

Li Zehou on the place of sociology, sociality and kinship in classical Confucian thought

Andrew Lambert, City U of New York

The discourse on personal and kinship relations in classical Confucianism has been understood differently in different historical eras. Furthermore, how such bonds and attachments are conceptualized often determines how Confucian moral and normative demands are understood. This paper critically examines Li Zehou's rehabilitation of Confucius during the 1970s in China and, in particular, Li's account of the role pre-Confucian clan and kinship society in the formation of Confucian thought.

To highlight Li's approach, I contrast it with other interpretive frameworks applied the Analects, and their corresponding accounts of human bonds and attachments. Traditional readings focus on a return to a golden era of Zhou court culture, and understand human bonds in terms of obligation. Han Confucians appeal to cosmological frameworks and explain the cardinal Confucian relationships accordingly. More recent progressive readings emphasize the contingency nature of social forms and practices, and understand Confucian social roles as contextual and amenable to personal authorship. In contrast, Li argues that Confucian values such as *ren* emerged from a very particular historical and cultural milieu. Such values reflected a particular social structure – clan-based kinship networks and shamanistic practices.

Exploring Li's account helps us to understand that the history of Confucian social ethics is, partly, the evolution of representations of human relationality. Furthermore, although linking classical Confucianism to specific forms of social organization appears to limit Confucian social ethics to a specific time and place, it nevertheless suggests a novel model of human flourishing, which emerges from human attachment and relationality.