A CONFUCIAN ADAGE FOR LIFE: 
EMPATHY (SHU) IN THE ANALECTS 

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In Chinese literature the *locus classicus* of what in the West has been called “the golden rule” is a passage from the *Lunyu* (Analects)\(^1\) in which Zigong 子貢, one of Confucius’ favourite disciples asks his Master about a principle that can guide man’s behaviour:

Zigong asked: “Is there an adage that can guide us throughout our life?”

The Master said: “It is shu! What you don’t want done to yourself, do not do to others.”\(^2\)

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\(^1\) Considered the main source of the Master’s teachings, for more than two thousand years, the *Analects* have been an essential focal point in the philosophical and political discourse concerning ancient, modern and contemporary China. Several sections were written after Confucius’ death, while about half the text, and in particular the last of the twenty books comprising it, date to a later period. It originally circulated in a fluid form consisting of scattered heterogeneous collections of conversations, aphorisms and anecdotes that, in all likelihood, around the mid 3rd c. B.C., were drawn up in several versions of the work. Side by side with the vulgate, the earliest exemplary manuscript of the work is the text discovered in 1973 in the tomb of Liu Xiu 劉修 of Zhongshan 中山, who died in the year 55 B.C. at Dingzhou 定州 (in Hebei province). A total of 7576 characters of this manuscript have been identified – about half the text passed down. On the origin and textual narrative of the *Lunyu* passed down and of the Dingzhou manuscript, see, for instance, D.C. Lau (transl.), *Confucius: The Analects (Lun yû)* (Hong Kong 1983), pp. 262-74; Anne Cheng, “*Lun yû,*” in Michael Loewe (ed.), *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley 1993), pp. 313-323; Ernst Bruce Brooks – A. Taeko Brooks, *The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors* (New York 1998), pp. 1, 201-256; Roger T. Ames – Henry Rosemont (eds.), *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York 1998), pp. 7-10; Hebei sheng wenwu yanjiusuo Dingzhou Han mu zhujuan zhengli xiaozu 定州漢墓竹簡整理小組, *Dingzhou Han mu zhujuan Lunyu* 定州漢墓竹簡論語 (Beijing 1997).

\(^2\) 子貢問曰：「有一言而可以終身行之者？」子曰：「其恕乎！己所不欲，勿施於人。」 *Lunyu* XV, 24. The “golden rule” theme in Chinese tradition has been the subject of numerous comprehensive debates over the past few decades. The most important studies in this regard include: Fung Yu-lan [Feng Youlan], *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York 1948), pp. 42-44; Herbert Fingarette, “Following
In the sentence “What you don’t want done to yourself, do not do to others” (ji suo bu yu, wu shi yu ren 己所不欲, 勿施於人) Confucius defined shu 恕, a character variably translated as “reciprocity,” “consideration of others” or “do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” Shu is one of the most widely debated and controversial assertions of Confucian ethics, not only because of the alleged analogy with the biblical “golden rule,” but also because of its semantic richness, as we discover from reading the Analects and other Confucian writings. Confucius perceived in shu a basic requirement for anyone setting out to lead a virtuous life, in conformity with the mores of the sages of ancient times, as inherited and elaborated by Confucius and his followers.

Shu recurs again in Lunyu IV,15, where it imposes itself with greater force and incisiveness, together with another key concept of Confucian ethics, zhong 忠, which contributes to defining the semantic area of both terms. This time, it is the Master who leads off with a statement and one of his disciples, Zengzi 曾子, who offers a plausible interpretation of his laconic statements:


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The Master said: “Shen! In my Way there is one thread binding all together.” Zengzi said: “Indeed!” When the Master had left, the disciples asked: “What did he mean?” Zengzi [Shen] replied: “The Master’s Way consists of zhong and shu and that’s all.”

Zengzi, here interpreter of the Master’s teachings, explains shu, which according to Confucius means “what you don’t want done to yourself, do not do to others,” and zhong as the unique and indispensable path along the Way (dao). Shu and zhong are inextricably interwoven, aimed at a virtuous and exemplary modus vivendi that only a gentleman (junzi) is able to achieve.

Ernst Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks maintain that Lunyu IV,15 is a later interpolation, subsequent to the rest of Book IV, one of the oldest in the work. Sharing this hypothesis, in a very intriguing article Bryan Van Norden, who ascribes Lunyu IV,15 to Zengzi’s followers, has argued that the terminus a quo for the interpolation would be Zengzi’s death in 436 BC.

He does not deny that the claim expressed in the passage, that is that zhong and shu constitute the “one thread” that binds together Confucius’ teaching, may be true but, according to him, the assertion that zhong and shu were two cardinal virtues promoted by Confucius as suggested in Lunyu IV,15 is not supported by the rest of the Analects. 5

Zhong versus shu

In order to fully understand Zengzi’s assertion it is advisable to examine the semantic variability of shu and zhong in other passages in the Analects by comparing them with several occurrences of the two terms in other texts of the Confucian tradition. Commenting the practices of zhong and shu, the Zhongyong 中庸 (On the practice of the mean), traditionally ascribed to Zisi 子思, Confucius’ grandson and Zengzi’s disciple, reads:

One who is zhong and shu will never stray from the Way. What he does not wish done to him he does not do unto others. The way of the true gentleman involves four things, and I, Qiu (Confucius), have so far been incapable of any of them. In serving my father, I have been incapable of doing what is expected of a son; in serving my lord, I have been incapable of doing what is expected of a minister; in serving my older brother, I have been incapable of doing what is expected of a younger brother; in

4 子曰:「參乎! 吾道一以貫之。」曾子曰:「唯!」子出, 門人問曰:「何謂也?」 曾子曰:「夫子之道, 思而不已矣。」Lunyu IV,15.
Commenting on *Lunyu* IV,15, Huang Kan 皇侃 (488–545) interpreted zhong 忠 as *jin zhong xin ye* 尽中心也 (to fully focus on one’s heart-and-mind) and shu 恕 as *cun wo yi duo wu ye* 忿我以度於人也 (to ponder on oneself in order to measure the others). According to this interpretation, starting from oneself is the only way to analyse and understand the others, and, in the words of Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249), zhong 是 *qing zhi jin ye* 情之盡也 (to fully realize one’s feelings/emotions), while shu 是 *fan qing yi tong wu ye* 反情以同物也 (to reflect on one’s feelings/emotions in order to have sympathy with other beings). Xing Bing 邢昺 (931–1010), following Huang Kan, explained zhong 为 *jin zhong xin ye* 尽中心也 (to fully focus on one’s heart-and-mind) and shu 为 *cun ji duo wu ye* 忿己度物也 (pondering on oneself to measure other beings).

Moving from the etymology of zhong 忠, which is composed of two words, zhong 中 (center) and xin 心 (heart-and-mind), Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) explained its meaning with the locution *jinji* 尽己 (to fully exert oneself, to do the utmost), or *jiejin* 竭盡 (to do one’s best, to exhaust oneself). He explained shu 恕, composed of the words ru 如 (to follow) and xin 心 (heart-and-mind) as *tuiji* 推己 (to extend oneself), in the sense of to be empathetic towards others. He quoted a commentary and then Master Cheng’s 程 (one of the Cheng brothers) interpretation:

Someone said: “To focus on the heart-and-mind corresponds to zhong, to follow the heart-and-mind corresponds to shu.” This indeed captures the meaning. Master Cheng said: “Moving from oneself to approach other creatures is *ren* 仁 (benevolence, humanity). Extending oneself to other

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7 Huang Kan 皇侃, *Lunyu jiye yishu* 論語集解義疏 (Taipei 1968), ch. 4, pp. 31-32; see also E. Slingerland, *Confucius. Analects. With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis – Cambridge 2003), p. 34.

8 *Lunyu zhushu* 論語注疏, in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (Taipei 1989), vol. 8, chap. 4, p. 4.

creatures is shu (empathy). This means being ‘not far from the Way’.

As in the Analects, so in the Zhongyong, the two virtues are linked. It is worth dwelling first on the assertion zhong shu wei dao bu yuan 忠恕違道不遠 (One who is zhong and shu will never stray from the Way): this sentence echoes what was declared in Lunyu IV, 15, wu dao yi yi guan zhi 吾道一以貫之 (in my Way there is one thread binding all together), namely, in the interpretation by Zengzi, “the Master’s Way consists of zhong and shu.” It is clear how zhong and shu are two essential conditions regarding the conduct of the gentleman and, however humble Confucius is in admitting he has not yet achieved them, he is nevertheless wholly projected towards them in the desire to attain an exemplary conduct.

But what exactly is meant by zhong, and what implications does it have when related to shu? According to Xu Shen 許慎 (ca. 55–149), the author of the first systematic dictionary of Chinese characters, Shuowen jiezi 說文解字, the meaning of zhong 忠 is jing 敬 (respect, reverence) and he adds: jin xin wei zhong 盡心為忠 (to give full realization to one’s heart-and-mind is what is meant by zhong). This amounts to saying that he who is zhong shows reverence as he performs his tasks with absolute devotion, dedicating the whole of himself. Shu 恕 is instead generically defined by Xu Shen as ren 仁 (benevolence, humanity), while Mengzi 孟子 (fourth cent. B.C.) is more precise, claiming that it is something close to benevolence, that is a virtue that must be strengthened in order to attain benevolence.

Whoever wrote Lunyu IV, 12 and Zhongyong, XIV – according to tradition, Zengzi or his followers in one case, Zisi or his followers in the other –

10  "…或曰：『中心為忠, 如心為恕。』於義亦通。程子曰：『以己及物, 仁也; 推己及物, 恕也。違道不遠是也。』 Zhe Xi, Sishu zhangju jizhu, p. 72. See also Daniel K. Gardner, Zhu Xi’s Reading of the Analects. Canon, Commentary, and the Classical Tradition (New York 2003), pp. 158-159.


12  "…或曰：「盡其心者, 知其性, 則知天矣。」 For a man to give full realization to his heart-and-mind is for him to understand his own nature, and to understand his own nature is to understand Heaven.” See also D.C. Lau, Mencius (Hong Kong 1979, repr. 1984), p. 265 and Bryan W. Van Norden (transl.), Menczi. With Selections from Traditional Commentaries (Indianapolis – Cambridge 2008), p. 171.

13  "強恕而行, 求仁莫近焉。 “Strengthen your empathy and you will find that this is the shortest way to benevolence.” Menczi VIIA, 4.
it cannot be denied that these texts emphasize a close and essential relation between zhong and shu.

The primary meaning of zhong is loyalty, a cardinal ethical norm in Chinese political culture during the Chunqiu (770–453 BC) and Zhanguo (453–221 BC) periods. Officials and ministers were urged to preserve zhong even at the expense of their lives, since without loyal ministers the state would perish. In an illuminating essay, Yuri Pines has analyzed the implications of the concept of zhong in the manuscript texts found in the tomb of a high-ranking mid-Zhanguo official at the site of Guodian, in Hubei province, in particular the bamboo slips that contain miscellaneous sayings known as Yucong 談叢 (Collected Sayings), Lu Mugong wen Zisi 魯穆公問子思 (Duke Mu of Lu asks Zisi) and Zhongxin zhi dao 忠信之道 (The Way of loyalty and truthfulness). In Zhongxin zhi dao it is stated that zhong, ren zhi shi ye 忠, 仁之實也 (loyalty is the essence of benevolence), which denotes the centrality of zhong in this text. From the Guodian texts, we may infer a dichotomy between blood ties and ruler-minister ties, in which family ties are favoured over political obligations. Moreover, the ruler-minister relations, as Yuri Pines remarks, are explained in reciprocal, egalitarian terms, rather than hierarchical terms. This has shed a new light on our understanding of zhong: a minister should be loyal to his ruler in the sense that he will preserve the paramount position of a ruler as the single source of political authority without renouncing his freedom to leave him if his behaviour is improper. In fact, in Yucong 1 we read that jun chen, peng you, qi ze zhe 君臣, 朋友, 其擇者 (ruler and minister are like friends: they select each other). And in Yucong it is stated that if the ruler and minister are unable to stay together, their relation can be interrupted:

A father is not hated. The ruler is like a father: he is not hated. He is like a flag for the three armies - he [represents] correctness. Yet, he differs from the father: when ruler and minister are unable to stay together, you can sever [these relations]; when you dislike [the ruler], you may leave

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14 For an exhaustive analysis of the concept of zhong in the political sphere of pre-imperial China, also in the light of the analysis of recently acquired manuscripts, see Yuri Pines, “Friends or Foes. Changing Concepts of Ruler-Minister Relations and the Notion of Loyalty in Pre-Imperial China,” Monumenta Serica 50 (2002), pp. 35-74.

15 Zhongxin zhi dao, slip 8; Jingmen shi bowuguan bian 荊門市博物館編 (ed.), Guodian Chu mu zhujian 郭店楚墓竹簡 (Beijing 1998), p. 163; see also Li Ling 李零, Guodian Chu jian jiao duji 郭店楚簡校讀記 (Beijing 2002), p. 100.

16 Yucong 1, slip 87; Jingmen shi bowuguan bian, Guodian Chu mu zhujian, p. 197; Li Ling, Guodian, p. 160; Pines, “Friends or Foes,” p. 41.
him; when he acts improperly/unrighteously towards you, you should not accept it.17

Yuri Pines has demonstrated that the concept of loyal minister in the Chunqiu times differed from the subsequent concept in the Zhanguo times. In Chunqiu times, the minister was to be faithful and obedient to his ruler, with an understanding that the minister’s highest goal was to serve the “altars of soil and grain” (sheji 社稷), that is the state or the populace in general. Thus, when a minister could claim that his actions were in accord with what he believed to be the state’s interests, he had the right to defy the ruler’s orders, and even act against the ruler. This notion of loyalty to the altars allowed, as we shall see, considerable freedom of action to the ministers – largely at the expense of the rulers.18

The minister was to be obedient to his ruler, but he was primarily expected to pursue state interests. This attitude resulted from the balanced combination of two virtues from which the compound zhongxin 忠信 derived: zhong, loyalty for the sake of the state (represented by the expression “altars of soil and grain”), and xin 信, unconditional faithfulness and obedience to the ruler. But there were instances in which a good minister could not obey the ruler’s orders, that is, when the ruler’s orders were incompatible with the state’s interests. In these cases, a good minister was expected to act on behalf of the state and disobey the ruler, being zhong rather than xin, since the interests of the state clashed with the principle of faithfulness and obedience to the ruler. Thus loyalty prevailed over fidelity as the state interests prevailed over the ruler’s interest: zhong and xin were complementary when the ruler’s and the state’s interests coincided. The concept of loyalty changed if applied to a lower social level, that is the shi 士 stratum, whose position was not hereditary but contractual. Their life depended on the emoluments granted by their superior, therefore their fidelity to and dependence on him were practically absolute. Things changed in the fifth and fourth centuries BC when the hereditary aristocrats lost their power and position and the members of the shi could ascend to the higher echelons of the government apparatus. Therefore the shi formulated a new concept of loyalty congenial to their new condition: it was no longer loyalty to the state (or altars of soil and grain) nor was it absolute fidelity to their superiors; rather, it was a more abstract concept of loyalty in the name of an ethical principle named

17 父亡惡, 君猶父也, 其弗惡也; 猶三軍之（旗）也, 正也。所以異於父; 君臣不相在也, 則可己; 不悅, 可去也; 不義而加諸己, 弗受也。Yucong 3, slips 1-5; Pines, “Friends or Foes,” p. 41.
18 Pines, “Friends or Foes,” p. 44.
dao. The shi par excellence, Confucius, proposed the following definition of “great minister”:

What is called a great minister is one who serves the ruler according to the dao, and when he is unable to do so, he stops [serving him].19 In other words, Confucius and his followers adopted the Chunqiu notion of loyalty to the ruler provided that he was a good ruler. They set a normative ideal of behaviour, the dao, which was supposed to be followed both by the ruler and by a good minister. In this way, they established a new order in which the dao, which was understood and interpreted by them, was identified with the universal principle – it replaced the Chunqiu “altars of soil and grain” – which governed human relations. Therefore the relation between ruler and minister was the following: the minister owed loyalty to his ruler and the ruler was supposed to treat his minister with propriety, according to the li 禮.20

A shi wanted to be acknowledged and respected by his ruler, and only then did he show him profound loyalty. “A shi would die for the sake of the one who profoundly understands him” (shi wei zhi ji zhe si 士為知己者死), we read in Zhangguo ce 战國策:21 from this statement it becomes clear that what the shi demanded was reciprocity in ruler-minister relations. This concept is expressed also in Lunyu II,20, which reads:

Ji Kangzi22 asked: “To make the people be respectful, loyal and zealous, what should one do?” The Master said: “Regard them with dignity, and they will be respectful. Be filial to your elders and caring to your juniors, and they will be loyal. Raise the good and instruct those who are unable, and they will be zealous.”23

Thus, it was the notion of reciprocity, in the name of the dao, that linked the two notions of zhong and shu in the Analects. Zhong was not unilateral but, like shu, it implied reciprocity.

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19 所謂大臣者以道事君不可則止。Lunyu XI,24.
20 君使臣以禮，臣事君以忠 (A ruler should employ a minister according to ritual, the minister should serve the ruler with loyalty). Lunyu III,19. Pines, “Friends or Foes,” pp. 53-58.
22 The head of the three most influential families of Lu, who were de facto rulers of Lu. He died in 469 BC.
23 季康子問：「使民敬，忠以勤，如之何？」子曰：「臨之以莊，則敬；孝慈，則忠；舉善而教不能，則勤。」
More recently, Paul R. Goldin has observed that the term zhong in many Eastern Zhou contexts and throughout the imperial period indeed means “loyalty,” but in other contexts it has different meanings. In early Confucian ethics zhong should not be rendered as “loyalty” but as “consciousness” or “being honest with oneself in dealing with others.” He argues that the rendering of zhong as “doing one’s best” seems to be inspired by the medieval notion of zhong as jinji 尽己, which he renders as “making the most of himself,” therefore he concludes: “Following such Neo-Confucian usage is anachronistic, to say the least, especially since zhong appears in early Confucian (and even pre-Confucian) discourse long before the emergence of the dispute over human nature.” In my opinion, the translation of zhong as loyalty, intended not as unconditional faithfulness but as honesty to oneself and to the others, a condition the individual achieves by focusing on his heart-and-mind and doing his utmost (as explained before), is not in contradiction with the reading proposed by Goldin. Moreover, both readings require what Goldin calls “to be vigilantly self-aware,” thus imply doing one’s best. Zhong is loyalty and absolute dedication which transcends all individualism, the purely personal, in the attempt to achieve completeness, moral integrity and sincerity to oneself and to the others. It is, as Yuri Pines put it, loyalty in the name of an ethical principle, the dao.

In the light of its explicit association with zhong (in Lunyu and in Zhongyong), shu was interpreted as the negative formula of the “Confucian golden rule,” while zhong, symmetrical with and complementary to it, was equated with the positive formula. In reaching this conclusion, Feng Youlan remarks how in the Zhongyong shu corresponds precisely to what Confucius defined in Lunyu XV,24 with the classical negative formula; indeed, the mention of zhong and shu in Zhongyong is followed by a paraphrase of the negative formula of the golden rule, and shortly after, the implicit precept is “behave towards the others (father, king, elder brother, friend) as befits your role.” And it is in the latter assertion, corresponding, according to Feng Youlan, to the concept of zhong, that he perceives the golden rule in its positive formula. In other words, zhong refers to the actions performed towards the others precisely as one would have them performed towards himself, while shu refers to the actions not performed towards the others precisely as one would not have them performed towards himself. Shu is arduous to achieve. In fact, when the disciple Zigong expressed to his Master the intention of not doing to the others what he did not want for himself Confucius admonished him: “Zigong, you have not yet reached this

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25 Fung Yu-lan, A Short History of Chinese Philosophy, pp. 43-44.
Thus, *zhong* and *shu* are two aspects of one and the same principle woven together to produce a “unifying thread” running along the Way indicated by the Master. This interesting, albeit controversial, interpretation is open to further reflections on the meaning of the two terms: the existence of a complementary relation between them cannot be denied as it is already foreshadowed in *Lunyu* IV,15, although the rich underlying implications are much more comprehensive and complex than the simple articulation in positive (*zhong*) or negative terms (*shu*) of the same precept. Moreover, if *zhong* were simply the positive formula and *shu* the negative formula, it would be logical to assume that, since no logical difference exists between the two terms, in some contexts one should exclude the other. In fact, Feng Youlan founds his thesis on two passages from the *Analects* in which the golden rule is set out in negative and positive terms, although in the same passages no mention is made of *shu* or *zhong*. The first passage reads as follows:

Zhonggong asked about *ren*. The Master said: “When you are in public behave as though you were receiving an important guest. When employing the common people behave as if you were conducting a great sacrifice. What you do not want for yourself, do not do to others. In this way you will not encounter resentment in your public or private life.”

Here, the golden rule is not summed up in the character *shu*, but rather expressed explicitly in the formula: *ji suo bu yu, wu shi yu ren* (What you do not want for yourself, do not do to others), a precept that, moreover, is defined in the same passage as an essential component of human benevolence (*ren*).

The second passage of the *Analects* mentioned by Feng Youlan is the following:

Zigong asked: “What about him who is broadly generous with the people and is able to help the multitudes? Can we define this *ren*?” The Master said: “Why stop at *ren*? Such a person should surely be called a Sage! Even Yao and Shu would find such a task arduous! The term *ren* means that when you desire to get established yourself, you help others to get established; and when you desire success for yourself you help others to

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26 子貢曰：「我不欲人之加諸我也，吾亦欲無加諸人。」子曰：「賜也，非爾所及也。」 *Lunyu* V,12.

27 仲弓問仁。子曰：「出門如見大賓，使民如承大祭。己所不欲，勿施於人。在邦無怨，在家無怨。」仲弓曰：「雍雖不敏，請事斯語矣。」 *Lunyu* XII,2.
succeed. The ability to take as analogy what is near at hand can simply be called the method of attaining ren.”

Also in this passage, the positive formula, as expressed in the sentence neng jin qu pi (the ability to take as analogy what is near at hand) is not explicitly equated with the term zhong.

I shall shortly come back to the two passages cited. For the time being, I shall merely point out that zhong or shu are not mentioned in them.

Indeed, the two virtues are specific to a morally irreprehensible conduct as far as family and social relations are concerned, but what distinguishes them is not only the type of action they imply, but above all the recipient of this action. Returning to the passage from the Zhongyong mentioned above, while in the first assertion, which can presumably be equated with the negative formula of the golden rule, “What he does not wish done to him he does not do unto others” (shi zhu ji er bu yuan, yi wu shi you ren 施諸己而不願，亦勿施於人), no explicit reference is made to family or social relations, in the second one four fundamental types of relation are explicitly mentioned: between son and father, subject and king, younger brother and elder brother and lastly between friends. The behavioural model described, both in a family setting (son-father, younger-elder brother) and at the social level (subject-king, friend-friend) is the one specific to him who occupies a lower, subordinate, position. Clearly, the precept illustrated here is: “Behave towards your superiors as you would have your subordinates act towards you,” which seems to extend and complement the definition of zhong given in Lunyu II,20: xiao ci, ze zhong 孝慈，則忠 “Be filial to your elders and caring to your juniors and they will be loyal.”

From this passage it is clear that zhong is the utmost loyalty the ruler will get if he manifests filial love to his elders and care to his subordinates.

The importance of family and social relations in defining the golden rule is further emphasized by a passage from the Daxue 大學 (The Great Learning), a text traditionally ascribed to Master Zeng:

28 子貢曰：「如有博施於民而能濟眾，如何？可謂仁乎？」 子曰：「何事於仁！必也聖乎！堯，舜其猶病諸！夫仁者，己欲立而立人，己欲達而達人。能近取譬，可謂仁之方已。」 Lunyu VI,30.

29 This is the theory proposed by David Nivison, who states that zhong and shu are hierarchic opposites. Shu normally has a downward direction whereas zhong “bids me to be strict with myself in dealing with another in an equal or higher position, disregarding my own feelings about myself if I must, and holding myself to at least the same high standard of behavior toward the other that I would expect him to observe toward me if our positions were reversed.” Nivison, “Zhong (Chung) and Shu: Loyalty and Reciprocity,” p. 884.
What you dislike in your superior, do not use in employing your inferior; what you dislike in your inferior, do not use in serving your superior; what you dislike in the one who precedes you, do not use in dealing with the one who comes after you; what you dislike in the one who comes after you, do not use in dealing with the one who precedes you. This is what is called the method of the “measuring square.”

Xieju 絜矩 (measuring-square), is the rule governing human relations. Zhu Xi glosses xie絜 as du度 (to measure) and ju矩 as suoyi wei 方 (an instrument for squaring). Elsewhere he explains the concept in these terms:

What is called “measuring square” is [the carpenter’s] square, that is the heart-and-mind. What my heart-and-mind wishes corresponds to what others wish. If I wish to show filial and brotherly love and be caring to the young, I will wish others, like me, show filial and brotherly love and be caring to the young […]

Therefore the gentleman perceives that the heart-and-mind of others and his own are similar. Hence he always uses his own heart-and-mind to measure the heart-and-mind of others, so that all will become tranquil.

A gentleman perceives that the heart-and-mind of others and his own are similar, therefore he considers and understands the feelings and wishes of others starting from his own.

Zhu Xi further comments that “shu恕 also corresponds to the meaning of xieju” (shu yi shi xieju zhi yi 原亦是契矩之意), an equation which he infers from the last sentence of the Daxue passage which he comments as follows:

30 所惡於上, 毋以使下; 所惡於下, 毋以事上; 所惡於前, 毋以先後; 所惡於後, 毋以 從前; 所惡於右, 毋以交於左; 所惡於左, 毋以交於右: 此之謂絜矩之道。Daxue, in Zhu Xi, Sishu zhangju jizhu, chap. 10, p. 10; transl. D.S. Nivison, “Golden Rule Arguments,” p. 64 (modified), see also Andrew Plaks (transl.), Ta Hsüeh and Chung Yung (The Highest Order of Cultivation and On the Practice of the Mean) (London 2003), pp. 15-16.

31 Andrew Plaks remarks that the first word in the compound expression xieju is an obscure verb meaning “to tie,” possibly a graphic substitute for a near homophone meaning “to grip.” The compound is generally understood in the sense of measuring, in the sense of “taking the moral measure” of one’s proper role in the ordering of the world. Plaks, Ta Hsüeh and Chung Yung, p. 109.

32 所謂絜矩者，矩者，心也。我心之所欲，即他人之所欲也。我欲孝弟而慈，必欲 他人 皆 如我之孝弟而慈。[...] 是以君子見人之心与己之心同，故必以己度人之 心，使 皆得其平。”Li Jingde 劉靖德, Zhuzi yulei 朱子語錄 (Beijing 1985), ch. 16, p. 361.
If you do not wish your superiors not to observe ritual propriety toward you, considering this you must measure the heart-and-mind of your subordinates and dare not treat them without observing ritual propriety. If you do not wish your subordinates to be disloyal toward you, considering this you must measure the heart-and-mind of your superiors and dare not serve your superiors with disloyalty.33

In this case, the Daxue defines the behavioural model governing the relations between men of different social rank by the term xieju, “measuring square,” namely, to take oneself as the model for understanding and assessing the feelings of others, and consequently regulating one’s conduct towards them. Proper conduct towards an inferior is implemented by means of the li 礼, the traditional ritual norms of kindness, courtesy and good manners required to win the confidence of the people, while zhong, as we have said before, is “to serve with loyalty one’s superiors.”

Unlike the passage cited in Zhongyong, where the behavioural model described is that of someone in a subordinate position vis-à-vis a superior, the Daxue takes both situations into consideration, that of the subordinate towards the superior and vice versa, at the same time respecting their respective roles. The “measuring square” applies in all the situations, even though a hierarchic relation is postulated. One passage from the Lunyu definitely supports this interpretation:

Duke Ding asked: “How should a ruler employ his ministers, and how should ministers serve their ruler?” Confucius replied: “A ruler should employ his ministers by observing ritual propriety (li) and ministers should serve their ruler by their loyalty (zhong).”34

As for the ruler, as Confucius emphasizes, it is through the respect of traditional rules of social conduct, that is, by expressing magnanimity, respect and courtesy to his subjects, that he can exercise a virtuous rule, relying on moral virtue rather than on the coercive power of laws and punishment. In

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33 如不欲上之無禮於我，則必以此度下之心，而亦不敢以此無禮使之。不欲下之不忠於我，則必以此度上之心，而亦不敢以此不忠事之。Zhu Xi, Sishu zhangju jizhu, ch. 10, p. 10.

34 定公問：「君使臣，臣事君，如之何？」孔子對曰：「君使臣以禮，臣事君以忠。」Lunyu III,19. Another definition of zhong as the loyal and faithful conduct of a minister towards his king is found in Lunyu V,19: 子張問曰：「令尹子文三仕為令尹，無喜色；三已之，無慍色。舊令尹之政，必以告新令尹。何如？」子曰：「忠矣。」 [...] Zichang asked: “The Prime Minister Ziwen was three times appointed prime minister, and showed no sign of delight. He was three times dismissed and showed no sign of resentment. As outgoing prime minister, he always informed the incoming prime minister on the affairs of state of his office. What do you think of him? The Master said: ‘He doubtless acted with loyalty.’”
these conditions, he is able to give orders to his ministers, who consequently will relate to him with the greatest loyalty and absolute dedication.

Zhong is, above all, that condition of loyalty that inextricably binds the individual to his superior when the latter exercises his power above all in compliance with the ritual norms. In the Lunyu, loyalty (zhong), respect (jing 敬) and zeal/diligence (qin 勤) are described as the virtuous modes of people’s behaviour. 35 Man must therefore nurture filial love (xiao 孝) towards his elders and parental love towards his children (ci 慈): only then will the maximum loyalty and absolute devotion be obtained from his subordinates. This is what is prescribed by the traditional ritual rules, the li: kindness and respect are an integral part of the traditional rules of conduct inherited from the ancient sages and, in the case of the ruler, an essential prerequisite for assuring the loyalty and absolute devotion of the people. In this sense, li and zhong – one referring to the ruler and the other to the people – are complementary in a relation similar to that linking shu and zhong.

In the assertion “What you do not want for yourself, do not do to others” – which for Confucius amounts to shu – what is expressed by “do” is shi 施, a character usually used to indicate actions performed towards one’s subordinates or one’s peers. Furthermore, the fact that the golden rule expressed by shu refers mainly to the individual occupying a higher-ranking position toward an inferior is inferred from the above-mentioned Lunyu XII, 2, where it is stated that: “When employing the common people behave as if you were officiating a great sacrifice. What you do not want for yourself, do not do to others.” In this passage, those on the receiving end of the actions are the people, who must not be treated roughly or severely but, on the contrary, politely and with dignity, in accordance with the ritual norms – whence Zhu Xi’s interpretation “If you do not wish your superiors to not observe ritual propriety towards you.” It is precisely the respect of the ritual norms that safeguards the respective roles in a family and that guarantees the maintenance of social order.36 Thus, in order to be accepted, the ruler

35 Lunyu II.20.
36 These considerations led David S. Nivison to formulate another interpretation of the Confucian golden rule: zhong, which he interprets as “doing one’s best,” “committing the whole of oneself,” “considering oneself responsible for one’s actions” and shu, consideration for others, are concretely conceived of in terms of family, social and political relations. Shu is always addressed to those who occupy a subordinate position, while zhong is the attitude of loyalty towards one’s superiors or, at most, towards one’s peers (in connection with this, Kant asserted that Confucius was unaware of a genuine morality and that the teachings contained in his works were simply a moral doctrine for rulers). Therefore Nivison concludes that they are universal laws, albeit somewhat attenuated: shu is a directive intended to amend or suspend the rules (on the strength of one’s own perception and experience) and is therefore asso-
should respect his public function which consists of safeguarding peace and welfare. As Roetz remarks: “Political rule is measured by the standard of a just give and take. [...] Applied to politics, the golden rule may have a moderating and humanizing effect. It helps to remind the powerful that the ruled are human beings with feelings and expectations like themselves, and should be treated as such.”

The Hypothesis of Herbert Fingarette: 
The Analogy with the Christian Golden Rule

Before going on to examine the important function of the li in the dialectical relation between zhong and shu, it is worth dwelling for a moment on the hermeneutics of those passages from the Analects that traditionally define the Confucian golden rule.

One interesting and appealing interpretation of the relation between the two concepts was proposed by Herbert Fingarette, who remarked on the analogy between the “Confucian golden rule” and Jesus’ words according to Matthew 22:35-4 (repeated in Luke 10:25-27 and Mark 12:28-31):

“Master, which is the greatest commandment in the law?” Jesus answers: “‘Love thy Lord your God, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ That is the greatest commandment. It comes first. The second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ Everything in the Law and the prophets hangs on these two commandments.”

According to Fingarette, zhong essentially corresponds to what is stated in the first commandment, while shu proposes the content of the second, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Such an assertion does not imply that the amount of love felt for the other, who is near you, is equal to that felt for yourself, nor indeed that this love must be quantitatively similar. Rather, the object of the love ought just to be one: yourself, namely your neighbour, which presupposes that you are “putting yourself in the other’s shoes.”

Shu is intended to cause me to have concern for you, not to impose my tastes and inclinations on you. Therefore, to assess the situation appropriately in deciding what I would want, I must not only imagine being in your place, I must do this in such a way as to see it through your eyes.

ciated with ritual norms, flexible human rules, as opposed to laws (fa), that are universal and inflexible. Zhong, on the other hand, is a rule that governs and regulates behaviour towards a superior, an actual rule for inner cultivation. Nivison, “Golden Rule Arguments,” pp. 64-67. See also id., “Zhong (Chung) and Shu: Loyalty and Reciprocity,” pp. 882-885.

37 Roetz, Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age, p. 139
To put it in a nutshell I must not imagine myself being in your situation; I must imagine being you.38

In such circumstances those who successfully “put themselves in others’ shoes” can understand the situation in which the other finds himself and can consequently act. This postulate is clearly expressed in the Lunyu VI,30 where the phrase neng jin qu pi (the ability to take as analogy what is near at hand) means, as Fingarette explains, “to be able from what is close, i.e., oneself, to grasp analogy with the other person, and in that light to treat him as you would be treated,” or, in other words, “I must analogize to the other, imagine being in the other person’s place; then, in that status, I am to ask myself what I want or do not want done.”39 This concept refers to a similar process and presupposes a mental exercise: in the instant in which I succeed in imagining myself “in your shoes” and become one with you – what Zhu Xi renders as tui ji zhi ji ren (extend oneself to the others) – not only can I see things as you see them, think like you, perceive like you and appreciate things like you, but, at the same time, I could follow in my imagination everything as if it were my own personal situation, my own experience, my own life. Of course, I am only imagining that I am someone else and might do so incorrectly, incompletely. And the greater the effort I make to put myself in your place, the more this condition belongs to me and becomes an essential part of my inner life while my life view is affected by it, and conforms to it. Shu acts not through coercive means but by virtue of my willingness to adapt; it acts on me, tout court, and not just by changing some of my convictions. Once I have attained this condition I am able not only to express a desire but also to formulate a judgment as, even imagining with a part of myself to be in your place, to be you, with the other I am judging myself in such a position.

In this sense, shu is a moral principle that transcends personal desires and inclinations, similar to zhong. It implies that I am not expressing a desire but would like to judge what is right and appropriate. If this were not the case, I would be authorized to express and fulfil my desires and expectations, which might be wicked and corrupt. Shu is not only an invitation to grasp the analogy and support the desires of others, but is also an encouragement to express a judgment and to act correctly, for the purpose of doing good.40 This, according to Fingarette, is the context in which we should con-

38 Fingarette, “Following the ‘One Thread’ of the Analects,” pp. 382-383. Fingarette’s interpretation was probably influenced by the reading of zhong and shu suggested by Zhu Xi, who interpreted zhong as the way of Heaven and shu as the way of man.
40 Analogous considerations led Heiner Roetz to suggest the translation of “fairness” for shu, in the sense of renunciation of prerogatives for oneself, and the granting of
sider zhong, which comes into play to fill the semantic and conceptual gap left by shu: zhong is loyalty and absolute dedication which transcends all individualism, the purely personal, and is a spur to achieving completeness and authenticity, that is moral integrity, which designates a psychological effort to be sincere, authentic to oneself and to others.

Fingarette claims that, just as in the teachings of Jesus, the golden rule is made up of two essential components – the love of God and the love of one’s neighbour – in similar fashion, in the teaching of Confucius “the unifying principle” is made up of zhong, loyalty, absolute dedication to a transcendent principle (the dao, as in the analysis of Yuri Pines) and shu, love of one’s fellow man. The basic difference between the Confucian precept and the biblical one lies in the identity of the transcendent principle.41

Zhong, as we have seen, primarily expresses the concept of absolute loyalty, devotion: it is loyalty defined not as blind obedience to a superior or one’s peer but as an absolute commitment to preserving the integrity of one’s existence, of safeguarding one’s social role. The individual practices this virtue in accordance with the ritual norms, that is, by displaying deference and willingness but also by resisting and remonstrating when the other

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41 Fingarette, “Following the ‘One Thread’ of the Analects,” p. 388; Nivison (“Zhong [Chung] and Shu: Loyalty and Reciprocity,” p. 883; “Golden Rule Arguments,” pp. 72-73), while appreciating H. Fingarette’s interpretation, points out several contradictions in it. Fingarette interprets zhong as “loyalty-fidelity” (zhong–xin) which he considers to refer to moral rules, to principles of justice dictated by Heaven (which he associates with God); in fact, loyalty and fidelity are primarily displayed towards men, not toward principles. Moreover, Fingarette emphasizes the role of zhong and shu as criteria for judging what is just. This interpretation, suggested by the passage in the Daxue defining the Confucian golden rule in terms of “measuring square,” was developed in the 18th c. by the philosopher Dai Zhen 戴震 (1724–1777), who claimed that the ethical sense belongs to the sage and coincides with his desires. Therefore, genuine moral principles are precisely those that appear such to us. In this sense, the sage is guided by a kind of moral intuition, a theory formulated by Dai Zhen on the basis of the conception of the original goodness of the human nature of Mengzi. Mengzi ziyi shuzheng 孟子字義疏證 (An Explication of the Meaning of Terms in the Mengzi), Xixiu siku quanshu 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai 2002), chap. 1, pp. 21-22; P. Ivanhoe (“Reweaving the ‘one thread’ of the Analects,” p. 21) observes that, although Fingarette’s analysis reveals important features of the thinking we find in Lunyu, it is based on a misunderstanding of the concept of zhong which, associated with xin, would mean something like “interpersonal good faith and loyalty, mediated by the li ‘rituals’.” Instead, according to Ivanhoe, zhong in the Lunyu means “doing one’s duty in service to others.”
does not behave correctly.\textsuperscript{42} In this way he guarantees a status, a dignity, a role within the community for the superior or for his fellow man.

The Song Confucians, in their attempt to explain the relation between \textit{shu} and \textit{zhong} in \textit{Lunyu} VI,30, interpreted \textit{zhong} as a principle inherent in the heavenly sphere, while \textit{shu} as a principle inherent in the human sphere, thereby endeavouring to emphasize the predominance of \textit{zhong} over \textit{shu}. Zhu Xi, quoting Master Cheng, thus interpreted \textit{Lunyu} IV,15:

\textit{Zong} and \textit{shu} are pervaded by a single unifying principle. \textit{Zong} is the Way of Heaven, \textit{shu} is the Way of man. \textit{Zong} means absence of hypocrisy, \textit{shu} is how to put \textit{zhong} into practice. \textit{Zong} is substance, \textit{shu} is function. These are the great root and the realized Way.\textsuperscript{43}

In this way, they enhanced the value of \textit{zhong} as an immanent principle and its fundamental role in producing \textit{shu}, the Way of man. On the basis of the interpretation given by Zhu Xi and the Song era Confucians, Fingarette reiterates the primary value of \textit{zhong} in the Confucian golden rule: \textit{zhong}, which represents the Way of Heaven, transcends the purely personal perspective, the here and now and desires, feelings, attitudes and personal inclinations and completes \textit{shu}, which presupposes the existence of a relation of mutual understanding and love among men.

In this interpretation, what characterizes the “Confucian golden rule,” as expressed in the dialectical relation between the two terms, is essentially the immanent principle.

In actual fact, in Confucius’ teachings there is an almost total absence of any transcendent reality towards which good actions and charitable works tend. The main divine entity of the \textit{Analects} is Heaven (\textit{tian} 天), which is mentioned only twice in the work – a supernatural entity which promulgates its own decree (\textit{tianming} 天命). Confucius declares he came to understand its meaning at the age of fifty, but man generally is afraid of it.\textsuperscript{44} With the exception of these laconic statements, the Master does not specifically elaborate on the supernatural,\textsuperscript{45} focusing greater attention on man and his

\textsuperscript{42} The Master urges one to remonstrate against one’s superiors if necessary and to give good advice to one’s fellow men: 事父母諫,見志不從,又敬不違.勞而不怨 “In serving your father and mother, a faint protest is allowed, but if you realize that your advice is not accepted, continue to be respectful and do not contradict them. Even if this hurts you, do not hold this against them” (\textit{Lunyu} IV,18).

\textsuperscript{43} 忠恕一以貫之：「忠者天道，恕者人道；忠者無妄，恕者所以行乎忠也。忠者體，恕者用，大本達道也。Zhu Xi, \textit{Sishu zhangju jizhu}, pp. 72-73. See also Nivison, “Golden Rule Arguments,” p. 69.

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Lunyu} II,4; \textit{Lunyu} XVI,8.

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Lunyu} VII,21.
role in the community. The Master did not reject the existence of the supernatural but toned it down by indicating the exclusive Way to elevate man, namely self-cultivation and the commitment extended to one’s fellow man.

Assuming that zhong, in harmony with the Way of Heaven, implies full self-realization, the attainment of the right way in one’s relations with others, Zhu Xi interpreted shu as functional to zhong: a virtue requiring an inner discipline, self-cultivation.

As we have said before, Confucius interpreted dao as the Way of Man, not of Heaven. Even when he aims at perfection, becoming a true gentleman (junzi) or even pursuing the privileged condition of the Sage (shengren), man is never the object of worship or devotion: nevertheless, he performs with an intimate religious attitude the ritual acts he has inherited from the past.

It is necessary to be loyal to those occupying a position that is superior to or on a par with your own, sincere with your friends, and scrupulous in observing the ritual norms handed down from ancient times. The ultimate reality towards which each virtuous act tends is identified with the dao. The authenticity and moral integrity (cheng 誠) mentioned in the Zhongyong in the final analysis reside in the dao of man, the Way indicated by the ancient Sages, the Way that runs like a thread through everything, uniting it, the mainstays of which are “to act with the maximum loyalty” and “not to impose on others what you do not want for yourself.” As emphasized by the Master, loyalty and fidelity are virtues displayed towards one’s peers or superiors. By exercising shu, man measures himself with his neighbour, he draws from himself analogies and tries to be empathetic to him: this is to take the path of benevolence. Shu is that attitude that accompanies man throughout his life. I agree with Nivison when he asserts that:

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46 When his disciple Fan Chi 樊遲 questions him on the subject of wisdom, he replies: “To devote yourself to what is righteous for the people, to show respect for the gods and spirits while keeping them at a distance, can be called wisdom” 务民之義，敬鬼神而遠之，可謂知。Lunyu VI,22.

47 吾日三省吾身: 「為人謀而不忠乎? 與朋友交而不信乎? 傳不習乎? “Every day I examine myself on three questions: In planning for the other was I disloyal? In relations with my friends was I untruthful? Have I not practised what was handed down to me?” Lunyu I,4.

48 Lunyu VI,30. Zhu Xi comments: 近取諸身，以己所欲譬之於他人，知其所欲亦猶是也。然後推其所欲以及於人，則恕之事而仁之術也。“Near at hand to draw from oneself is to take what one desires oneself and analogize it to others, understanding that what they desire is just the same. Afterwards, one approaches others extending to them what he desires, which is a matter of empathy and the way to be-
It is not really a “rule” at all, but a maxim to guide one in shaping and cultivating a character of ideal human kindness in oneself. That is, it describes a virtue in persons rather than a quality of correctness in acts. It is therefore shu that essentially expresses the principle of the “Confucian golden rule,” while zhong contributes to defining the terms thereof when it is transferred onto the social sphere.

Shu is a virtue that must constantly be cultivated, while zhong completes its meaning, leading man to transfer his natural feelings and attitudes to the community level, pouring his whole self into the relation that identifies him as socially subordinate or similar.

In this view, “do not do to others what you do not want for yourself,” “take as analogy what is near at hand” come to appear as maxims for life, while zhong acts as an essential condition, just like other cardinal virtues such as xin (fidelity/truthfulness), xiao (filial love), di (brotherly love) and ci (love toward the young).

The ruler earns the respect, loyalty and zeal of his people through kindness, filial love, the promotion of worthy men (Lunyu II,20). In that sense, loyalty is not understood as a cardinal principle of Confucian ethics, but as the consequence of virtuous governance, exercised by a ruler who governs by virtue of his own moral strength and a correct application of the ancient ritual norms. The Confucian golden rule equates moral principles with human sensibility, appealing to a series of moral prescriptions (that may be identified with the li) that regulate life and guide man towards a sense of what is just.

**Empathy (shu) as the Way Towards Benevolence**

(…) The ability to take as analogy what is near at hand can simply be called the method of attaining benevolence. The true gentleman daily displays benevolence towards others, and is always resolute in curbing his selfish impulses and unfailingly directed by the ancient ritual norms:

Yan Hui asked what benevolence was. The Master said: “Through self-discipline and by turning to the ancient ritual norms one attains benevolence. If for one whole day man succeeded in disciplining himself by benevolence.” Sishu jizhu, p. 92; Daniel Gardner, Zhu Xi’s Reading of the Analects: Canon, Commentary and the Classical Tradition (New York 2003), p. 58.

49 Lunyu XV,24.


51 Lunyu VI,30.
turning to the ancient ritual norms, the whole world would be led back to benevolence. Attaining benevolence depends on us, how could it depend on others?"\(^{52}\)

Benevolence stems from such natural dispositions as love and respect of one’s parents and older brothers, love of one’s children, which are feelings and attitudes that, when extended to others, reveal a deep sense of human understanding.

The centrality of ren in the Analects and in Confucian ethics is demonstrated by the large number of times it occurs.\(^{53}\) Benevolence, or humanity, is that virtue par excellence to which the gentleman tends, a state of mind that is indicative of generosity, unconditional love and devotion to the good of others. It is not easily attained, and indeed requires a constant exercise of the mind (si 思), study (xue 學) and overcoming the self (keji 克己). Man’s goal is to achieve benevolence, and this is a heavy burden!\(^{54}\)

It is by constant inner cultivation, supported by study, meditation, discipline and religious observance of rules of social conduct inherited from ancient Sages that man is shown the authentic Way, the dao. It is not an absolute gift nor a choice, but a rugged path that man naturally follows by means of gradual self-perfection, by pursuing moral integrity, fulfilling his duties to his family and society. And this rugged path leading to the dao is constructed by man himself as it is “man who glorifies the Way and not the

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52 颜淵問仁。子曰:「克己復禮為仁。一日克己復禮,天下歸仁焉。為仁由己,而由仁乎哉!」 Lunyu XII, 1.

53 In the Analects, the term occurs 105 times; together with junzi (gentleman), which occurs 107 times, it is the most widely discussed issue in the work. However, in one of the most controversial passages in the Analects it is stated that seldom did the Master express himself on the subjects of profit, destiny and benevolence (Lunyu IX, 1). Among the various interpretations of the passage, Anne Cheng suggests that the expression hanyan 罕言 refers to a type of communication similar to that rendered by the expression weiyan 微言 (parler subtilement), which does not indicate simply a discursive language but a type of communication made up of allusions, silences, metaphors and gesture, of which only the true Master is capable; A. Cheng, “Si s’était à refaire ... ou: de la difficulté de traduire ce que Confucius n’as pas dit,” in Viviane Alliton – Michael Lackner (eds.), De l’un au multiple. Traductions du chinois vers les langues européennes (Paris 1999), pp. 205-217. See also Kwong-Loi Shun, “Ren 仁 and li 礼 in the Analects,” in Van Norden, Confucius and the Analects, pp. 53-72.

54 士不可以不弘毅,任重而道遠。仁以為己任,不亦重乎? […] “Scholar-officials cannot but be strong and resolute, for they bear a heavy burden and their way is long. If they take benevolence as their burden, is it not a heavy one? […]” Lunyu VIII, 7.
Way that glorifies man.” However, he does not set off alone along this path; he is always accompanied by someone who provides the example he is to follow in his own conduct or the basis on which to correct it:

When you meet persons who are worthy, think to emulate them; when you meet persons who are unworthy, turn inward and examine yourself.

Thus, it is in the relationship with the other that man’s thought and action are activated. The character ren 仁 is a perfect expression of the idea of relating to the other with a loving attitude. The close relationship between ren and shu is indicated by Shuowen jiezi, in which shu is defined as ren. The Qing scholar Duan Yucai 段玉裁, precisely in connection with this, quotes the passage from the Analects “The ability to take as analogy what is near at hand can simply be called the method of attaining ren.” He also adds a passage from the Mengzi:

Mengzi said: “The ten thousand things are all brought to completion by us. There is no greater joy for me than to find, on self-examination, that I am authentic. Strengthen your empathy and you will find that this is the shortest way to benevolence.”

According to Mengzi, benevolence cannot be too distant from shu, “not to do to others what you would not want for yourself,” a natural attitude that must be constantly cultivated and strengthened.

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55 人能弘道，非道弘人。Lunyu XV.29.
56 子曰：「見賢思齊焉，見不賢而內自省也。」Lunyu IV.17.
57 Duan Yucai, Shuowen jiezi zhu, ch. 10, p. 28.
58 人能弘道，非道弘人。Lunyu VI.30.
60 In another interpretation, the “golden rule” could stem from a personal interest, thus shedding its moral nature: “Do not do unto others what you would not want for yourself” would, in this sense, correspond to the assumption “If I treat the other decently, the other will treat me decently”: do ut des, as suggested, for instance, by Confucius himself when he urges man not to impose on the others what he does not want for himself, “so as not to arouse resentment either in public or in private” (Lunyu XI.2). A loving disposition towards the others in this case would not be unconditional but has a definite aim: to safeguard the harmony of family and social relations. Also Xunzi apparently adopts a utilitarian criterion when elaborating the
There is a passage in the Zhongyong that reiterates and expresses more clearly by means of a metaphor the idea that the source of benevolence and the quest for the Way are inherent in man himself:

The Master said: “The Way is not far from man. If a person in following the Way distances himself from other men, it cannot be considered the Way. The Book of Odes says: “In hewing an axe handle, the pattern is not far away.” 61 We take hold of an axe handle in order to hew another axe handle. Yet if we look at them from far away, the two appear different. Therefore the true gentleman starts from man (i.e., himself) to govern men and, when they are reformed, he stops.

He who is loyal and empathetic is not far from the Way. What you don’t want done to yourself, do not do to others. 62

What emerges from the quoted passage? Man’s dao stems from what is close to man, from man himself. It gives an analogical description of this model; although the model is not far away, there always remains a difference between it and what is used to model, to forge it. The new axe handle is derived from its archetype, but differs from it; the archetype takes part in the formation of man and, after forming him, is dissolved. Forming a man in relation to another is an act aimed at achieving harmony, not perfect identity.

golden rule, when for instance he warns: “Remember that the others will treat us as we have treated them” (and in another case he declares: “He who does not give when he has possessions will not receive when he falls into poverty.” Wang Xianqian 王先謙, Xunzi jijie 荀子集解, Xuxiu siku quanshu 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai 1995), chap. 11, p. 148, chap. 30, p. 353. However, this is an interpretation, as H. Roetz emphasizes, that is relevant to the political and social sphere – as such, the urging is addressed mainly towards rulers and politicians. For further details on this interpretation see Roetz, Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age, pp. 143-148.

61 The Ode, which appears in the Shijing, reads as follows: “In hewing [the wood for] an axe-handle, how do you proceed? Without [another axe] axe it cannot be done […] In hewing an axe-handle, the pattern is not far off. […]” James Legge, The Chinese Classics, vol. IV, The She King (London 1871, repr. Hong Kong 1960), Book XV, Ode VI, p. 240.

Confucius defined the dialectical relation among men as an initiatic journey to be undertaken in company, in the direction of an inner growth borrowed from the perception of the other, from interaction, from dialogue.

The Master said: “If three of us were walking together I would certainly always have a master beside me: I would draw the good qualities of one to take example from, and the bad qualities of the other to correct myself.”

Moreover, the true gentleman helps the other in self-consolidation and in cultivating sensitivity towards what is just and appropriate, encouraging him to develop the good in him and not to develop what is bad.

Ren is a benevolent disposition towards others that is gradually cultivated and implemented through a process of inner discipline, by study, meditation, the practice of the ancient ritual norms and the application of the golden rule. It is born of the love and respect for one’s parents, for one’s older brothers and for the family. Confucius claimed that love and the sense of duty towards one’s parents and older brothers was the basis of benevolence. Affection and respect within the family are primary values for Confucius, the foundations of a feeling that spreads outwards towards one’s fellow men. If an individual wishes to attain benevolence, he can do so at any time of his life as it is not too far away.

Therefore, according to Confucius, man has the potential capacity to develop and achieve benevolence: those who seek it and then cultivate it, perfect it, and develop it through study, reflection and inner discipline, are able to attain it fully. It is born out of natural sentiments such as love for one’s family. Xu Shen, defined the term ren as qin, which expresses parental love, love within the family circle. Humanity, care of others, both stem from and are sustained by a natural sentiment, namely love for one’s parents and one’s brothers. Shu is a component of benevolence, but demands further commitment: to extend to others that loving disposition defined as qin, desiring for them what one wants for oneself. This is why the Master, when

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63 《論語》VII,22.

64 《論語》XII,16.

65 《論語》I,2.

66 《論語》VII,30.

67 Duan Yucai, Shuowen jiezi zhu, pp. 365 and 409.
questioned about the definition of “he who works on behalf of others and succeeds in helping people,” answered “Why stop at ren? He is certainly a Sage!”  

A loving disposition towards one’s family and one’s fellow men forms the basis of ren, the greatest Confucian virtue, above which there is only wisdom, a condition that only a few men – in the first instance, the ancient Sages – succeeded in attaining. Ren is the virtue that comprises all human virtues, namely, deference, loyalty, tolerance, sincerity, zeal, generosity and is constantly growing and evolving. It is thus not a static concept, but a dynamic one, as its achievement stems from and is nourished by a process of inner enrichment generated by a constant, reciprocal and changing relationship with others. There is thus an initial benevolence (love within the family) and a benevolence towards man in general, the achievement of which represents the fulfilment of all virtues. Love and the sense of family duty represent the foundations of a sentiment that, through the practice of shu, reaches out to the others, to one’s fellow man.

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68 Lunyu VI,30.