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Comparing Confucius and Cicero: Problems and Possibilities

As author of this contribution, I have to start with some clarifications. I am not a Cicero specialist. I am a Latinist and as such have read quite a bit of Cicero, and I have taught Cicero, but I am not a Cicero specialist. And it is worse concerning ‘the other side’. Because my professional life developed as it did, at some point I came to China, learned, to a certain – limited – extent, Chinese, and – many years ago – read the Lunyu in the original. But I am not a sinologist, let alone a Confucius specialist. So what could have induced the organizers of this comparative enterprise to invite me to participate? It must have been the fact that I have done some work in the field of comparative studies between the Greco-Roman world and China: on Greek, Roman, and Chinese historiography,¹ on the concept of empire in China and Rome,² and on the Homeric epics and the Chinese Book of Songs as foundational texts.³ Thus, I assume that I am expected to comment on the comparison of Confucius and Cicero from a relatively general perspective, discussing both problems and possibilities that come into view when approaching this task.

1 Problems

It may be best to start with what the initiators of the project announced in their invitational letter as its purpose: a “scientific comparison between the two intellectuals, i.e. Confucius and Cicero, taken as symbols of their respective cultural worlds”. This formulation seems to indicate that the ultimate interest of the organizers lay in expanding our understanding of the commonalities and differences between Chinese and Western civilizations in toto, and that they believed that a comparison of Confucius and Cicero could serve this aim. If this is so, there arise at least two questions: 1. Is the relationship between Confucius and

I am grateful to Achim Mittag and Heiner Roetz for commenting on an earlier version of this paper.

1 During the period from Mutschler (1997) to Mutschler (2015).
2 Mutschler/Mittag (2008).
Cicero and between their respective cultural worlds really as similar as the commonly applied term “symbol of” indicates? 2. Is the concrete material we have in both cases so similar as to allow for a direct comparison? I think that these questions point to certain problems concerning the significance and feasibility of the intended comparison; problems, however, that can be dealt with and need not deter us from the undertaking as a whole.

I start with the first question concerning Confucius and Cicero as “symbols of their cultural worlds” and, taking literature as a case in point, I will state: only if two authors (or groups of authors) or two texts (or groups of texts) can be considered as representative of the larger cultural entities to which they belong is it reasonable to assume that the results of comparing them will also be meaningful for the comparison of the larger entities. Let me give two examples from my own work. When, by and by, I became acquainted with Chinese Classical texts, I realized that the occupation with the past played a similarly important role in early China as it did in ancient Greece and Rome. Thus, historiography appeared as a potentially interesting object of comparative research, since a society’s relation to its past is an important aspect of its cultural character, and since there seemed to be texts that could be directly juxtaposed and investigated. The problem was that there were actually many more texts than could be analyzed by one individual.⁴ So a selection had to be made, but it had to be a selection that would guarantee that the comparison of selected texts would reveal something about the two (or three) historiographic traditions in their entirety. In the end, my idea was to concentrate on the ‘classics’, i.e. on works that from a certain point had achieved recognition as exemplary models and thus had exercised a formative influence on their respective traditions.⁵ My assumption was that the observation of commonalities and differences between this limited number of works – because of their status as ‘classics’ – would be meaningful not only for these works themselves but also for Chinese, Greek, and Roman historiography in general.

It was a similar idea that drove me to initiate more recently a conference on “The Homeric Epics and the Chinese Book of Songs”.⁶ These two textual corpora are not just the fountainheads of the Chinese and Western literary traditions; for centuries, they played a central role in education and communal life and thus

⁵ Thus I had the works of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Polybius represent Greek historiography, the works of Sallust, Livy and Tacitus represent Roman historiography, and the Book of Documents, the Spring and Autumn Annals, the Zuozhuan, and Sima Qian’s Shiji represent Chinese historiography.
exercised a lasting influence on both civilizations. They are true foundational texts. A comparison could therefore be expected not only to inform us about the commonalities and differences between these texts themselves but also to lead us to a deeper understanding of Chinese and Western civilizations, their common human basis, and their characteristic differences in general.

Independently of whether, in these two concrete cases, one finds the selection of authors or texts convincing, I believe that the reflections underpinning it are valid. Thus the question we have to ask is whether Confucius and Cicero – or the texts we have from and about them – are representative for the ‘cultural worlds’ to which they belong to the same degree as the Homeric epics and the Book of Songs are for these same worlds, or as the historical ‘classics’ are for their respective historiographic traditions.

As far as Confucius is concerned, one can certainly argue for such a view. From his teaching grew a school of thought that after some time reached the status of a kind of state-ideology. Confucianism, as we Westerners are accustomed to call it, succeeded in remaining in a privileged position for more than two thousand years. The ‘Confucian’ Classics served as the basis for the imperial examination and thus exercised an enormous influence, not only in the sphere of ideas but also in the socio-political sphere. In this sense, one is justified in considering Confucius as one of the most representative figures of Chinese civilization or, if we want, as a ‘symbol of his cultural world’.

The situation is different with Cicero. There has never developed a Ciceronianism in the West that would correspond to Eastern Confucianism. Cicero’s writings have not become the privileged object of research and teaching at any governmental institution. Nowhere has Ciceronian thought served the ethical-political orientation of a political elite for an extended period. No state examinations for the recruitment of civil servants were held anywhere with Ciceronian texts as their basis. All of this means that Cicero has not influenced Western civilization with the same intensity with which Confucius can be said to have influenced Chinese civilization or even Asian culture writ large. It does not mean,
however, that Cicero is not representative of Western civilization at all, but it means that he is so to a lesser extent and in other ways than Confucius. If we compare him with the Chinese sage in order to learn more about China and the West we have to keep this difference in mind.

Then there is the second question as to what material a comparative study of Confucius and Cicero has at its disposal. Here another problem arises. The amount and kind of evidence that is available in both cases is very different. For Confucius, we do not have any undoubtedly authentic text. The Lunyu (the Conversations or rather the Collected Sayings) in all probability contain authentic material, but it is disputed when the text found the form in which we have it, and which of its parts really go back to the time of Confucius.¹¹ Also disputed is his exact relationship to the ‘Confucian’ Classics like the Shujing (Book of Documents) or the Chunqiu (Spring and Autumn Annals), with Western sinologists being rather skeptical concerning his editorship – let alone authorship – of any of these works.¹² Finally, the first biography we have appears in Sima Qian’s Record of the Historian, which came into being about 350 years after Confucius’ death. Thus, every representation of Confucius’ life and thought has to work with assumptions, inferences, and reconstructions. With Cicero the situation is very different. Thanks to his own testimony, in particular his letters, and to the testimony of others, his life is probably better documented than that of any other person of Greco-Roman antiquity. In addition, there are his works. His speeches, treatises on rhetoric, and philosophical writings are, to a large extent, preserved and offer access to his thinking. The contrast with Confucius is striking and, though it need not deter us from comparing the two, it is obvious that such a comparison demands particular reflection on the available material and on the problem of what information it can provide and what not.

With these monenda in mind, I will look now at three subjects which it seems both possible and worthwhile to investigate: first, Confucian and Ciceronian ethics as presented in the Lunyu and De officiis; second, the role of ren and humanitas in Confucius’ and Cicero’s thinking; and, third, the personalities of Confucius and Cicero in their potential capacity as role models. In each case, I will not provide any final word on the subject but only point to some possible avenues of research including their pitfalls.

¹¹ See now e.g. Hunter (2017).
¹² For a comprehensive discussion see Nylan (2001).
2 Possibilities

2.1 The ethics of the Lunyu and of De officiis

The renown and impact of Confucius is first of all connected with his ethics, an ethics that is, to be sure, conceived of as general, but aims in particular at those active in or about to enter the political sphere. The text on which knowledge of his ethics rests, and whose continuous tradition of interpretation and commentary constituted the heart of Confucianism as it developed over the course of time, is the Lunyu. As far as Confucius is concerned, it is, obviously, this text that will have to serve as the basis of our investigation.

Cicero discusses ethical questions in many of his literary productions: in his speeches, in his philosophical writings, of course, and also in some of his letters. To take all these texts into account would be quite arduous and, in addition, there would be an imbalance with the Lunyu in mere quantity. Fortunately, however, there is one text that by itself can serve as a counter-piece to Confucius’ Collected Sayings: Cicero’s last major work, De officiis. Several characteristics qualify it for comparison with the Lunyu. Cicero speaks here in his own name and not through any persona as in many of his other philosophical writings. The subject of the treatise is his basic ethical ideas, and he presents them to his son, who is approaching the age of entering a public career. Written towards the end of his life, De officiis represents Cicero’s final statements on the issues discussed. Finally, to touch upon the question of representativeness, De officiis is the one philosophical text of Cicero’s that has been received most intensely through the centuries, with readers from the elder Pliny to the church-fathers, from the medieval philosophers to the Renaissance humanists, from a reformer like Melanchthon to stars of the enlightenment like Montesquieu and Voltaire. Thus, even if it may not compare to the Lunyu in terms of concrete socio-political impact, its impact on the Western history of ideas is such that at least a certain general representativeness – and in this respect a certain equality with the Lunyu – cannot be denied to it.

There is, however, also a point in which the positions that the Lunyu and De officiis hold within their respective cultural traditions differ. This difference has

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14 See Zielinski (1929) and Altman (2015).
to be noted as well, and it can even be the starting point for our comparative study of the texts proper since it has an effect on the way in which they present their ethical issues. The point is that Confucius and the Lunyu are part of Chinese culture and that Chinese culture developed for many centuries on its own, relatively un-influenced by the outside world. In contrast, Roman culture is characterized by the fact that from early on it was influenced by an older neighbor, Greek culture, in particular with respect to art, literature, and philosophy. A consequence of this difference can be observed in our two texts. Confucius’ Lunyu belongs to the formative phase of what we can call Chinese philosophy. Earlier texts referred to are few, they are Chinese, and they are non-philosophical, with the Book of Songs or Classic of Poetry being the most important one. In contrast, the Roman Cicero writes after Greek philosophy, which came into being more or less contemporaneously with its Chinese counterpart, had already produced several ethics, and, taking advantage of his excellent knowledge of this lore, Cicero bases his De officiis on the work of a Greek predecessor, the Peri tou kathēkontos of the Stoic philosopher Panaetius (c.180 – c.110 BCE).

Against this backdrop, we can now compare our texts with respect to the first concrete topic: the significance of tradition for the ethics of the present. The role of tradition is of central importance in the Lunyu and it is relevant in Cicero’s De officiis as well. For Confucius – and I follow here the interpretation of Heiner Roetz – it is clear that ethics do not start from point zero but that man finds himself always embedded in a cultural context that provides him with recommended patterns of conduct. This complex of rites, etiquette, decorum, and morals is called li in Chinese, and it is obvious that Confucius has a positive affective attitude towards it. On the other hand, he is also aware of the fact – and in this he is a typical representative of Jaspers’ Axial Age – that tradition may be...

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15 This is not to say that there was no outside influence at all (e.g. from India or Central Asia), but what can be observed with respect to Rome is certainly of a different scale.
16 Namely in Karl Jaspers’ “Axial Age”, for which Confucius and, on the Western side, Socrates – not Cicero – are key figures.
17 The relationship between the two works has, of course, been intensely analyzed. See more recently Dyck (1996) and Lefèvre (2001), and, for a concise survey, Fiori (2011) 199–205.
18 The investigation of the literary form of the two texts seems less rewarding than the discussion of questions of content. The difference, to be sure, is obvious. On the one hand, we have a collection of conversations, on the other hand, a treatise in the form of a letter to the son. The problem is that the literary form of De officiis is not typical for Cicero’s philosophical writings, the majority of which – like the Lunyu, though in a different way – are dialogical in form. Thus a comparison of the literary form of the Lunyu and De officiis could not lead to results of more general validity.
come subject to questions. The requirements of *li* may develop into something merely formal, they may degenerate in other ways, and they may turn out to be in conflict with each other. Therefore, ethical conduct cannot be reduced to blindly following the requirements of tradition. There has to be an agency that reflects and examines these requirements and which is able to decide whether to follow them or not, whether to accept them as they are or to modify them. This agency is the self-cultivated responsible self, and its instruments are humaneness and the Golden Rule. Because of its humaneness, the self-cultivated responsible self is able to adopt the position of the other and thus to test whether a certain action corresponds to the Golden Rule or not. As a result, it is able to overcome its own desires and conduct itself in a moral way.

The relationship between tradition and ethics is also dealt with in Cicero’s *De officiis*, however, rather implicitly. As both his political actions and many passages of his works show, Cicero cherishes the Roman tradition. There arises, therefore, the question as to how the traditional Roman value system, the famous *mos maiorum*, the ‘custom of the ancestors’, relates to an elaborate ethical theory such as that which Greek philosophy had developed from Plato and Aristotle down to the thought of someone like Cicero’s ‘source’, Panaetius. Interestingly, Cicero does not discuss this question explicitly. Instead, he follows the design of Panaetius’ work, correcting and supplementing it where necessary, and important for our question – illustrating the Greek philosopher’s prescriptions concerning ‘appropriate actions’ with Roman material from past and present.

The question of how the Roman *mos maiorum* relates to middle-Stoic ethics and how both are applicable to cases of the present does not seem to be a problem for Cicero. Rather, one gets the impression that for him – the philosophical adherent of the skeptical Academy, for whom there exists no final certainty but only probability anyway – Panaetius’ un-doctrinaire version of Stoic ethics and the Roman moral tradition point in the same direction and provide sufficient ori-

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20 Concerning the Confucian concept of the self, apart from Roetz (1992), see also the contributions in the second section of Shun/Wong (2004).
21 Roetz’s interpretation of the relationship between *li* and *ren*, which is the basis of the above presentation, is, of course, not the only one possible. For other interpretations of this relationship, see Shun (2002). In basic agreement with Roetz is Tiwald (2011), though his discussion focuses on Neo-Confucianism.
22 On the relationship between tradition and philosophy in Cicero, cf. now Sauer (2017a and b) with literature.
23 The main purpose of the references to the present, as Dyck (1996, 59) has correctly pointed out, was to “provide ... commentary on currently significant political topics” like “the recent civil war, Caesar’s policies and murder” etc.
entation concerning the ethical and political problems with which a member of the Roman elite might be confronted.

Thus, at least at first sight, in this case Confucius appears as the deeper thinker, Cicero as the cavalier pragmatist. Yet only a more thorough investigation can lead to safe conclusions. And even if such an analysis should confirm the first impression, the opposition between profoundness and ready-made pragmatism should not be generalized but rather attributed to the specific circumstances of the composition of *De officiis*. Moreover, this analysis is certainly not suitable for characterizing Chinese and Western ancient ethics in general.

A second topic worth investigating is the complex of virtues. Independently of whether Confucian and Ciceronian ethics qualify as virtue ethics or not, it is obvious that positive moral qualities play a central role both in the *Lunyu* and in *De officiis*. The *Lunyu* discusses *inter alia* the following virtues (here in alphabetical order of the Chinese terms): *li* (ritual correctness, decency, civility), *ren* (humaneness), *xiao* (piety), *xin* (reliability), *yi* (justice), *yong* (courage), *zhi* (wisdom, judiciousness), *zhong* (loyalty), *zhong-yong* (moderation, sense of the middle). In *De officiis*, *inter alia* the following virtues are addressed (here in alphabetical order of the Latin terms): *beneficentia* / *liberalitas* (generosity, beneficence), *cognitio* / *prudentia* / *sapientia* (insight, wisdom), *fides* (loyalty, reliability), *fortitudo* (courage), *humanitas* (humaneness), *iustitia* (justice), *magnitudo animi* (high-mindedness), *moderatio* / *temperantia* (moderation, sense of measure). These lists could, of course, be varied and/or extended, but I think that they reflect more or less correctly the state of affairs.

It is striking that, at first glance, the lists look rather similar. There are several overlaps, and one gets the impression that with respect to the basic virtues there exists a notable accord between the two texts. On the other hand, on closer investigation, differences come to the fore as well, perhaps not so much in the selection of the virtues dealt with, but certainly in the nuances of apparently identical virtues (e.g. the more practically-oriented *zhi* vs. the more theoretically-oriented *sapientia*) and in the significance attributed to each virtue (e.g. *ren* and *humanitas*). Thus, the task – which cannot be carried out in this framework – is clear. It has to be determined which virtues are discussed in both

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24 The treatise came into being within a few weeks in the autumn of 44 BCE, at a time when Roman politics was more than turbulent and Cicero was becoming once again one of the main players involved in the action. Cf. Dyck (1996) 21–23.


26 See below the section on “Confucian ren and Ciceronian humanitas”
cases, how exactly each of them is characterized, and in what relationship they stand to each other. The similarities and differences that can be observed in these respects should provide a valid impression not only of the ethical views of the Lunyu and of De officiis, but can also be expected to give at least an indication of the Chinese and the Roman/Western view of things in general.

Yet caution is always advisable, as one example can demonstrate. Confucius and Cicero are both, so to speak, of unmilitary nature and thus have reservations concerning the virtue of courage/bravery in its military manifestation. Thus, Confucius stresses in several passages that yong (courage, bravery) has to subordinate to li (etiquette, morality), ren (humaneness), and yi (justice). Similarly, Cicero, in his treatment of magnitudo animi – which tellingly appears in the place of fortitudo as the third cardinal virtue – takes great pains to demonstrate that the res urbaneae, civilian deeds, performed by fortes and magni animi are much more significant than their military counterpart, res bellicae. The question is whether or to what extent these attitudes are representative of the Chinese and the Roman or Western ‘cultural worlds’. And here we probably have to give different answers in the two cases. The civilian orientation of Confucianism and, under its influence, of much of Chinese culture has become a cliché for good reason. In contrast, in Rome, Cicero’s is a lone voice when he tries to push fortitudo – whose status as one of the four cardinal virtues is never questioned – toward the civil sphere. In Rome, military achievements always impressed people more than civilian efforts and, at least to a considerable extent, this holds true for Western culture in general, within which most of the time men like Alexander the Great or Caesar exercised greater appeal than the civilian consul Cicero. This example shows that a comparative analysis of the Lunyu and De officiis must not only be performed with care and precision, but that its results have to be tested

27 The topic of virtues has always played an important role in the secondary literature on both Lunyu and De officiis, so there is a solid basis on which to build a comparative analysis (which does not yet exist). The most important of the differences listed above is undoubtedly the fact that li is, besides ren, the most important value notion in the Lunyu (I avoid the term “virtue” since li, to be sure, can denote a virtue in the sense of “decency”, “politeness”, but more often means simply “ritual”, “etiquette”). There is no real correspondence to it on the Ciceronian side. To clarify the significance of this difference will be central for a proper appraisal of Confucian and Ciceronian ethics.

28 Lunyu 8.2.
29 Lunyu 14.4.
30 Lunyu 17.21.
31 Off. 1.61–92.
32 Cf. especially 1.74–78.
33 See Ess (2003), 33, with the necessary qualifications.
as to how representative they really are before they are used for more general conclusions concerning the two ‘cultural worlds’.

Besides the virtues, a further potentially fruitful object of investigation could be other values like wealth, reputation and fame. They receive attention in both texts, and to analyze how Confucius and Cicero think a person should behave regarding these values will further widen our understanding of their respective ethics. Finally, it would make sense to pay tribute to the fact that both the Lunyu and De officiis are very much oriented toward the political sphere, and to look at concrete problems of political ethics that are discussed in both texts. To give an example: there is the problem of how to behave vis-à-vis an unethical ruler or officeholder. Both Confucius and Cicero have their say about this, and it could be rewarding to compare their opinions.

Perhaps these observations suffice for the first subject of our comparison, the ethics of the Lunyu and De officiis.

### 2.2 Confucian ren and Ciceronian humanitas

The second subject that I would like to suggest for analysis is closely related to the first. It is the comparison of Confucian ren and Ciceronian humanitas. It was this comparison that I immediately thought of when the invitation to the Torino conference arrived, and (unsurprisingly) it turned out to be one of the topics to be dealt with in a special pair of papers at the conference. What I myself have to offer are, once again, only some introductory remarks.

The first observation one makes is relatively surprising; namely, that the roles of ren in the Lunyu and humanitas in De officiis are rather different. Ren is the most frequently used ethical term in the Lunyu, where it appears around 60 times. Its significance corresponds to the frequency of its appearance. As we have seen, for Roetz ren is the decisive value in the ethics of the Lunyu, the value which in cases of conflict takes precedence even over li, the other fun-
damental norm of conduct.\textsuperscript{38} Most other interpreters likewise see ren’s relation to li at the heart of Confucius’ ethical thought, though they interpret this relation differently.\textsuperscript{39} Yet more or less everybody who attempts to give an account of the ethics of the Lunyu lists ren as one of the decisive concepts of the Collected Sayings and then tries to define it and determine its position in the whole construct.\textsuperscript{40}

In contrast, humanitas is only of limited importance in De officiis. Though the text is much longer than the Lunyu, humanitas occurs here only around 10 times,\textsuperscript{41} and it is not one of the ‘cardinal virtues’, wisdom, justice, fortitude and moderation, which – with telling Ciceronian modifications\textsuperscript{42} – determine the structure of the work. Rather, it appears, so to speak, as a positive but secondary quality.

Yet humanitas is an important concept for Cicero. To see this, one has to look beyond De officiis to all of Cicero’s writings, including the letters. It is at this point that the problem of the different evidential bases between Confucius and Cicero becomes significant. If one wants to get a full picture of the Ciceronian side, one has to use the whole textual corpus, which in terms of quantity and generic variation surpasses that of Confucius many times over. A possible remedy for this dilemma could be to broaden the textual basis on the Confucian side and to include texts like the Kongzi jiayu, the Family Conversations, and Confucius-passages in the Book of Rites, the Liji, texts that seem to contain authentic material and may open additional views of Confucian ren. This is, of course, only a suggestion for future research. In the meantime, let us accept the imbalance between the source materials and look briefly at the semantic content of ren in the Lunyu and of humanitas not only in De officiis, but also in other Ciceronian texts.

An initial survey shows an important difference. The range in meaning of ren is more limited than the range in meaning of humanitas. Experts distinguish between a narrower and a more general meaning.\textsuperscript{43} In its narrower meaning, ren denotes a relatively specific quality that we can circumscribe as “love of, sympa-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{38} See above p. 13 n. 21. Cf. also King (2012).
\item \textsuperscript{39} For a survey, see Shun (2002).
\item \textsuperscript{40} Cf. e.g. Van Norden (2001) 20, 27; Littlejohn (2011) 28–30; Tiwald (2018) 178–179.
\item \textsuperscript{41} I.62, 1.90, 1.145, 2.18, 2.51, 3.32, 3.41, 3.89 (2).
\item \textsuperscript{42} Thus, Cicero speaks of the third cardinal virtue more often as magnitudo animi than as fortitudo (e.g. in 1.61–92), which makes it easier to claim the superiority of achievements in the civil sphere over military feats.
\end{itemize}
thy with, respect for one’s fellow-beings”. Thus, in the most quoted pertinent passage, Confucius, asked for a definition of ren (仁), answers ai ren (爱人) “to love men/the others”. In its broader meaning, ren refers to a master virtue “humaneness”, “which is universal and fundamental and from which all other virtues ensue”, “an all-encompassing ethical ideal that includes all the desirable qualities”. In both meanings, and this is decisive, ren remains within the sphere of ethics.

If we turn to Cicero’s humanitas we meet with a considerably greater variation of meanings. One of them, ‘humanity, mankind’, can be left aside since it does not concern the kind of human quality that interests us at the moment. Whereas this usage of the word is rare, the usage of humanitas in the sense of ‘humaneness, human sympathy, philanthropy etc.’, that is, in a sense close to that of Confucius’ ren, is frequent and it occurs in Cicero’s philosophical writings as well as in his speeches and in his letters. Similarly, but with less gravity, humanitas can denote simple ‘friendliness’.

And there are still other meanings of humanitas. One is ‘education, cultural formation, Bildung’. Humanitas in this sense implies familiarity not only with the Roman tradition but also, and in particular, with Greek literature and philosophy. Such familiarity leads to the ability to accompany the praxis of daily life with reflection and give it a deeper intellectual foundation. Cicero speaks of humanitas in this sense both in private and in public contexts.

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44 The reach or extension of ren is disputed in the scholarly literature. Is it perhaps limited to the members of the upper layers of society? Is it limited to Chinese people, or does it even include non-Chinese human beings, i.e. the “barbarians”? These are interesting questions, not least in regard to a possible comparison with Cicero, but they lie beyond the scope of this paper.

45 Lunyu 12.22. Mengzi, the most important successor of the Master, compares ren to the natural affection children feel towards their parents (7 A15) and the spontaneous compassion one feels with other beings when they are suffering (1 A7, 2 A6).


48 The literature on humanitas is rich. On humanitas in Cicero, as collection of material still fundamental is Mayer (1951); most recent is Martínez Sánchez (2014). On humanitas from Cicero onward, cf. now Høgel (2015), where most of the former contributions can be found.

49 In an impressive passage in De officiis, Cicero states about cruel tyrants like Phalaris that because of their beastliness they have to be cut off from the corpus humanitatis, the “body of mankind” (3.32). For the text critical problem, see Dyck (1996) ad locum.

50 Cf. e.g. Off. 2.51 and rep. 2.27.

51 Cf. e.g. Flacc. 57 and Balb. 19.

52 Cf. e.g. Quint. fr. 1.1.27 and Att. 16.16.10.

53 Cf. e.g. Fam. 4.13.2 (about Caesar!).

54 Cf. e.g. Fam. 5.21.3 (letter to L. Mescinius) and Arch.3 (speech on behalf of the poet Archias).
A further aspect of humanitas comes into view ex negativo in a passage of De officiis where Cicero points out that being in a state of deep concentration on the difficulties of a law case, and for this reason absent-minded and unsociable, is in order when one walks through the woods on one’s estate, but is inhumanum at a gathering with friends.\(^5\) In contrast, what humanitas in the latter kind of context looks like is illustrated in the opening conversation of De oratore: Crassus, the perfect host, succeeds by his charm and amiability, iucunditas, and his elegant wit, lepos – in one word, by his humanitas – in helping his guests to overcome the somber mood that had depressed them in view of the grave political situation.\(^6\)

Overlooking this little survey, we can state that Confucius’ ren both in its narrower and its broader meaning is a purely ethical notion, while Cicero’s humanitas, where it refers to personal qualities and not to ‘mankind’, can and often does denote an ethical quality similar to Confucian ren, but just as often points to an intellectual or educational disposition or to a much appreciated – but, so to speak, ethically neutral – behavioral or social competence.

This is not the moment to draw any far-reaching conclusions. But we can at least have a brief look at the problem of representativeness. And with all necessary caution, we can say that in this case there is a chance that both Confucius’ and Cicero’s views are, at least to a certain degree, representative of their ‘cultural worlds’.

Few will doubt that, starting at the latest with the Han period, Confucianism exercised an intense influence on the Chinese world. Of course, its position was not always undisputed. At times, it stood in competition with other world views like Daoism and Buddhism and in the modern period also with Christian faith and Western political ideologies. Accordingly, it underwent modifications and developments.\(^7\) Yet, in spite of all this, it is probably fair to say that (a) from the Han dynasty onward until right into the 20\(^{th}\) century Confucianism found itself for extended periods in a privileged ideological position and that therefore (b) ren, even though it experienced alterations in the nuances of its meaning,\(^8\) stayed a central concept in Chinese thinking during this long stretch of time. Thus, even if not every Confucian scholar-official, let alone all the other men and women, lived up to the moral demands inherent in the concept, Confucius’

\(^5\) Off. 1.144.
\(^6\) De orat. 1.27.
\(^7\) For two concise presentations of the development of Confucianism through the centuries, see Ess (2003) and Littlejohn (2011).
\(^8\) For the Neocconflucian attempt to reconcile the narrower and the broader meanings of ren, see e.g. Tiwald (2018) 178f.
ren, as a widely accepted ethical value, must have had its effect on people’s moral thinking and, at least to some extent, behavioral patterns.

How about Cicero’s humanitas? The last years of the republic, full of inner strife and conflict, were not favorable to humaneness and benevolence. And yet even Caesar, who in the course of time became something like Cicero’s bête noir, on many occasions made a point of surprising defeated enemies with his clementia, undoubtedly a kind of humanitas in the ethical sense of the word. In addition, in view of his wide-ranging Bildung, his literary taste, his temporary charm and wit even Cicero, at certain moments, could not help conceding him the socio-cultural or behavioral humanitas we were discussing.⁵⁹

As for the further development of the concept, even though humanitas never had the central significance in the Roman socio-political environment that ren had in the Chinese context, it surfaced in its different forms again and again in Western antiquity and beyond.⁶⁰ During the Principate, when the social and cultural, as opposed to political, activities of the upper classes gained a value of their own, humanitas in the sense of paideia attained significance as a cultural ideal.⁶¹ For Christians, like Lactantius, the philanthropic component of humanitas as empathy and compassion was important (while humanitas could also denote human fragility). The Renaissance rediscovered humanitas as education, Bildung, in particular as familiarity with the ancient authors, and thus gave birth to humanism, while the enlightenment developed the ideal of ‘Humanität’, stressing the unity of humankind, the equality of human civilizations, and the importance of religious tolerance.

On the whole, the idea of humaneness, or of what is the essence of being human, is definitely worthy of investigation if one is interested in coming to a deeper understanding of Chinese and Western civilizations, and a comparison of Confucius’ ren and Cicero’s humanitas is an appropriate starting point.

⁵⁹ Cf. Fam. 4.13.2: Caesaris summam erga nos humanitatem.
⁶⁰ Cf. the pertinent sections in Zielinski (1929), and the pertinent papers in Steel (2013) and Altman (2015).
⁶¹ Cf. Gellius’ statement (13.17.1): Quiv erba Latina fecerunt quique his probe usi sunt, ‘humanitatem’ non id esse voluerunt, quod volgus existimat quodque a Graecis philanthropia dicitur et significat dexteritatem quandam benivolentiamque erga omnis homines promiscam, sed ‘humanitatem’ appellaverunt id propemodum, quod Graeci paideian vacant, nos eruditionem institutionemque in bonas artis dicimus. Quas qui sinceriter cupiunt adpetunqute, hi sunt vel maxime humanissimi. Huius enim scientiae cura et disciplina ex universis animantibus uni homini datast idcircioque “humanitas” appellata est.
2.3 Confucius and Cicero as Role Models

The third possible subject that I see as allowing a comparison of Confucius and Cicero is that of the personalities of the two protagonists. Since the assumption that they exercised their cultural influence not least through being who they were and acting as they did, i.e. by serving as role models, it is probably not unreasonable to compare their personalities with the hope of deepening our understanding of the cultures on which they had their impact.

Yet ‘personalities’ constitutes a potentially questionable term, or at least a term that demands explanation. Access to the historic personalities of Confucius and Cicero is, at any rate in the case of the former, very difficult or even impossible. The difference in the quantity and quality of evidence available in each case is particularly striking here. But it is less the historic personalities of our protagonists with which we are concerned than the general impression their personalities left on their contemporaries and on posterity. This impression can in each case be summarized in a short biographical sketch, and so I will give two such sketches as a basis for further reflections.62

Confucius (551–479 BCE) was the possibly illegitimate son of a member of the (lower) nobility in the state of Lu. Since his parents died early and the family became impoverished, Confucius grew up in moderate circumstances, which meant, as he says himself, that he acquired knowledge in many simple things. In addition, we may assume, he acquired the kind of knowledge usually conveyed through noble education. And it was education that became his profession. At some point he must have started to teach and in doing so to exert influence as one of the first free-lance educators in China. His disciples were probably second and third sons of noble families but also ambitious social climbers, both of which groups intended to offer their services to the rulers of one of the numerous states of the time. The subjects taught were the basics, like reading and writing, and aristocratic subjects, like archery, chariot-driving, etiquette, and music. But a central part of what Confucius offered was acquaintance with and understanding of the classical scriptures, like the Changes, the Documents, the Rites, the Spring and Autumn Annals and in particular the Book of Songs, which included an introduction to the ethical standards that these writings conveyed. As it seems, Confucius considered his teaching not only a profession but also as a calling, by which heaven mandated him with restoring the culture of the Zhou and leading the world back to the right ‘way’. It was entirely consistent with

62 I apologize for offering this kind of basic information, but, on the other hand, it may not be totally out of place at the beginning of the volume.
this self-understanding that, in order to attain this goal, he also sought direct access to politics. It is not clear which positions he held or when and where, or whether any at all, but some sources claim that at least for a certain period he was installed as Minister of Justice in his home state, Lu. Whereas this remains uncertain, it is not doubtful that, on the whole, he was politically unsuccessful. This comports also with his long years of wandering (497–484 BCE), which led him to many states without bringing him into any position of influence. After his return to Lu, he continued with his teaching and was the revered master of a growing number of disciples when he died in 479.

Cicero (106–43 BCE) was born in Arpinum, approximately 100 km east of Rome, into a wealthy equestrian family. He received an excellent education, from a certain point of time in Rome and later also in Greece. Full of ambition, he was determined to make his way into the political elite of Rome. Being an outstanding orator and a shrewd lawyer, he built up a reputation in the courts of Rome. At the same time, he pursued his political career, which at the minimum age of 43 brought him into the highest office in Rome, that of consul. At the same capacity that he suppressed the conspiracy of Catiline, having some of the conspirators executed on the decision of the senate but without trial. This high point of his political career was also its turning point. A few years later, Cicero was exiled because of the allegedly unlawful execution of the Catilinarians, yet after only a year he was honorably recalled. With Pompey, Caesar, and Crassus dominating Roman politics, Cicero felt powerless and frustrated, and thus, intellectually well-equipped and literarily-gifted as he was, he turned from praxis to theory. The fruits of this first period of extended writing (55–52) were works in which, *inter alia*, he presented his ideas about the development and standards of oratory, and about the best form of the state and of its legal system. There followed an unwelcome pro-consulship in Cilicia (51–50). On his return, civil war broke out between Pompey and the senate on one side, and Caesar on the other. This soon saw the unmilitary Cicero withdraw to southern Italy until he returned to Rome with the victor Caesar’s permission. Yet, in view of the latter’s dictatorship, Cicero once again turned to literary production, this time presenting the whole range of Greek philosophy to the Roman public in an impressive series of writings. However, after the murder of Caesar in 44 when the opportunity arose to play a part once again in the running of the state, there was no hesitation. Cicero engaged with all he had in support of the senate and the republic, which in consequence poised him against Caesar’s lieutenant Marc Antony and Caesar’s heir Octavian. The outcome could have been guessed. After their victory, the Caesarians drew up proscription lists and Cicero was among the first victims.
If we compare the two sketches, we note first a set of fundamental commonalities. We have here two personalities who combined intellectual and more specifically philosophical inclinations with the urge to engage and exercise influence in politics. Both tried to do this in an ethically-based way, and both were more oriented toward the civilian than the military side of affairs. In the end, however, both had to come to terms with the fact that concerning the concrete results of their efforts they were less successful than they would have wished.

Beside these commonalities, one can also observe a number of differences. They are connected partly with the distinct socio-political and cultural situations, partly with the distinct personalities. To start with the socio-political framework: In 6th cent. China, the only foreseeable political role for someone of Confucius’ standing was that of a trusted adviser or minister in one of the monarchical states of the time. Such a role was not totally unrelated to the alternative activity, that of teaching young men in order to prepare them intellectually and morally for governmental service. In both cases, the lore of venerated texts played an important role. The conveyance of the values these texts contained, and of the ability and the will to implement them in accordance with the demands of the actual situation, was the primary goal of such guidance, whether advice or instruction. Personal communication was its usual form. In the Roman Republic, political practice – and closely connected with it, forensic practice – consisted to a large extent in public speech and its goal was the attainment of public office. The pinnacle of this ascent was the office of consul, where one was – temporarily – leader of the state. Cicero acted accordingly. The alternative activity – to which he turned when he was deprived of political influence – was not personal instruction, though in a few cases he engaged in such instruction as well, but literary production. One of the reasons for this was Greek philosophy, which existed in numerous writings of the highest intellectual and literary quality and which Cicero rightfully felt qualified to introduce to his compatriots in writings of equal scope, intellectual clarity, and stylistic excellence.

Confucius’ and Cicero’s personalities were as different as the socio-political circumstances in which they lived and were active. The Confucius of tradition seems indeed to have been something like a sage who went his way, unperturbed by difficulties and set-backs, and every now and then was even capable of self-irony. To observers from the outside he seemed “to know that what he was trying to do was impossible but to keep trying anyway”. Cicero, on the other hand, as we know him in particular from his letters, was certainly not a sage in this sense.

63 Lunyu 14.38.
He was immoderately ambitious, prone to emotional ups and downs, vain and yet insecure, easily depressed but at the same time of inexhaustible intellectual energy, full of deadly hate against someone like Marc Antony, but sensitive and caring towards his daughter and his friends, and so on.

I stop here with my enumeration and turn to the question of to what extent these commonalities and differences can be transferred from the two individuals to ‘their cultural worlds’, i.e., to what extent Confucius and Cicero proved to be role models in the course of the centuries.

As for the former, it seems that – starting with the establishment of Confucianism as a state-sponsored ideology under the Han – the personality of the master as it appeared in the *Lunyu* did exercise a strong influence on an important section of society over extended periods of the next two millennia. One precondition for this was the continuity of the socio-political framework, which through the centuries remained that of a monarchically-ruled central state whose administration depended to a high degree on the proper functioning of its bureaucracy. As is well known, the recruitment for this bureaucracy was based on literary and intellectual performance, and in the different examination systems that were in place over time Confucian lore always played a decisive role. This is, of course, not to deny that in the course of the centuries dynasties rose and fell, periods of turmoil occurred, other dynasties brought new political and ideological developments, and that all of this could not leave Confucianism and its social, political, and cultural position untouched.\(^6^4\) And yet, even if at times repressed, and at others undergoing the influence of rival world views, Confucianism lived on and, in the end, continued to serve as an ideological backbone of the Chinese state right into the 20\(^{th}\) century. This also meant that Confucius functioned as a role model for the members of the bureaucracy, the scholar bureaucrats, and that already this significance within the socio-political sphere alone may be considered as justification for calling him a “symbol of his cultural world”.

As far as influence in the socio-political sphere is concerned, Cicero cannot be said to be on a par with Confucius. Since role models always function in competition with other role models, a look at two anti-types of Confucius and Cicero is telling. On the Chinese side, Qin Shihuangdi, the forceful unifier of the Empire, over the course of two thousand years received mostly bad press, being perceived and condemned as a violent tyrant. With Caesar, on the other hand, who in terms of military achievement and violent pacification of an Empire can be considered

\(^6^4\) For a relatively recent, concise presentation of the history of Confucianism, see Littlejohn (2011).
the Roman counterpart to China’s First Emperor, things were different. Cicero, in the end, probably hated him, but through the centuries this did not prevent many others from looking at him in admiration and awe. Friedrich Gundolf, in a famous book, presented the history of this reception under the title “Caesar. A History of his Glory”,⁶⁵ a perhaps remote but nevertheless indisputable sign that Cicero’s, the civilian politician’s, success as role model was limited.

It is all the more interesting that as soon as one looks beyond the socio-political sphere one realizes that Cicero had a great impact on posterity as well. Not surprisingly, different times appreciated different qualities and achievements.⁶⁶ For Quintilian, the first state-employed professor of rhetoric, Cicero was the paragon of Latin language and literary style. It was the same with the church father Jerome, whereas other Christian authors like Minucius Felix, Lactantius, Ambrose, and Augustine partly leaned on, partly took issue with some of his philosophical writings. In the Middle Ages, the ecclesiastical institutions of education used (and thus preserved) his introductory works on rhetoric. The Renaissance humanists venerated him for his mastery of Latin style and his wide-ranging Bildung, and felt a deep sympathy for him as a special and articulate human being. Protagonists of the enlightenment were attracted by some of his theological and ethical ideas, while his republicanism, for better or worse, inspired some of the Founding Fathers in North America and some of the revolutionaries in France. Thus it seems that all in all we may call Cicero too “a symbol of his cultural world”.

As a result of our reflections we may retain the following: The comparison between Confucius and Cicero is not without pitfalls, but if it is done with circumspection and caution towards hasty conclusions it can teach us much, not only about the two individuals but also about the two cultures to which they belong.

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⁶⁵ Gundolf (1924).
⁶⁶ See n. 10.