

EAST MEETS WEST

Dignity in Western vs. Chinese Culture: Theoretical Overview and Practical Illustrations

by
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Dignity is an important concept in ethics. Human rights organizations justify rights by appealing to human dignity. They argue that rights are necessary to protect dignity and that human beings possess rights by virtue of the inherent worth of persons (United Nations, 1948). Some governments base their legitimacy on human dignity. For example, Article One of the German Grundgesetz guarantees human dignity (Hofman, 1996). Prominent politicians have cited the need to protect human dignity and urged the founding of international institutions. Nelson Mandela has pressed for the establishment of an international criminal court in order to hold states accountable for human rights violations and to enable human dignity to “shine brightly” (Chothia, 1998). The International Red Cross was founded by the Swiss humanist Henry Dunant “for the protection of human dignity under all circumstances” (Bulgarian Red Cross, posted 1999). A number of countries and religions boast human dignity initiatives (Sikkuy, posted 1999) and celebrate Human Dignity Day (Kansas City Star, 1995).

In addition, the concept of human dignity often is used to evaluate and critique the ethics of select practices. The American Bioethics Advisory Commission considers whether various bioethical procedures uphold the “innate dignity” and “unique nature” of man (American Bioethics Advisory Commission, posted 1999). Becker (2006) has suggested that leadership is only morally legitimate to the extent that the leader respects human dignity by basing his or her rule on consent, looking after the safety and welfare of others, and governing in a participatory way. Many ethicists go so far as to argue that true morality is based on the concept of dignity enunciated by

Immanuel Kant—to act with dignity is to act so as to become worthy of happiness.

This paper examines human dignity in detail. In Part One, I compare and contrast what the term means in a Western and a Chinese context. In Part Two, I consider how these different ideas “cash out” in two specific business ethics cases. While the substantial differences do not plunge us into ethical relativity, they do pose a problem for anyone who thinks that ethically sound judgment means subsuming the particular under a universal rule. It is far better, I believe, to address ethical problems by seeking to identify the many goods at play in a contested situation and to realize as many of these goods as possible.¹

I Western vs. Chinese Conception of Dignity

Dignity: Innate vs. Acquired

The West understands human dignity as personal worth. This worth stems from man’s being as a creature of God or as a rational being. In both derivations, the worth is understood to be innate, a consequence of man’s nature. According to the Judeo-Christian religion, human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. God is good. Man, the image and likeness of God, is thus good as well. In creating human beings, God bestowed an intrinsic worth upon each individual. This dignity cannot be destroyed by any human authority, nor should it be contested by human representatives.

Western ethical systems that take rationality, rather than our creaturely nature, to be the defining or characteristic mark of the human equally understand men and women to possess an intrinsic, innate worth. Kant, for example, argues that reason sets mankind apart from the animals. If mere biological existence were the goal of humanity, we might well be better off without reason. Animals exist quite well, living by instinct alone. The fact that we have reason means that reason serves another purpose—namely, to impose its own demands upon us (e.g., a demand to be logically consistent) (Kant, 1972). Experiencing and honoring these demands sets each of us apart from the animals and gives us worth in our own eyes and in the eyes of other rational beings. This worth belongs to us as members of a species. Again, no human authority has any power to either deny or confer this worth. On the contrary, human societies and states gain in legitimacy to the extent they honor intrinsic human dignity.

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Both of these Western views treat innate human dignity or worth as a characteristic or property of individuals. Chinese ethics, by contrast, understands dignity as worth that one acquires by behaving properly within relationships. Liang contends that relationship is the most prominent and pervasive feature of Chinese culture (1949:86):

Relationships of ethics are also relationships of mutual favors, that is to say, there is a relationship of mutual obligation. The logic of ethical-relational principles is found in the components of feeling and obligation.

Chinese ‘relationship-based’ society is governed by relational ethics. These relations begin with dyadic relations of family and kin and then extend outward to all types of interpersonal relationships. Relationships are evaluated in light of the Confucian interdependent virtues of *jen* and *li*. *Jen* refers to human-relatedness. An individual qualifies as fully human only when he or she takes proper account of others and acts towards them appropriately. *Li* are the rules of propriety or proper behavior. Becoming fully human and having human dignity are equivalent notions. Since humanity is an achievement—we must acquire the virtue of *jen* and learn the civilizing rules or *li*—it follows that neither our humanity nor our dignity are innate. True, each person has the innate ability to become civilized. Nevertheless, dignity is acquired and actualized in and through social relations.

Jen and *li* structure social relations. The structure orders human relations hierarchically. For example, children should defer to parents’ authority, junior managers to senior executives’ authority. The resulting relationship-based ethic stresses neither intrinsic rights of individuals within the relationship nor the good of the larger social whole, both of which are characteristic of Western universalistic ethics (Yang, 1994). Instead, the ethic stresses appropriate behavior in accordance with *li*. Moreover, since the ethic structures relationships, the Chinese look to these implicit moral relationships to maintain order, instead of imposing order through jurisdiction (Redding, 1990).

Reciprocity is an extremely important implicit Confucian norm. Loosely interpreted, reciprocity means returning, in some fashion or manner, a favor granted by another party. Even in relationships of unequal power, the dominant party, who expects obedience and loyalty, must reciprocate by protecting and caring for the weaker party. For example, if one does not treat other people inhumanely, they will not treat one inhumanely in return. Thus, if:

you yourself desire rank and standing; then help others to get rank and standing. [If] you want to turn your own merits to account, then help others to turn theirs to account (Confucius, 1979).

Dignity: Within the Individual vs. Within the Relationship

In Western ethics, dignity inheres in the individual person. If we follow Kant and take rationality to be the basis or ground of dignity, then dignity resides in each individual in the form of a potential. The person manifests this dignity—realizes the rational capacity—by making choices that are logically consistent. A person who resolves to commit suicide on the ground that he will be better off in doing so acts irrationally and sins against his dignity. For once the man is dead, there will not longer be any “he” who can be better off. By contrast, the melancholic individual who resists suicidal impulses by refusing to engage in such irrational speculations acts with dignity.

If we treat our nature as children of God as the ground of our dignity, we again find that dignity resides in the individual. Insofar as each person is a child of God, she has an actual, intrinsic dignity. Each of us is bound to respect this dignity because, as the divine word has it, “as you do unto the least of men, you do unto me as well.” One might say, therefore, that human dignity has a relational aspect. We owe it to others and to ourselves to respect the divine spark inside the human being. Nevertheless, the dignity resides in the individual, not in these relationships. Others may turn their back on God. They may abuse us. If they strike our cheek, we should turn the other cheek. Submission does not cost us our dignity. To refuse to engage in violence out of a hope that the circle of violence can be broken and that love will triumph honors the divinity that is inside each person. Even the angry party retains dignity. At any point he can renounce his violent past and mend his ways.

The Confucian ethic, by contrast, makes dignity inhere in relationships. No one is an individual simply. We are teachers, students, lovers, parents, children. We are relational beings who owe it to others and to ourselves to show appropriate care for those people with whom we are in specific relations. In a narrow sense, *jen* means the individual manifestation of ideal human nature —i.e., each person should love others. However, we always must remember that, although Confucian ethics recommends individual perfection, the achievement of that perfection manifests itself in dealings with others. Acting humanely is thus closely related to other social virtues

such as filial piety. Indeed, filial piety and brotherly respect are specifically described as the roots of *jen* (Dawson, 1981).

Jen or humaneness is not entirely selfless or altruistic. The social virtues have their reciprocal obligations and duties. Just as filial piety is rewarded with parental care, parents, in return, should receive the same kind of loving care from their grown-up children. Dignity is acquired in and through such highly determinate relations of give and take. People in these relations need to be aware of the consequences of breaking the rules of reciprocity. The current high suicidal rate of Chinese parents can be attributed to the behavior of children (who, for the most part, belong to the new generation). The children have refused to reciprocate the respect and loving care shown by their parents to them—i.e., the children have failed to make financial contributions to their parents after the children have left home. The unfilial children cause the parents to lose face and dignity because the parents are not recognized *as parents*. The parents lose, as it were, their relational being and thus their dignity.

To put the same point in terms of *li*: one cannot determine which manners are proper without knowing how interpersonal relations should be conducted. *Li*, or the propriety principle, therefore, not only calls for having manners but also for conducting human interaction in appropriate, dignity-affirming ways. At home and in social life, “*li* is the principle that channels respect for each other and for the world, and regulates human nature” (Blackburn, 1994:75).

Dignity: Collective Linkage with Explicit Limits vs. Metaphors of Kinship Ties

The Kantian and Christian ethics conceive of an individual who is part of a collectivity. Each person is a children of God and, as such, is part of the city of God. This community is not fully realizable on earth. Nevertheless, there are better and worse images of the divine community. Just and humane states have greater legitimacy than unjust regimes. Totalitarian regimes lack legitimacy because they grant the state or its representative (e.g. the party) complete control over the individual. Since man is a creation of God, absolute allegiance can never be owed to the state. We should “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

In a Kantian ethic, human beings are part of a rational community. People of reason will grant limited authority to the state to promulgate and enforce laws designed to enable people to live together harmoniously. But, again, there are rational limits to the state’s authority. For example, since we

can never know people's motives for certain, legitimate states will proscribe certain behaviors but will refrain from policies that amount to thought control.

In both Christian and Kantian ethics, the idea of human dignity serves to link the individual to a larger community of like-minded or like-created individuals, each of whom possesses exactly the same kind and degree of dignity. At the same time that this dignity binds people together it generates explicit, rational limits what the community (or its representatives) justifiably may do to individuals. In the Confucian system, by contrast, there are few explicit norms governing the relationship between the individual and the collective. This Chinese ethic centers on kinship relations. These function as the controlling metaphor for the conduct of social and political relations (Yang, 1994). The ruler or senior executive must be shown respect and obedience just as a child should respect his elders, but, at the same time, the ruler, like a parent, must offer care and protection to those whom he governs. The dignity inherent in kinship relations, not an intrinsic individual dignity, regulates behavior at all levels of the community.

For example, family members and relatives are known by relationship-kinship terms, not by their first names. This familial, surname form of address is considered respectful and dignified. The junior owes it to her elders, including her older brothers and sisters, to use the kinship name. Using such names is a courteous and dignified gesture akin to using both hands when offering a cup of tea to one's elders. It is no accident that the first Chinese words children learn to use are kinship terms (Kipnis, 1997). Small children are taught to call their uncles *shushu* or aunts *yiyi*. These kinship terms also may be extended to close friends of the child's parents. Children are rewarded with praise when they manage the correct form of address without being prompted by their parents. Children must gain their dignity and self-esteem through the disciplined use of kinship language. Self-disciplined children who show proper awareness of kinship relations are the source of "face" for their parents because this behavior shows good upbringing—i.e., that the parents' lives are regulated by *jen* and *li*.

Showing the proper respect for people's status extends from next of kin outward into the society. The title teacher *laoshi* and master *shifu* are used as kinship terms. Chinese students learn to bow to their teachers. As apprentices, they learn to follow the instructions of their masters without making any complaints. These relationships endure for life. The student refers to his teacher as such as long as the teacher lives. Both teachers and masters are considered to be elders. These elders, in turn, must themselves

be serious and self-controlled and knowledgeable about *li* in order to merit respect and to have face.

In this respect, kinship, like dignity, must be earned. Those lacking in intrafamilial power must earn their kinship name. Thus, the children of concubines without status may not call their biological mothers “mother.” The first wife has power, and she commands the title of “mother.” Children are taught and socialized into accepting kinship role positions and relations and to internalize the values and behavior patterns that go with these relations. They are brought up to accept and respect authority, to be obedient, to conform to expected behavior patterns, to stick to the rules of proper behavior, to display moderation, and to work hard at maintaining harmony in the home. In many cases, children are expected to pursue and to realize their parents’ unfulfilled dreams.

Children, therefore, learn to put the interests of the family above their own narrow concerns. Behaving properly secures a place with dignity in the family. Failure to secure such a place means the child becomes a family outcast—possibly the worst possible fate for a Chinese child. Parents reciprocate by sacrificing for the sake of the child. A survey conducted by Chao (1996) compared the values of Chinese and European-American mothers. Chao found that Chinese mothers placed higher value on their children obtaining a fine education. They felt a greater need to sacrifice for the sake of the child’s education and were more willing to intervene in the educational process because they believed they played a significant role in the child’s success in school.

While the Confucian ethic stipulates that children ought not to follow the dictates of elders if and when these seem unwise, the dignified child takes care not to confront elders in an antagonistic way. In the West, the dignity of the individual may require that he or she stand up and fight for the truth. In China, disagreement always has the potential to cost both the elder and the child “face.” Any disagreement should be gentle and perhaps even disguised so as to minimize the cost to dignity and to preserve social harmony.

Dignity: Absolute vs. Conditional and Role-Specific

Western ethics treat life as an absolute good. The Judeo-Christian tradition insists that God is the giver of life. Life is a great and good gift. Since God gave mankind the gift of life, only God has the right to end human lives. As long as a person lives, she merits our respect. She lives by grace of

the internal divine spark. This spark confers dignity. Even after the person has died, she still deserves respect. Her body was a divine vessel and will become such again at the point at which God resurrects the dead. For Kant, too, respect for life is absolute. To be alive means to be a rational being. Life is “of value beyond price.” No price—no relative or contingent value—can be put upon our rational lives because any attempt by us to do so requires rationality. Since rational being necessarily precedes efforts at valuation (i.e., valuation presupposes rationality as its basis), our lives never can have a merely contingent value. Setting a price on human life would be equivalent to making necessary rationality merely contingent, an act that is a contradiction in terms and thus irrational and immoral.

In Chinese culture, though, respect for life is conditional. The essence of *li* is to distinguish among human beings. As Yu Dunkang (1991) observes, *li* divides human society into superiors and inferiors, a class of nobles and a class of commoners. Acquiring human dignity entails taking note of factors that confer status (e.g., family background, occupations, and social positions). In general, the Chinese are very status-conscious. Status differences are respected and have strong behavioral implications. Those in lower ranks should honor those of higher rank (Westwood, 1992). Social status is always linked with wealth, authority and power – it is, in short, a matter of reputation and appearance. The son of a tycoon will be afforded a place of dignity in society because of his family’s influence. Riches and honor command respect within the social system because they are signs that the individual has fulfilled his various roles successfully.

As I noted earlier, the Confucian ethic greatly esteems education and self-development. Dignity is tied to the person’s level of education. Professions requiring a high level of education and self-discipline confer dignity. Becoming a doctor, lawyer, accountant or scholar bestows dignity upon the person occupying these roles. Dignity is role-specific in the Chinese context. As Ho (1976:883) puts it, “the respectability a person can claim for himself from others [varies according to the] relative position he occupies in his social network and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in that position as well as acceptably in his general conduct.” A prestigious job is a social honor given to a person and grants that party a measure of secure dignity.

Some workers (e.g., prostitutes) find it nearly impossible to acquire dignity because their jobs are shameful and have no merit. Prostitutes are in no position to command respect or to refuse to engage in certain shameful practices. As Whitehead (1997) observes in her book *Sex in South China*,

the paying customer may demand any sexual favor he desires because the “customer is always right.” The prostitute-client relation is understood as one of domination. The client has all of the power because he owes the prostitute nothing unless she does what he wants. When she complies, she reinforces the relation by augmenting the client’s sense of power. There is no way she can obtain any dignity.

Dignity: Inalienable vs. Alienable

Dignity is permanent as well as absolute in Western ethics. To say that dignity is absolute just is to say that it is not conditional upon circumstances. Nothing that people do can change the fact that each person is a creature of God. Not even God can strip humans of their dignity. Anything that God could or might do to His creatures would confirm that they are His creatures. Since their creatureliness is the ground of their dignity, their dignity remains intact throughout their history, regardless of what God does or does not do. Similar reasoning applies to humans considered as rational beings. Given that dignity inheres in humans’ capacity for reason, humans could lose dignity only if reason determined that such a loss had occurred. However, the very act of using the rational capacity would confirm that the rational capacity remains intact.

It is possible, though, to lose dignity within the Chinese system. Dignity is hard-earned, and, in order to become dignified, individuals must adhere to *li*. They must exercise self-control, keeping their passions in check and restraining appetites and desires. Respectful persons harmonize their behavior with rituals and the expectations built into the social system. Those who fail to meet these expectations will lose dignity. The loss can be dramatic and can occur overnight.

There are several conditions that produce a loss of dignity:

- A person within an in-group (e.g., within the nuclear or extended family) fails to meet the expectations associated with his/her kinship network;
- Other people fail to treat the person in the manner his/her face deserves.
- The person falls short of the standards the society associates with certain roles;
- The person’s status is largely symbolic and thus the person loses status when he or she suffers some misfortune.

In addition, the doctrine of *yin* and *yang* brings social relations under two opposing headings. Superiors are bearers of *yang* force, while inferiors embody *yin* force. *Yang* is hard, productive, active, and commanding; *yin* is soft, receptive, passive, and obedient. The person of *jen* embodies both forces. She is prudent. Consequently, like Confucius, she knows when to assert herself and when to yield. However, the historical system of gender construction within China has associated *yin* with the feminine and *yang* with the masculine. Labor has been divided along sex lines. This interpretation of the *yin-yang* principle has shaped the role definitions and expectations that are the source of dignity. A man should play a man's role, while a woman should inhabit a woman's role. Of course, role definitions change over time precisely because people challenge these definitions. Still, those who choose to violate current role definitions often pay a high price: they lose dignity, especially in the eyes of the more conservative portion of the community. While the Chinese are willing to forgive and forget; and while people can regain dignity by bringing their behavior back into conformity with rituals (*li*) and social expectations, the loss of dignity may prove permanent in cases where the behavior is especially egregious or taboo (Ho, 1976).

Dignity: Internal Property vs. A Matter of Face

Many commentators have noted that Western ethics tend to be guilt-based, while the ethics of Asians revolve around shame. While the distinction between shame and guilt is complex; and while it may not be not as clear-cut as this opposition suggests, the contrast is suggestive. Individuals feel guilty when they violate a law. Even if there are no witnesses to the violation, the individual still feels guilt. Why does a violation of the law give rise to guilt and how is guilt connected with dignity?

The Judeo-Christian tradition makes God the giver of the moral law. Moral laws reflect man's status as a creature of God (e.g., "Thou shalt have no other god above Me"). These laws aim at keeping human beings in the proper relation to God. To violate the law is to sin against God, regardless of whether anyone else knows about the action. Since God is omnipotent, no violation escapes His notice. Insofar as we carry the divine spark, we, too, are aware—consciously or subliminally—that we have broken the law and have failed to show the proper respect both to God and to ourselves. This awareness of our shortcoming (the Greek word for sin *amartia* that is used in the New Testament literally means "falling short of the mark") constitutes guilt.

Kantian ethics base the moral law on the dictates of reason: reason demands that we always act in a way that is logically consistent and coherent. Failure to conform to this law leads to guilt. The law-violating party has failed herself. The violation in no way destroys her capacity for rationality. Her intact rationality tells her both that she should have abided by the moral law and that her forbidden action was irrational and in violation of the law. This two-fold awareness is the essence of guilt.

In both the Kantian and Christian schemes, guilt is one's awareness that one has sinned against one's intrinsic dignity. In the Chinese context, shame, not guilt, is the crucial notion because feeling shame is the same as "losing face." The expression is apt, for when we feel ashamed, our face reddens and falls into an expression of abjectness, losing its brightness. Shame arises when we are seen by others—or imagine that we are seen by others—to have failed to have met others' expectations. Such shame or loss of face-dignity is at the core of the Confucian ethic because this ethic revolves around understanding and meeting social and ritual expectations and achieving and preserving high social status.

The Chinese recognize two kinds of face: *lian* and *mianzi*. An individual's *lian* is preserved by compliance with ritual or social norms. In contrast, *mianzi* is a matter of "reputation achieved through getting on in life, through success and ostentation" (Hu, 1944:45). *Mianzi* is closely associated with a person's place in the social structure (e.g., with the status inhering in the person's occupation). Or, as Ho (1976) puts it, *mianzi* is 'social/positional' face. It is a major mechanism governing social relationships because it sanctions select behaviors and choices (Westwood, 1992). Given the current rapid economic change in Chinese societies, it is not surprising to find that dignity increasingly correlates with *mianzi* or positional face.

The second type of face—*lian*—is allied with the important virtue of reciprocity. *Lian* operates both within kinship relations and outside of them (e.g., within the neighborhood). A popular Chinese saying proclaims that "If someone pays you an honor of a linear foot, you should reciprocate with ten linear feet as a return of honor." *Lian* creates an obligation to reciprocate and functions as the basis for the respect owed by one party to another. When one person gives a second *lian*, the person who has granted the face typically anticipates a return of face. Consequently, the Chinese seek to present themselves in interactions in such a way that others will attribute positive characteristics to them. In this way, they make a good impression, obtain the esteem of others, and gain face or dignity.

Giving *lian* to others is viewed as a social investment for which a return is expected. According to the rules of decorum or *li* pertaining to ceremonial functions (e.g., weddings, parties and funeral services), an offer of help, or even an acceptance of help, are face-giving gestures. The logic of face-giving and face-saving gives rise to a calculus of exchange. People keep track of the relative proportion of “faces given” vs. “faces taken” in any particular relation. Face correlates positively with the degree that a person is indebted to another and is an indication of the direction the parties hope the relationship will take in the future.

Dignity: Completely Internal vs. Having an Internal Aspect

While Western ethics make dignity an entirely internal property or trait, the Confucian ethic’s understanding of dignity is more nuanced. As I argued in the preceding section, dignity inevitably is bound up with external norms and perceptions in Chinese society. However, dignity always has an internal aspect as well. Confucian ethics promote what are known as the “Five Cardinal Virtues”: humanity, knowledge, credibility, righteousness, and filial piety. The first three virtues are internal attributes, while the last two are related to social rules of conduct and behavior (Trauzettel, 1991). Thus even a person who has low social status (e.g., a construction worker) can obtain a measure of dignity by disciplining himself to show humaneness, to be trustworthy, etc. When a person acquires and exhibits the internal virtues, he gains what Bond and Lee (1981) term “moral face.” These internal virtues and the good deeds that spring from them enable an individual to overcome a background of low social status. In fact, sometimes a person should embrace a low social status if doing so is necessary in order to act with *jen* or humanity and to preserve one’s dignity: “poverty and lowliness are hated by men, but they must not be rejected if avoiding them could harm the pursuit of the way” (Confucius, 1979). Clearly a high degree of self-control and self-awareness are needed to gain moral face. In particular, individuals must be able to negotiate and to adjust to frequent changes in interpersonal relations if they are to preserve the harmonious equilibrium of transactions among members of the community (Kim and Nam, 1998).

Dignity: Spiritual vs. Material

Western ethics make dignity entirely a matter of spirit. Kant’s moral law applies to rational beings. Such beings need not even inhabit human bodies. Dignity, therefore, cannot be a matter of catering to the body’s material

needs or desires. Furthermore, the demands of reason are invariable. Desires for material come and go. Such transience plays no role in human dignity. For its part, Christianity does recognize the material needs of men and women. Our bodies are the temple of God. They should be cared for. Christians are obligated to look after the poor and to strive to insure that the marginal members of the community have adequate food and shelter. However, even a beggar clad in rags retains her intrinsic and absolute dignity. It is precisely her dignity as a creature of God that imposes an obligation on others to assist her: "much shall be expected from those to whom God has given much." Jesus sometimes holds up the poor as models. It is easier for a camel to go through a needle than for a rich man to go to heaven. Attachment to material goods can prevent people from seeking and finding the God who is the source of their being and their ultimate solace. Those who are poor in material goods but rich in the spirit are the people to be emulated.

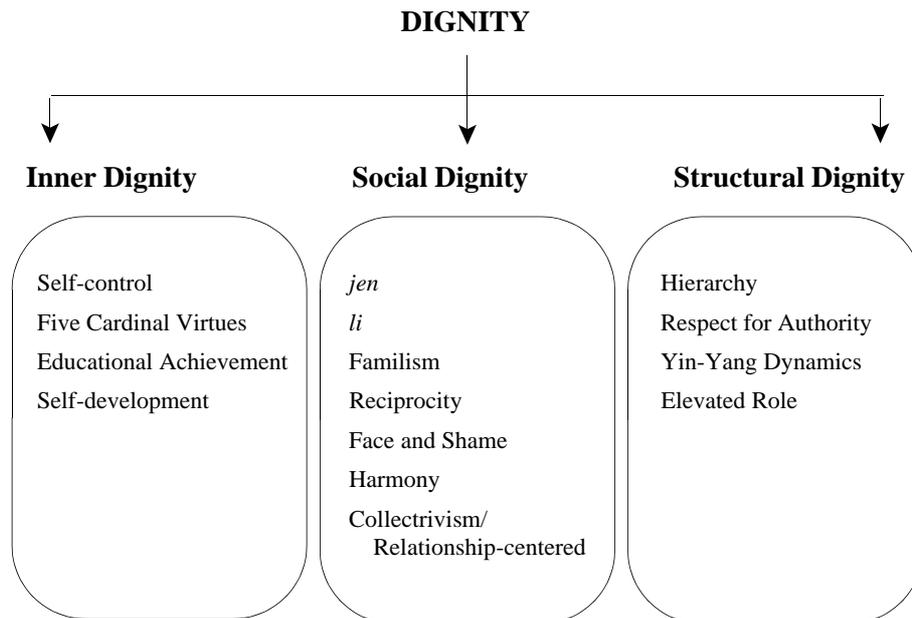
In China, dignity has a material component. Designer clothes, expensive European cars, and dining at high-class restaurants are signs of wealth and power. These things express and confer *mianzi*. Not having these things results in a loss of face. The list of necessary things necessary for dignity can be quite specific. For example, mistresses of businessmen in Hong Kong expect to have the following items: an apartment of at least three bedrooms in an affluent area of HK; a red, white or black convertible (often a Mercedes-Benz); membership in a health club; flashy jewelry (Cartier; Piaget); the latest mobile phone (to be kept on 24 hours a day); big name-brand clothing (Dior; Chanel); and their own credit cards billed directly to the boyfriend (Post Magazine, 1999). Only those mistresses who have obtained these things are accorded prestige and are able to maintain their self-esteem. The *nouveau riche* may not have a high status background. They may be less well-educated than their peers, or they may be new members of the society (e.g., an immigrant from mainland China to Hong Kong). Still, they are as keen as everyone else to climb the social ladder to prestige and dignity through the acquisition of material symbolic capital.

The marriage process nicely illustrates how people materialize dignity and gain symbolic *mianzi*. In a traditional Chinese wedding, the bride's elder female relatives give gifts to the bride on her wedding day. In addition to the red envelopes filled with money, they bestow pure gold in the form of necklaces, rings and bracelets. The bride dons all this valuable gold at the wedding banquet. She wants to make sure that she will not be looked down upon by her guests or feel embarrassed in front of them. Wearing the gold

enhances her *mianzi*. The more gold she receives, the more respect she gains from the groom's family and the more dignified she becomes in their and her eyes. Since symbolic *mianzi* depends so heavily upon the favorable judgments of other people, individuals tend to be extremely sensitive to their place within the hierarchical social network and will behave in ways designed to enhance and protect both the image and the reality of this position (Gabrenya and Hwang, 1996).

Two Business Ethics Cases

By now it should be clear that Westerners and the Chinese understand something very different by the term "human dignity." For Westerners, there is only one form of dignity—an intrinsic, inalienable, internal self-worth. In the Chinese context, dignity has at three aspects, which can be summarized in the following form:



The differences between these two notions of dignity are non-trivial and reflect a profound divergence in the way in which the two groups conceive of human being, the ground of ethical obligation, and the role material goods and contingent circumstance play in an ethical life. In this final

section, I take up two business ethics cases. The first involves an issue within a Chinese firm; the second an interaction between an American and Chinese firm. I will discuss how the two different ideas of dignity might come into play in these scenarios and then suggest a way to resolve the ethical problem that, on the one hand, honors the different approaches of the Chinese and Westerners while, on the other hand, avoiding ethical relativity.

II Dignity in Action—Two Business Ethics Cases

Case 1: The Ambitious Junior Employee

A Chinese service industry firm recently has begun to stress individual risk-taking and innovation. Several years ago the firm hired Ben Wang, an ambitious young man with many ideas for improving the firm's performance. His ideas are good, and his clients like Ben's energy and his obvious desire to improve the service they are getting from Ben's firm. They have begun to give more business to the firm. Ben works for Betty Tao. Betty is an older woman who has been with the company for more than twenty-five years. She is extremely loyal and rose up through the ranks by scrupulously observing the applicable social customs and by giving face to her elders within the company. Betty thinks Ben is brash. He continually suggests improvements, ignoring the fact that Betty was partly responsible for the firm's current procedures. The firm relies heavily upon performance evaluations when deciding whether to renew an employee's work contract. For the second year in a row, Betty has given Ben a negative performance review. Betty's superiors now must decide whether to renew his contract for yet another year. They believe Ben has many of the entrepreneurial traits they are trying to foster within their company; however, they are leery of upsetting the hierarchy within the firm by discounting Betty's negative reviews of Ben's performance. The company therefore decides not to renew Ben's contract. Is this choice ethically sound?

Kantian and Christian Western ethics would look to see whether management respected the intrinsic dignity of all concerned parties. Management told Ben one thing—they were looking for entrepreneurialism—but then they punished him when he took them at their word. They failed to honor his *rational capacity* by feeding him unreliable information. As a member of the corporation, Ben's primary duty was to exercise his intelligence with a view to promoting the company's welfare. In siding with

Betty, the corporation failed to support Ben who was trying—rightly—to discharge his legal and ethical duty. Furthermore, as was noted above, human dignity places limits on what a collective legitimately may do to an individual. Respect for the individual entails that corporations put into place some checks and balances to ensure that people are fired only for due cause. Ben's customers love him. They are giving more business to the company. The shareholders should prosper as a result. It looks as if Betty is pulling rank to get Ben fired simply because she has a grudge against him. Granted, Ben has not been as respectful of tradition as she would have liked. But there is no ethical right to preserve traditional ways of doing things.

Ben's right to have his dignity respected appears to have been violated. Ben likely would be well within his rights to sue the company. The company violated the moral law. In the West, the moral law gets embodied in legal statutes. Moral guilt easily translates into legal guilt because moral guilt is itself conceived of in legalistic terms.

The Confucian ethic would see the key issue quite differently. Neither Ben nor Betty have any intrinsic dignity. Dignity is *relational*—i.e., it is worth inherent in highly specific, determinate relations. In this case, both Ben's and Betty's dignity resides in the senior-junior relation. Both will have dignity only if they obey the social rules or *li* applicable in this relation. Ben knew, or should have known, the *li*. He was free to innovate, but he should have tried harder to enlist his senior Betty as an ally and as a partner in his initiatives. As Confucius puts it, if you want to advance your own rank, advance others interests as well. If Ben had helped Betty, she would have reciprocated, since *reciprocity* is a part and parcel of having and maintaining dignity. Ben did nothing to encourage reciprocity.

Furthermore, both sides need *face*. Ben apparently did little to try to bring Betty around and showed little sensitivity to her need for face. For the Chinese, dignity must be *acquired* and can be lost. Ben simply tried to push through his own ideas, damaging Betty's face and costing him dignity in her eyes. Ben behaved as if dignity were simply an internal matter, a case of feeling good about himself. He ignored the *external* aspect of dignity. He also ignored the need for *self-discipline*, pushing ahead with his plans in a somewhat immoderate fashion.

Since some of his ideas would involve discarding established procedures created by Betty, Ben's initiatives amounted to an implicit critique of her ideas. Juniors owe it to their seniors to disagree in a polite, private, discreet and gentle manner. Honoring the *hierarchy* is the source of everyone's dignity. For its part, management has an ethical obligation to preserve all

employees' dignity. While Western ethics understand the firm to be a legal entity, many Chinese think of the firm as a nexus of highly determinate social relations. Respecting employee dignity thus means visibly honoring the social expectations built into all of these various relations. Management owes it to both Betty and Ben to support and enforce the senior-junior relation. When Ben failed to give face to the woman who was his teacher as well as his senior, he forfeited his own dignity in the eyes of management as well.

Management needed to be sensitive to Betty's position as a senior woman at the firm. Betty had worked diligently for many years, giving and receiving face. If management failed to support her when Ben refused to give her face, then both Betty and the management would lose *mianzi* and *lian*. Being a woman in a traditional man's role (i.e., manager) might make Betty especially sensitive to initiatives by junior men who could be seen as trying to oust her from her position. Again, management needed to be sensitive to Betty's perceptions, perceptions that may be shared by many other women in the firm. If Ben wanted to advance in the firm, he should have demonstrated greater awareness of all these dimensions of face. The company did want to encourage initiative, but not at the expense of social order and *harmony*. When the company decided not to renew Ben's contract, they simply recognized that Ben had forfeited his dignity and his face by acting insensitively.

Notice that both ethics focus on dignity. Both consider whether all parties have been rendered their due. Therefore, we might say that the Western and Confucian ethics share a concern for dignity and justice. However, they arrive at apparently opposite conclusions as to the correct course of action in this case because they diverge in their understandings of dignity and of the individual. The Western approach revolves around the autonomous individual who has intrinsic worth, while the Confucian ethic centers on relational beings whose dignity inheres in specific, concrete relations, not within atomistic individuals. Given these very different concepts of individuals, it is not surprising that the ethics differ in what is "due" to the parties in question.

However, the fact that the two ethical approaches would seem to sanction different, even opposing, courses of action does not mean that we must embrace ethical relativism. On the contrary, *both ethics recognize objectively better and worse responses to the situation in question*. The Western ethic, for example, requires that Ben's dignity be respected but management should not favor Ben at the expense of humiliating Betty. The Confucian ethic does not permit management to stand on the sidelines and

do nothing while Betty and Ben publicly berate each other. Furthermore, I would argue, *it is possible to find common ground between the two approaches if we focus on the practical goods implicit in the situation*. It is clear, for example, that even from the Western perspective, teamwork is as much a good as entrepreneurialism. If so, then the Western ethic will require that Ben be sensitive to Betty's perceptions. If Ben wishes to make fully rational choices, he needs not only to be logically consistent but also to gather data from other people who will be affected by his action. He will not, and cannot, understand exactly what his proposed initiatives involve until he takes counsel with others. To put the point slightly differently: acting rationally and in an ethically sound manner means considering the many goods implicated in a course of action. It is true that, in this day and age, companies must be flexible and responsible. They need entrepreneurial spirits like Ben. On the other hand, creating a consultative environment and promoting teamwork is every bit as much of a good as furthering individual initiative. Ben won't be able to realize his ambitious plans without internal support and assistance. If we adopt a more prudential (in the Aristotelian sense of that term) approach, shifting our attention from a narrow conception of rationality (i.e., logical consistency) and broadening it to include the need to consider relevant practical goods, then the Western ethic and Confucian ethic begin to converge.

We have just seen how the Western ethic requires Ben to be more of a team player. From the Confucian perspective, the company needs to be more clear-sighted and reasonable about its objectives. The company desires to foster both harmony and entrepreneurialism within the company. Management should recognize that this two-fold expectation is likely to create some strains within the company. The company has put Ben in an untenable position. He is expected to innovate while reporting to a manager who supports the status quo. If management lets Ben go, it at least owes it to him to help him find another job. Furthermore, discharging Ben only defers the day of reckoning. At some point the company is going to have to address the strains its new policy of entrepreneurialism is creating within the company. Instead of discharging Ben, perhaps the company should hire some executive coaches or ask other senior managers to serve as mentors to Ben and Betty, working with them to clarify corporate expectations. Such clarification is a good that goes hand in hand with the Confucian value of preserving harmony. This alternative approach respects both Confucian relational dignity (it recognizes that Ben and Betty are a junior and senior who need to learn to work together) and Western individual dignity (Ben is

not put in a no-win situation; Betty's rational and creaturely nature are honored because the company cares for Betty by offering her an opportunity to air her reasonable concerns and to grow and develop as the company changes).

Case 2: The Senior Foreign Female Executive

Sherry Jones is a senior vice-president at an American internet company. She has successfully negotiated a number of acquisitions for her company. Since Sherry is such a good negotiator, the company would like to send Sherry to China to explore the possibility of establishing a joint venture with an internet start-up in China. However, Sherry's boss Bill Smith is wondering whether he should send over a male colleague instead. On an earlier visit to China, the start-up's executive Charles Lee took Bill aside and noted that "it would be more appropriate to have a male negotiator because all parties would feel more comfortable. Women are likely to feel out of place at the often boisterous dinner parties that play such an important role in cementing relations." Bill suspects that, in Mr. Lee's eyes, women lack authority and are unlikely ever to become effective managers, negotiators or sales people. Should Bill send Sherry to negotiate with Lee's executive team or not?

From a Western ethical perspective, Bill is ethically obligated to respect his own dignity as well as that of Sherry and Charles Lee. As CEO of the company, Bill must identify and adopt strategies in the long-run interest of his company. Since the company needs to forge this joint venture; and since Sherry is the most skilled negotiator within the company, it would be irrational—i.e., a violation of Bill's dignity—to send a less qualified negotiator to China. Sherry could make exactly the same argument, so sending her to China respects her rational nature. Although Charles is reluctant to negotiate with women, his reluctance may be dismissed as irrational. After all, as CEO of the Chinese company, it is in Charles' long-run interest to negotiate with the person who can come up with a package that gives the start-up company the capital and control that it desires. By sending Sherry to China, Bill honors Charles Lee's true or rational interests and thereby respects Charles' dignity.

In addition, Bill, Sherry and Charles are equally children of God. Therefore, each should be accorded an equal opportunity to develop and to exercise his or her divinely-bestowed talents. Bill and Charles have had ample opportunities to act upon their business visions. Sherry deserves a

chance to play a role in establishing this high-profile joint venture. Charles may think that women are not effective in business, but his data are suspect because he has never given them a fair opportunity to show what they can do. His perspective is biased. On this view, Bill should send Sherry to China and hope that Charles will learn to be more charitable and to overcome his prejudice against women.

At first glance, the Confucian ethic seems to yield a result diametrically opposed to the recommendation of Western ethics. If Sherry comes to China, she inserts herself into a complex social matrix. From the Confucian perspective, the Chinese quite reasonably will expect that Sherry make some effort to understand and to appreciate their customs and their well-developed system of ethical norms and expectations. In short, Sherry must give and receive *relational* dignity. For Sherry to insist that she has a right to negotiate with Charles Lee is a form of cultural hegemony. The Confucian can argue that such a hegemonic stance cannot be justified even within Western ethics because it is neither rational nor caring to demand that other people give up the commitments and sensitivities that individuate them in the first place. Sherry and Bill cannot respect *individual* dignity if they demand that all non-Americans forfeit their *individuality*. This position is inherently self-contradictory, irrational and thus a violation of human dignity when assessed using the Western ethical perspective.

So, it seems that if Sherry comes to China, she must honor the *yin-yang* dynamics discussed above. If Charles is her senior, she is bound to grant him the *face* he deserves as an elder. Sherry must earn her dignity in and through the *hierarchy* just like everyone else in China. The Americans desire to get the deal done. The Chinese want to get the deal done in an harmonious, appropriate way. Only then will all parties have dignity. From this perspective, Sherry has no absolute right to a place at the negotiating table. For her to proceed as if she does have such a right shows a lack of *self-discipline* and *jen* on her part. Nor do she and Bill have any ethical right to insist upon an arrangement that will destroy the *harmony* that is created when relations and the social customs or *li* are honored. Of course, if Bill were to send a male colleague instead, the substitute would have to earn his dignity as well. His task, though, might be somewhat easier. An American male would not have to contend with yin-yang dynamics in addition to all the other complexities of the envisioned relation with Charles Lee. As the CEO of his company, Bill has an ethical obligation to consider which candidate will best be able to acquire dignity in the Chinese context, to accord others the face they deserve, and to forge a mutually acceptable joint venture agreement.

But again the contrast between the two ethics ignores possible common ground. Let us look at the many goods implicit in the situation and see if there is some way to realize a maximal number of these goods. These goods include: preserving face, avoiding cultural hegemony, overcoming prejudice and stereotypes, consummating the deal and avoiding illusion, especially the illusion that the form of relations (e.g., male-female relations) never change. All of these goods can be realized if Bill designates Sherry as his chief negotiator *and* takes steps to educate her and the rest of her team in ways to earn dignity in the eyes of the Chinese.

The American team might consist of Sherry and some junior male colleagues. The men should defer to her in ways immediately recognizable to their Chinese partners as indicators of her high position in the American *hierarchy* (structural dignity). For example, her juniors should establish her seniority and *authority* (structural dignity) by refusing to sit until she enters the room. They should avoid sitting in the power seat—i.e., the seat furthest from the door. During the planning of the visit, male colleagues should repeatedly state that all plans must be approved by Sherry. By giving Sherry such *face* (social dignity) and by highlighting her *elevated role* (structural dignity), the American side will insure that Sherry will gain dignity in the eyes of her Chinese hosts. For her part, Sherry should be somewhat formal with her junior colleagues, thereby establishing her *gravitas and self-discipline* (inner dignity). She should find out how women in positions of power in China dress and then imitate them in an appropriate fashion. By doing so, she will gain *mianzi* (social dignity). If Sherry and her team adhere to the Chinese conventions for acquiring dignity, they will have face. What is more, the Chinese side will not lose face negotiating with a woman because she will be perceived by both sides as a woman of power who has the authority to negotiate the deal and to commit her company to it. Sherry's intrinsic dignity is respected as is the relational, hierarchical dignity implicit in the senior-junior and a senior-senior peer relation. Charles and his team likely will not be overjoyed at negotiating with Sherry, but they may find they have to revise their prejudices against women if she proves to be an extremely skillful negotiator. As foreigners continue to send competent female business executives into China, Chinese ideas about *yin* and *yang* and male and female roles will surely change. Confucius himself argued that, in the long run, it is performance that matters the most (Confucius, 1979), a pragmatic sentiment echoed by businesspeople all over the world will echo.

This alternative strategy of sending Sherry and junior males to China while educating them to work within the Chinese system honors the many goods at stake. Moreover, it does not require imposing the Western idea of dignity on the Chinese or vice versa. Intrinsic dignity and face are both preserved in equal measure.

Conclusion

Major differences exist between the Western and Chinese concepts of dignity. Western ethics treat human dignity as an innate, collective, absolute, inalienable, internal and spiritual self-worth. The Confucian ethic understands dignity as self-worth that must be acquired and that is relation-specific, conditional, alienable, external as well as internal, and quasi-materialistic. In the Chinese context, acquiring dignity is a complex matter of having good intentions, acting honorably, being sensitive to changes in human dynamics, calculating self-interest, and reciprocating in the right way at the right time. The Western idea of innate dignity underpins a legal system that is used to force people to respect one another's dignity. At its best, the Chinese system produces harmony and gives and protects face by inculcating habits of humane sensitivity into each citizen, thereby obviating the need to appeal to the law.

Despite these differences, analysis of concrete practical cases suggests that it is possible to devise courses of actions that honor both types of dignity. We are most likely to arrive at these creative actions if we avoid imposing our respective concepts of dignity on other agents and instead seek to identify and to realize the many goods involved in the situation.

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