

# *Confucius' Thoughts of Ren and Li and Chinese Diplomacy*

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**Abstract:** The thought of Confucius not only serves as the ideological foundation of Chinese civilization but also constitutes one of the important sources of thought for Chinese diplomacy. *Ren* (Benevolence) and *Li* (Rites) are the two core concepts of Confucius' thought. In the context of diplomacy, *Ren* means advocating peaceful co-existence among countries and building a community with a shared future for mankind; *Li* means abiding by international order and rules and attaching great importance to etiquette norms and etiquette in diplomatic activities. *Ren* lays a moral foundation for Chinese diplomacy, and *Li* provides a code of conduct for Chinese diplomacy, providing a guidance for promoting Chinese diplomacy.

## 1. Introduction

During the Spring and Autumn Period, especially in the late Warring States Period, the social norms collapsed, and Confucius dedicated his entire life to restoring the political and social order of the early Zhou Dynasty. In Chinese, *ren* connotes a mother being linked with her baby and the parental feelings between a mother and her baby which are full of kindness and love. Through behavior cultivation at the beginning of life with feelings for parents, the kindly feelings are extended to other intimate people and spread over all human beings as universal love. Confucius believed that *ren* (benevolence) formed by individuals through behavior cultivation could be extended to the relationship among people and countries, as illustrated by “love the populace extensively and be close to those who are humane” in *The Analects of Confucius*, that is, one should love all people and be close to the benevolent. If each individual and country can act accordingly, showing mutual respect, understanding and love, a harmonious and stable social order and international order will be built up. Meanwhile, a harmonious and stable social and international order require the regulation and restraint of rites. *Li* emphasizes social order and norms, that is, one's words and deeds should be subject to social norms, more importantly, one should restrain one's own selfish desires in order to see, listen, speak, and act within such norms. If each individual and country follows the rites and acts according to “restraining oneself and follow social norms”, that is, restraining one's words and deeds to comply with social norms, a fair, just, stable and harmonious social and international order will be established.[1]

*Ren* is the inner spirit of rites, and *li* is the manifestation of benevolence. *Ren* is the essence; *li* is the form. In other words, *ren* is a moral pursuit, and *li* is an external restraint. Just as stated in “In

practicing the rules of propriety, it is harmony that is prized”, the core of Confucius’ diplomatic thought and the highest goal he pursued is harmony, that is, peaceful co-existence and cooperation among individuals and countries. The principles of mutual respect, fairness, justice, and win-win cooperation advocated by China’s diplomacy are closely related to Confucius’ thoughts of *ren* and *li*.

## 2. The Embodiment and Significance of Ren in Promoting Chinese Diplomacy

*Ren*, the core of Confucian thought, profoundly influences China’s diplomatic philosophy. The essence of *ren* is “loving others”, which means to have kindly feelings towards everyone. It advocates for universal benevolence and the pursuit of virtue, which holds profound significance in guiding human interactions and societal development. The thought of *ren* has been reflected in all aspects of China’s diplomatic practices, as demonstrated by the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, the diplomatic principle of seeking common ground while reserving differences, the diplomatic criterion of peacefully resolving international disputes proposed by Premier Zhou Enlai since the founding of the People’s Republic of China. The current diplomatic measures of building a new international relation, building the Belt and Road Initiative, constructing a community with a shared future for mankind, and promoting the common values of all mankind for peaceful development put forward by General Secretary also embody Confucius’ thought with *ren* as the core and harmony as the goal.[2]

### (1) Advocating Peaceful Co-existence

Chinese diplomacy has always adhered to the concept of *ren*, respecting the sovereignty and independence of other countries, refraining from interfering in other countries’ internal affairs, and treating all countries in the world with friendliness and inclusiveness. Upholding Confucius’ thought of *ren*, China respects other countries and nations in the world, and is committed to building a community with a shared future for mankind. In interactions with neighboring countries, China adheres to the principles of amity and partnership with its neighbors, as well as the diplomatic policies of fostering an amicable, secure, and prosperous neighborhood.

In international affairs, China actively promotes the settlement of disputes through peaceful negotiations and opposes the use of threat or force. China has always adhered to promoting peace talks, striving to maintain regional and world peace and stability, which is a vivid manifestation of *ren* in diplomatic practice. China advocates peaceful co-existence among countries. From ancient times to the present, China has always adhered to the principle of respecting the sovereignty and independence of each country, a concept that permeates every stage of China’s diplomacy. For example, the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence put forward in the early days upon the founding of the nation, which is a direct manifestation of *ren* in China’s foreign policy. These five principles, emphasizing mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence, have laid a solid foundation for China to establish diplomatic relations with countries around the world. When dealing with international disputes, China actively practices the concept of *ren* and insists on resolving issues through peaceful negotiations. China has always advocated resolving differences through peaceful negotiations and consultations, avoiding the use of force and committing to maintaining regional peace and stability. China has played an active role in promoting peace talks, holding the multi-party talks on various occasions, and making unremitting efforts to promote and maintain regional peace and stability. China firmly opposes the use of threat or force and safeguards world peace.[3]

Upholding Confucius’ doctrine of benevolence and virtue, as demonstrated in his sayings, such as “Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself” “A man without moral

character cannot long put up with adversity, nor can he learn enjoy prosperity” “If people from afar do not submit, then cultivate morality and virtue to attract them” and “All within the four seas are brothers”, China adheres to peaceful development and peaceful rise. With a long-standing emphasis on harmony, benevolence, and righteousness, China has always advocated for peaceful co-existence among nations. This cultural heritage serves as the ideological foundation for China’s approach to development in the international arena. It firmly believes that all countries, regardless of their size or strength, should be treated equally, and disputes should be resolved through dialogue and negotiation rather than force. Confucius proposed that “Harmony is the great way of the world”, which not only reflects Confucius’ rejection of violence and war, showcases his diplomatic wisdom of advocating harmony without uniformity and seeking common ground while reserving differences, but also embodies his diplomatic thoughts of being kind to neighbors and practicing universal love and non-aggression. Different from some Western countries, China will not interfere in other countries’ internal affairs in spite of its strong military and economic strength, nor will it suppress, restrict, or sanction other countries to force them to accept its ideology and system. When talking about Chinese culture of harmony and the concept of harmonious co-existence, pointed out that “China does not subscribe to the theory that a strong country is bound to seek hegemony. There is no gene for seeking hegemony or engaging in military adventurism in the Chinese people’s blood.” China actively shares valuable experiences in areas such as Chinese-style modernization and poverty alleviation practices. For example, by organizing activities like African ambassadors’ visit to Yan’an to experience the path of China’s poverty alleviation, these countries can recognize China’s outstanding achievements through first-hand experiences, thus winning people over with benevolence and virtue. Benevolent governance and non-military, peaceful diplomatic activities not only benefit the development of other countries but also enhance China’s soft power and international influence.

## (2) Building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind

The saying “To love the populace extensively and be close to those who are humane” embodies a profound and far-reaching philosophy. Having kindly feelings towards everyone implies a boundless sense of compassion and benevolence. It transcends the boundaries of social status, wealth, race. When people embrace this principle, they are more likely to offer help and support to those in need, which promotes harmonious co-existence among people and encourages people to consider the well-being of the entire humanity. Only through this collective act of kindness can we address global issues such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation, and build a more harmonious, compassionate, and inclusive world.

The ideas of putting oneself in others’ shoes and being generous in helping others are highly consistent with the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind advocated by China. It emphasizes that while pursuing their own interests, countries should also pay attention to the common interests of all mankind and jointly address global challenges such as climate change, terrorism, and public health crises.

China actively participates in global governance. In recent years, China has vigorously promoted projects to improve people’s livelihoods in neighboring countries as well as in African countries. These projects cover various aspects including living facilities, transportation, healthcare, housing, and school buildings, effectively addressing the urgent livelihood issues of these countries. China has also shared its valuable experience in poverty alleviation and agricultural development through overseas agricultural demonstration centers, helping local farmers out of poverty and become prosperous. Meanwhile, China provides substantial assistance to developing countries and regions in need, effectively maintaining world peace and stability. Over the past decade, China has provided more than a thousand emergency humanitarian relief operations to over 70 countries. China’s actions in providing humanitarian relief during the Israel-Palestine conflict, all-round rescue efforts

after the major earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, and assistance during the severe floods in Pakistan, have demonstrated China's bearing as a responsible powerful country. In public health crises, China provided medical supplies assistance and shared experience with other countries, practicing the concept of *ren*, and contributing to the building of a community with a shared future for mankind. In response to the global challenge of climate change, China has actively assumed its responsibility as a major country, proactively put forward the goals of carbon peak and carbon neutrality, increased investment in renewable energy, and promoted energy transformation. At the same time, China shares green technologies and experiences with countries along the Belt and Road, helping developing countries improve their capacity to address the problem of climate change. In addition, China participates and plays an active role in international counter-terrorism cooperation, contributing to maintaining regional and world peace and security. By actively practicing the idea of a community with a shared future for mankind, China contributes Chinese wisdom and strength to global governance.

Upholding Confucius' broad-mindedness and the idea of common prosperity as expressed in "He who can extensively benefit the people relieves the masses" and "The man of benevolence, when he wishes to establish himself, also helps others to establish themselves; when he wishes to achieve success, he also helps others to achieve success", China facilitates the establishment and development of other countries, while striving for its own development. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a case in point. Aiming to strengthen infrastructure, trade, and cultural exchanges among countries along the routes, the BRI has brought huge benefits to participating countries. It has created numerous job opportunities, improved infrastructure, spurred economic development and contributed to the local economic take-off. The year 2023 marks the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative. Over the past decade, China has vigorously promoted the high-quality development of the Belt and Road Initiative, opening up new space for world economic growth, building new platforms for international trade and investment, expanding new practices for improving global economic governance, and improving the well-being of people in various countries. As of June 2023, China has signed more than 200 cooperation documents with 152 countries and 32 international organizations under the Belt and Road Initiative.

### 3. The Embodiment and Significance of *Li* in Promoting Chinese Diplomacy

Confucius' thought of *li* encompasses a wide range of elements, including etiquette, traditional practices, social norms, and behavioral standards. It serves as a criterion and yardstick for measuring people's thoughts and actions, transforming moral and social norms into specific behavioral standards. Confucius' ideology of *li* indicates that individuals have to restrain and regulate their own behaviors according to these norms. In international relations, *li* implies that communication and interaction between countries should be guided by proprieties and norms. Confucius believes that *li* can ensure the orderliness of diplomatic relation. In ancient times, the proper observance of *li* helped to unite vassal states and coordinate relations between different states. In modern international relations, the application of *li* can contribute to building a harmonious and stable international environment. Following proper diplomatic etiquette and norms can show respect for the other party, reduce misunderstandings, promote the smooth progress of negotiations, and maintain international order in diplomatic negotiations.

#### (1) Abiding by International Order and Rules

China respects and abides by the international order and rules based on the Charter of the United Nations and international law. China actively participates in the formulation and improvement of international rules, promotes the development of multilateralism, and safeguards the fairness and justice of the international order through the active role it plays in international organizations such

as the World Trade Organization and the World Health Organization.

China has always firmly supported the United Nations in playing a central role in international affairs and actively participated in various tasks such as UN peacekeeping operations and humanitarian relief. In terms of international rule-making, China actively participates in the reform negotiations of the World Trade Organization, promoting the development of the multilateral trading system towards a more fair, reasonable, and inclusive direction. At the same time, China is also playing an increasingly important role in fields such as international maritime law and outer space law, contributing Chinese solutions to maintaining the fairness and justice of the international order. Within the framework of the World Health Organization, China actively participates in global public health governance.

Upholding Confucius' concepts of "Restraining oneself and practice propriety" and "do not speak or act contrary to the rites", Chinese diplomacy abides by international law and safeguards a fair and just international order, offering Chinese wisdom and solutions for the construction of the international order and cooperation mechanisms. The concept of "Restraining oneself and practicing propriety" has significantly shaped China's diplomatic philosophy and practices. "Do not speak or act contrary to the rites" further emphasizes the importance of conforming words and deeds to the standards of propriety. It means that a country should be self-restraint in its actions and policies, and adhere to established norms. Relying on their strong national strength, some countries disregard international law and practice political, military, economic, technological, and cultural hegemony in international community. China practices Confucius' thought of *li*, actively constructing a harmonious and orderly international social order, and demonstrating its image as a responsible powerful country, as stated in *The Analects of Confucius* "The function of *li* is to maintain harmony among people". For instance, China has always advocated for peaceful negotiations based on historical facts and international law, rather than resorting to force in territorial disputes.

In the past decade, China has helped 40 million people in underdeveloped countries and regions out of poverty through measures such as aid and relief projects, construction of economic and trade zones, and training projects. In regional conflict crises, China always adheres to an objective and fair stance, persists in promoting peace talks, ensures equal participation of all parties, and makes every effort to reach a fair and just peaceful solution. It can be seen that the diplomatic policy advocated by China is non-military and peaceful. In diplomatic dialogues, Chinese representatives choose their words carefully, avoiding any remarks that might be disrespectful or offensive. However, when facing provocations from other countries, China stands firm to any deliberate provocations.

## (2) Paying Attention to Diplomatic Etiquette and Cultural Exchanges

*Li* is also reflected in diplomatic etiquette and cultural exchanges, following international etiquette norms in diplomatic occasions and demonstrating the demeanor and bearing of a powerful nation. China attaches great importance to etiquette norms in diplomatic activities, paying attention to details and respecting the cultural customs of other countries, conforms to the highest standards of diplomatic etiquette and interacting with other countries friendly, which is in line with "Do not speak or act contrary to the rites".

At the same time, through cultural exchanges, China spreads its excellent traditional culture, promotes mutual understanding and respect among different cultures through various activities, such as Chinese overseas cultural promotion activities, Confucius Institutes, which carry out cultural activities and academic exchanges in various fields, thus promoting cultural exchanges, cooperation and understanding among cultures. These activities enable the world to have a better understanding of China, promote mutual understanding and respect among different cultures and lay a good foundation for the development of diplomatic relations.

In bilateral diplomatic relations, China shows respect for the unique cultures, political systems,

and development paths of other countries. When conducting exchanges and cooperation, China follows diplomatic etiquette and norms. For instance, during state visits, China arranges activities meticulously, demonstrating respect for the visiting country. In economic cooperation, China does not impose its will on partner countries but engages in win-win cooperation based on equality and mutual benefit. This approach reflects China's self-restraint and its commitment to practicing propriety in international relation. In multilateral diplomacy, China actively participates in international organizations and cooperation mechanisms while abiding by their rules and regulations. China is a responsible permanent member in the United Nations, fulfilling its obligations and contributing to global peace and development. In international trade negotiations, China adheres to the principles of free and fair trade, respects the rights and interests of all members, and does not engage in unfair trade practices. This shows that China restrains itself from disrupting the international order but practices *li* by promoting the smooth progress of negotiations, and maintaining international order. In global governance, China's initiatives also reflect the concept of "Restraining oneself and practicing propriety." The Belt and Road Initiative adheres to the principles of extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits. China respects the sovereignty and development choices of the countries along the routes. During the implementation of BRI projects, Chinese enterprises strictly abide by local laws, regulations, and environmental protection requirements. China's peaceful rise, guided by the concept of *li*, has brought positive changes to the international community. As China continues to develop, it will further uphold international fairness and justice, promote multilateral cooperation, demonstrating this traditional wisdom in the international diplomatic stage.

#### 4. Conclusion

*Ren* lays a moral foundation for Chinese diplomacy, enabling Chinese diplomacy to uphold values of justice and kindness, and *li* provides a code of conduct for Chinese diplomacy, ensuring that China's actions comply with norms and order on the international stage. The two complement each other and jointly shape the unique charm of Chinese diplomacy. With Confucius' Thoughts of *Ren* and *Li* as a guidance for China's diplomacy, China has successfully resolved many international conflicts through peaceful negotiations and consultations, playing a constructive role in maintaining world peace and stability in international disputes, which has won China extensive respect and recognition on the international stage. It also promotes cooperation and exchanges among countries, and contributes to the building of a more fair, just, and inclusive international order. In future diplomatic practices, China will continue to uphold the concepts of *ren* and *li* and make greater contributions to world peace and development.

Confucius' thoughts of *ren* and *li* are the origin of China's commitment to the path of peaceful development and lay the ideological foundation for Chinese diplomacy. Confucius advocated that "being diligent brings achievements." At a critical time when the world is undergoing profound changes, based on China's excellent traditional culture, General Secretary has put forward a series of diplomatic policies, such as building a community with a shared future for mankind, building the Belt and Road Initiative, promoting the building of the new international relations, constructing a global partnership network, and advocating a vision of global governance featuring extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits. The world has witnessed the spirit and endeavor of a responsible powerful country as it makes friends around the world and advances along the great path of mutual development.

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