

# The “Confucian” Ideal Person(ality) and Pacifism

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## Abstract

So-called Confucianism (*rujia* 儒家) developed a notion of an ideal person(ality), the *junzi* 君子, who eschews solving problems or eliminating disagreement by use of force. Instead, guided by principles of humaneness (*ren* 仁) and righteousness (*yi* 義), he uses well-founded arguments, and he does this in a becoming way, displaying no show of superiority. Moreover, the *junzi* highly values human dignity (*tianjue* 天爵, literally “nobility of Heaven”), i.e. individual moral autonomy, not giving in to the temptations of power, fame, public reputation, or wealth. Similar ideas were developed in European history. Evidently such ideal persons would be pacifists, but they are individuals, whereas wars concern whole nations and masses of people. So which role does, and can, the ideal individual actually play if it comes to the question of war? Is not there a vast difference between ideal individual character and behaviour on the one side, and an individual’s actual position and options (possibilities) with regard to war on the other? As to Chinese ethics and history: did the notion of *junzi* have any influence on concepts and occurrences of pacifism and war? And if so, in what respect? And how should we understand the *junzi*’s ideas about punishment and wars led in the name of humaneness?

In short, taking as starting point and focusing on the “Confucian” concept of *junzi*, I deal with what may be called “individual pacifism”—or more precisely, individual rejection or renunciation of war—and the impact such individual pacifism can and ought to have on decisions about war and peace. In so doing, I also speculate about combining a “rule of virtue” with a “rule of law”, thereby considering the role of individuals in 21st century wars. Finally, I utilize my results to propose a notion of pacifism that sharply contrasts with contemporary arguments in favour of wars, including those for uncompromising wars of defence.

**Keywords:** war, pacifism (renunciation of war), humaneness, ideal individual, governments

## Konfucijanski ideal osebe (osebnosti) in pacifizem

### Izvleček

Tako imenovano konfucijanstvo (*rujia* 儒家) je razvilo pojem idealne osebe (osebnosti), *junzi* 君子, ki se izogiba reševanju problemov ali odpravljanju nesoglasij z uporabo sile.

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Namesto tega, v skladu z načeli sočlovečnosti (*ren* 仁) in pravičnosti (*yi* 義), uporablja utemeljene argumente in to počne na primeren način, brez izkazovanja večvrednosti. Poleg tega *junzi* visoko ceni človeško dostojanstvo (*tianjue* 天爵, dob. »plemenitost neba«), to je individualno moralno avtonomijo, in se ne podreja skušnjavam moči, slave, javnega ugleda ali bogastva. Podobne ideje so se razvile tudi v evropski zgodovini. Očitno bi bili takšni idealni ljudje pacifisti, vendar pa so to le posamezniki, medtem ko vojne zadevajo cele narode in večje množice ljudi. Kakšno vlogo torej dejansko igra in sploh lahko igra idealni posameznik, ko gre za vprašanje vojne? Ali ni med idealnim značajem in vedenjem posameznika na eni ter dejanskim položajem in možnostmi (izbire) posameznika v zvezi z vojno na drugi strani velika razlika? Kar zadeva kitajsko etiko in zgodovino: ali je pojem *junzi* vplival na pojmovanje ter pojavljanje pacifizma in vojne? Če da, v kakšnem smislu? In kako naj razumemo *junzijeve* ideje o kaznovanju ter vojnah, ki se dogajajo v imenu sočlovečnosti?

Na kratko, »konfucijanski« pojem *junzi* si jemljem za izhodišče in fokus ter skozenj obravnavam to, kar bi lahko imenovali »individualni pacifizem« – ali natančneje, individualno zavračanje *vojne* oziroma odpoved *vojni* – ter vpliv, ki ga tak individualni pacifizem lahko ima in bi ga moral imeti na odločitve o vojni in miru. Podajam tudi razmislek o združevanju »vladavine kreposti« z »vladavino prava« ter s tem o vlogi posameznikov v vojnah 21. stoletja. Nazadnje na podlagi svojih ugotovitev predlagam pojem pacifizma, ki je v ostrem nasprotju s sodobnimi argumenti v prid vojnem, vključno s tistimi, ki zagovarjajo nekompromisne obrambne vojne.

**Ključne besede:** vojna, pacifizem (odpoved vojni), sočlovečnost, idealni posameznik, vlade

## Necessary Presuppositions and Foundations of Pacifism

Without adequate individual education *and* public, or political, freedom of mind and opinion, pacifism cannot develop. To be more precise: without an education that teaches solving problems by ways of argument, i.e. reliance on logic and general experience, especially everyday experience, and not by force or violence, and/or without a regime and public media that allow for the free expression of different views/convictions and a free exchange of arguments, a pacifist state (i.e., citizens who make a state a pacifist organization) will never come into being. In particular, individual education and the public expression of different views *must* include information about opposing theories and positions of other states, ideally also *from* these other states.

There are many pacifist theories, among them Kant's (1724–1804) impressive *Eternal Peace*, but there has never existed a radically pacifist state. There have been pacifist movements, but without lasting effect. Instead, even schoolbooks of countries such as Japan and China present one-sided views of their common history. By the way, this was the same with the schoolbooks of the German Democratic

Republic (i.e. East Germany) and the German Federal Republic (i.e. West Germany). Arabian or Palestinian and Israeli education, Russian and Ukrainian, Chinese and American education and politics, for example, are of a kind that makes respective mutual understanding almost impossible if people have no access to information *from* the “other side”. No wonder that even the two World Wars, Vietnam War, Second Iraq War, wars in the Near East, and the many wars in Africa, to mention only a view, did not prevent the outbreak of the Ukrainian and Gaza wars. In sum, and to say the least, a large number of the people of these countries simply lacked the information and, decisive, the pacifist education that would have enabled them to disbelieve (or at least reflect critically on) the official war propaganda, or, in other words, that would have made it impossible for the political powers to force “their people” into a war.

The word “pacifism” is used in different ways. For instance, in Germany politicians and scholars use qualifications like “pragmatic pacifism” or “enlightened pacifism”. But such expressions often serve to justify a war. Adherents of such positions regard radical opponents to any kind of war as hopelessly naïve, or even argue that their views are dangerous, actually encouraging other states to attack. When I speak of pacifism, I always refer to a conviction or position that radically rejects war. One need not reject individual self-defence, but can nevertheless *consistently* reject war. In Germany, the state defended compulsory military service by arguing that whoever approves of violent self-defence must also approve of war, for there could arise situations in which one, attacked in a war, could not but defend oneself by killing the attacker—an evidently invalid argument.

As far as I know, there has never existed a pacifist state in “Chinese” history. From the wars between the Shang 商 and the Zhou 周 (during the 11th century BCE) up until that between the Communists and Guomindang 国民党, many wars have occurred. There exist of course theories of peace, and perhaps certain Daoist lineages come close to a pacifist theory in demanding that one ought not to infer with the “natural way” of things. In such theories, wars are considered “unnatural” occurrences that result from (unacceptable) interference with self-organized (and self-determined) developments. This is not to say that such Daoist “schools” recommended interference with “unnatural” occurrences aiming at re-establishing natural states (or conditions). They rather recommended withdrawal from any participation in public life. Such withdrawal is of course, as far as it was or is possible, an individual reaction to a war that can probably be found in all civilizations that are not determined by what may be called a martial spirit (as *perhaps* the Alexandrian Macedonia). It may be protest or simple resignation, motivated by fear, disgust, ethical convictions, and so on. The *rujia* 儒家 (so-called Confucianism, but more appropriately called Ruism) condemned what it regarded as aggressive war but justified defensive war, especially if the defence, in the *rujia* view, was led in the name of *ren* 仁 and *yi* 義. However, the *rujia*

notion of defensive war was somewhat questionable, for it permitted (or even demanded) attacking a country that, according to the *rujia*, gravely violated *ren* and/or *yi*, even if this country had not attacked (and did not plan to attack) one’s own country (see Paul 2003). This notion may remind one of the contemporary idea of humane intervention that was utilized to justify the “Western” violation of international law by attacking Yugoslavia (in the 1990s) or Libya (in 2011). *Humaneness overrules law is the guiding norm in such cases.*

Instead of dealing with Daoist or *rujia* theories of war and peace that do not include any *uncompromising* theory of *pacifism*, I prefer to discuss the *rujia* notion of an ideal person (*junzi* 君子) who, perhaps in contradiction to *rujia* intentions, by only slight modification would make an ideal pacifist. Put another way: the *rujia* theory of learning (from others) *and* of self-perfection can be understood as guidance for becoming a pacifist (*though this was probably not intended*). Since one of the basic *rujia* ideas of government is the notion of a rule of virtue, this idea emphasizes the role of the individuals in power, thus supporting the idea of the importance of becoming a *junzi*. It also establishes a connection (even a logical one) between individual and state (government) pacifism. However, the idea of a rule of virtue sharply contrasts with the idea of rule of law. This points to certain well-known problems.

After sketching the *rujia* notion of *junzi*, I argue that *consistent with the basic features* of this notion, and leaving aside that *rujia* philosophers advocated what they regarded as wars in the name of humaneness, being a *junzi* amounts to being a pacifist. Then I discuss the relations between the concepts of rule of virtue and rule of law, thereby also referring to recent and contemporary wars. In the final section I propose combining the elements “education”, “ideal (pacifist) person”, “rule of virtue”, and “rule of law” to formulate an uncompromising theory of pacifism. Much of what I say may be well known. In earlier publications, I have already addressed some of the same topics, especially the *rujia* notion of *junzi*. What is perhaps “new”, is the attempt to *utilize* these ideas to *develop* a comprehensive notion of an uncompromising pacifism that could be of systematic, and thus actual, relevance.

To emphasize an important aim, often misunderstood or even rejected: I am *not* simply contextually interpreting Chinese theories or describing occurrences in Chinese history, but attempt to utilize Chinese philosophy (more precisely: philosophy developed in China) by abstracting from its particular theoretical and historical contexts to develop a systematic concept of universally valid presuppositions of pacifism. Such a concept need not neglect the cultural particularities that could and ought to be preserved, for otherwise inhumanity would increase instead of being diminished. For instance, different (peaceful) religious beliefs could of course exist side by side.

## The Ideal *Rujia* Character (*Junzi*) as a Peace-Loving Virtuous and Wise Person(ality)

Like several other theories, classic *rujia* philosophy, as put forward in the *Lunyu* 論語, *Mengzi* 孟子, and *Xunzi* 荀子, emphasizes the importance of learning. Perhaps John Locke (1632–1704) and “modern” Behaviourism, and the idea of the mind as a *tabula rasa*, may be regarded as (at least implicitly) similar theories. However, there is a significant difference. Classic *rujia* does not maintain that humans are merely product of environmental influences (determinations). In other words, according to classic *rujia*, learning is not merely a function of environmental (external) factors, but also a function of inborn faculties shared by all humans as human beings. While the *Lunyu* and *Mengzi* maintain that we are by nature good, and that this is the basis and guarantee that, in principle, all of us are able to become humane and righteous persons, the *Xunzi* maintains that we are by nature bad, but since this classic also states that, in principle, *everybody* can become a *junzi*, and furthermore clearly implies that this is possible because everybody has *by nature* the respective abilities, the Mencian and Xunzian notions of the good and bad nature of man turn out to be simply results of different language uses (see Paul 1990, 116, note 169). The fact that Behaviourism has been thoroughly and definitely refuted, strengthens the idea that *all humans* can become humane and righteous persons, *since, independent from environment, all of them possess by nature* respective capabilities.

A new investigation entitled “The Evolution of Violence” perhaps supports the *rujia* approach. It comes to the conclusion that during 99% of the 2.5 million years of human evolution there was no war, and that it is *only a small number of individuals* who are actually responsible for wars—for initiating wars and forcing people to engage in them—while the vast majority wants peace (Meller, Michel and van Schaik 2024, 46, 330).<sup>1</sup> It is not that humans are by nature bad that wars occur. And wars are no inescapable human fate. Though Xunzi (3rd century BCE) and Kant held that (in a certain sense) humans are by nature bad, they also showed that a humane world is possible. The question of human nature is at best misleading. We are neither devils nor angels. In sum: it is a fact that it is certain *individuals* (especially powerful rulers and politicians) who are ultimately to blame for the occurrence of war. *They want war*.

Now, one thing is clear, trivial and evident, and it is precisely this point that the *Xunzi* emphasizes: without learning, nobody can become an ideal person, a *junzi*. It is because of this reason that the *Xunzi* stresses that education is help,

1 The authors refer to the evolution of the species *homo* since about 2,5 million years ago. As to the more than 300.000 years old history of the *homo sapiens*, wars occurred only during the last 4% of this period.

and ought to be understood as such. Thereby, learning comprises learning from others *and* cultivating oneself. “Others” are teachers, friends, and even accidental acquaintances. To Confucius (551–479 BCE) is attributed the saying: “When I walk along with two others, they may serve me as my teachers. I will select their good qualities and follow them, their bad qualities and avoid them” (*Analects* n.d., “Shu Er”, 22). Thinking of cases such as Caspar Hauser or “wolf-children”, one may add that even survival would be impossible without learning, without instruction by others. “Oneself” can refer to one’s own attempts of cultivation, such as by intensively and persistently studying teachings and practicing certain kinds of behaviour.

To put it plainly: without instruction by others, we cannot develop into humane beings, and probably not even survive. Instruction is thus a kind of help and ought to be thankfully acknowledged as such. Now, what precise and specific goals should be pursued and what methods should be applied in learning, i.e. education and self-cultivation? How, and in what sense, could this contribute to “generating” pacifists?

In my view the most impressive statement in this regard is found in the *Xunzi*. It says that whoever makes an assertion without supporting it by reason is looking for, provoking, or seeking a quarrelling. There are of course other translations/interpretations of “*bian er bu shuo zhe zheng ye*” (辯而不說者爭也) (*Xunzi* n.d., 4),<sup>2</sup> but in my opinion the meaning of the statement is clear, namely, that without rationally (logically and/or empirically) supporting a position, one “invites” violence. Applying the logical law of contraposition—by the way not only explicitly formulated and applied by Aristotle, but also in Chinese texts<sup>3</sup>—it follows that *whoever rationally justifies a position, does not provoke violence*. Of course, one evident implication of the statement is that one ought to avoid violence. Now, the quoted phrase and its conversion express a norm or maxim of ideal discussion or disputation and of how to solve problems “peacefully”.<sup>4</sup> One may comment that everybody would agree with the Xunzian demand that problems should be solved non-violently, and that therefore such an idea does not mean much if not explained in detail. However, the *Xunzi* offers an elaborate and detailed explanation of how conflicts and problems should *and could* peacefully be solved by argumentative discourse. But before turning to this explanation, I must come back to the *Xunzi*’s (and to a certain extent also to the *Lunyu*’s and *Mengzi*’s) theory of education, for after all: *the capability to solve problems by argumentative discourse presupposes adequately educated participants*.

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2 More “literal”: “Who discusses/argues without explaining, [provokes] quarrelling.” In my understanding, I follow Köster (1967, 30).

3 See Paul (2022, 53). This law is applied already in the *Shijing* 詩經.

4 From a general logical point of view, this would also imply peacefully solving the conflicts that arise between different countries.



According to classic *rujia*, education and/or teaching could mean conveying knowledge, admonishing, criticizing, and/or exercising influence by being an exemplary example (role model)<sup>5</sup> of right and good behaviour. Since everybody can make mistakes, classic *rujia* emphasizes the necessity and importance of criticism. This is to say that, if one is wrong, one ought to be “confronted” with views (convictions, positions, etc.) and/or practices that contradict one’s own convictions and behaviour. That one’s own convictions or behaviour are wrong can only be realized by being told or shown what is “right”. Generally speaking, the one-sidedness which results from a closed, uninformed mind ought to be avoided. But one can avoid this only if there are different sources of instruction. Even superiors, rulers included, if they severely violate *ren* or *yi*, ought to be admonished. The *Xunzi* takes into account that we (usually) do not appreciate being criticized, but (as indicated) argues that we should realize that justified criticism is help, and that one therefore ought to be thankful for it. *Education, teaching, and instructing ought to be carried out in a rational and, to avoid emotional resistance, becoming way and thankfully regarded as help.*

There is, however, one problem with the *rujia* notion of *junzi*. This normative notion not only permits but even asks for violent action against those the *rujia* considers incorrigible opponents, and it advocates attacking a state (country) that severely violates the virtues of *ren* and *yi*. Within the historical context of the Warring states, this can be understood and explained. As mentioned above, even in the 21st century the idea of a humane intervention is justified and followed by certain politicians and scholars. *Rujia* philosophers conceived of such wars as a particular kind of defensive wars, namely wars by which virtue is defended. These wars are not led to protect one’s own country—which would be justified only if one’s country were a virtuous one. In other words, classic *rujia* (at least implicitly) held that one’s own country would deserve to be attacked by another one if one’s country gravely violated the rules of humaneness, and if the attack aimed at (re-)establishing a humane government, etc. However, history has shown that even wars that were *not a reaction to an attack by a foreign aggressor*, have been justified as defensive, although they were in fact aggressive. But such deliberations do not alter the fact that classic *rujia* advocated a too narrow notion of freedom of mind and tolerance that ultimately cannot be justified. Since, from a logical point of view, *Xunzi*’s conception of argumentative problem solving permits for a wider notion, and since the *Book of Xunzi* itself is open to the historical changes of a doctrine, it is legitimate to utilize its teachings by way of a generalized abstraction.

In sum, the *ultimate goal of education and learning* is to make a person an ideal human being (*junzi*), a person who in thinking and acting follows the *Dao*. The

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5 Ames and Rosemont (1998, 60, 62) translate *junzi* as “exemplary person”.

*Dao* is the right way of human thought and action, and the rules and maxims guiding both. It is characterized by humaneness (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), *pleasing* (conventionally established and accepted “beautiful”) behaviour (*li* 禮), and knowledge (*zhi* 智). In the given context it should suffice to state that the virtues referred to evidently imply that a *junzi* should behave (think and/or act) humanely (benevolently, empathically, generously, etc.), justly, appreciatively, and based on valid knowledge. In what follows, I offer some detailed explanations of these terms.

## Education for Peace

### *Discussion, Dispute, and Criticism as Means of Non-violent Problem Solving*

According to the *rujia* classics, and especially to the *Xunzi*, the participants in an acceptable (or ideal) discussion (a *peaceful* dispute) should live up to the following standards and abide by the following rules.

1. Heart-and-mind (*xin* 心) should be in harmony, i.e. accord, with the *Dao* (*xin he yu dao* 心合於道) (e.g., *Lunyu* n.d., 16.6; *Xunzi* n.d., 22 (“Zheng-ming”); Hutton 2014, 241; Dubs 1972, 500; Watson 1967, 147; Köster 1967, 294.
2. Statements (or propositions) should be in harmony with the heart-and-mind (*shuo he yu xin* 說合於心). That is to say that one should be upright, honest, and trustworthy (*xin*, *zhi*). One ought to live up to one’s words, and one’s actions should be in line with them. The Chinese expression *xin* 信 implies all these meanings.
3. One should be modest, self-critical, polite and tolerant (*kuan* 寬, *rong* 容), explaining things to others with sympathy / benevolence (*yi ren xin shuo* 以仁心說) and in a beautiful, becoming way (*wen*, following *li*), while listening to them patiently, attentively and eager to learn (*yi xue xin ting* 以學心聽).
4. One ought to take into account the concrete and specific circumstances of a discussion, especially by watching others’ facial expressions (*Xunzi* n.d., 1; Dubs 1972, 18; Watson 1967, 21–23; Köster 1967, 8–10; Hutton 2014, 6–7).
5. One’s statements should be meaningful and as comprehensible as possible, namely:
  - (5a) clear, without mystification, sophisms and paradoxes, unambiguous, objective and coherent (*lei* 類, *lun* 論, *fa* 法, *ci he yu shuo* 辭合於說);
  - (5b) compatible with the established conventions of naming (designation) and grammar (*zhengming* 正名);



- (5c) free of contradictions (*bu fu* 不拂, *ci he yu shuo* 辭合於說);
- (5d) supported by reasons, for otherwise quarrels could arise (*bian er bu shuo zhe zheng ye* 辯而不說者爭也) (*Xunzi* n.d., 4);<sup>6</sup> and
- (5e) compatible with human experience and sensory perception (*yuan tian guan* 緣天官), implying that what is conceived of in the same way (*tong shi* 同實) ought to be named (designated) in the same way (*tong ming* 同名), etc.

The relevant passage in the *Xunzi* runs:

When the heart-and-mind accords with the *dao*, when explanations accord with the heart-and-mind, when phrases [*ci*] accord with explanations, when the correct designations [*zheng ming*] are formed into combinations, when terms are founded on realities and are [thus] understandable, when differences are distinguished without going too far, when classifications are made without contradicting what is right [*bu bei* 不悖], then one can listen in a refined manner, and in disputating [*bian bian*] can exhaust all reasons. (*Xunzi* n.d., 22; Dubs 1972, 500–03; Watson 1967, 147–49; Knoblock 1988–1994, III: 133; Köster 1967, 293–95; Hutton 2014, 241)

心合於道，說合於心，辭合於說。正名而期，質請而喻，辨異而不過，推類而不悖。聽則合文，辨則盡故。

Rule (2), which implies that speech should be in harmony, or concur, with the *Dao*, reminds one of the correspondence theory of truth according to which a statement is true if it accords with reality. Further, like rule (5), rule (2) seems to imply that statements must be true to be acceptable. (5c) can be interpreted as a criterion of formal truth. However, it would be wrong to conclude that classic *rujia* ethics demanded that speech *must* be true to be acceptable. Given the aim to realize *Dao* and *ren*, the crucial criterion of acceptability was not truth but moral effectiveness. Lies, especially white lies, were regarded as tolerable means for furthering *ren*, with the *Lunyu* providing a number of examples (*Lunyu* n.d., 13.18, 17.20).

To complete my reconstruction of the *rujia* methods of ideal disputation, i.e. argumentation as non-violent ways of problem solving, I recall that, according to the three classics, disputations should not be insincere or carping, and *not be guided, determined, or marked by such things as lust for power, anxiety, longing for*

6 More literally: “Who discusses/argues without explaining, [provokes] quarrelling.” In my understanding, I follow Köster (1967, 30).

*fame, personal relations, material interests, flattery, and insults.* Lust for power especially can be, and in history often was, a source of war and brutal violence.

One cannot overestimate the maxim that education, and in particular criticism, must be carried out in a becoming way. Criticized people must not feel insulted or disrespected. They must not get the impression that the critics themselves do not live up to the norms they profess (which would ultimately amount to violating the law of non-contradiction), or that the critics (want to) display intellectual and/or moral superiority, and (thus) force them into “acceptance”.

### *Mencius’ and Kant’s Conceptions of Human Dignity as Anti-war Norms*

There is another, *rather fundamental*, approach to theoretically solving the problem of war and peace. This is suggested by two of the most eminent philosophers from “China” and “the West”, namely Mencius (4th century BCE) and Kant. Both assert, and emphasize, that all humans—as humans—possess dignity, and both demand that this dignity ought to be respected and protected. Moreover, contemporary Western constitutions such as the German one (which is strongly influenced by Kant) are based on the conviction that “human dignity is inviolable”, implying that it must not be violated. Now, *if this would be taken seriously, compulsory military service and war would be impossible. Even defensive wars would be impossible, for there is no war which does not violate human dignity.* One horrible example is the current war in Gaza, which Israel, many European countries, the German government included, and the USA regard as a defensive war. This war neglects the dignity of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. The Israeli military kills masses of innocent people, children included, disables them, destroys their houses, drives them from their homes and forces them to fight for food and water.<sup>7</sup> It even bombs hospitals and schools, justifying this by explaining that Hamas uses them as military bases. However, “modern” missile and drone wars often leave the attacked military no alternative. If it does not have the means to defend itself against missiles and drones, it would be completely destroyed if it did not hide itself and/or keep its “equipment” in civilian sites. Missile and drone wars are no longer fought on battlefields or at sea. Since all politicians and military leaders know this very well, and moreover usually pay lip-service to the idea of human dignity, they, by approving missile and drone attacks, intentionally and consciously let innocent people be killed (i.e. murdered), and if not killed otherwise disgraced and humiliated. To just murder persons, of course, means to attribute no value to them as human beings. However, and to

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<sup>7</sup> I wrote this in May 2025. On July 21, the UK and 25 other nations published a joint statement on the Gaza war in which they accused the Israeli government of “depriving Gazans of human dignity” (Gov.UK 2025). On October 10, a cease-fire was arranged, but has been violated several times.

avoid a grave misunderstanding, criticizing the war in Gaza does in no way mean (or imply) justifying the Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the massacre of Israelis.

Though my argument that the problem of war and peace could be solved if human dignity were respected may be logically valid, it may indeed appear rather naïve, utopian, or simply unrealistic. But again: appropriate education could help in establishing conditions favourable to pursuing the goal of taking the protection of human dignity seriously. Since all humans very well understand what oppression, derogation, humiliation, or simply pain means, and since this has been explained for thousands of years in different teachings of different cultures, the norm of inviolable human dignity is easily appreciated, and thus its value may even be felt. In other words: if one is not in a position to act as one pleases, personal individual emotions strongly support this norm.

I have dealt with the concept of human dignity rather extensively and in detail elsewhere,<sup>8</sup> but some explanations may be warranted. Though Kant's concept of human dignity may be rather well known, the respective Mencian notion is not. Some scholars even deny that he developed a notion of individual human dignity, maintaining that he put forward a "mere" role ethics.<sup>9</sup> But it simply cannot be denied that Mencius asserts that every individual human—by virtue of being human—possesses a "nobility of Heaven" (*tianjue* 天爵) that nobody can take away from him. Only the individual human being himself (or herself) can violate and even destroy this nobility by disgracing or humiliating himself (or herself).<sup>10</sup> On this point, Mencius's notion differs significantly from the Kantian one, according to which it is impossible to lose one's dignity. However, regarding the meaning of disgrace and humiliation, both are in almost complete agreement, and are easily understood, for they both maintain that such derogation consists in letting one's morally significant decisions and actions be determined by egoistic interests or other people. For instance, one ought not to be influenced by any interest in power, fame or money. One must not prostitute oneself, not accept bribery, nor bribe others, not to mention that one must not murder or torture others. In sum, with any such actions one would, according to Mencius and Kant, disrespect one's own dignity. Mencius went even further than Kant in this regard, stating that one should commit suicide rather than accept being not respected. *Ideal Ruist persons simply do not, and must not, permit to be humiliated, and must not humiliate themselves. They defend or protect their individual dignity at all costs.*<sup>11</sup> Sima

8 See for instance Paul (2024; 2022; 1990), and Ommerborn, Paul and Roetz (2011).

9 So does Gassmann (2016).

10 See Mencius (n.d., "Gaozi I", 16 and 17).

11 Kant and Schiller (1759–1805) would rather "idealistically" have argued that one should try to withstand humiliation by making oneself aware that one's dignity simply cannot be destroyed. In other words, like a martyr one should behave as if one's fate were one's own decision.

Qian (c. 145 BCE–c. 86 BCE) and others basically agreed with Mencius. Emperors like the first Ming emperor Hongwu 洪武帝 (1328–1398, ruled 1368–1398) hated Mencius’s teachings. This emperor even had his own edition of the *Book Mencius* produced in which all passages that advocated insisting on one’s moral autonomy, even if this contradicted the politics of a ruler, were omitted. In other words: there exists a strong Chinese ethical tradition according to which disgrace (in the sense of not defending one’s dignity and/or public reputation) must be avoided, even if this means killing oneself.

The extraordinary emphasis with which Mencius argued that it is oneself (and not anyone else) who is responsible for maintaining one’s moral integrity, leads to the conclusion (also pointed out, for instance, by Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910)) that lasting peace can only be achieved if (almost) every individual (honestly) wants it. Ultimately, it is not certain groups, and not even governments, that are responsible for peace—it is every single individual person. This, in turn, again shows the necessity of adequate education of all people.

In sum: since war would be impossible if individual human dignity were to be respected, and since the idea of individual human dignity has been, in a similar way, convincingly put forward in different times and traditions—with classic *ru-jia* highlighting this idea of dignity<sup>12</sup>—and since this idea, especially in its understanding of derogation, concurs with common knowledge and feelings, it could certainly be used for developing a viable and convincing pacifism. Its so-called “idealistic” or “utopian” features notwithstanding, the idea of individual human dignity ought to become a central part of an education that aims at making war finally impossible.

## Deficiencies of the Rule of Virtue and the Rule of Law

Xunzi advocated a “rule of virtue”, i.e. government by wise and noble men (*jun-zi*), and so did Plato (c. 428–348 BCE) in arguing that philosophers should rule. In contrast, Karl Popper (1902–1994), strongly criticizing Plato, argued in favour of a rule of law (see Popper 1966). The basic intention, however, was the same: to

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12 I often wonder about the great interest in finding out and emphasizing differences between “Western” and “Eastern” cultures, even at the cost of denying such evident and significant similarities that exist between the Mencian and Kantian notions of individual human dignity. To be sure, it is Western scholars in particular who do this. But why? Are they afraid of being accused of reading “Western” ideas in Chinese texts? Afraid of being accused of a kind of cultural centrism? Of cultural “imperialism”? Or victims of their interest in finding an existentially significant alternative to what they (wrongly) regard as Western logo-centrism? Looking for “Eastern” spirituality? The so-called Chinese modern Confucian philosophers tend instead to stressing the similarities between Mencius and Kant, to mention only Mou Zongsan (Mou Tsung-san) 牟宗三 (1909–1995), Li Zehou 李泽厚 (1930–2021), and Li Minghui (Lee Ming-huei) 李明辉.

make sure that government serves the people, i.e. that it is humane, and that rulers do not abuse their power. Adherents to the concept of a rule of virtue believe that virtuous and wise people live up to such demands *simply because of their virtue and wisdom*. Adherents to the concept of a rule of law are convinced that all rulers and politicians are liable to sooner or later falling to the temptations of power if not subjected to laws that preclude this. Now, the second war against Iraq, the war between Russia and Ukraine, and the war in Gaza show beyond doubt that individual politicians (in these cases George W. Bush, Putin, and Netanyahu), *in spite of existent laws* (or in spite of formally being subjected to a rule of law), can ruthlessly abuse their power. Even the democratic systems in the US and Israel cannot prevent this. The case of Putin is of course a special one. While the US and Israel are certainly not acceptable democracies, Russia is this even less. In other words, the rule of law, as it exists in the 21st century, is proving to be inefficient even if comes to the question of the life and death of thousands, if not millions of people. This does not only apply to countries like the US and Israel, but even those like Germany where individual politicians (e.g. Merz, Pistorius, Baerbock, Strack-Zimmermann), probably against the will of the majority of people, in one way or the other support, or further, involvement in wars. Though individual politicians who support war do so, as they say, in the name of humaneness, their motives are at least questionable, for while they are usually the last who suffer from a war, they accept that more and more people will be killed, tortured, raped, severely injured, driven out of their homes, suffer hunger and thirst, their houses destroyed, not to mention all the other evils war inevitably brings with. Tolstoy was of the opinion that the leading politicians of a state, *because of the character (structure) of a state as state*, could not but fall to the temptations of power. Consequently, he favoured a kind of anarchism. And indeed, 21st century wars urge us to look for a form of government, or more generally, a form of organization of human societies in general, that in a new way takes into account both the virtues and wisdom of politicians, and rules that make it actually impossible that the state government has the power to initiate or engage in war. The classic *rujia* idea of *junzi* certainly is a notion of an ideal politician. Even Chinese history, however, shows that such a politician never determined Chinese politics. And if there ever were such ideal persons in Chinese history they did not become rulers. Chinese emperors who claimed to admire Confucius paid only lip service to classic *rujia* ethics. The Chinese saying *wai ru nei fa* 外儒内法—outwardly *ru*, i.e. “Confucian” and humane, inwardly/in truth *fa*, i.e. actually Legalist (and cruel)—expresses just this.

There is no alternative to striving for both: the education of ideal persons and a rule of law that excludes being violated by politicians such as Bush, Putin, and Netanyahu—leaving aside the even much more severe cases of Hitler, Stalin and Mao (who were no part of a rule-of-law system). But here we are in a vicious cycle. If there is no adequate education, governments—i.e. the people who make up

a government—will in all probability gravely violate rules of humaneness. And if (an actual) government gravely violates rules of humaneness, it will probably not permit any critical education. In a state of war, pacifist education is impossible.

Russian, Israeli, Palestinian, and even contemporary German politics and public media do not offer their people, and especially their school children, all the different, and often contradicting, information necessary to arrive at a logically and empirically founded valid conclusion. One has to know about all the reasons why a war was started, and about all the evils that not only one’s own people, but also those of the “enemy”, suffer. One even has to know the evils of an uncompromising war of defence. Hence, it is particularly notable that those people who need such information are prevented by their own governments and media from accessing it. To put it briefly: states that lead wars do not offer sufficient information about the alternative of abstaining from war, and lacking such information people are liable to believe in war propaganda.

Up until now neither the idea of a rule of virtue nor the idea of a rule of law has prevented wars. First of all, there has never been a rule of virtue in human history. In other words, there have never existed states that were actually ruled by ideal persons. Either rulers who seemed to be ideal persons ultimately fell to the temptations of power, or the existing conditions simply did not permit an ideal person to become a ruler. The idea of a rule of law has also proved problematic. Democracies like the US are responsible for a number of cruel wars and even for systematic torture, thus violating some of the most important international laws we have. To a certain extent, classic *rujia* and Daoist criticism of (or scepticism regarding) law is certainly true: there are always people who “ingeniously” find ways to violate a law, and the more sophisticated a law is, the more “intelligent” are its violations. Awareness of this problem may lead to an ever increasing number and specification of laws, finally severely restricting human freedom. (Many Germans, for example, regard the German laws about environmental protection as a kind of dictatorship.) Even more problematic, however, is the fact that whoever holds power *can use existing laws to undermine the rule of law*, especially by more or less doing away with an efficient division of power(s), or by simply enticing a majority of parliamentarians to vote for increasing their power.

### **How to Establish Civilizations that Make War Impossible. The Lessons of Xunzi, Mencius, Kant and Popper in Light of 21st Century Wars**

To repeat: without a kind of education that realizes the goals put forward in the *Xunzi*, as outlined above, lasting peace would in all probability be impossible. These goals can be summed up as the aim of making a person a *junzi* without,



however, the animosity even classic Ruism showed in dealing with its philosophical opponents. This conclusion may appear somewhat old-fashioned or untimely, but it remains valid (or true). It simply amounts to stating that without knowledgeable and morally integer politicians, peace cannot be safely secured, and that without the appropriate education—which presupposes/implies appropriate general education—such politicians cannot be “produced”. But even in a country like Germany, such an education is next to impossible. For, and this is the above-mentioned vicious cycle, such an education already presupposes a government of *junzi*.

Perhaps all that can be safely said is that combining a rule of law and a rule of virtue must include a balance and division of power, and criteria and procedures for selecting only virtuous and knowledgeable people as politicians. The history of democracies offers a wealth of ideas for establishing a rule of law. However, how to select “ideal politicians” without interfering with a person’s “privacy”? And by making sure that the person will not use lies to initiate or support war?

There are of course some possibilities to exclude evil or unsuitable people from becoming rulers, ministers, governors, or parliamentarians. They are well known, but as far as I know were never completely realized. To qualify for an influential political position one ought to have concluded at least basic school education, must have spent some time in a “real job”, must not be professional politician, and must (if elected) not break election promises.

To come to a final conclusion: until now, all so-called realistic or practical policies have failed to achieve lasting peace. This is because as long as military states, and/or democracies like the present ones, exist, wars will occur. And such states will only then be replaced by (organized) communities that can and will be absolutely peaceful ones, if people are offered appropriate education. Thus, from a logical point of view the best thing—and ironically, the only *really realistic* way to achieve and secure “eternal peace”—is to step by step try to realize the ideal of moral integrity.<sup>13</sup> This ideal should be understood as the most important guiding idea of politics. Though politicians like Gandhi (1869–1948), Willy Brandt (1913–1992), Mandela (1918–2013), or Gorbachev (1931–2022) were certainly not ideal people or personalities, their international politics was not power politics. In this respect, it was a step in the right direction. However, it was not accompanied by an education for peace. On the contrary. In 2025, education in India, Pakistan, Germany, and Russia even tells, and “teaches”, young people that they ought to prepare for war.

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13 To avoid any misunderstanding: this does not mean that ascetic, oppressive regimes of morality should be established.

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