



 Research Article

The Concept Of “礼” (Lǐ) And Human Nature in Chinese Proverbs: A Linguocultural Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the concept of “礼” (Lǐ), which is manifested in Chinese proverbs, from a linguocultural perspective. The term “Lǐ” holds a significant place in ancient Chinese philosophy, especially in Confucian teachings, where it represents etiquette, rituals, respect, and the social order within society. The article explores how this concept is reflected in Chinese proverbs and how it appears in the context of human and societal relationships. Through examples, the study highlights that “Lǐ” functions not only as a moral and ethical criterion but also as a representation of the human concept — that is, how individuals behave within society, their attitude toward others, and their understanding of duty and responsibility. The article also includes a comparative analysis of Chinese and Uzbek proverbs, identifying both similarities and differences. The study reveals how the concept of “Lǐ” exists within the semantic field of the people’s worldview as expressed in Chinese proverbs.

KEYWORDS

Chinese proverbs, the concept of 礼 (Lǐ), linguoculturology, human concept, Confucian philosophy, ethics, social values, semantic analysis, intercultural comparison.

INTRODUCTION

The "Eight Virtues" played a central role in ancient China, especially in the teachings of Confucianism and Mencius. These values formed the moral foundation of Chinese society and were integrated into official education and governance during the imperial era. Even today, these virtues play an important role in Chinese society, particularly in family upbringing, education, and state administration. Similar ethical principles can also be found in many other Eastern countries. These teachings define the fundamental requirements and behavioral norms for individuals. Throughout China's history, these virtues have evolved with different meanings and standards across various periods. Today, they continue to shine through historical timeframes and reflect modern values.

The character 'Li' (礼) is a compound ideogram, where 示 (shì) means "to show" or "display," often referring to rituals or ceremonies performed to honor deities or spirits. 丰 (fēng) means "abundance" or refers to a container used in rituals. Additionally, the component "豆" (dòu), used for preparing food in ancient China, was often decorated with two precious items (e.g., stones or pearls).

The ancient Chinese dictionary *Shuōwén Jiězì* (《说文解字》), compiled by Xu Shen, provides a detailed explanation of the character 礼 (li). Xu Shen emphasizes its connection to rituals and ceremonies, interpreting 丰 as a ritual container shaped like 豆, which held valuable items. In describing '示' (shì), the *Shuōwén Jiězì* states: “天垂象，见吉凶·所以示人也,” meaning, “Heaven displays signs of fortune and misfortune to guide people.” Therefore, '示' is associated with divine and spiritual revelations. Thus, '礼' (li) is closely related to reverence for deities and spirits.

Historically, the formation of the character 礼 is linked to the necessity for rituals and religious respect in Chinese culture. In ancient China, the concept aimed to strengthen social relations and mutual respect among people. The essence of "礼" lies in maintaining social respect, ethics, and order. In China, "礼" holds significance not only in ceremonial practices but also in daily interpersonal interactions. It is a fundamental element of Confucianism and one of the core ethical principles underpinning social structure and personal cultivation.

For centuries, the thoughts and behaviors of the Chinese people have been influenced by Confucius and his teachings. Even when not consciously perceived, these ideas have deeply permeated their daily values and general moral outlook, shaping the unique spiritual identity of the Chinese people. The *Analects of Confucius* (Lun Yu) is a key source of Confucian teachings, compiled by his disciples after his death, documenting his words and actions. It is one of the most comprehensive reflections of Confucian ideology.

“Li” (礼) — that is, propriety, ritual, and rules of conduct — is one of the central concepts of Confucian philosophy and is frequently mentioned in the *Analects of Confucius*. According to statistics, this word

appears 75 times in the text, second only to “ren” (仁), which represents benevolence. This highlights the importance Confucius placed on the concept of “li.”

To Confucius, “li” is considered a primary means by which a person's role in society is determined. He believed that harmony between individuals and society, based on mutual respect and standardized interactions, is achieved through adherence to etiquette and rituals. Observance of “li” not only fosters inner moral development in individuals but also contributes to social stability.

The Analects contains the following quote from Confucius, which clearly shows the value he assigned to “li”:(continued in the full paper)

“If one does not study propriety, one cannot establish oneself” This statement by Confucius underscores that ethics and proper conduct are fundamental criteria defining a person's social position within society. The concept of li regulates all aspects of human behavior — from one's manners and speech to one's overall demeanor. That is why Confucius regarded li as one of the most essential tools for achieving moral perfection.

Moreover, in Confucian philosophy, li is seen as a means to ensure harmony between a person's inner and outer worlds. A person's adherence to outward rituals and etiquette shapes their inner moral state. The sincerity and internal honesty of an individual are expressed through their external behavior. For this reason, Confucius emphasized that observing propriety among people strengthens mutual respect and trust in society. In his philosophy, li is not limited to outward rituals and politeness, but serves as an ethical foundation necessary for human relationships and personal growth within society. Hence, the concept continues to hold an important place in modern Chinese cultural and moral systems.

Although Confucius did not provide a precise definition of li, we can infer his understanding of the concept through his statements recorded in The Analects. Generally, li represents a standard — a set of ethical and social norms to which people should adhere. It determines a person's role in society, helping the individual to define who they are, what responsibilities they hold, and how they should interact with others. Through this, order and harmony are maintained within society.

The influence of li extends from the individual level to the realm of state governance. In other words, everyone must follow the principles of propriety at all times. Confucius' ideas in this regard have stood the test of time and continue to offer valuable insights in the spheres of personal development, social stability, and moral education. His teachings serve as a crucial source for human cultivation and societal advancement.

Analysis of a Proverb

1) 【礼不可缺】 (Lǐ bù kě quē) — “No matter the situation, propriety must not be lacking.”

This proverb implies that moral norms and proper behavior should never be forgotten under any circumstances. Example: — Jing: “You go out and watch the people first. I’ll have a drink, then we can switch places.” [He takes a sip of wine] — Chou: “Even sneaky drinking has rules of propriety?” — Jing: “The ancients said, “There is no task without propriety.”” (From the Ming dynasty drama “Shāgǒu jì” (《杀狗记》 “Killing the Dog”) by Xu Guan, Act III)

Lexical-Semantic Analysis:

1. Lexical-Structural Level:

- o 礼 (lǐ) — etiquette, propriety, morality, or ritual conduct. In Chinese culture, this term encompasses a wide array of moral standards that govern interpersonal relationships.
- o 不可 (bù kě) — “cannot,” “must not,” expressing negation or strict necessity.
- o 缺 (quē) — lack, absence, or deficiency. Taken together, the proverb conveys that “propriety must never be absent” or “there should always be proper conduct.”

2. Semantic Analysis: The central semantic component of the proverb is 礼 (lǐ), emphasizing its role as a core value in Confucian philosophy and Chinese society. The construction 不可缺 (bù kě quē) intensifies the obligatory nature of this value, reinforcing its necessity in interpersonal relations. Thus, the proverb encapsulates the moral principle that propriety must be upheld in all situations.

3. Contextual Semantic Analysis: Within the scene, the proverb is used in a humorous and satirical context. The dialogue between Jing and Chou reveals layers of characterization: even during an act as trivial as secret drinking, Jing insists on observing propriety. Chou's incredulous question (“Even sneaky drinking has etiquette?”) mocks this insistence, while Jing’s response (“The ancients said...”) affirms the universality of 礼. Through this, the playwright uses satire to highlight the deep cultural significance of propriety in Chinese society. The proverb here becomes a tool not just for humor but for emphasizing the ever-present role of etiquette in everyday life.

4. Linguocultural Significance: In traditional Chinese culture, 礼 (lǐ) is a central concept rooted in Confucian thought. It encompasses ceremonial practices, moral codes, and behavioral norms that govern both social and familial relationships. In Confucianism, 礼 is listed as one of the Five Constants (五常

wǔcháng): 仁 (rén), 义 (yì), 礼 (lǐ), 智 (zhì), and 信 (xìn), representing the fundamental virtues essential for societal harmony. As such, lǐ is a measure of a person's role and position within society.

The proverb 【礼不可缺】 (Lǐ bù kě quē) historically reflects the high regard for propriety and etiquette in Chinese moral consciousness. In ancient Chinese society, behavior was strictly regulated by defined norms. This tradition, dating back to the Confucian era, has been passed down through generations and remains a vital part of Chinese cultural identity today.

Although used in a satirical scene, the proverb still expresses key elements of Chinese mentality — the importance of maintaining order and etiquette in all human interactions. Even in private or humorous contexts, social expectations remain prominent, and personal dignity is safeguarded.

From a theatrical standpoint, the character dynamics are also noteworthy. Chou (丑) and Jing (净) are comedic figures in traditional Chinese drama. Their use of such a proverb highlights the universal application of lǐ, while also poking fun at overly rigid or superficial ritualism.

Through this exchange, the playwright Xu Guan presents a dual-layered interpretation of propriety:

- On one hand, emphasizing the genuine importance of upholding propriety in every situation;
- On the other, critiquing excessive formalism that can undermine sincerity and authentic human connection.

Although humorous, the scene ultimately upholds traditional Confucian values by reinforcing the necessity of etiquette. The proverb “礼不可缺” functions as a linguocultural unit that reflects China’s deep-rooted values, the pivotal role of propriety in social life, and the distinctive mental framework of the Chinese people. It showcases the harmony between cultural values, historical traditions, and national character.

The text you've provided includes an analysis of the Chinese proverb “礼下于人，必有所求” (Lǐ xià yú rén, bì yǒu suǒ qiú), which translates to "If someone behaves with courtesy and lowers themselves before you, they are certainly seeking something from you." The proverb emphasizes the idea that when a person adopts a humble or respectful attitude toward another, they likely have a hidden request or purpose.

The analysis includes:

1. **Lexical Analysis:** A breakdown of the key terms in the proverb:
 - o 礼 (lǐ): etiquette, courtesy.

- o 下 (xià): to lower, to humble oneself.
- o 于人 (yú rén): towards others.
- o 必 (bì): certainly, without fail.
- o 有所求 (yǒu suǒ qiú): to seek something, to request something.

2. **Semantic Analysis:** The proverb explores how a person who is seeking help or favor from another might adopt a respectful or humble demeanor. It highlights:

- o The cause-and-effect relationship between humility and the underlying desire for something in return.
- o The psychological aspect of human behavior, especially in terms of hidden motives behind outward politeness.
- o The way this proverb can reflect the true, often unspoken intentions behind respectful behavior.

3. **Contextual Analysis:** Various historical texts and dramas provide examples of how this proverb is used in different contexts. It demonstrates how respect and humility are often part of a strategy to achieve personal goals, whether they are social, romantic, or practical.

4. **Cultural and Philosophical Context:** The proverb reflects deep-rooted cultural ideas in Chinese society, particularly regarding the interplay between courtesy and self-interest. It is connected to Confucian principles, where outward behavior often reflects inner intentions. The concept of "face" (面子, miànzi) and "respect" (尊重, zūnzhòng) is central in Chinese social interactions, and this proverb underscores the complex relationship between outward respect and underlying personal motivations.

This proverb and its interpretation provide insight into the nuances of Chinese social dynamics, where politeness and respect can be both a reflection of moral values and a means of fulfilling personal objectives.

Laws are for maintaining state order, while etiquette is for preserving human relations. I share this view. If a ruler did not issue clear and just decisions, what would we orphans and widows do throughout our lives?

("Jing shi tong yan", Chapter 29)

This saying can also be expanded as follows:

律设大法· 理顺人情；事可从权· 圣人不废 (lǜ shè dàfǎ, lǐ shùn rénqíng; shì kě cóng quán, shèngrén bù fèi). This means: Laws exist for state order, while etiquette exists for regulating human relations. One can adapt according to the situation, as wise people never strictly prohibit this. For example: If laws and rules were strictly followed, the royal palace would never have taken a commoner's daughter as a consort or chosen beautiful girls from among the common people for the palace. However, as stated in ancient times: "Laws exist for state order, while etiquette regulates human relations; wise people did not strictly prohibit adapting to the situation." Honorable district head, please think this matter over carefully! I do not intend to force you or cause you harm.

1. Lexical-Semantic Analysis:

- 律 (lǜ) – law, standard, regulations set by the state;
- 设 (shè) – to establish, to implement, to set up;
- 大法 (dàfǎ) – the main law, the most important rules and principles of the state;
- 礼 (lǐ) – etiquette, rituals, moral standards that regulate interpersonal relations;
- 顺 (shùn) – to be in accordance with, to adapt to, to harmonize with;
- 人情 (rénqíng) – human emotions, human nature, natural human relations.

2. **Semantic Analysis:** This saying contrasts two key concepts: 律设大法 (the necessity and obligatory nature of state laws and regulations, expressing the rigid, unchanging character of laws) and 礼顺人情 (etiquette that must align with human nature and account for human emotional needs). The combination of these two concepts indicates the need for a balance between law and etiquette in society. This saying emphasizes that, besides laws, etiquette also plays a significant role in regulating human relations, and that laws should not conflict with human nature.

3. Contextual Analysis: This saying appears in various historical contexts:

- **First Context** (from "Hou Han Shu•Zhuo Mao zhuan"): "Someone said: 'If it is like this, then why should laws prohibit it?' Mao laughed and said: 'Laws are for state order, and etiquette governs human relations. Now, I teach you with etiquette, and you will have no resentment; if I govern you by law, where would you place your hands and feet?'" In this context, two types of governance — 礼 (etiquette) and 律 (law) — are contrasted. Zhuo Mao emphasizes that governance through etiquette is preferable, as it

governs without provoking internal resistance or dissatisfaction. The law, on the other hand, restricts a person's actions with harsh measures.

- **Second Context** (from "Jing shi tong yan", Chapter 29): "Laws establish the main legal framework, and etiquette governs human emotions. If not for the clear and just decisions of the judiciary, how would orphans and widows rely on anything throughout their lives?" This excerpt indicates the importance of just decisions in protecting the interests of the weak in society. It stresses that just decisions should align with both law and etiquette in safeguarding human interests.
- **Third Context** (from "Nü xian wai shi", Chapter 9): "Laws are for state order, and etiquette governs human relations; one can adapt according to the situation, as wise people never completely abolish this." This expanded form emphasizes that laws can be adapted based on circumstances, and wise people never reject such adaptations. The context suggests that, in balancing state and human interests, it is acceptable to adapt laws when necessary.

Main Ideas of This Saying:

- Laws (律) are necessary for maintaining state and societal order but must not contradict human nature;
- Etiquette (礼) should deeply consider human nature and interpersonal relations;
- Social order and stability are maintained through the harmonious balance between laws and etiquette.

Additionally, the saying reflects the preference for a softer form of governance through etiquette and morality rather than strict legal enforcement. Laws should be flexible according to the situation, ensuring they adapt to human interests.

Linguistic and Cultural Context: The saying represents significant philosophical and ethical concepts in Chinese culture regarding the relationship between law and etiquette. Historically, it has been used in discussions of governance, highlighting the balance between legal rigor (律) and moral conduct (礼).

Cultural-Philosophical Analysis: In Chinese culture, the relationship between 律 (law) and 礼 (etiquette) has always held significant importance. This saying reflects the need to reconcile two governing systems: 律 (law), seen as an external force ensuring state stability through rigidity and clear rules, and 礼 (etiquette), seen as a cultural and moral principle regulating internal human relations. Confucianism highlights that laws should align with human nature, acknowledging internal psychological needs and natural emotions.

Historical and Cultural Roots: This saying traces its origins to major Chinese historical texts such as the Zuo Zhuan and Hou Han Shu. In ancient Chinese society, two primary methods of governance were recognized: Legalism (法家), which advocated for strict adherence to laws, and Confucianism (儒家), which promoted governance through etiquette, ethics, and rituals. This saying conveys the idea of harmonizing these two philosophical schools. Historically, in Chinese governance, law and etiquette complemented each other.

Relation to Chinese Mentality and Culture: In Chinese mentality and culture, observing etiquette in interpersonal relations is considered crucial for preserving human dignity. At the same time, strict laws are seen as necessary for state governance and public order. The balance between these concepts forms a cultural mindset where:

- Governance by law is necessary, but people should be educated through etiquette;
- Laws limit people externally, while etiquette nurtures self-regulation and internal discipline.

This balance is connected to the concept of 人情 (human emotions), suggesting that laws should not contradict human nature.

Linguistic and Cultural Characteristics of Key Concepts:

- 律 (lǜ) represents the external, rigid rules governing society, linked to duty, legal responsibility, and accountability;
- 礼 (lǐ) is one of the core values in Chinese culture, reflecting internal cultural attitudes, social behavior, rituals, and ethics;
- 人情 (rénqíng) expresses human emotions, natural sentiments, and the interpersonal connections that define human relations.

Relation to Confucian Philosophy: Confucius' philosophy stressed governance not through laws but through morality and etiquette (礼). A famous saying by Confucius illustrates this: "Governing by policy brings order, but people fear only punishment; governing by virtue brings respect, and people regulate themselves." This aligns with the central idea of the saying 律设大法 · 礼顺人情, which advocates for governance through both laws and ethical conduct.

Linguocultural Significance:

This article expresses two important cultural aspects in Chinese society: the external coerciveness of law in regulating the state and society, and the flexibility and sincerity of etiquette in forming internal moral and spiritual relationships between people. Through the integration of these two principles, it demonstrates how a unique system of governance and interpersonal relationships has been formed in Chinese culture. In general, the proverb “律设大法 · 礼顺人情” reflects the cultural and social necessity of harmony between the state law (律) and ethics-manners (礼) in Chinese culture. This proverb expresses the significant role of laws that do not contradict human nature and ethical norms that align with human relationships in maintaining social stability.

Additionally, there are many other Chinese proverbs that reflect the relationship between humans and etiquette-morality:

1. **【让人是个礼 · 锅里没下米】** (ràng rén shì gè lǐ, guō lǐ méi xià mǐ). "Even if there is no rice in the pot, show manners to your guests." The meaning of this proverb is that, even if a guest arrives unexpectedly and there is no preparation, one should still offer hospitality in terms of manners.
2. **【人恶礼不恶】** (rén è lǐ bú è). "Even if a person is bad, one's manners should not be bad." The meaning is that regardless of how others behave or their character flaws, one must maintain good manners and behave with decorum.
3. **【让礼一寸，得礼一尺】** (ràng lǐ yī cùn, dé lǐ yī chǐ). "If you show an inch of courtesy, you will receive a foot of respect." This proverb emphasizes that showing a little courtesy will result in greater respect and courtesy in return. It underlines the importance of mutual respect and manners in interpersonal relationships.
4. **【欠情别欠礼】** (qiàn qíng bié qiàn lǐ). "You may be short on gratitude, but never short on manners." The main message is that although one may fall short in expressing gratitude, one should never fail in showing respect and politeness.
5. **【碰上好事不挑礼】** (pèng shàng hǎo shì bù tiāo lǐ). "When a good opportunity comes, don't be too formal." This proverb means that when presented with a good opportunity, one should not waste time on excessive formality or hesitation. Instead, one should act quickly and confidently.

Based on the analysis of these proverbs, the following conclusions can be drawn regarding the role of etiquette (礼) in the Chinese cultural concept of "human" (人):

- 1. Etiquette as a core aspect of human concept:** In Chinese culture, the essence of a person and their place in society are directly defined by their adherence to etiquette. The concept of "礼" in proverbs reflects that practicing etiquette not only maintains societal order but also expresses personal inner growth and refinement.
- 2. Harmony between etiquette and human nature:** As mentioned in the proverb "礼顺人情" (etiquette should align with human nature), the norms of etiquette must be formed without contradicting human nature. This shows that etiquette in human life is natural and sincere. That is, etiquette that disregards human nature will not last long or foster stable relationships in society.
- 3. Expression of etiquette in interpersonal relationships:** As reflected in the proverb "礼下于人, 必有所求," there is an underlying connection between the external practice of etiquette and hidden interests in relationships. Additionally, "让礼一寸, 得礼一尺" emphasizes that mutual respect and manners play a crucial role in improving interpersonal relations.
- 4. Etiquette and human role in society:** In Chinese society, etiquette is seen as the primary determinant of one's status in society. The proverb "礼不可缺" indicates the essential nature of etiquette in every situation, demonstrating its universal importance for stable and harmonious relationships in society.
- 5. The importance of etiquette in both internal and external relations:** In Chinese culture, there must be a balance between external manners and internal sincerity. Proverbs like "欠情别欠礼" and "人恶礼不恶" emphasize that even in the face of bad treatment by others, one must maintain good manners. This demonstrates the delicate balance between external etiquette and internal integrity in human relations.
- 6. Pragmatic importance of etiquette:** The proverb "碰上好事不挑礼" implies that in situations involving favorable opportunities, one should not be held back by excessive formalities. This shows the practical aspect of etiquette, suggesting that sometimes a pragmatic approach must coexist with the values of decorum.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, based on the proverbs analyzed, it can be stated that etiquette plays a central role in shaping the concept of "human" in Chinese culture. A person's role in society, their relationships with others, and even their interests are closely connected to their practice of etiquette. The importance of etiquette in the human concept is evident not only in ceremonial occasions but also in the smallest daily interactions. This

highlights one of the key characteristics of Chinese culture and a core cultural value that shapes the concept of humanity.

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