

Article

Individual and Unity (*Heti*): The Generative Structure of Human Relations from the Confucian Perspective

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Abstract: In terms of the comprehension of modern order and values, understanding individuals and their relationship with the community has always been an important perspective. Scholars have noticed that traditional Confucian thought in China contains a profound understanding of individuals and their relationship with the community. In the Confucian perspective, an individual's significance lies in human relations, with the "family" constituting the foundation and core of these. This study presents the unique structure of the "family" in Confucian ethics and its generative significance. A literature analysis of Confucianism reveals that it places significant importance on the husband–wife relationship. The husband–wife relationship is a unity (*heti*) in the order of human relations, where spouses enjoy equal status and respect. The union of husband and wife propels the generational progression of the entire human relation system, making the husband–wife relationship a core node in the continuity of human ethical order. In this generative structure woven by human relations, the individuals are always subordinate to the human relationships they are involved in. The primary significance of the individual lies in the roles and corresponding responsibilities assumed within various human relations. Previous discussions on Confucian ethics have failed to clearly unveil the generative structure inherent in the concept of the family. The Confucian understanding of the individual and their relationship with the community can only be accurately grasped by clarifying this aspect.

Keywords: individuals; human relations; husband–wife; generative structure; responsibilities



Citation: Meng, Qingnan. 2023. Individual and Unity (*Heti*): The Generative Structure of Human Relations from the Confucian Perspective. *Religions* 14: 981. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14080981>

Academic Editor: Zhongjiang Wang

Received: 16 June 2023

Revised: 11 July 2023

Accepted: 26 July 2023

Published: 29 July 2023



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1. Introduction

The concept of the "individual" forms the foundation of modern social order and values. The rights and freedoms of individuals have been fully expressed in various aspects of modern life and hold irreplaceable positive significance. However, as scholars have noted, if rights are one-sided or if excessive emphasis is placed on the rights and freedoms of individuals while neglecting the social attributes that individuals acquire in the "community", a series of negative consequences that jeopardize modern civilization may arise (Rosemont and Ames 2020, pp. 6–8; Sun 2019, pp. 67–69). Therefore, we need to think more deeply about the relationship between the "individual" and the "community" as well as how to make a reasonable settlement for the "individual" in the "community" in which the "individual" lives. Some scholars have noticed that the Chinese Confucian tradition contains a profound understanding of the "individual" and its relationship with the "community" (Rosemont and Ames 2020, pp. 4–9; Wang 2022, pp. 22–31). The combing and clarification of this Confucian thought can provide a useful reference for us to solve the problems caused by the concept of "individual".

When discussing the relationship between the individual and the community in the context of Confucianism, the concept of "family" is indispensable. In recent years, with the publication of Professor Zhang Xianglong 张祥龙's book (Zhang 2018), *Jia Yu Xiao: Cong Zhongxijian Shiye Kan 家与孝: 从中西间视野看 (Family and Filial Reverence: A Cross-Cultural Perspective)*, more and more mainland Chinese scholars have started to discuss the notion of family in the Confucian tradition. In overseas Confucian studies, scholars such as Daniel

A. Bell, Roger T. Ames, and Robert Neville have also maintained a continuous interest in the matter of family (Rosemont 2021, p. 212). Based on a comparison between Chinese and Western intellectual traditions, previous scholars recognize the significance of valuing family as an important and fundamental feature of Confucian ethical thought. For modern China, “home” holds a special significance. Since the New Culture Movement, Chinese academic circles have deeply reflected on the oppression of individuals and the corruption of society that the traditional concept of “family” may cause (Sun 2019, pp. 102–6). This is also a positive result of cultural reflections including the New Culture Movement. However, while being critical and vigilant, we also need to have a more comprehensive understanding of the traditional concept of “home”, discovering and revealing the positive factors that may be contained in it.

In the following discussion, we will first see that in Confucian ethics, the husband–wife relationship presents a distinct meaning and structure. Husband and wife are not related by blood like parents and children or siblings, but they participate in the order of human relations in a “combined” way and enjoy the same status. This dense structure implies that such a relationship holds particular significance for the order of human relations. The second part of this article will further examine the meaning of this husband–wife union, which propels the generational progression of the entire human relation system, making the husband–wife relationship a core node in the continuity of human ethical order. After clarifying this generative structure, the third part of this paper will further show that the individual is always subordinate to the relationships in which they are involved. The individual’s primary significance lies in the roles and corresponding responsibilities they assume within various human relations.

2. Unity of Husband and Wife

With the development of related research, the complex connotations contained in the concept of family have gradually become clearer. Generally speaking, a family is composed of relationships such as those between a husband and wife, parent and child, and siblings. Based on these basic human relations, the family can also extend to larger structures of clans and lineages. Confucianism has provided detailed explanations on the conduct and behavior that individuals should follow while occupying ethical roles, such as *xiao* 孝 and *ti* 悌, which have also become focal points in modern Confucian studies. However, it is important to note that the ethical requirements of different family roles not only reflect important aspects of Confucian thought but are also built upon a fundamental ethical structure. Although the relationships between husband and wife, parents and children, and siblings may seem familiar, there is a subtle structure underlying these family relationships that carries significance in terms of human relations. This is where the Confucian tradition has shown a keen insight.

Among the three basic relationships that constitute a family, the parent–child and sibling relationships are based on blood ties, compared with which the distinct characteristic of the husband–wife relationship is apparent. The establishment of the husband–wife relationship does not depend on inborn blood relations but is instead chosen and molded during a later life stage. In fact, no matter in the design of the ritual system since the Zhou Dynasty or in the discourse of Confucianism, the human relations formed by blood have a natural closeness.¹ Does this mean that the constructed husband–wife relationship is not as close as the parent–child or sibling relationship maintained by blood? Confucianism clearly rejects this notion, as we can see later. In the ritual system inherited and upheld by Confucianism, the husband–wife relationship is established through the wedding ceremony. In “Hunyi 昏义”, a chapter of *Liji* 礼记 that extensively expounds on the rites of wedding ceremonies, a crucial definition of this close relationship of husband and wife is provided:

After this they went down, and he went out and took the reins of the horses of her carriage, which he drove for three revolutions of the wheels, having handed the strap to assist her in mounting. He then went before, and waited outside his

gate, when she arrived, he bowed to her and gave place to her as she entered. They ate together of the same animal, and joined in sipping from the cups made of the same melon; thus showing that they now formed one body, were of equal rank, so as to express mutual affection.²

降出，御妇车，而婿授绥，御轮三周，先俟于门外。妇至，婿揖妇以入，共牢而食，合巹而醕，所以合体同尊卑，以亲之也。(Kong 1999a, p. 1619)

Before analyzing the excerpt, it should be noted that “Hunyi” is not long and does not provide explanations for every aspect of the wedding ceremony. It is evident that within its limited length, it selectively discusses what the author considers to be the most important details. The excerpt above highlights the significance of the husband–wife’s “*heti tongzunbei yi qin zhi* 合体同尊卑以亲之 (forming one body, being of equal rank, so as to express mutual affection)”, which is a crucial aspect portrayed by the wedding ceremony. It explains how the wedding ritual embodies “*heti tongzunbei yi qin zhi*”.

First, it is clear that the essence of this excerpt is the statement “*heti tongzunbei yi qin zhi*”. The preposition “*以*” indicates that “*heti tongzunbei*” is a way to express “*qin zhi*”, and the establishment of a close relationship is the ultimate goal. It is important to note that in ancient China’s ritual system, the affection between husband and wife was not achieved through the modern sense of free love. Bound by the principles of “*nannv youbie* 男女有别 (establishing the distinction to be observed between man and woman)” (Kong 1999a, p. 1620) and “*wu mei bu jiao* 无媒不交 (no interaction without a matchmaker)” (Kong 1999a, p. 1417), unmarried men and women were not allowed to have private contact, let alone intimacy. Therefore, the wedding ceremony served as the initial direct contact between husband and wife and marked the beginning of a close relationship.

Second, regarding the etiquette focused on in “Hunyi”, there are multiple details aimed at fostering affection between husband and wife but not all emphasize “*heti tongzunbei*”. According to the ceremony described in “Shi Hunli 士婚礼” (Jia 1999, pp. 60–92), the contact between husband and wife begins on the day of the wedding reception. The groom arrives at the bride’s house and after completing the ceremony in the ancestral temple with the bride’s father, he escorts the bride out. At this point, the groom symbolically performs the role of charioteer by presenting a cord to assist the bride in boarding the carriage. Once the bride is seated, the groom leads the procession in three revolutions before stopping. Zheng Xuan believed that this ceremony expresses the meaning of “*qin er xia zhi* 亲而下之 (demonstrating affection being inferior)” (Jia 1999, p. 79). After this symbolic ceremony, the groom and bride proceed in separate carriages. The groom arrives first and waits outside the house. When the bride arrives, the groom greets her with a bow and gives place to her as she enters. The ritual of washing upon entering the house also includes a demonstration of the affection between husband and wife. During the washing, there is a description of the “maidservant and charioteer pouring water interchangeably” (Jia 1999, p. 80). Zheng Xuan’s annotations explain that “maidservant” refers to the female attendant accompanying the bride, while “charioteer” refers to the male attendant accompanying the groom. “Pouring water interchangeably” means that the maidservant pours water for the groom in the southern basin, while the charioteer pours water for the bride in the northern basin (Jia 1999, p. 80). Similar arrangements can be seen in the rituals of undressing and preparing the sleeping mat before bedtime. The maidservant attends to the groom, while the charioteer serves the bride. According to Zheng Xuan’s annotations, the groom and bride express their affection for each other, but due to the “modesty and shame when first meeting as husband and wife”, their affection cannot be expressed directly. Therefore, they employ the arrangement of interchanging attendants to “communicate their intentions” (Jia 1999, p. 80).

Furthermore, although many other details in the wedding ceremony are designed to express affection between husband and wife, what is emphasized and explicitly highlighted in “Hunyi” is “*heti tongzunbei*” between them. This begs the question, what is “*heti tongzunbei*”? We can understand its meaning through the symbolic significance of specific rituals explained in that chapter. The “feast sharing” and “nuptial cup sharing” rituals

play a significant role in embodying the concept of “*heti tongzunbei*”. After the groom and bride enter the house, they sit at a table, and the directrix offers them food and wine three times, which are consumed after a preliminary sacrificial ritual. According to Kong Yingda 孔颖达’s annotations, “feast sharing” means “sharing a single dressed pig and eating together” (Kong 1999a, p. 1620). “Shi Hunli” specifies using a special pig, which is symmetrically divided into two halves, with the right half referred to as the “right plump” and the left half as the “left plump”. These halves are then placed together in a tripod cauldron, known as the “shared vessel” (Jia 1999, p. 69). After the meal, husband and wife rinse their mouths with wine in a process known as “*yin* 酌”. During the third round of wine offering, a pair of “cups” (a gourd divided into two halves) are used instead of goblets. The groom and bride each hold one half of the gourd to drink the wine, hence the phrase “sharing libation with nuptial cups” (Kong 1999a, p. 1620). Both the “feast sharing” and “nuptial cup sharing” rituals emphasize the idea of the husband–wife sharing a unified entity. The unity of the shared object symbolizes the unity of husband and wife. The two originally separate individuals become united through the marriage ceremony. Additionally, this “unity” is closely associated with the concept of “*tongzunbei*”. “*Zunbei*” refers to the identity and status of a person in a certain order of human relations. Defining the significance of “*heti*” through the concept of “*tongzunbei*” means that the unity of the couple is a union in an ethical sense. The husband and wife participate in the order of human relations as a whole and thus share the same status and position.

However, we know that one of the main criticisms of traditional Chinese family values in modern times is marital inequality. This criticism largely obscures the concept of the husband–wife’s “unity”. Of course, we must acknowledge that Confucianism does uphold the idea of the husband’s superiority and the wife’s subordination. While this kind of superiority and inferiority in status is also manifested as the docility of women to their husbands at the level of actual behavioral relationships. However, even in the Han Dynasty, when the “Three Cardinal Guidelines” and the “Three Obediences” of women were clearly stated, it was emphasized that “The husband is *yang* 阳 and the wife is *yin* 阴; *yin* and *yang* cannot act independently. In the beginning, they must not act exclusively, and in the end, they must not separate their accomplishments. There is a principle of mutual inclusion” (Su 1992, pp. 350–51). Seen in this light, the husband–wife relationship embodies the principle of *yin* and *yang*. In the relationship between *yin* and *yang*, *yin* and *yang* are both indispensable to each other and to the unity formed by the combination of the two. *Yin* and *Yang* play their own unique roles in relation to each other. And our discussion of “Hunyi” here hopes to provide a more comprehensive and complete understanding of the relationship between husband and wife on the basis of this understanding. Based on the investigation of “Hunyi”, we can see that the widely criticized “inequality” between couples and the “*tongzunbei*” created by weddings define the relationship between husband and wife on two different levels. The first level is that the husband and wife as a unity enjoy the same status in the whole order of human relations; the second level is the subdivided distinction of master and subordinate in this unity.

3. The Origin of Generation

This kind of “unity” seen in the husband–wife relationship is highly distinctive in the family ethics and the entire order of human relations constructed by Confucianism. The bond between parent and child or among siblings is not designated as a “unity”, whereas the relationship between husband and wife, despite lacking a blood tie, forms an exceptionally close-knit entity. This implies that, according to Confucianism, a family is not composed of several homogeneous kinship relationships but rather has a tightly-knit core. Such a structure also suggests that the husband–wife relationship holds unique significance within the order of human relations.

In attempting to clarify the unique significance of husband–wife relationship in human ethical order, we find that Confucianism employs different sequences in its descriptions of various family relationships across different contexts. If we temporarily overlook

the scope of these discussions and the specific details involved, we can broadly categorize the Confucian narrative order into three types.

In the first type, the sequence is “father–son”, “elder–younger brother”, and “husband–wife” as seen in the “Wangzhi王制” chapter of *Li Ji*:

The seven lessons (of morality) were (the duties between) father and son, elder brother and younger³, husband and wife, ruler and minister, old and young, friend and friend, and host and guest.

七教：父子、兄弟、夫妇、君臣、长幼、朋友、宾客。(Kong 1999a, p. 435)

The “Liyun礼运” in *Li Ji* also expands upon this:

When there is generous affection between father and son, harmony between brothers, and a happy union between husband and wife, the family is in good condition.

父子笃，兄弟睦，夫妇和，家之肥也。(Kong 1999a, p. 711)

Regarding these three types of family relationships, their order reflects the individual’s development process. When a person is born, “It is not till a child is three years old that it is allowed to leave the arms of its parents” (Xing 1999, p. 242). So the first relationship they experience is that of parent and child. As they grow older, “they all know to love their elder brothers” (Sun 1999, p. 359), and they begin to deal with their sibling relationships. When they reach adulthood, they enter into the husband–wife relationship through the wedding ceremony. This sequence follows the order of time based on the individual’s development experiences.

The second category consists of a sequence of five relationships: “ruler–minister”, “father–son”, “husband–wife”, “elder brother and younger”, and “friends”. This is seen in the “Zhongyong中庸” chapter of *Liji*:

The duties are those between sovereign and minister, between father and son, between husband and wife, between elder brother and younger, and those belonging to the intercourse of friends. Those five are the duties of universal obligation.

曰君臣也，父子也，夫妇也，昆弟也，朋友之交也。五者，天下之达道也。(Kong 1999a, p. 1441)

This sequence also appears in the “Tengwengong Shang滕文公上” chapter of *Mengzi* 孟子:

This was a subject of anxious solicitude to the sage Shun, and he appointed Xie to be the Minister of Instruction, to teach the relations of humanity: how, between father and son, there should be affection; between sovereign and minister, righteousness; between husband and wife, attention to their separate functions; between old and young, a proper order; and between friends, fidelity.

圣人有忧之，使契为司徒，教以人伦：父子有亲，君臣有义，夫妇有别，长幼有叙，朋友有信。(Sun 1999, p. 1620)

This sequence apparently follows another logic. Although they differ slightly in the listed relationships and their order, both excerpts prioritize the connection between ruler and minister and father and son. We know that Confucianism has always attempted to establish a connection in father–son and ruler–minister relationships, teaching people to serve their ruler with the same attitude and approach as they serve their fathers, which is what “Daxue大学” means when it says that “There is filial piety, therewith the sovereign should be served” (Kong 1999a, p. 1599). This essentially aims to establish a relationship between the ruler and the minister by emulating the natural and stable father–son relationship or by framing the former as an extension of the latter. This reflects a political concern, under which the link from father–son to ruler–minister forms the backbone of the entire human ethical order, making the father–son and ruler–minister relationships the primary focus. The second category emphasizes this implication by placing the father–son and ruler–minister relationships at the forefront equally.

The third type is based on the sequence of “husband–wife”, “father–son”, and “ruler–minister”, as presented in the “Ai Gong Wen 哀公问” chapter of *Liji*:

The duke said, “I venture to ask how this practice of government is to be effected?” Confucius replied, “Husband and wife have their separate functions; between father and son there should be affection; between ruler and minister there should be a strict adherence to their several parts. If these three relations be correctly discharged, all other things will follow”.

公曰：“敢问为政如之何？”孔子对曰：“夫妇别，父子亲，君臣严。三者正，则庶物从之矣。” (Kong 1999a, p. 1375)

It also appears in “Hunyi”:

From the distinction between man and woman came the righteousness between husband and wife. From that righteousness came the affection between father and son; and from that affection, the rectitude between ruler and minister.

男女有别，而后夫妇有义；夫妇有义，而后父子有亲；父子有亲，而后君臣有正。 (Kong 1999a, p. 1620)

The “Xugua Zhuan 序卦传” chapter of *Zhouyi* 周易 also includes a description of this sequence:

Heaven and earth existing, all (material) things then got their existence. All (material) things having existence, afterwards there came male and female. From the existence of male and female there came afterwards husband and wife. From husband and wife there came father and son. From father and son there came ruler and minister. From ruler and minister there came high and low. When (the distinction of) high and low had existence, afterwards came the arrangements of propriety and righteousness.

有天地然后有万物，有万物然后有男女，有男女然后有夫妇，有夫妇然后有父子，有父子然后有君臣，有君臣然后有上下，有上下然后礼义有所错。 (Kong 1999c, pp. 336–37)

This sequence also involves the politically significant ruler–minister relationship. The background of “Ai Gong Wen” clearly indicates the political concern behind this sequence. However, in this sequence, the husband–wife relationship is no longer secondary to father–son and ruler–minister relationships; instead, it takes precedence. The excerpts from “Hunyi” and “Xugua Zhuan” provide clear clues as to why this is so by extending the “husband–wife”, “father–son”, and “ruler–minister” sequence. “The Meaning of the Wedding Ceremony” includes “men–women” before “husband–wife”, while the “Sequence of Hexagrams” goes further by incorporating “men–women”, “husband–wife”, “father–son”, and “ruler–minister” after “heaven and earth” and “all things”. More importantly, using the “from... there came...” sentence structure, these two excerpts express that the items in the sequence are not simply parallel, but that they follow the order of time. Considering the temporal significance expressed in these texts and the generative meaning that heaven and earth usually hold for all things in traditional thought, we can confirm that in the structure of “from... came...”, “came” implies a generative existence and should be understood as “emergence” or “from non-existence to existence”. When it comes to traditional narratives of generation, especially the generative role of heaven and earth for all things, we often interpret generation in terms of physical or material generation. However, if it is restricted to physical entities and material things, it cannot explain the subsequent generation phase of all things. If we examine some typical statements from early generative theories, it becomes evident that the process of formation of physical entities and material things is not the sole factor involved. For example, “Zhengmin 蒸民” in *Shijing* 诗经 states that:

Heaven, in giving birth to the multitudes of the people. To every faculty and relationship annexed its law.

天生蒸民，有物有则。 (Kong 1999b, p. 1218)

According to the interpretation of Mao's "Biography", "Zheng, the multitude. Wu, things. Ze, laws" (Kong 1999b, p. 1218). Based on this, the first sentence says that people are born, which can be understood as the formation of the human body. The second sentence points out that heaven not only generated the human body, but also accomplished all kinds of worldly affairs common to human beings, and endowed order and laws for human beings and human affairs. Substituting this kind of generative connotation of "You Wu You Ze有物有则" into the interpretation of the above-mentioned "Xugua Zhuan" sequence, its significance becomes clearer. In this sequence, of course, there is the process of the generation of all things and the human body, but what permeates the entire sequence as a whole is the successive construction of order and principles. The laws that govern the generation of all things in heaven and earth are implemented in humans through the distinction between males and females. Males and females form husband–wife through the institution of marriage, and husband and wife give birth to children, forming the relationship between father and son. Then, by emulating the way of attending to one's father to serve the ruler, the relationship between ruler and minister is established. With this understanding, when we revisit the fundamental "husband–wife", "father–son", and "ruler–minister" relationships, we can see that the reason why this sequence differs from the order of "father–son", "ruler–minister", and "husband–wife" is because it does not simply emphasize the logic of political order but also incorporates an understanding of generative relationships at a more fundamental level.

From this perspective of generation, husband–wife relationships undoubtedly hold crucial significance in the construction of the entire ethical order. Setting aside the preceding stages with more cosmological implications, the order that truly embodies the attributes of human relations begins with the husband–wife relationship. Furthermore, while the progression from "husband–wife" to "father–son" and from "father–son" to "ruler–minister" reflects the natural generation of human relations, what genuinely drives this process remains the procreation accomplished by husband and wife. This is also the irreplaceable significance on which the husband–wife relationship is founded.

The above only describes the linear trajectory of human relation generation. In fact, in the broader scale of the evolution of human relations, the generation of human relations is not linear but cyclically overlapping. Husband and wife bear children, and when these children grow up, they form new husband–wife relationships with others, thus completing a generation of human relations (Meng 2022, pp. 121–23). All other human relations are gradually derived from this cyclically overlapping structure, in which the husband–wife relationship is not only the starting point of a new generation of human relations but also the transition point between generations. The Confucian school clearly recognizes this point. Therefore, in discussing the significance of marriage ceremonies, "Hunyi" specifically points out:

The ceremony of marriage was intended to be a bond of love between two (families of different) surnames, with a view, in its retrospective character, to secure the services in the ancestral temple, and in its prospective character, to secure the continuance of the family line. Therefore the superior men set a great value upon it.

昏礼者，将合二姓之好，上以事宗庙，而下以继后世也，故君子重之。(Kong 1999a, p. 1618)

The reason why marriage ceremonies carry the significance of honoring the ancestral temple and ensuring the continuation of future generations is precise because the husband–wife relationship established through the wedding serves as the transition point between different generations.

4. Becoming-Human (*Chengren* 成人) and Responsibilities

Through our analysis above, we can see that the Confucian school of thought has a profound understanding of the generative structure of human relations. Confucianism has realized that reproduction and the continuation of human relations both rely on a specific

generative structure. As it is indispensable for human life, this structure determines the fundamental modality of human ethical order. Under its influence, the unity of husband and wife becomes the core node of the human ethical order, and the procreation of husband and wife drives the evolution of human relations as a whole, which is mainly based on the succession of family relationships.

In this generative structure woven by human relations, the individual is always subordinate to the human relations they participate in constructing. Each individual is tied up in various human relations and constantly participates in constructing new relations as the generative process unfolds. Some scholars have discussed this from different perspectives. For example, Henry Rosemont and Roger T. Ames focused on the ethical roles that individuals have in various human relations, regarding Confucian ethics as “role ethics” (Rosemont and Ames 2020, p. 4). From the Confucian perspective, the various ethical roles that people assume are not abstract “names”. Each “name” or role points to corresponding responsibilities. The “Guanyi冠义” chapter of *Liji* emphasizes the ethical roles that individuals undertake and their corresponding responsibilities when interpreting the meaning of “becoming-human” in *Guanli冠礼* (the rite of capping):

Treating him (now) as becoming-human, they would require from him all the observances of becoming-human. Doing so, they would require from him the performance of all the duties of a son, a younger brother, a minister, and a junior. But when these four duties or services were required from him, was it not right that the ceremony by which he was placed in such a position should be considered important?

成人之者，将责成人礼焉也。责成人礼焉者，将责为人子、为人弟、为人臣、为人少者之礼行焉。将责四者之行于人，其礼可不重与？ (Kong 1999a, p. 1615)

We would like to emphasize that, in the exposition of “Guanyi”, the individual’s “becoming-human (becoming a grown man)” is presented through *chengren li*成人礼 (observances of becoming-human). First and foremost, “becoming-human” involves “*ze chengren li*责成人礼”. The word “*ze*责(require)” is repeatedly used here, implying a sense of obligation or requirement that aligns with the normative meaning of rituals. “*ze chengren li*” refers to acting in accordance with the requirements and standards of “*chengren li*”. Specifically, it is divided into the rites of being a son, a younger brother, a minister, and a junior. This means that the expectations of becoming-human are distributed among these ethical roles of being a son, a younger brother, a minister, and a junior. Meeting the requirements of becoming-human entails assuming these ethical roles and their corresponding responsibilities in accordance with the rituals. From this perspective, Confucianism does not overly emphasize individual rights. Its understanding of the individual’s state of existence and ethical duties clearly differs from the modern notion of the individual and becomes one of the important characteristics of Confucian ethical thought.

After clarifying this characteristic of Confucian thought, we must still note that the understanding of ethical roles and individuals’ responsibilities should not be limited to a static examination of each ethical relationship or role. The roles and responsibilities that an individual bears continually accumulate in the generation of real human ethical order. Therefore, a more in-depth investigation of relevant issues requires placing the individual within the holistic ethical perspective of Confucianism—that is, to examine them within a generative structure centered on husband–wife relationships. Next, we will examine how individuals participate in the formation of various ethical relationships and assume the corresponding responsibilities by tracing their life trajectories as a guiding thread within Confucian discourse.

As mentioned above, the union of husband and wife marks the beginning of a new generation of human relations and serves as a transition point between generations, which is where our examination of the individual begins. Bred by husband and wife, an individual comes into existence, forming a new parent–child relationship; this is expressed in the phrase “from husband and wife there came father and son” (Kong 1999c, pp. 336–37). The newborn individual begins to forge various relationships with others, albeit within

an expanding scope. In the initial three years, the infant remains primarily in the care of their parents, focusing on the parents. Later, they interact more with siblings and extended family members before gradually expanding their connections beyond the household. The issue that needs to be examined here is whether the individual's involvement in the relationships implies the completion of a specific ethical relationship. In other words, has the individual already assumed the corresponding responsibilities of their ethical roles within a particular relationship? By carefully examining the explanations in "Hunyi" and "Xugua Zhuan" referenced earlier, a subtle difference can be observed. The "Xugua Zhuan" only states that "from husband and wife there came father and son" (Kong 1999c, pp. 336–37), whereas "Hunyi" emphasizes that "from that righteousness (between husband and wife) came the affection between father and son" (Kong 1999a, p. 1620). Achieving "righteousness" and "affection" means going beyond mere participation and the construction of a relationship; it also involves maintaining the relationship in an appropriate state. This involves a developing process from initiating a relationship to reaching a proper state. This deeper understanding is further elucidated through the Confucian interpretation of "Guanli". According to the "Neize 内则" chapter of *Liji*, "At twenty, he was Capped" (Kong 1999a, p. 869), which signifies the transition of an individual from the immaturity of childhood to the responsibilities of becoming-human. The excerpt from "Guanyi" listed above provides a clear explanation for this. However, it is important to note that "Guanyi" is attached to a specific caveat when talking about the individual being required to follow all the observances of becoming-human, which is "jiangze 将责" meaning that the individual "will be required" to perform the observances of becoming-human. This indicates that the "becoming-human" required by Guanli is not an achievement in the sense of completion but only the beginning of a person's genuine assumption of ethical responsibilities.

Based on these details from "Hunyi" and "Guanyi", an individual's experience of ethical relationships can be divided into two stages by Guanli. The first stage spans from birth to the age of 20 (*ruoguan* 弱冠). During this stage, the individual is in various ethical relationships but cannot assume ethical responsibilities due to their young age. Instead, they learn and experience the appropriate behaviors of various ethical roles. The second stage begins after the *Guanli*, during which the individual is expected to assume various ethical responsibilities. Of course, the rites of being a son, a younger brother, a minister, and a junior mentioned in "Guanyi" are only a few limited ethical roles that individuals may have in their early adulthood. As individuals grow up, especially after marriage, which opens up another new generation process of human relations, the ethical relationships that they construct and the ethical roles that they bear will further expand. In addition to being a husband or wife in the husband–wife relationship, individuals also become parents, elders, and superiors in new ethical relationships. With the accumulation of human relations and ethical roles, the ethical situation faced by the individual becomes increasingly complex. The assumption of ethical roles and corresponding responsibilities is always accompanied by new problems and challenges. Therefore, people need to continuously learn and practice ethical relationships. Human relations as a whole are in constant generation and evolution. In this sense, the individual's adaptation to ethical relationships, as well as the learning and refinement associated with these relationships, is infinite.

5. Summary

In this paper, we have revealed a generative structure of human relations in Confucianism that is centered on the husband–wife relationship. This relationship drives the continuous evolution and continuation of human relations. Meanwhile, it is also evident that the generation of ethical relationships by husband and wife is not instantaneous. The true achievement of ethical relationships unfolds alongside the individual's life trajectory. Each individual assumes various ethical roles and corresponding responsibilities in the entanglement of ethical relationships. As ethical relationships continue to evolve, individuals continuously adjust their roles in relationships to better assume their ethical responsibilities and maintain their human relations in an appropriate and ritual state.

The Confucian understanding of ethical order and its generative structure also determines that its understanding of the individual must be viewed from the perspective of ethical relationships. The primary significance of the individual is not defined by individual rights but rather by the roles and corresponding responsibilities assumed within various human relations.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Confucianism places a strong emphasis on the filial affection between parents and children, considering it as the fundamental moral principle and the basis of the ritual system. See “filial affection for parents is the working of benevolence” (Sun 1999, p. 359). Also, see “benevolence is the characteristic element of humanity, and the great exercise of it is in loving relatives. Righteousness is the accordance of actions with what is right, and the great exercise of it is in honoring the worthy. The decreasing measures of the love due to relatives, and the steps in the honor due to the worthy, are produced by the principle of propriety” (Kong 1999a, p. 1440).
- ² The English translations of Confucian literature cited in this paper are all sourced from the Chinese Text Project (<https://ctext.org/>) accessed on 1 June 2023. We make modifications to the translation where necessary.
- ³ Confucianism generally regards the father–son and brotherhood relationships as representative of broader family relationships and considers them to hold greater significance compared to other relationships.

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