

Confucian Ideas in the Chinese Mind Underlying Moral Decision Making

ÇİN DÜŞÜNÇESİNDE ETİK KARAR VERME SÜRECİNİN ALTINDA YATAN KONFİÇYUS ÖĞRETİSİ

Baoqi SU*

* Ph. D. Candidate, Graduate School of Integrative Environmental Sciences, University of Tsukuba
Institute of Biological Sciences, University of Tsukuba, Tsukuba Science City 305-8572, JAPAN

Summary

The traditional Confucian culture has been considered to be representative of Chinese culture, and it has directed social, educational, and moral actions in Chinese society for more than two thousand years. The ancient Chinese medical ethics was also established on the foundation of Confucian ethics. This paper starts with examining Confucian ideas of "a moral person", which is expressed of a *Junzi* (the moral person or the superior man).

The Confucian conception of "person" is important to understanding the way people resolve moral dilemmas of practical medical issues in contemporary Chinese society. Some of the important implications, such as the moral status of the fetus, abortion, death, physician-patient-family relationships, and finally "medicine as an art of humaneness" are given as examples in the second part of this paper.

This paper concludes that Confucian views in facing new bioethics issues brought about by recent advances in medicine could be seen as offering important contributions to the ongoing development of Chinese society. The Confucian thoughts should not be ignored even though the solutions of contemporary China's bioethics dilemmas cannot be found only in the historical dimension, because they are fundamental constructs to what we might call the "Chinese mind".

Key Words: Confucian ideas, Mind, Genetics, Bioethics, China

T Klin J Med Ethics, Law and History 2004, 12:98-103

Özet

Çin toplumunu sosyal, eğitimsel ve ahlaki açıdan iki bin yıldan daha fazladır idare eden Konfüçyus kültürünün Çin kültürünü temsil ettiğine inanılır. Kadim Çin Tıp etiği de Konfüçyus etiği temelinde kurulmuştur. Bu makale başlangıçta Konfüçyus'un anlayışına göre 'ahlaklı birey' *Junzi* (üstün insan)'ı tartışmaktadır.

Konfüçyus'un 'birey' anlayışını kavramak günümüz Çin toplumunda tıp etiğinin pratik sorunlarının nasıl çözümlendiğinin anlaşılması açısından önemlidir. Makalenin ikinci kısmında fetusun ahlaki statüsü, kürtaj, ölüm, hekim-hasta-aile ilişkisi ve 'insanlık sanatı olarak tıp' ele alınmaktadır.

Makale son olarak Konfüçyus'un görüşlerinin, yeni karşılaşılan biyoetik ikilemlere sunduğu önemli katkılarla Çin toplumunun gelişimini nasıl olumlu etkileyeceğini göstermektedir. Günümüz Çin biyoetiğinde karşılaşılan her ikilemin tek çözümü olmasa da, Çin düşüncesini temsil eden Konfüçyus öğretisi ihmal edilmemelidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Konfüçyus düşüncesi, Akıl, Genetik, Biyoetik, Çin

T Klin Tıp Etiği-Hukuku-Tarihi 2004, 12:98-103

The traditional Confucian culture has had deep impact on the shaping and development of the ideas of the Chinese people. In this paper I would like to share a few thoughts about Confucian views in facing modern bioethical debates.

Confucian ideas of "Persons"

Mencius' (Meng Zi) idea of a moral person, is precisely the mind which cannot bear to see the

sufferings of others. As Mencius argued as follows:

"When I say that all men have the mind which cannot bear to see the suffering of others, my meaning may be illustrated thus: Now, when men suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, they all have a feeling of alarm and distress, not to gain friendship with the child's parents, nor to seek the praise of their neighbors and friends, nor because

they dislike to the reputation of lack of humanity if they did not rescue the child. From such a case, we see that a man without the feeling of commiseration is not a man; a man without the feeling of shame and dislike is not a man; a man without the feeling of deference and compliance is not a man; and a man without the feeling of right and wrong is not a man. The feeling of commiseration is the beginning of humanity (*ren*); the feeling of shame and dislike is the beginning of righteousness (*yi*); the feeling of deference and compliance is the beginning of propriety (*li*); and feeling of right and wrong is the beginning of wisdom (*zhi*)..." (1)

According to Mencius, people with capacities of humanity (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), propriety (*li*), and wisdom (*zhi*) are regarded as a virtuous person.

As Dr. Tsai has argued in his paper "The Two-Dimensional Concept of Confucian Personhood in Biomedical Practice" (2), Confucius (Kong Zi)' concept of a moral ideal person is expressed as a *Junzi* (the moral person or the superior man). A *Junzi* in Confucian ethics is the person of high moral achievement who constantly tries to improve and cultivate himself to attain various stages of perfection. He is a man of humaneness (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*); he pursues harmony and unity with the universal moral order, the *Dao* (the Way). *Junzi* is well qualified to be an autonomous person, a true moral agent who is self-activated, self-determined, self-reliant, and is constantly improving himself via moral self-cultivation. Besides being an autonomous person, *Junzi* has another important feature as emphasized in Confucian ethics in relational perspectives. A Confucian person is socially situated, defined, and shaped in a relational context where he must achieve humaneness (*ren*) through interaction with other particular individuals. No one can be fully human without playing roles in the interaction with one's fellow persons.

To examine Confucian ideas of "persons" is the key to many moral dilemmas of practical medical issues in contemporary China. Some of the important implications, such as the moral status of the fetus, abortion, healthy birth and eugenics, physi-

cian-patient-family relationships and other issues, including death and euthanasia, reproductive technology and genetics. Let us examine a few in order to illustrate ideas that would be important to include in the construction of the mental map (3).

Moral Status of Fetus And Healthy Birth

The person often considered to be the third greatest Confucian, Xun Zi said: "birth is the beginning of a person, and death is the end of a person. If one has a good birth and a good death, then he fulfills the *Dao* of mankind (Xun Zi)." Since then, this idea has become a conventional Chinese idea. The human fetus has value, but it has not been treated as a person (4). A zygote, an embryo or an early fetus will not be regarded as an independent person in that it presents no sign of any personal behavior before it is born (5). A person is an entity that has body or shape and psyche, and has rational, emotional and social-relational capacity. Thus Confucianism accepts early abortion with some conditions and it is not considered as killing a person. Traditionally, the mourning period of a person's death continued for several weeks, but a dead fetus was never officially mourned. When an abortion took place, the Chinese philosophy would not say that a person died. However, human embryo is not merely stuff, which has potential to become a person. Stem cell research is permissible under very strict conditions presently in China.

As to the phrase "good birth and good death", it can be interpreted a person should have a healthy birth and a peaceful death. The Chinese word "*Yousheng*" (which is sometimes translated into the English word of "Eugenics") has an original meaning as "good birth" or "healthy birth" without any intention of the tragic history of eugenics in the earlier twentieth century. Infanticide or abandonment of newborns has happened in China, however, it may not be of wide extent. It was due to various reasons. In traditional Chinese culture, a child usually ranks at a higher level, and is regarded as having more value because it is a future person. As a matter of fact, we always save a child first if we could not save both an adult and the child.

A Human Being is a Part of a Family and Community

Confucian ideas are very much concerned about human relationships. A person is a relational person, who cannot survive without support from others. A person is only a drop in the sea, without this drop of water the sea will still exist. It is a quite a different concept of person to the modern idealized Western independent person. The social interest is more important than individual interests, and when they conflict, the latter should be given priority. That is why, in some issues, the Chinese people always give priority to family, community and society. For example, Chinese people understand and support the one-child family law, although most of them desire to have at least one boy and one girl.

From the Confucian point of view, this is how we could understand the physician-patient-family relationship in the Chinese society. The family has responsibility to take care of sick members, and on the basis of respect of the patient's will, traditional Confucian culture takes all the opinions of the patient's families into account. The family is the basic unit of traditional Chinese society. In actual practice, physicians frequently inform the families rather than the patient about a serious disease. They consult the families in order to establish a plan for treatment (6). This stands in contrast with some other countries where the patient's individual autonomy is more highly respected. However, family values and the common good may cause the patient to reconcile their right of autonomous decision-making to the preferential choice of the family or society (2). Informed consent is not given by individual patient, but by the family. For example, the decision of donating organs after death by a person may be against by their family. The extremes of totally ignoring the family views are not seen in any culture.

Death Is A Taboo in Chinese Mind

Many countries in the world have admitted the concept of brain death, organ donation from dead bodies, and even euthanasia has become legitimate in several countries. However, Chinese people are reluctant to accept these, probably because of the

influence of Chinese traditional culture. Confucian ethics puts greater emphasis on the doctor's duty to help people. Saving life is regarded as the highest virtue. In a Confucian culture, life is the most precious good whereas death should be avoided. This tradition is expressed in the concepts of "Five Blessings" and "Six Disasters" in the *Shangshu's* chapter "Magnificent Norms", where life is cherished and death is detested. The *Five Blessings* are longevity, happiness, health, virtuous living and life unto and old age; the *Six Disasters* are dying young, disease, worries, poverty, evilness and weakness (6). In tradition, it was also connected with the understanding of life and death as mysterious and holy destiny. *The Lunyu Yanyuan (Analects of Confucius: On Yan Yuan)* wrote that "Death and life belong to destiny, and wealth and rank are determined by fate". Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism all consider that life and death are destined by fate and reflect the Will of Heaven and cannot be changed by human power (7). Therefore, everyone should fulfill his life from birth to death naturally.

The main Confucian idea is that body, hair, and skin are received from the parents, and life is owed to the parents, so one should keep the body integrated even after death. That is why people hesitate to donate organs in China, though it is difficult to compare the attitudes to people in other countries given the difference in life quality and health insurance. However, the Confucian idea of death has a deep impression on Chinese mind. Death is unwanted and no action that helps someone to die is regarded as a virtuous action. Hence generally Chinese have a negative attitude against euthanasia of their elderly relatives. This is contrary to a popular idea in Western medical ethics, to respect patient's autonomy as the most important and fundamental principle. Hence physicians in medical practice have to respect the patient's decision, even if they believe that the decision is against the patient's health or life.

Ideas of Health, Genetic Diseases in Cultural Context

Chinese traditional medicine does not use the word "jiankang" (health). *The Huangdi neijing*

(*The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*) defined health as the unification of the counter-position as *Yin* and *Yang* (According to ancient Chinese medicine, *Yin* and *Yang* are the two opposing principles of nature, the former being feminine and negative, and the latter being masculine and positive) (8). *The Huangdi Neijing* considered that health is the balance of *Yin* and *Yang*. Excess or deficiency of *Yin* or *Yang* will cause illness.

Genetic diseases can due to the imbalance between *Yin* and *Yang* too. The lives of disabled persons in society can be miserable, due to all kinds of reasons. Confucian ideas of treatment of genetic diseases can be one demonstration of the contribution to the current moral dilemmas in medical ethics. We will see that the practice of medical genetics has been greatly affected by traditional Chinese culture. The Confucian principle for dealing with the ethical issues of biotechnology is *Dao*. *Dao*, in Chinese philosophy exists everywhere in everything and dominates the exercise and functioning of all things in the universe (9). A moral person practices the *Dao*, not only to develop their own nature, but also to help others, as well as all things on earth, to fulfill their nature (10). This aspect of morality is expressed in *the Zhongyong (The Doctrine of Mean)* as follow:

“Only those who are absolutely sincere can fully develop their nature. If they can fully develop their nature, they can fully develop the nature of others. If they can fully develop the nature of others, they can fully develop the nature of things. If they can fully develop the nature of things, they can then assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth. If they can assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can thus form a trinity with Heaven and Earth” (1).

The Confucian mind regards biotechnology as an act of great virtue to help people who suffer from diseases. There are numerous natural defects that need the help of human beings to improve (11). Traditionally Chinese people are very enthusiastic with science and technology. However, one should not abuse the employment of genetic tech-

nology, such as using it for sex selection, or as an aid to eugenics and raising discrimination to individual according to his or her genetic information.

Confucian Ethics is “Virtue Ethics”

Confucian ethics as well as traditional medical ethics are mainly “virtue ethics”. It is well known that medicine is regarded in Confucian culture as “an art of humaneness (*yi ben ren shu*)”. *Ren* (humaneness) means loving people, caring for people, and doing good to people. A Chinese adage says: “if you could not become a prime minister, then become a doctor.” The responsibility of a physician is the same as a prime minister to practice *ren*. The Confucians emphasize cultivating the virtue of doctors themselves is more important than norms or ethical standards (4).

The famous Tang dynasty physician Sun Simiao says: “If a patient requests help, one may not consider whether he is rich or poor, superior or inferior, old or young, beautiful or ugly, a Chinese or a barbarian, dumb or intelligent, all patients must be regarded in the same manner, as they were the closet of kin.” Physicians should be dedicated to helping others. And he also indicated that the doctors should be indifferent towards wealth. As he wrote in his book (*The Essence of Great Medicine*): “Essential prescriptions worth a thousand gold prices”, “Physicians may not use their skills for commerce” (12). He also regarded the life of animals is the same as human's, so he argued against using animal components as medication. I assume that is why Chinese herbal medicine welcomed by the people from the world today apart from its other merits.

According to a fundamental moral norm “*Xiao*” (filial piety), it is a rule to have boys to take the family line, and a child to taste a poison and a medication on behalf of his parents. A cancer patient or a terminally ill patient (although he or she is a competent and rational person) is not told the real disease by doctors or their children until death. As to Confucian rule of etiquette, Meng Zi said in giving and receiving, men and women should not touch each other (*nan nu shou shou bu qin*). But if one's sister-in-law is drowning, he should give a hand to her (13).

Conclusions

The basic Confucian idea is *ren*, which means “loving people”. The golden rule is: “What you do not wish for yourself do not do to others”, and “After establishing yourself, you should help others to establish themselves; after you develop yourself, you should help others to develop themselves” (The *Lunyu*, *The Analects of Confucius*). This is consistent with the Western principle of “good”: “To do to others only what you wish others to do to you”. From the origin of morality in China, the moral principles of *ren* (humaneness), *yi* (righteousness), *li* (propriety) and *zhi* (wisdom) are key ideas for the mental map. People with such a moral character are regarded as virtuous persons. This is in harmony with the Western principles of autonomy, justice, do no harm and beneficence, as Darryl Macer expresses as various forms of love, self-love, love of others, loving life and loving good. They are both major guiding principles for our common lives and they both share a common idea of *ren* and *ai* (humaneness and love). We could see the idea of love of others in traditional Confucianism and today, as well as in other cultures.

Confucianism has long been a representative of traditional Chinese thoughts and it has directed social, political, educational, and moral actions in Chinese society for more than two thousand years. The ancient Chinese medical ethics was also established on the foundation of Confucian ethics (9). The traditional Confucian culture has impacted deeply on the development of the ideas of the Chinese mind. Confucian views in facing new bioethics issues brought about by recent advances in medicine could be seen as offering important contributions to the ongoing development of Chinese society. The Confucian thoughts should not be ignored even though the solutions of contemporary China’s bioethics dilemmas cannot be found only in the historical dimension, because they are fundamental constructs to what we might call the “Chinese mind”.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Professor Darryl Macer and the colleagues participating in the Eighth International Tsukuba Bioethics Roundtable: Proposal for an Integrative Human Idea Map and the Methodology of Cross-Cultural and Multidisciplinary Bioethics for their comments on the earlier draft of this paper.

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Geliş Tarihi: 02.04.2004

Yazışma Adresi: Baoqi SU

Graduate School of Integrative
Environmental Sciences,
University of Tsukuba
Institute of Biological Sciences,
University of Tsukuba,
Tsukuba Science City 305-8572, JAPAN
subaoqi2005@sina.com