

From Kernel to Skin
— Aesthetic Commentary on *Rén* 仁 and *Lǐ* 禮

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In the *Analects*, Confucius created a new concept *rén* 仁 “human-heartedness” through formalizing the principles of “ritual propriety” *lǐ* 禮. The etymology of *rén* is under debate – but in Chinese *rén* can also mean “kernel” – the innermost nucleus of life in which inheres all potential of growth; most vulnerable, yet open and in anticipation of encounters. When Confucius advocated *lǐ* 禮, he assumed that one could relate this Self to an unfathomable beginning through observing and performing ancestral “rites”. Thus, conjoined to *rén*, the kernel, *lǐ* is not rigid formulation and coercive regulation, rather, it can be seen as a concrete performance of present, individual life. While the official Confucian commentaries focused on moral cultivation for an exemplary personality (*jūn zǐ* 君子) and a social structure based upon filial piety (*xiào* 孝), it is through encountering *Other* texts, that were not intentionally written to support the canons, not necessarily written in Chinese, and perhaps not even “written”, that we may trace a thin line of thought through the temporal and personal aspects of *rén* and *lǐ*, which constitute a lived and living complement to the aspirations of canonical Confucian values.

Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1724), Japan’s foremost playwright of the Edo period, developed an art of *jōruri* (puppet theatre), which he interpreted in a treatise named “the interspace of the skin membranes, between unreal and real being”. The phrase “unreal and real” uses the Chinese characters “*xū* 虛” and “*shí* 實”, whereas the “skin membrane” is written as *himaku* 皮膜, in contrast to *hiniku* 皮肉 “skin and flesh”. To illustrate, Chikamatsu humorously interprets *himaku* through a *kabuki* performance, where the quest for “reality” is manifested in the need for makeup and red lip-paint – “Is it amusing that the main figure allows his beard to grow wild and appears with a bald head, since the real Minister does not paint his face”? This paradox, to Chikamatsu, opens our eyes to the space between the membranes of the skin: inseparable, yet always apart.

For the Noh master Zeami Motokiyo (1364-1443), the similar idea was expressed as “the various degrees of differences between thick and thin”, and he named the mastery of this subtlety to be the “Flower” in *Fushikaden* 風姿花伝 (“Transmission of the Flower of Performance”), a secret text that he wrote only for his descendants. For Zeami, instead of praising an ideal performance as “perfect combination of the good and the beautiful” (*jìn shàn jìn měi* 盡善盡美) like Confucius did, an ultimate performance can only be properly expressed as a persistent spirit embracing the very imperfection of life’s vicissitudes, as “The Flower remaining on a bag of bones”.

In contrast to traditional Chinese commentaries on Confucian canons such as Máo brothers’ “big” and “small” Preface (*dà xù* 大序, *xiǎo xù* 小序) for the *Book of Poetry* (*Shī Jīng* 《詩經》), which intend to foster a moral distance to the original poetic emotion, the uniquely hidden ethics inherited by the traditional Japanese Aesthetics actually dissolves the tension between “virtue” *dé* 德 and “worldly beauty” *sè* 色 (literally, color) through a tangible, transient performance in utmost precision. This performance requires not only a source from the deepest personal engagement, but also exquisitely precise timing. This, naturally, is not confined to theatrical experience, and inheres the essence of *lǐ* (“ritual propriety”) at its core.

Interpreting kernel through skin, this *other* tradition, as it were, introduces an aesthetic dimension that transforms the original openness of *rén* into an encounter between this body and the world. Amazingly, as Merleau-Ponty observed: “the world is made of the same stuff as the body”, whereas “the enigma is that my body

simultaneously sees and is seen” (“Eye and Mind”). Such aesthetic “commentary” is to manifest the Confucian *lǐ* through the very fabric, color, texture, subtlety and nuances of this life, at this moment, through the most tangible and mundane gestures, that connect us to the future from the past. And none of it has to rely on words.

If this were a new Confucian “commentary”, it has existed already for more than a thousand years.