of understanding interpersonal and intercultural interactions that might help us develop new strategies against current and possible future pandemics.

## 2. The Chinese philosophy of life

The Chinese philosophy of life cannot be confused with the philosophical movement which spread in Germany in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries under the name *Lebensphilosophie*,<sup>2</sup> even though the two discourses share some commonalities, such as a critique of purely materialist and mechanistic approaches to human existence and thought. These two philosophical discourses also proceeded from similar lines of thought in their basic epistemology, for they are both rooted in the supposition according to which a comprehension of life can only be obtained by and through life itself, and from within itself.

In the European philosophy of life, these epistemological bases were mainly established upon the foundation of the ideas of Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, while in Chinese philosophical vitalism these basic groundworks go as far back as to the oldest written sources of the Chinese tradition. First, let us take a look at the principle of the creative creativity of life (*shengsheng* 生生),<sup>3</sup> which belongs to the basic paradigms underlying Confucian discourses from their very beginning, i.e. since the spread of the *Book of Changes* (*Zhou Yi* 周易). In my opinion, this vital creativity and the importance of human life that is—as we shall see in the following—implied in it, is of crucial importance for the establishment of interpersonal empathy, which later manifested itself in the central Confucian virtue of humaneness (*ren* 仁). Interpersonal empathy, the feeling that other people, and society as a whole, not only ourselves, matter and are important, is of crucial significance during any crisis, especially the current pandemic that endangers innumerable lives around the world. Therefore, let us take a closer look at the basis of such a view of the importance of human life.

In the modern times, the philosophical paradigm of creative creativity was theoretically upgraded and developed by the modern Chinese philosopher Fang Dongmei (1899–1977).<sup>4</sup> Fang saw Chinese philosophy primarily as a discourse focusing upon the importance of such matters as human life (*shengming* 生命), reciprocal love (*ren'ai* 仁爱), transformational and generating energy (*huayu* 化育), a return to the primordial harmony, mean-directed harmonization (*zhonghe* 中和), an analogical approach to understanding the entire category through a single example, and so on (K. Wang, 2020, p. 191).

Fang Dongmei integrated and combined Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist and Western philosophical traditions into his own philosophical theory (Sernelj, 2020, p. 165). Following the *Book of Changes*, he defined philosophy as the study of the synthesis of the emotive and rational that emerged from the Ultimate Original (*Taiji* 太極) and created human existence (Sernelj, 2020, p. 165). For him, the emotive and rational are mutually determining and interdependent.

In the centre of Fang's philosophy lies the concept of life or the living (*sheng* 生), which is derived, as already mentioned, from the philosophy of the *Zhou yi* (*Book of Changes*).<sup>5</sup> According to Fang, all schools of traditional Chinese thought emerged from a cosmology, which is defined by an all-prevailing instinct for life and survival, the vital impulse that constantly creates and recreates everything that exists. For Fang, the cosmos was a 'living environment',<sup>6</sup> and as such, it was permeated by 'circles of rational principles and feelings.'<sup>7</sup> While the structural coherence patterns (*li* 理) of existence remain fundamental, feelings (*qing* 情) represent the primary source of life<sup>8</sup>: 'Life is a world of feelings, and its essence is a continuous, creative desire and impulse'<sup>9</sup> (Fang, 1936, p. 25). For Fang, life is thus 'a flexible, extendable power'<sup>10</sup> (p. 163).

The universe is a living entity that cannot be reduced to mere inertial physical matter. Based on these premises, Fang then added a third category to the dualism of matter and idea, namely that of life: 'We can see that life is a novel, original phenomenon; we cannot deal with it in the same way as with matter. Its system is predicated upon an organic wholeness'<sup>11</sup> (p. 179).

This living universe is full of energy, and everything in it is structurally connected to the living process that penetrates the entire realm. Human thought is also rooted in this colourful, sensitive and creative palette of life itself; it is not merely a product of rationality: 'Life is the root of the thought, and thoughts are symbols or signs of life'<sup>12</sup> (p. 164). Accordingly, even science is a symbol of the sentiments of life, for its value lies in 'developing the human desire for life'<sup>13</sup> (p. 160). In this way, Fang 'has completed the process of a ontologization of life'<sup>14</sup> (Fang, 1995, p. 892). In his philosophy, he 'aims to fuse the "objective world" with the "subjective spirit of humanity" by the 'creative force of unceasing production and reproduction of life'<sup>15</sup> (p. 904).

Life is thus the fundamental driving force of the universe. For this reason, Fang calls it the original (Fang, 1982, p. 149) or ultimate substance<sup>16</sup> (Fang, 1984, p. 28) of the universe. However, he stresses that while this ultimate substance is transcendent (*chaoyue* 超越), it is not so supremely unique as to be an absolute (*chaojue* 超绝) (p. 20). Fang Dongmei's ontology thus clearly belongs to the holistic realm of what Modern Confucians called 'immanent transcendence.'<sup>17</sup> In my opinion, such a view may be called a 'life-ontology.'<sup>18</sup>

In the theory of being, Fang believes that the nature of existence is multi-layered. Its multifarious all-pervading unity includes biological, physical, psychological, religious, aesthetic, moral, and unfathomable factors. These are posited into a structural order, beginning from the basic, physical levels and rising gradually to the inexplicable. Then, they descend again from the inexplicable to the physical level. According to Fang Dongmei, human beings can also develop from the basic to higher levels. On the higher stages they can pour their creative forces back to those on the lower levels and reinforce them (Sernelj, 2020, p. 166). This movement from downward to upward represents two cosmic processes that are continuously stimulating and inspiring each other (Shen, 2003, p. 251).

As for his theory of humanness (*renxing* 人性), Fang, like most of his fellow Modern Confucians, believes that it contains an inner dynamism, which is inherently good; in its natural development, it is inclined toward the completion of goodness. Humanness evolves in accordance with the structural order of existence (Shen, 2003, p. 251). Fang's organistic philosophy and his theory of comprehensive harmony represent an ontology of dynamic relations. His affirmation of creativity as the ultimate reality demonstrates in itself the interchange between humans and nature (Sernelj, 2020, p. 166).

In his ontology of life, Fang Dongmei believes that although there is an objective (material) world which forms its actual foundation, the dynamic and creative existence of life itself tends to dissolve the merely physical world through its inherent and consistent value system that points to the meaning of life. In this context, it is important to point out that according to Fang human existence is not merely about survival but presupposes the search for meaning and purpose. (Sernelj, 2020, p. 166)

In traditional Confucianism, this life-ontology of unceasing creative creativity was linked to the universal human feeling of mutual empathy, which found its manifestation in the concept of humaneness (*ren* 仁). This ontological dimension of humaneness, rooted in the cosmic principle of creative creativity, was already outlined in Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian theory. In contemporary times, however, Chen Lai was the first to meticulously elaborate upon and to thoroughly analyse these Neo-Confucian foundations, which enabled him to upgrade them and establish a coherent model of an all-pervasive ontology of *ren*:

The theory of humaneness was connected to the theory of the cosmic creativity of life as a result of the reversal of the original mode of thinking. Namely, if the way of the humaneness is universal, if it is something which is not limited to the human world, then, how does it manifest itself? Even in earliest times, the Confucians believed that in the universe, humaneness manifests itself in the creative creativity of life. The cosmic creative creativity is actually humaneness, while the cosmic humaneness is the origin and the root of the humaneness of the human world. In other words, it is the substance.<sup>19</sup> (Chen, 2014, p. 44)

Humaneness in the sense of interhuman empathy thus obtains a very elementary character. Life in itself is what engenders people with meaning. The very fact that we are alive, makes us human and provides us with an inherent connection to our humaneness.

### 3. Relationalism and role-ethics

The contemporary Chinese philosopher Li Zehou<sup>20</sup> also proceeds from a similar paradigm<sup>21</sup>, for the first presumption of his own philosophy is the supposition that 'human beings are alive.'<sup>22</sup> Similar to Fang, he also believes that this high evaluation of life as such is deeply rooted in the Chinese culture and philosophy. His essential point here is the fact that the meaning of human life is not derived from death (or from that which happens after it—as in Christianity, and hence for the majority of the Western population), but from the life itself. But Li also asks himself 'Why (or for what reason) do human beings live?'<sup>23</sup>

And this second dimension pertains to the relation between the individual, who is denoted as the 'small self' 小我, and society or communities, in which people see a wider notion of themselves, i.e. the so-called 'great self' 大我<sup>24</sup>. Li Zehou also believes that a crucial difference between Western and traditional Chinese ethics lies in their respective views on the relation between individual and society. He critically questions Western systems of ethics and moral philosophy, which are rooted in the notion of individualism.

While Western culture is therefore based on the idea of a free and abstract individual, the Chinese social order is grounded upon a network of relations and could therefore be denoted as a 'relational virtue ethics'<sup>25</sup> (Li & Liu, 2014, p. 209). This basic distinction leads to great differences in the ethical thought that prevailed in these two cultural-philosophical discourses, not only concerning their respective views on the relation between the individual and society, but also regarding the relation between reason and emotion.

Li emphasizes that traditional Chinese societies were structured as networks of relations that bonded together individuals who were not constituted as isolated and independent entities, but rather as the so-called relational selves, which means that humans were essentially interrelated and their social relationships largely determined their identities. Li's highlighting such a concept of the human self, which is always situated in particular concrete situations and social settings, is linked to Chinese, and especially Confucian, traditions, where conceptions of the person focus on relationships. This also implies that each person's chosen pursuits, failures and achievements can only be understood under consideration of their interactions with others (Lai, 2018, p. 64). 'In this way, Confucianism amounts to a moral interpretation of relationships as the fundamental constituents of human life and morality' (D'Ambrosio, 2016, p. 720). Hence, it is in such relationality that people achieve and experience meaning as moral human persons, including in their values and attitudes toward life (Li, 2016, p. 1096).

Morality is thus rooted in the harmonious interplay among different persons, embedded in various social roles. Li uses the term 'relationalism' or (in his own translation) '*guanxi-ism*'<sup>26</sup> to denote such particularities of Confucian ethics, which establishes morality on the basis of social relations, instead of on the foundation of individualism. According to Li Zehou, such an understanding is a typical product of the Chinese one-world view.<sup>27</sup>

Because of the Confucian one-world view, people have cherished interpersonal relationships and earthly emotions even more. They were mourning the impermanent nature of life and death. Seeking for the meaning of their existence, they found it in the midst of their actual life among other people. In this way, they found innumerable infinities within the finite and they discovered that redemption can be achieved in this world.<sup>28</sup> (Li, 2016a, p. 11)

Ancient Confucians defined the main structure of human social networks as consisting of five basic relationships (*wu lun* 五倫). The first description (or definition) of the moral contents of these relations can be found in *Mengzi*:

There must be love between fathers and sons, moral appropriateness between rulers and subordinates, difference between husbands and wives; there must be precedence of the old over the young, and trust between friends.<sup>29</sup> (2019; Teng Wen gong I, p. 4)

Such a model or conception of interpersonal relationships, ethical order, and mutual responsibilities, is rationalized, but it also includes emotions (Li, 2016, p. 1097). These basic relations roughly define in which way interpersonal interactions should be carried out, because specific duties and behavioural patterns are assigned to each of them. This model can be viewed as a summary of the elementary human relations in any civic society, for it consists of the familial, political, and companion relationships. However, it also demonstrates the Confucian emphasis on the family, for three of the five basic relationships are rooted in it. According to Li, this is the basis of the abovementioned relationalism. This social system allows emotion to permeate in interpersonal relations with the sincere emotion of parent-child love as the root, substance, and foundation (Jia, 2018, p. 156). Thus it is not a coincidence that in traditional China, families were linked to the state through the ideal of a good citizen; in Confucian ethics, a good citizen first had to be a good family member. The core idea behind such an outlook is that regulating the relationships in one's own family is what leads to a well-ordered state (Rošker, 2020, p. 105).

Moreover, as we have seen from the above quotation, the Confucian system of the five basic relationships is not merely a description of our social relationships, but also a set of

prescriptive norms regulating our social interactions, for each relationship is governed by a virtue (Q. Wang, 2016, p. 194). The crucial role in these moral interactions is played by filial piety or family reverence (*xiao* 孝).<sup>30</sup> This virtue, which is a constitutive element of the love from a child toward its parents, is mostly seen as one of the cardinal virtues in Confucian ethics.<sup>31</sup> In concrete contexts, this mostly implies the fulfilment of filial obligations toward one's parents.<sup>32</sup> Among other issues, filial piety is important because the parent-child relationship provides the earliest social environment in which a child learns to respond and understand normativity in relationships (Lai, 2018, p. 121). Hence, virtue is cultivated first and foremost within the family, and within the constraints of duties and responsibilities that constitute family relationships. The priority of family love over love for others outside the family (or, in other words, the priority of closeness over distance), is therefore crucial to Confucian moral epistemology. It is in the family that one first and foremost learns the life of virtue (Fan, 2010, p. xii). The natural sympathy between parents and children establishes the human disposition of love. The love between parent and child constitutes the very ground of the fundamental human virtue of humaneness (*ren*). It must be developed and cultivated in order to build a good society (p. 16).

In their book *Confucian Role Ethics—A Moral Vision for the 21st Century*, Roger Ames and Henry Rosenthal also emphasize that family reverence (*xiao*) is the origin of virtuous social behaviour and the source of humaneness or consummatory conduct (*ren*). The model that was denoted as 'relationalism' by Li Zehou, they designated as role-ethics, emphasizing that it represents a network of social roles which originate from the roles of the members within a family. In such roles, people's lives are embedded into meaningful contexts. Moreover, the network is dynamic and multi-layered, for no one assumes only one role, and everyone plays many parts. For instance: I am a mother, but also a daughter; I am teacher, but also a researcher, and hence, a student of other people's work. I am also a wife, a citizen, a driver, a consumer, a producer, a singer and so on.

Therefore, the Confucian notion of person is constituted by a dynamic manifold of always specific relations, which Ames and Rosemont describe in the following way:

Confucian role ethics has a holistic and compelling vision of the moral life that is grounded in and is responsible to our empirical experience. First, Confucian role ethics would insist on the primacy of vital relationships, and would preclude any notion of final individuality. Personal discreteness is a conceptual abstraction and strict autonomy a misleading fiction; association is a fact. And giving up the notion of a superordinate "self," far from surrendering one's personal uniqueness, in fact, enhances it. (Rosemont & Ames, 2016, p. 12)

Since personal uniqueness is an important point when speaking about the relation between society and individual, let us take a closer look at its position within traditional Chinese philosophy.

#### 4. The ideal of the moral self and individual uniqueness

In the framework of Confucian relational morality, the moral ideal toward which all individuals are striving is the achievement of the perfect moral self. In the context of contemporary concerns, we have to ask ourselves whether such an ideal is something purely universal, or something that also allows for the uniqueness of particular individual existences?



In the holistic system of classical Chinese philosophy, the moral self and a unique individual seem to be posited in mutual contradiction. However, in reality, they are actually parts of the same theoretical principle defining the complementary interactions of binary oppositions.

The common Western arguments based on the belief that the Chinese notion of the Self does not possess any strong 'individualistic' connotations are, for the most part, too generalizing. Besides, the Western notion of an isolated, delimited and completely independent individual is, to a great extent, also a product of the ideologies of modernization. Thus, when treating or exploring the Chinese notion of the 'self-realization' of the Self, we must proceed with due caution, for whoever has been acculturated within the discourses of Western modernity automatically tends to equate this term with the self-realization of an individual existence. But in fact, the Confucian Moral Self can only be realized through and in one's fellow people, through and in the community.

Hall and Ames (1998, p. 25) emphasize that the notion of 'individuality' has two different meanings. First, it refers to a particular, uniform, indivisible entity which can, due to a certain feature, be included in a certain class. As an element (or a member) of a certain kind or class, this 'individuality' is interchangeable. Hannah Arendt describes this as an individuality which is in contrast with any kind of plurality. Such a concept of individuality represents the basic level of human existence, for such an individual is merely the product of labour as a primary activity of survival. Arendt writes:

To be sure, he too lives in the presence of and together with others, but this togetherness has none of the distinctive marks of true plurality. It does not consist in the purposeful combination of different skills and callings as in the case of workmanship (let alone in the relationships between unique persons), but exists in the multiplication of specimens which are fundamentally all alike because they are what they are as mere living organisms. (Arendt, 1998, p. 212)

This 'loneliness of the *laborer qua laborer*' is mostly unnoticed in the literature on the topic, because the concrete organization of labour and the related social circumstances require the coinciding presence of numerous labourers for any given task; therefore, it appears as if there were no barriers of isolation between them (Arendt, 1998, p. 212).

Such an individual has no face, he or she has no particular discrete personality or identity. And yet, it is precisely this concept of individuality which underlies the equality of all individuals before the law, the concept of universal human rights, equal access to opportunities, and so on. According to Hall and Ames (1998, p. 25), it is precisely this understanding of the individual which also makes it possible to elaborate notions such as autonomy, equality, free will, and the like. This type of Self belongs in the domain of a one-dimensional, empirical self or, to express it in Chinese terms, in the sphere of the 'external ruler (*wai wang* 外王).'

But Hall and Ames point out that the notion of the individual can also be linked to the notions of uniqueness and singularity, which do not possess any connotations of affiliation, or membership in any class. Here, equality is posited on the basis of the parity principle. According to the authors, it is precisely this sense of 'unique individuality' which enables us to understand the traditional Confucian notion of the Self.

Fang Dongmei has advocated a very similar idea, emphasizing that the uniqueness which underpins the Confucian Self is already a value in itself:

*Dao* is omnipresent and unites everything in itself to an entity. Therefore, we say that the great *Dao* is unlimited. But, on the other hand, it also contains specific particularities. We have to accept the uniqueness of these particular entities as being true. Every particularity which has been realized bears in itself a tendency of value. Thus, its significance cannot be denied. (Fang, 2004, p. 259)

However, even this kind of self which possesses a unique individuality is 'unique' in a 'typical Chinese' (i.e., relational) way, for it constitutes itself by means of the quality of its relations with the external world.

Because of the domination of individualism, there is a widespread prejudice in the Western world regarding the specific view of the self, as has been developed in China and all other Sinitic (i.e. East Asian) regions. The so-called 'Eastern people' are seen as lacking any individuality, as people who act and think collectively. But actually, collectivism is a notion which stands in direct opposition with individualism. Collective units consist of mechanistically conceived individuals, who act and behave as tiny wheels functioning within a large machine. Indeed, collectivism can only be established by a multitude of the one-dimensional, empty individuals described above:

It is indeed in the nature of laboring to bring men together in the form of a labor gang where any number of individuals "labor together as though they were one," and in this sense togetherness may permeate laboring even more intimately than any other activity. But this "collective nature of labor," far from establishing a recognizable, identifiable reality for each member of the labor gang, requires on the contrary the actual loss of all awareness of individuality and identity; and it is for this reason that all those "values" which derive from laboring, beyond its obvious function in the life process, are entirely "social" and essentially not different from the additional pleasure derived from eating and drinking in company. The sociability arising out of those activities which spring from the human body's metabolism with nature rest not on equality but on sameness. (Arendt, 1998, p. 213)

However, relationalism has nothing to do with collectivism, even though in its framework society is at least as important as a particular individual. Relationalism and role ethics both represent a system, in which people are aware that they cannot survive alone, without each other, and therefore develop a contextualized self-awareness.

Karl Gustav Jung calls this process of self-realization 'individuation' (Jung, 1976, pp. 301, 402, 433), which is a kind of self-realization in the sense that each human Self is perceived as a unique, completely exceptional and inimitable combination of particular qualities that are, as such, universal. The universal and particular elements of each individual stand in a mutually complementary relation.

Jung believes that individuation is the highest objective in human life. It is precisely this concept that can answer the most intimate, but at the same time, most universally human question: 'What is the meaning of life?' (Jung, 1976, pp. 301, 402, 433). The realization of this objective requires the courage which is needed to find out who we are, and the process of finding out who we are is individuation.

According to Jung, it is an ongoing 'psychological development that fulfills the individual qualities given . . . , a process by which a [person] becomes the definite, unique being' (Spartz, 2016) that they indeed are. In China and all other regions that have been influenced by the Sinitic, especially Confucian culture, such a self-awareness is more realistic, for precisely through his or her uniqueness each human being can truly understand the meaning and importance of the social contexts in which they are embedded.

In contrast to individuation, individualism appears as self-centeredness and selfishness, which emphasizes how one is different than everybody else rather than how one is related to others (Spartz, 2016). The aim of individuation is to 'divest the self of the false wrappings of the persona' on the one hand, says Jung, and to cultivate the 'suggestive power' of the collective unconscious on the other.

Therefore, many contemporary scholars of ethics emphasize that the notion of the individual is problematic; this is also one of the reasons why Li Zehou prefers relationalism over individualism.

For him, a relational attitude and understanding is more accurate and closer to reality than social theories based on the notion of an abstract individual, because in the real world there is no such thing as a completely independent, 'pure' self, separated from all intentions, emotions and relationships.<sup>33</sup> Henry Rosemont and Roger Ames seem to agree with such a view, for they state:

It increasingly seemed to us that describing the proper performances of persons in their various roles and the appropriate attitude expressed in such roles in their relationship to others with whom they are engaged, sufficed to articulate an ethics that seemed ... to conform to our own everyday experience much better than those abstract accounts reflected in the writings of the heroes of Western moral philosophy, past and present. (Rosemont & Ames, 2016, p. 9)

Li also criticizes such Western discourses for their one-dimensional emphasis on individual autonomy and the idea of free choice. Such paradigms ultimately rest on the underlying presumption according to which individuals can be separated and abstracted from social contexts, relationships, and even from such parts of the human condition that are vital to human life, like the ability and need for interpersonal connectedness and mutual care (Fan, 2010, p. 13). From the perspective of Confucianism as relationalism, however, humans are basically relational existences. Thus, Li emphasizes:

That people are raised and cared for by their families and communities leaves them with duties and responsibilities to this relationality and even their "kind" (humankind). People do not belong to themselves alone. The very first passage of the *Classic of Filial Piety (Xiao jing)* tells us that as our bodies are received from our parents, we are not allowed to harm them. If even harming one's body is denounced, how could suicide possibly be allowed? (Li, 2016, p. 1131)

In the relational system, an individual is not expected to act as an independent, detached moral agent (Lai, 2008, p. 6). Hence, he or she is rarely judged according to an idealized standard of independent selfhood. In such an understanding of the self, relationships and environments largely determine individual values, thoughts, beliefs, motivations, behaviours, and actions. In addition, relationships in this framework are always marked by reciprocal and co-relative complementarity: 'A good teacher and a good student can only emerge together, and your welfare and the welfare of your neighbor are coterminous and mutually entailing' (Rosemont & Ames, 2016, p. 12). Even though relationalism involves unequal rankings—for a ruler has authority over a minister, a father over a son, and so on—both persons involved in a relationship are still metaphysically and morally complementary to each other in order to form profound social unities composed by their relations.

Relationalism also includes a type of virtue ethics, although this type of virtue ethics is not founded on the concept of an isolated individual but is rather defined by relationships, which are intrinsically emotional. However, Li Zehou also emphasizes (Li, 2016, p. 1097) that

in this system it is important to cultivate these underlying emotions, which are rooted in biological instincts, and to link them to fundamental mutual obligations. This means that emotions must be rationalized, ordered, standardized and integrated into a relational network within the human emotio-rational structure. In this structure, relations are objective, while emotions and commitments are subjective and need to be differentiated. This kind of ethics leads to harmony rather than to abstract notions of normative justice.

In the face of the current pandemic, it becomes even more apparent that such values might bring us closer to a more caring society, one based upon the acknowledgement of our responsibility to look after one another, of our human weakness, and of our continued interdependence.

## 5. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly shown how intertwined our human fates are. It has also shown that continuous, cooperative deeds are needed in order to effectively solve our shared difficulties. To this end, we must spread the awareness that we are all parts of global humanity, and hence we are all in the same boat: we sink or swim together. Therefore, it is also necessary to nurture a sensitivity and empathy for our fellow human beings who might be suffering. The traditional Chinese philosophy of humaneness (*ren* 仁), and its relational spirit might help us clarify some theoretical foundations for such an endeavour.

Such ideas can stimulate a view of cooperation that surpasses the gap between an independent singularity and obliterated self, and challenge the dichotomies between the self and the other or between the individual and the whole. These views are rooted in the paradigm of contrastive complementation because the distinctiveness of an individual may be measured not simply in terms of their individual merits, but also in terms of their wider social impact. This in turn is evaluated according to the individual's position within his or her contextual environment and his or her relations with other individuals (Lai, 2008, p. 88). From an ethical viewpoint, such a relational network has various significant social implications, particularly in comparison with those frameworks which postulate the independent stability of individuals.

In a period of crisis in which COVID-19 is being spread around the world, learning about different modes of cooperation and solidarity is of utmost importance. This short introduction of traditional Chinese relational ethics, which doubtless—albeit in a latent and unconscious form—played a significant role in the Sinitic social responses to the crisis, is meant as a preliminary contribution to the forming of such mutual transcultural learning, which is nowadays both more needed—but also more possible—than ever before.

## Notes

1. The process of individuation must not be confused with individualism. The main differences between the two models will be explained in later parts of this article.
2. The movement is also known as German vitalist philosophy.
3. In the *Book of Changes*, this principle of vital creative creativity is seen as the source of the change, which is the basic paradigm of every existence: 'Creative creativity of life is what we call the Change (生生之謂易)' (*Zhou yi*, s.d., Xi ci I, p. 5).
4. According to his student Cheng Chung-ying, Fang Dongmei, who was trained in both Western and Chinese philosophy, belonged—together with Feng Youlan and Jin Yuelin—to the field of so-called

synthesizing philosophy within the so-called Modern New Confucian (现代新儒家) stream of thought (Sernelj, 2020, p. 163).

5. Here, we might be able to detect one of the many influences of his favorite philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), who advised students and scholars to go beyond the ivory-tower mode of bookish education, and to step into the open air, expose themselves to classical works of arts and other fruits of life, and ‘to think over more significant issues in their own right instead of bending over classroom desks and burying themselves in textbooks, being alone all day’ (K. Wang, 2020, p. 184).
6. 生命的环境
7. 情理团
8. 生命的原态
9. 生命是有情之天下, 其实质为不断的, 创进的欲望与冲动
10. 一种伸张的权力
11. 从这种比较里, 我们可以看出生命显是新的现象, 不能与物质等视齐观了, 生命的现象系以机体的全部为大本营。
12. 生命是思想的根生, 思想是生命的符号
13. 科学的价值就在发舒人类的生命欲
14. 走完了将生命本体化的思想历程
15. (方)企求的是‘客观世界’与‘主体的人类精神’贯通, 而作为两者贯通的连续点或曰相关点即“生命生生不息的创造力
16. 生命为原体
17. 内在超越
18. 生命本体论
19. 仁学之所以要与宇宙论的生生论联结在一起, 其思路在原初应是反推的结果, 即如果仁道是普遍的, 是不限于人世的, 那么其在宇宙的表现为何? 儒家很早就认为, 仁在宇宙的体现便是生生, 生生便是宇宙之仁, 宇宙之仁是人世之仁的根源和本源, 换言之就是本体。
20. 关系主义
21. 角色伦理
22. 人活着
23. 人为什么活?
24. In the Chinese intellectual history, the concepts of ‘small’ and ‘great’ selves were often used to denote the difference between immature and self-centred people on the one, and cultivated individuals that were genuine social beings. Liang Qichao, for instance, has defined these two concepts as follows: ‘What does the great self mean? It is me as a social being. And what does a small self mean? It is me as an individual’ (“何謂大我? 我之群體是也。何謂小我? 我之個體是也”) (Liang, 1916, p. 4/154).
25. 关系主义的美德伦理
26. 关系主义
27. With this term (in Chinese 一个世界观), Li Zehou denotes the holistic nature of the Chinese and Confucian worldview.
28. 由于儒家的‘一个世界’观, 人们便重视人际关系, 人世情感, 感伤于生死无常, 人生若寄, 把生的意义寄托和归宿在人间, ‘于有限中寓无限’, ‘即入世而求超脱’。
29. 父子有親, 君臣有義, 夫婦有別, 長幼有序, 朋友有信。
30. Similar to many other aspects of classical Confucian ethics, filial piety represents a great potential for reevaluating and reconstructing some of the modern institutions and ideas. Erin Cline, for instance, states (Cline, 2013, p. 232) that the strong Confucian emphasis on the parent-children relationship has much to offer in improving, reinforcing, and further developing contemporary educational programs.
31. Paul D’Ambrosio writes (D’Ambrosio, 2016, p. 727) that ‘filial piety is an especially important virtue because it is founded in feelings that are natural for all humans. However, it is only a virtue once it has been cultivated and practiced. Other virtues are similarly grounded in natural emotions (including desires) and developed through practice.’

32. Confucian filial obligations mainly include the obligation to respect and obey one's parents, to support, emotionally as well as financially, one's aged parents, to carry on the family name, etc. (Q. Wang, 2016, p. 195).
33. In this context, Li states that the Confucian view of the origins and future of humankind are more universal than comparable views held by major world religions, because the latter often rely on a final day of judgement. Besides, they mostly regard their followers as chosen people. Confucianism instead looks at the workings of 'the Way' in everyday situations and relationships (Li, 2016, p. 1142).

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