



## The Chinese Lexicon\*

(excerpts)

When we consult traditional Chinese dictionaries which themselves are endeavors to explain such a world – the second-century *Shuowen jiezi*, for example – we discover that terms are not defined by appeal to essential, literal meanings, but rather are generally brought into focus paronomastically by semantic and phonetic associations. “Exemplary person” (*jun*), for example, is defined by its cognate and phonetically similar “gathering”, which must rest on the underlying assumption that “people gather round and defer to exemplary persons.” As it insists in the *Analects* (4.25): “Excellent persons (*de*) do not dwell alone; they are sure to have neighbors.” [ . . . ] (pp. 28-29)

To render *junzi* as “Gentleman” is to impose a masculine reading of the term which is not marked in the term itself, and making it singular is also an extrapolation that is not indicated by the characters. One reason for doing so, of course, is because most translations wish to point up the patriarchal social hierarchy of ancient China, and “Gentleman” does this, as do “he” and “him” when a pronominal form refers back to *junzi*. But pronouns are not marked for gender or number either, and consequently the resultant sexist translation appears straightforward, even though altogether absent in the original. (And there is at least some evidence that women could be regarded as having some of the same qualities of the *junzi* at the time of, or shortly after, the composition of the *Analects*. (pp. 39-40)

*Dao* occurs some eighty times in the *Analects*, and is of central importance for interpreting the thinking not only of Confucius, but all other early Chinese thinkers as well; it is very probably the single most important term in the philosophical lexicon, and in significant measure to understand what and how a thinker means when uses *dao* is to understand that thinker’s philosophy.

The character has two elements: *chuo*, “to pass over”, “to go over,” “to lead through” (on foot), and *shou*, itself a compound literally meaning “head” – hair and eye together – therefore “foremost”. [ . . . ]

Taking the verbal *dao* as primary, its several meanings emerge rather naturally: to lead through, and hence, road, path, way, method, art, teachings; to explain, to tell, doctrines. At its most fundamental level, *dao* seems to denote the active project of “road building,” and by extension, to connote a road that has been made, and hence can be traveled. It is by this connotation that *dao* is so often nominalized in translation (“the Way”), but we must distinguish between simply traveling on a road, and making the journey one’s own. In our interpretation, to realize the *dao* is to experience, to interpret, and to influence the world in such a way as to reinforce and extend the way of life inherited from one’s cultural predecessors. This way of living in the world then provides a road map and direction for one’s cultural successors. For Confucius, *dao* is primarily *rendao*, that is, “a way of becoming consummately and authoritatively human.” (pp. 45-46)

[ . . . ]

*Ren*, translated herein as “authoritative conduct,” “to act authoritatively,” or “authoritative person,” is the foremost project taken up by Confucius, and occurs over one hundred times in the text. It is a fairly simple graph, and according to the the *Shuowen* lexicon, is made up of the two elements *ren* “person”, and *er*, the number “two.” This etymological analysis underscores

the Confucian assumption that one cannot become a person by oneself – we are, from our inchoate beginnings, irreducibly social. [ . . . ]

Ren is most commonly translated as “benevolence,” “goodness” and “humanity,” occasionally as “humanheartedness,” and less occasionally by the clumsy and sexist “manhood-at-its-best.”

While “benevolence” and “humanity” might be more comfortable choices for translating ren into English, our decision to use the less elegant “authoritative person” is a considered one. First, *ren* is one’s entire person: one’s cultivated cognitive, aesthetic, moral, and religious sensibilities as they are expressed in one’s ritualized roles and relationships. It is one’s “field of selves” the sum of significant relationships that constitute one as a resolutely social person. *Ren* is not only mental, but physical as well: one’s posture and comportment, gestures and bodily communication. [ . . . ] It is an aesthetic project, an accomplishment, something done. The human being is not something we are; it is something that we do, and become. [ . . . ] It is not an essential endowed potential, but what one is able to make of oneself given the interface between one’s initial conditions and one’s natural, social and cultural environments. [ . . . ]

Our term “authoritative person” as a translation of *ren*, then, is a somewhat novel expression, as was *ren* itself, and will probably prompt a similar desire for clarification. “Authoritative” entails the “authority” that a person comes to represent in community by becoming *ren*, embodying in oneself the values and customs of one’s tradition through the observance of ritual propriety. [ . . . ] At the same time, the way of becoming human (*dao*) is not a given; the authoritative person must be a road builder, a participant in “authoring” the culture for one’s own place and time. [ . . . ] The authoritative person is a model that others, recognizing the achievement, gladly and without coercion, defer to and appropriate in the construction of their own personhood. (pp. 48-51)  
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\* excerpts from the “Philosophical and Linguistic Background” section of the Introduction to Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr. *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1998.