

A Dialogical Study of the Buddhist Concept of Compassion and the Confucian Concept of Benevolence

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Abstract: This paper conducts a dialogical study of Buddhist compassion (cibei) and Confucian benevolence (ren) as two core ethical categories. Moving beyond the reductive dichotomy of “graded love versus equal love,” the paper proposes a dialogical ethics framework that reveals how compassion and benevolence, though grounded in different metaphysical paths—the theory of dependent origination and emptiness versus the theory of mind-nature—converge at the level of existential attainment and complement each other in contemporary moral practice. Drawing on primary sources including the Da Zhi Du Lun, the Lotus Sūtra, the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra, the Analects, the Mencius, and Zhang Zai’s Ximing, the paper analyzes the similarities and differences between the two traditions from three dimensions: theoretical foundations, modes of practice, and orientations toward the world. By juxtaposing Zhang Zai’s “all people are my brothers and all things my companions” with the Mahayana notion of “unconditional great compassion,” the paper critically reflects upon the reductive dichotomy that categorizes benevolence as merely “graded love” and compassion as simply “equal love.” Taking Master Yuanying’s “harmonization of Buddhism and Confucianism” as a modern paradigm—distinguished from the approaches of Taixu, Juzan, and Zhao Puchu—the paper explores the synergistic value of compassion and benevolence in contemporary philanthropic ethics, interreligious dialogue, and global ethical reflection.

Keywords: Buddhist Compassion; Confucian Benevolence; Ethical Dialogue; Unconditional Great Compassion; Master Yuanying; Dialogical Ethics

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1. Introduction

Compassion and benevolence, as the core categories of Buddhist ethics and Confucian ethics respectively, constitute the fundamental answers of the two intellectual traditions regarding the basis, scope, and ultimate direction of “love.” Since the initial transmission of Buddhism to the Han Chinese region, the tension, mutual permeation, and convergence between compassion and benevolence have constituted an unavoidable and significant topic in the history of Chinese ethical thought. Against the backdrop of globalization and inter-civilizational dialogue, reexamining the internal structures and mutual relationships of these two ethical resources concerns not only the restoration of intellectual history, but also the activation and reconfiguration of contemporary moral resources.

Regarding existing scholarship, Huo Jinfeng has compared Confucian benevolence and Buddhist compassion from four dimensions—the objects of giving, theoretical foundations, requirements for practice, and ultimate goals—pointing out that the two “share common ground in many respects, while also holding divergent views”^[1]. Xu Tao and Liu Ru have

systematically examined Master Yuanying's historical achievement of harmonizing Buddhism and Confucianism along the Sinicization path of Han Chinese Buddhism—integrating Confucianism into Buddhism and achieving convergence between the two—interpreting the Mahayana bodhisattva's path of compassion of “benefiting self and others” through the Confucian idea of benevolence expressed as “loving all people and being close to the benevolent,” thereby revealing its epochal significance in advancing the modern transformation of Chinese Buddhism^[2]. Zhang Mandi, in her comparison of Mohist and Confucian theories of love, has cautioned scholars against categorizing Confucian benevolence and Mohist universal love as simply “graded love” versus “equal love”; such a dichotomous judgment should not be uncritically applied to Buddhist compassion either^[3]. Wang Wenwen and Shen Shunfu further point out that the Confucian ethics of benevolence underwent a genealogical evolution from “consanguineous ethics” through “ethics of the Other” to “ethics of symbiosis,” and that the “benevolence of oneness” (yiti zhi ren) in Song-Ming Confucian symbiotic ethics had already transcended the boundaries of early consanguineous ethics, converging with the Buddhist “great compassion of shared identity” (tongti zhi bei) at the level of existential attainment^[4].

In international scholarship, significant debates and diverse approaches have enriched the study of both Buddhist and Confucian ethics. In Buddhist ethics, a major theoretical disagreement has emerged: Damien Keown has articulated the structure of Buddhist ethics through the lens of virtue ethics, providing a systematic framework for understanding compassion as an ethical virtue rather than a mere sentiment^[5]; Charles Goodman, in contrast, has argued in *Consequences of Compassion* that Buddhist ethics is best understood as a form of consequentialism grounded in the well-being of sentient beings, with the doctrine of emptiness not undermining but rather grounding the universality of compassion^[6]. This debate between virtue-ethical and consequentialist readings of Buddhist compassion has important implications for comparative ethics, as it determines whether compassion is best compared with Confucian ren as a virtue or as a principle of impartial concern. Peter Harvey has examined the dynamics of compassion in early Buddhist and Mahayana contexts, highlighting its practical and soteriological dimensions^[7]. A recent study further distinguishes *karuṇā* from sympathy, empathy, and pity, arguing that compassion is an “ethically cultivated disposition” grounded in *anātman* and *pratīyasamutpāda*^[8].

On the Confucian side, David Hall and Roger Ames have interpreted ren not as a transcendent principle but as “authoritative conduct”—a relational, processual achievement emerging in concrete human interactions^[9]. In their translation of the *Zhongyong*, Ames and Hall further situate this reading within the broader framework of centrality (*zhong*) and the everyday (*yong*)^[10]. Ames has further developed this interpretation in his philosophical translation of the *Analects*, rendering ren as “authoritative conduct” rather than the traditional “benevolence,” thereby emphasizing its performative and relational character^[11]. This translation choice has direct implications for the Buddhist-Confucian dialogue: if ren is a mode of relational conduct rather than an internal sentiment, the comparison with Buddhist compassion shifts from a comparison of feelings to a comparison of practical orientations. Ames's conceptual lexicon further refines this by translating *jian'ai* (兼爱) as “inclusive care” rather than “universal love,” providing a more precise conceptual tool for comparing Confucian graded extension with Buddhist universal compassion^[12]. Tu Weiming has articulated ren as the core of a “spiritual humanism” that extends from self-cultivation to cosmic harmony^[13], and has further argued that ren involves a “creative transformation” of the self in which self-cultivation and cosmic participation are inseparable^[14]. Bryan Van Norden has clarified the structure of Confucian virtue ethics, demonstrating that ren operates through graded extension without sacrificing its universal scope^[15]. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on Chinese ethics provides a comprehensive overview of these debates, noting that ren functions both as a comprehensive virtue and as one particular virtue among others^[16].

In the field of Buddhist-Confucian dialogue, comparative studies have been growing in recent years. Hamar (2021) has examined how Chinese Buddhism reinterpreted the Confucian concept of filial piety as a form of universal compassion, demonstrating a historical model of Buddhism-Confucianism convergence^[17]. Villamor Herrero (2024) has analyzed the synthesis of ren and *cibei* in the Japanese *Nihon ryōiki*, arguing that compassion in East Asian Buddhist assimilation became not merely a path to personal liberation but an obligation to act for social welfare^[18]. A 2022 study has examined the Wei-Jin-Nanbeichao process of “interpreting Buddhist precepts with Confucian rites,” revealing a dialogue structured around both similarity and dissimilarity^[19]. Muller has analyzed the Korean Buddhist-Confucian confrontation, noting that both

traditions share an altruistic foundation in “oneness of all things” while differing in practice ^[20]. Stalnaker’s comparative study of Xunzi and Augustine, though not directly about Buddhism, provides a methodological model of “bridge concepts” for cross-traditional ethical comparison that informs the present paper’s dialogical approach ^[21]. Despite this growing body of work, a systematic dialogical framework that moves beyond listing similarities and differences remains underdeveloped. Moreover, there is a striking gap in English-language scholarship on Master Yuanying: the only available English sources are a biographical entry in the Dharma Drum Institute’s Digital Museum of Chinese Buddhism ^[22] and a brief DBpedia notice, with no monograph or journal article devoted to his thought. The present paper seeks to fill both gaps.

1.1 Research Question and Thesis

Building upon the aforementioned research, this paper poses a single central question: Can Buddhist compassion and Confucian benevolence be understood not as opposing models of “equal love” versus “graded love,” but as complementary ethical resources that converge at the level of existential attainment and diverge only in their metaphysical starting points and practical paths?

The thesis of this paper is threefold: (1) The common dichotomy of “graded love / equal love” is reductive; both traditions internally contain the mechanism for transcending their starting points—benevolence moves from gradedness toward oneness, while compassion moves from non-differentiation through differentiated skillful means. (2) At their respective peaks of existential attainment—Zhang Zai’s “all people are my brothers and all things my companions” and the Mahayana “unconditional great compassion”—the two converge at the metaphysical level. (3) This convergence is not merely conceptual but has been historically enacted, as demonstrated by Master Yuanying’s harmonization of Buddhism and Confucianism, and holds practical significance for contemporary philanthropic ethics, interreligious dialogue, and global ethical reflection.

1.2 Methodological Framework: From Comparison to Dialogue

The distinction between “comparison” and “dialogue” is central to this paper’s approach. Comparison, as traditionally practiced, treats compassion and benevolence as objects of external juxtaposition: one lists their similarities and differences from a neutral vantage point, as if examining two specimens under the same lens. This method has value but also limits: it presupposes a third, external standard that neither tradition may recognize, and it tends to freeze living traditions into static conceptual schemas.

This paper seeks to extend “comparison” into “dialogue.” By dialogue, we mean a threefold methodological movement:

First, mutual interpretation on each tradition’s own terms. Rather than imposing a single framework, we first allow each tradition to articulate its own internal logic—compassion from within the Buddhist framework of dependent origination and the bodhisattva path, benevolence from within the Confucian framework of mind-nature and the extension of care. This means attending to primary sources in their own conceptual language before translating them into comparative categories.

Second, ethical complementarity. Having established each tradition’s internal coherence, we then allow them to illuminate each other’s blind spots and unspoken assumptions. Where compassion’s grounding in emptiness may risk detachment from concrete human relationships, benevolence’s insistence on the graded extension of care provides a practical corrective. Where benevolence’s starting point in kinship may risk parochialism, compassion’s universal scope provides a metaphysical horizon. This complementarity is not synthesis but productive tension.

Third, constructive retrieval for contemporary ethics. The dialogue is not merely retrospective; it aims to retrieve and reconfigure ethical resources for present challenges. This means examining how compassion and benevolence, individually and synergistically, can inform contemporary moral practice—without reducing either tradition to a mere instrument of modern concerns.

This threefold dialogical method differs from both simple comparison and forced synthesis. It does not seek to dissolve differences into a unified system, nor does it leave them as static contrasts. Rather, it holds differences and convergences in productive tension, allowing each tradition to challenge and enrich the other. In this respect, the present approach shares affinities with Stalnaker’s method of “bridge concepts” in comparative ethics—generic categories such as “virtue,” “human nature,” and “spiritual exercises” that are sufficiently general to guide comparative inquiry while remaining open to specific determination within each tradition ^[21].

2. The Connotations and Philosophical Foundations of the Buddhist Concept of Compassion

Buddhist compassion is not merely a simple emotional inclination; rather, it constitutes a comprehensive system with scriptural authority, metaphysical grounding, and a progressive hierarchy of practice. This chapter examines its internal structure from three levels: semantic origins and scriptural foundations, philosophical grounding, and practical gradations.

2.1 The Semantics, Scriptural Origins, and Primary Textual Foundations of Compassion

In Buddhist scriptures, “compassion” (ci) and “sympathy” (bei) respectively signify “bestowing joy” and “removing suffering”; when combined as cibe, they denote the fundamental aspiration to “bring joy and benefit to sentient beings and relieve them of suffering.” The thought of compassion has permeated the entire history of Buddhism since the Jātaka tales of the Buddha, and has received institutionalized expression in Mahayana scriptures and bodhisattva precepts.

The Da Zhi Du Lun (Great Perfection of Wisdom Treatise, T 1509), attributed to Nāgārjuna, provides one of the most systematic articulations of the four immeasurables (si wuliang xin) and the threefold structure of compassion. In Volume 20, the treatise states:

“The four immeasurables are compassion (ci), sympathy (bei), joy (xi), and equanimity (she). Compassion means loving and caring for sentient beings, constantly seeking peaceful and joyful things to benefit them. Sympathy means pitying sentient beings who suffer various physical and mental pains in the five realms. Joy means wishing sentient beings to attain happiness and joy. Equanimity means relinquishing these three [preceding] states of mind, contemplating sentient beings without aversion or attachment.” (T 25, 208c)

This passage reveals that the four immeasurables are not four separate emotions but a progressive cultivation: from active benevolence (ci), to empathetic response to suffering (bei), to sympathetic joy (xi), to the transcendence of partiality (she). The movement from ci through bei and xi to she traces an arc from engaged concern to non-attached equanimity—a structure that already hints at the internal tension within compassion between emotional engagement and metaphysical transcendence.

Peng Ruihua points out that “compassion is the fundamental spirit of Chinese Buddhism, as well as the guiding principle of the bodhisattva precepts” ^[23]. The threefold pure precepts encompassed by the bodhisattva precepts—the precepts of discipline, the precepts of virtuous deeds, and the precepts of benefiting sentient beings—respectively bear the three functions of refraining from evil, cultivating virtue, and delivering sentient beings, “none of which departs from the essence of removing suffering and bestowing joy upon sentient beings.” The Brahmajāla Sūtra (Fanwang Jing) runs the theme of “filial piety is named precept” throughout the text, securing the spirit of compassion through the binding force of precepts. The sūtra declares: “A disciple of the Buddha should have a mind of compassion and filial piety, saving all sentient beings” (T 24, 1004a). Here compassion is not merely a personal emotional disposition but the fundamental basis of institutional ethics, constituting the core spirit of the Mahayana bodhisattva path.

2.2 The Philosophical Foundations of Mahayana Compassion: Dependent Origination, Emptiness, and the Primary Sources

The reason compassion in Mahayana Buddhism can transcend worldly sympathy and attain universality lies crucially in its metaphysical grounding in the theory of dependent origination and emptiness (pratītyasamutpāda and śūnyatā). This grounding is not merely theoretical but is demonstrated through key Mahayana scriptural passages.

The Lotus Sūtra (Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra), one of the most influential Mahayana scriptures in East Asia, grounds compassion in the Buddha’s singular purpose of leading all beings to Buddhahood. The “Expedient Means” chapter states:

“The Buddhas appear in the world solely for this one reason, which is true; the other two are not the truth. Never do they use a lesser vehicle to save living beings and ferry them across.... In the Buddha lands of the ten directions there is only the Law of the one vehicle, there are not two, there are not three.” (T 9, 8a-b)

The “one vehicle” (ekayāna) doctrine establishes that the Buddha’s compassion is not partial or discriminative but universally directed toward the liberation of all sentient beings. The sūtra further declares that the Buddha’s compassion is the driving force behind all expedient teachings: “I have employed the power of expedient means to unfold and demonstrate this doctrine of three vehicles, but the World-Honored Ones, every one of them, all preach the single vehicle way” (T 9, 8b). Compassion,

in this framework, is what motivates the Buddha to adapt his teaching to different capacities without ever abandoning the universal goal.

Zhang Yuxia, in her study of the compassion thought in the Lotus Sūtra, points out that “the compassion of the Lotus Sūtra takes the theory of dependent origination and the theory of impermanence and selflessness as its intellectual foundations, with the ultimate reality of all dharmas as its internal basis”^[24]. Zhiyi, taking the ultimate reality of all dharmas as his object, proposed the “threefold truth of perfect integration” (yuanrong sandi), fusing compassion with prajñā wisdom.

The Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra provides another crucial primary source for understanding Mahayana compassion. In the “Bodhisattva” chapter, Vimalakīrti explains that the bodhisattva’s compassion arises from the recognition that all sentient beings share the same fundamental nature:

“When the bodhisattva contemplates the suffering of sentient beings, he does not generate weariness or aversion. Why? Because he has generated great compassion. As he has generated great compassion, he does not abandon sentient beings.” (T 14, 549a)

This passage reveals that Mahayana compassion is not passive empathy but an active commitment sustained by wisdom—the wisdom that sees through the illusion of separate selfhood while remaining engaged with the suffering of beings who have not yet realized this truth. The bodhisattva’s compassion is thus paradoxical: it arises from the insight that there are ultimately no beings to save, yet it does not thereby become indifferent. This paradox—grounded in the doctrine of emptiness—is what distinguishes Mahayana compassion from ordinary sympathy.

Liu Xiaobing examines the basis of compassion from the perspective of “ultimate emptiness” (bijing kōng), noting that it can be understood from four dimensions: naturelessness, signlessness, selflessness, and impermanence. “Naturelessness and signlessness reveal the dependent origination and equality of all things, laying the theoretical foundation for compassion; impermanence and selflessness reveal the existential condition of humanity, reflecting the practical necessity of compassion”^[25]. Great compassion corresponding to ultimate emptiness can therefore transcend the world’s discriminative attachments and dualistic oppositions, attaining a state of purity and vastness.

It is evident that the reason Mahayana compassion can break through the ethical radius of intimacy and distance lies precisely in its grounding of “love” upon the metaphysical foundation of “no-self” (anātman): since there is neither a self that loves nor an other that is loved, the dualistic opposition is dissolved, and the boundaries of love naturally open up.

2.3 The Practical Gradations of Compassion: A Primary-Source Analysis of the Threefold Hierarchy

According to the tradition of the Da Zhi Du Lun, compassion unfolds in practice as a threefold progressive hierarchy: compassion directed at sentient beings (zhòngshēng yuán cí), compassion directed at dharmas (fǎyuán cí), and unconditional great compassion (wúyuán dàcí). The Da Zhi Du Lun Volume 20 provides a detailed account:

“When this mind pervades sentient beings throughout the ten directions, this is called compassion directed at sentient beings (zhòngshēng yuán cí). It is practiced mostly by ordinary people, or by learners who have not yet exhausted their outflows. As for compassion directed at dharmas (fǎyuán cí): those who practice it are arhats who have exhausted their outflows, pratyekabuddhas, and Buddhas. These sages have broken through the mark of self and other, extinguished the mark of identity and difference, and merely contemplate how [beings] arise from the continuity of causes and conditions.... As for unconditional compassion (wúyuán cí): only Buddhas possess this. Why? Because the minds of Buddhas do not abide in either conditioned or unconditioned nature; they do not rely on past, future, or present; they know that all conditions are unreal, inverted, and deceptive, and thus the mind has no object of reliance.” (T 25, 209c)

This passage is crucial for understanding the internal dynamics of Buddhist compassion. The threefold hierarchy is not merely a typology but a developmental trajectory: compassion evolves from a discriminative emotional response (directed at particular sentient beings), through a philosophical understanding (directed at the dependent origination of all dharmas), to a transcendental state (free from all conceptual conditioning). Each stage transcends yet preserves the previous one.

The Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra (Da Banniepan Jing) further elaborates the threefold structure. It states: “Compassion directed at sentient beings arises from attachment to sentient beings; compassion directed at dharmas arises from attachment to dharmas; unconditional great compassion does not abide in any mark” (T 12, 456c). The sūtra explicitly links the three kinds of compassion to different levels of spiritual attainment, emphasizing that unconditional great compassion is the exclusive

domain of the Buddha.

Yang Ye, in his *A Study of the Compassion Thought in the Lotus Sūtra*, connects this progressive hierarchy with the One Vehicle thought of the Lotus Sūtra, pointing out that the elevation of compassion practice from concrete relief to ultimate universal salvation constitutes the fundamental path of Mahayana bodhisattva cultivation ^[26]. The unfolding of this threefold progressive hierarchy reveals the internal tension within Buddhist compassion between emotional expression and metaphysical transcendence, and also provides an important reference for the subsequent dialogue with the Confucian schema of “graded extension” in benevolence.

3. The Connotations and Philosophical Foundations of the Confucian Concept of Benevolence

Corresponding to Buddhist compassion, the Confucian concept of benevolence likewise constitutes a clearly structured whole across three levels: original textual articulation, the schema of extension, and metaphysical grounding. This chapter examines each in turn, with close attention to primary Confucian texts.

3.1 The Origin of Ren: Primary Textual Analysis of the Analects and the Mencius

Ren (benevolence) is the core category of Confucius’s thought. The Analects establishes its guiding principle through several key passages. When Fan Chi asked about benevolence, Confucius stated simply: “To love others” (ai ren) (Analects 12.22). This brief definition encapsulates the essence of ren: it is not a metaphysical abstraction but an active orientation toward other persons. Another crucial passage occurs in Analects 6.30, where Confucius elaborates:

“Now the man of perfect virtue (ren), wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be successful himself, seeks also to make others successful. To be able to take one’s own feelings as a guide—that may be called the method of benevolence.” (Analects 6.30)

This passage is foundational: it establishes that ren operates through an analogical extension of one’s own desires to others (“taking one’s own feelings as a guide”), yet this extension is not abstract universalization but proceeds from concrete self-experience. The man of ren does not love others from an abstract principle; he loves them because he recognizes in them the same desires and vulnerabilities he experiences in himself.

Mencius subsequently clarified the source of benevolence as “the heart of commiseration is the seed of benevolence” (ceyin zhi xin, ren zhi duan ye). The Mencius 2A6 provides the most famous articulation:

“Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to alarm and distress—not because he sought an alliance with the child’s parents, not because he wanted the praise of his neighbors and friends, and not because he disliked the child’s cries. From this we may see that a person who lacks the heart of commiseration is not human; one who lacks the heart of shame is not human; one who lacks the heart of deference is not human; one who lacks the heart of right and wrong is not human. The heart of commiseration is the seed of benevolence; the heart of shame is the seed of righteousness; the heart of deference is the seed of ritual propriety; the heart of right and wrong is the seed of wisdom.” (Mencius 2A6)

This passage is pivotal for the dialogue with Buddhist compassion. Mencius grounds benevolence not in a metaphysical doctrine but in an irreducible human experience—the spontaneous “heart of commiseration” (ceyin zhi xin) that arises prior to any calculation of benefit. This is remarkably close to the Buddhist notion of compassion arising from the perception of suffering, yet the grounding is different: Mencius anchors it in human nature itself (the “four sprouts”), while Buddhism anchors it in the metaphysical insight into dependent origination and emptiness. The former is a mode of grounding in the theory of mind-nature, with love activated from within to without; the latter is a mode of grounding in the theory of dependent origination, with love opening outward from emptiness.

Xu Baiyi points out that “the Confucian culture centered on benevolence,” though scattered across different classical texts, “still possesses an implicit theoretical system,” composed of three parts: “the cognitive dimension of benevolence thought, the moral ontology based on ren, and the theoretical essentials of benevolence,” sufficient to demonstrate the philosophical essence and cultural characteristics of benevolence thought in the history of Chinese thought ^[27].

3.2 The Extension of Ren: A Primary-Source Reading of “Loving Kin, Loving People, and Loving

Things”

The love of benevolence does not extend uniformly across a flat plane; rather, it expands from inner to outer according to a certain gradation. The key passage is Mencius 7A45:

“The gentleman, in his relation to things, loves them but is not benevolent toward them. In his relation to the people, he is benevolent toward them but does not feel familial affection for them. He feels familial affection for his kin, is benevolent toward the people, and loves all things.” (Mencius 7A45)

This passage has often been read as confirming the “graded” nature of Confucian love. Yet the gradation is not arbitrary: Mencius carefully distinguishes three modalities of concern—familial affection (*qin*), benevolence (*ren*), and love (*ai*)—each appropriate to its object. The movement from kin to people to things is not a decline in moral seriousness but an expansion of the scope of concern, with each modality retaining its distinctiveness. As the Song commentator Jiao Xun noted: “Affection is itself benevolence, but benevolence is not exhausted by affection. When benevolence operates within the family, it is called affection; when it extends universally to the people, it is called benevolence.”

Yang Haiwen, centering on this passage, points out that “loving kin is the foundation of consanguineous ethics, loving people is the root of kingly governance, and loving things is the basis of natural ecology”^[28]. This schema of “loving kin → loving people → loving things” has long been summarized as the graded structure of Confucian benevolence. However, Wang Wenwen and Shen Shunfu further reveal that Confucian benevolence ethics did not stagnate at graded love for kin in its historical evolution: Han and Tang Confucians constructed an “ethics of the Other,” highlighting the priority of the Other over love for kin and expanding the boundaries of consanguineous ethics; the “ethics of symbiosis” constructed by Song-Ming Confucians “emphasized loving all things from the perspective of the benevolence of oneness,” thereby achieving a genuine transcendence of early consanguineous ethics^[4]. It is evident that benevolence itself is not frozen in “gradedness,” but has undergone a genealogical evolution of continually expanding boundaries.

3.3 The Metaphysicalization of Ren: Zhang Zai’s Ximing—A Close Reading

The most profound contribution of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism to benevolence lies in its metaphysicalization. Zhang Zai’s Ximing (Western Inscription) is the locus classicus. The text begins:

“Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I regard as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.” (Zhang Zai, Ximing)

The Ximing performs a remarkable philosophical operation: it takes the natural human feeling of familial love and extends it to cosmic proportions through a metaphysical argument about the unity of all things in *qi*. If heaven and earth are parents, then all humans are siblings and all things are companions—not metaphorically, but ontologically, because they share the same constitutive *qi*.

Zhu Hanmin’s reading of Zhang Zai’s Ximing points out that Zhang Zai, taking “the Great Void is *qi*” (*taixu ji qi*) as his ontological basis, understood benevolence at “both the phenomenal and the metaphysical levels, explaining the causes of and the path to integrating partial love and universal love”; “the theory that the Great Void is *qi* both preserves the reasonable value of partial love at the phenomenal level and affirms the sublime value of universal love at the metaphysical level,” thereby achieving through metaphysics of existential attainment “the integration of partial love and universal love in actual moral practice”^[29]. “All people are my brothers, and all things my companions”—this immortal line extends benevolence from family ethics to cosmic unity, echoing from afar the Mahayana Buddhist existential attainment of “unconditional great compassion, great compassion of shared identity,” and also laying the groundwork for the subsequent juxtapositional dialogue between “all people are my brothers and all things my companions” and “unconditional great compassion.”

This metaphysicalization is crucial for the dialogue with Buddhism. Zhang Zai’s Ximing demonstrates that Confucian benevolence, when pushed to its logical conclusion, arrives at a universality that mirrors Buddhist compassion—not through the negation of the self (as in Buddhism), but through the expansion of the self to encompass all things. The difference in metaphysical path (expansion of the self versus dissolution of the self) yields a convergence at the level of practical outcome: both traditions arrive at universal concern for all beings.

4. Dialogue and Analysis Between Compassion and Benevolence

Having examined the internal foundations of compassion and benevolence respectively, this chapter enters the core stage of dialogue. Following the methodological framework outlined in Section 1.2, the dialogue proceeds through three moments: mutual interpretation, ethical complementarity, and constructive retrieval.

4.1 Common Ground: Both Arising from Commiseration, Both Aiming at Altruism

Compassion and benevolence share notable common ground at the level of surface emotional experience and ultimate direction. Huo Jinfeng points out that “both Confucian benevolence and Buddhist compassion involve the two dimensions of humans and things,” and “both possess tremendous conscious initiative in practice”; most importantly, “both share the same orientation toward engagement with the world,” regarding altruism and benefiting the world as the fundamental direction of value ^[1].

This common ground is confirmed by the primary sources examined above. Mencius’s “heart of commiseration” (cēyīn zhī xīn) and the Buddhist “four immeasurables” both originate in the irreducible experience of encountering the suffering of others. Both refuse to confine ethics to the internal realm of self-cultivation, striving instead to realize it as genuine concern for others. The Confucian extension from commiseration to governance and the Buddhist transformation of compassionate aspiration into deeds of delivering sentient beings both embody what may be called an “altruistic-world-engaging” orientation. This shared orientation constitutes the ethical basis for dialogue between compassion and benevolence.

4.2 Differences in Theoretical Foundations: The Different Starting Points of the Theory of Mind-Nature and the Theory of Dependent Origination

However, beneath the shared altruistic orientation, the theoretical foundations of compassion and benevolence are not identical. The primary-source analysis in Sections 2 and 3 reveals a fundamental difference in starting points.

Benevolence begins with the question “what makes a human being human?” Its answer—the heart of commiseration, the four sprouts—grounds love in the innate structure of human nature. The movement is from within to without: the moral subject discovers in himself a spontaneous response to the suffering of others, and then extends this response outward through the graded schema of “loving kin, loving people, loving things.” The metaphysical horizon—Zhang Zai’s “all people are my brothers”—is reached by expanding the self, not by dissolving it.

Compassion begins with the question “how do dharmas arise dependently?” Its answer—the theory of dependent origination and emptiness—grounds love in the metaphysical insight that there is no self, no other, no dualistic opposition. The movement is from emptiness outward: the practitioner realizes the emptiness of all phenomena and, on this basis, generates compassion that is inherently universal. The graded structure of the three kinds of compassion (sentient beings, dharmas, unconditional) is not an expansion of the self but a progressive dissolution of the conceptual limitations that constrain compassion.

These two modes of theoretical grounding are not diametrically opposed, but their philosophical presuppositions are indeed different. The difference shapes their distinct argumentative trajectories and determines their different directions in practical extension.

4.3 Beyond “Graded Love versus Equal Love”: A Juxtapositional Reading from the Ximing to Unconditional Great Compassion

One common way of contrasting compassion and benevolence is to categorize benevolence as “graded love” and compassion as simply “equal love.” While convenient in its simplification, this contrast easily obscures the rich tensions within each tradition. The primary-source analysis in the preceding sections already suggests that this dichotomy is reductive.

On the Confucian side, Zhang Mandi has cautioned that Confucian benevolence “contains profound ideas of equality; one cannot categorize Confucian ‘benevolence’ and Mohist ‘universal love’ as simply graded love versus equal love”—a warning equally applicable to the dialogue between compassion and benevolence ^[3]. A 2024 study of the Mencius-Yizi debate further refines this point by analyzing the “one root” (yīben) versus “two roots” (èrbēn) controversy: Mencius argues that graded love proceeds from a single source (the family), whereas Mohist impartial love is accused of “two roots” because it simultaneously acknowledges kinship and demands equal concern for all [30]. This framework can be fruitfully extended to the Buddhist context: does the Buddhist claim that “all sentient beings are equal” constitute a “second root” that competes with the natural

human inclination toward particular attachment, or does the Mahayana doctrine of emptiness dissolve the very distinction between one root and two roots by negating the self from which roots could grow? Li Xiangjun points out that although the Confucian order of benevolence is indeed “a differentiated yet integrated structure,” through “the expansion of the scope of the benevolent person’s love,” it is also possible to have “self-love dissolve into the state of the benevolent person’s unity with all things”^[31]—this bears a striking structural resemblance to the Buddhist progression from “compassion directed at sentient beings” through “compassion directed at dharmas” to “unconditional great compassion.”

On the Buddhist side, the threefold hierarchy of compassion itself demonstrates that compassion is not simply “equal love” in a flat, undifferentiated sense. The *Da Zhi Du Lun* explicitly states that compassion directed at sentient beings “takes the mark of sentient beings” and “is practiced mostly by ordinary people”—it operates within the realm of discriminative appearances. Only unconditional great compassion transcends all discrimination. The graded structure of Buddhist compassion thus mirrors, in reverse, the graded structure of Confucian benevolence: both traditions acknowledge the phenomenological reality of differentiated concern while pointing toward a metaphysical universality that transcends differentiation.

At the peaks of existential attainment in the two traditions—Zhang Zai’s “all people are my brothers and all things my companions” and the Mahayana “unconditional great compassion”—they reach the possibility of convergence at the metaphysical level. Therefore, rather than the reductive dichotomy of “graded / equal,” a more accurate description would be: benevolence takes gradedness as its starting point and oneness as its ultimate end; compassion takes non-differentiation as its fundamental nature and differentiated appearances as skillful means (*upāya*)—the two are mirror images of each other in their paths of extension.

4.4 Engaging the World versus Transcending the World: Complementarity as Productive Tension

Benevolence and compassion exhibit a tension that is both convergent and divergent in their ultimate directions. Although both possess an orientation toward engagement with the world, “the former emphasizes preserving benevolence and entering politics, advocating statecraft and practical application; the latter’s ultimate anchor lies in transcendence, with its final direction being the pursuit of enlightenment above and the transformation of beings below.”

However, the tension between transcendence and worldly engagement is not irreconcilable. The Mahayana bodhisattva path takes “never abandoning sentient beings” as its fundamental vow, advocating “engaging in worldly affairs with a transcendent mind”—this spirit precisely complements the Confucian orientation of “statecraft.” Compassion provides the spiritual elevation that transcends utilitarian calculation for worldly endeavors, while benevolence injects a practicable and traceable ethical path into tendencies toward withdrawal.

This complementarity is not a synthesis that dissolves the differences between the two traditions. Rather, it is a productive tension: each tradition retains its distinct identity while being enriched by the other. In the complex and pluralistic ethical circumstances of modern society, the ethical resources of a single tradition can no longer independently address compound moral questions: benevolence is more operational at the level of institutional ethics and public governance, while compassion possesses greater force at the level of ultimate concern and cross-cultural universality. The dialogue between the two therefore does not stop at the identification of differences, but points toward a dual anchor in contemporary moral practice—grounding institutions in benevolence, elevating spirit through compassion.

5. Historical Convergence and Contemporary Value

The dialogue between compassion and benevolence is not purely a conceptual construct; it has deep historical traces in the history of Chinese thought and continues to hold practical value in the contemporary era. This chapter first takes Master Yuanying’s “harmonization of Buddhism and Confucianism” as a modern paradigm, comparing his approach with those of Taixu, Juzan, and Zhao Puchu, and then explores the synergistic value of the two in contemporary philanthropic ethics, interreligious dialogue, and global ethical reflection.

5.1 Master Yuanying’s “Harmonization of Buddhism and Confucianism” as a Modern Paradigm

In modern times, as Buddhism confronted the reality of national survival, harmonizing Buddhism and Confucianism in a manner both faithful to principle and responsive to the times became a significant trend in the Sinicization of Buddhism. Among the modern Buddhist figures who undertook this harmonization, Master Yuanying (1878–1953) occupies a distinctive

position.

Why Yuanying? Master Yuanying is selected as the paradigmatic case for this study not because he was the only modern Buddhist figure to harmonize Buddhism and Confucianism, but because his approach was the most systematic in grounding the convergence of compassion and benevolence at the level of mind-nature (xin xing). Unlike other modern Buddhist leaders who primarily addressed institutional reform or social activism, Yuanying consistently returned to the philosophical question of how Buddhist compassion and Confucian benevolence share the same ontological root. It should be noted that Yuanying's thought is virtually unrepresented in English-language scholarship: the Dharma Drum Institute's Digital Museum of Chinese Buddhism provides a biographical entry^[22], but no monograph or journal article in English has been devoted to his Buddhist-Confucian harmonization. The analysis in this section thus constitutes a contribution to filling this lacuna.

Yuanying's own writings provide direct evidence of his approach. In a public lecture, he declared:

"In my youth I studied Confucian learning; in my twenties I entered the Buddhist gate. Having studied both Buddhist and Confucian learning, I find that in reality they share the same thread and follow the same path. In terms of cultivation, Buddhism speaks of 'returning from delusion to truth,' while Confucianism speaks of 'restraining oneself and returning to ritual.' In terms of ultimate attainment, Buddhism speaks of 'illuminating the mind and seeing one's nature,' while Confucianism speaks of 'exhausting principle and fully realizing one's nature.' This harmonization of Buddhist and Confucian teachings fits together like the two halves of a tally." (Yihoutang Wenji, p. 76)

This passage is revealing: Yuanying does not merely note external parallels between Buddhism and Confucianism; he argues for a structural identity at the level of soteriological method ("returning from delusion") and ultimate goal ("illuminating the mind / exhausting principle"). The convergence of compassion and benevolence, in Yuanying's framework, is not an accidental similarity but a necessary consequence of their shared root in the same universal mind-nature.

In his discourse on releasing living beings (fangsheng), Yuanying explicitly linked Buddhist compassion and Confucian benevolence:

"Regarding the protection of life, the Buddhist and Confucian teachings fit together like the two halves of a tally. Our Buddha takes great compassion and great sympathy as the foundation of saving the world. Great compassion means giving joy to all sentient beings; great sympathy means removing the suffering of all sentient beings.... The Confucian Book of Changes says: 'Heaven is called great generativity, Earth is called vast generativity; the greatest virtue of Heaven and Earth is generation.' Thus Confucius, in his commentary on the Changes, honors generation and generation again. Mencius says: 'When [the gentleman] sees [an animal] alive, he cannot bear to see it die; when he hears its cry, he cannot bear to eat its flesh.' ... We should protect life and preserve benevolence, advocating the protection of living beings. This truly accords with the shared purpose of both Buddhism and Confucianism." (Yuanying Dashi Wenhui, "Fangsheng Hui Yanshuo")

This passage demonstrates Yuanying's specific method of harmonization: he reads Mencius's "heart of commiseration" as the Confucian expression of the same fundamental impulse that Buddhism calls "great compassion." The convergence is not at the level of doctrinal formulation but at the level of the experiential root—the spontaneous inability to bear the suffering of others.

Xu Tao and Liu Ru's research indicates that Master Yuanying "along the Sinicization path of Han Chinese Buddhism—integrating Confucianism into Buddhism and achieving convergence between the two—interpreted the Mahayana bodhisattva's path of compassion of 'benefiting self and others' and 'benefiting sentient beings and saving the world' through the Confucian idea of benevolence expressed as 'loving all people and being close to the benevolent' and its spirit of 'extensively giving to and relieving the multitudes,' and, grounded in the practical circumstances of modern Chinese Buddhism, developed and harmonized the classical teachings of both Buddhism and Confucianism in a manner both faithful to principle and responsive to the times"^[2].

5.1.1 Yuanying in Comparative Perspective: Taixu, Juzan, and Zhao Puchu

To understand what is distinctive about Yuanying's approach, it is helpful to compare him with three other major modern Buddhist figures who also engaged with Confucian thought.

Master Taixu (1890–1947) advocated "Humanistic Buddhism" (renjian fojiao) and emphasized the social and institutional

dimensions of Buddhist engagement with the world. Taixu's approach to Buddhism-Confucianism relations was primarily practical: he sought to mobilize Buddhist ethical resources for social reform and national salvation. While Taixu acknowledged the compatibility of Buddhist compassion and Confucian benevolence, his primary concern was not their philosophical convergence but their shared capacity for social transformation. Pittman's comprehensive study of Taixu's reforms traces the development from "Human Vehicle Buddhism" (*rencheng fojiao*) through "Buddhism for Human Life" (*rensheng fojiao*) to "Humanistic Buddhism" (*renjian fojiao*), showing how Taixu progressively translated Buddhist compassion into a force for social transformation^[32]. A 2025 study further argues that Taixu's Humanistic Buddhism was not a rupture with tradition but a "performative philosophy" that reconfigured Buddhist practice for modern contexts^[33]. Taixu's "New Buddhist Movement" sought to integrate the ethical resources of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism to address the modern moral crisis, representing one of the most significant contemporary manifestations of Humanistic Buddhist thought and practice^[32].

Master Juzan (1908–1984) shared Taixu's commitment to social engagement but placed greater emphasis on the modernization of Buddhist ethics itself. Juzan sought to reform Buddhist institutional structures and doctrines, adapting them to contemporary social realities. His approach to Buddhism-Confucianism convergence was thus primarily reformist: he wanted to demonstrate that Buddhism could contribute to modern ethical discourse on its own terms, without being subordinated to Confucian categories. Juzan "dedicated himself to saving the nation and revitalizing the religion, propagating the Dharma and benefiting sentient beings, reforming Buddhist institutional structures and doctrines, and revitalizing Buddhist ethics and morality"^[34].

Zhao Puchu (1907–2000) represented yet another model: the Buddhist philanthropist-statesman whose charitable work embodied the convergence of compassion and benevolence in practice rather than in theory. Qing Yuan points out that Zhao Puchu's "family scholarly heritage of 'four generations of Hanlin academicians' and his Buddhist faith of 'unconditional great compassion' constituted the substrate of his philanthropic thought," and his philanthropic practice "transformed the Buddhist cultivation of 'repaying the four kinds of kindness above' into sustained charitable action, grounding religious faith and devotion to family and nation in social responsibility"^[35].

Yuanying differs from all three in a crucial respect: his harmonization operates primarily at the level of mind-nature theory (*xin xing lun*), not at the level of social reform (Taixu), institutional modernization (Juzan), or philanthropic practice (Zhao Puchu). Yuanying insists that the convergence of compassion and benevolence is not merely a matter of external cooperation or practical compatibility, but reflects an ontological identity: both arise from the same universal mind, and both aim at the same ultimate end—the transformation of the human heart. This philosophical depth is what makes Yuanying the most appropriate paradigm for the present study, which is concerned with the conceptual and metaphysical dimensions of the compassion-benevolence dialogue, not merely with their practical convergence.

5.2 Contemporary Value: Toward an Analytical Framework

The convergence of compassion and benevolence holds practical significance in at least three concrete domains. Unlike broad normative claims about "the community with a shared future for mankind," the following analysis specifies the mechanisms through which compassion and benevolence contribute to contemporary ethical practice.

5.2.1 Philanthropic Ethics: The Model of "Graded Universalism"

Contemporary philanthropic ethics faces a structural dilemma: universalist models of charity (drawing on Kantian or utilitarian frameworks) demand impartial treatment of all persons, yet in practice charitable giving inevitably reflects particular attachments—to one's community, nation, or cause. The dialogue between compassion and benevolence suggests a way beyond this dilemma.

Confucian benevolence provides the insight that ethical concern legitimately begins with particular relationships (family, community) and extends outward through graded extension. This is not a moral deficiency but a phenomenological fact about how moral motivation actually works. Buddhist compassion provides the metaphysical horizon that prevents this graded extension from collapsing into parochialism: the insight into dependent origination and emptiness ensures that the ultimate scope of concern is universal. Together, they suggest a model of "graded universalism"—philanthropic practice that begins

with concrete, particular commitments but is always oriented toward universal scope.

Sallie King's systematic study of engaged Buddhism provides cross-cultural support for this model. King analyzes nine contemporary Asian Buddhist activists and demonstrates that engaged Buddhist social ethics is grounded in the traditional Buddhist principles of interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and meditation, and that its non-adversarial stance bears structural resemblance to the Confucian emphasis on harmony^[36]. Her broader survey of socially engaged Buddhism further confirms that this complementarity is not an isolated case but a recurring pattern across Asian Buddhist traditions^[37]. This suggests that the complementarity between compassion and benevolence is not merely theoretical but is already being enacted in contemporary Buddhist social engagement.

Qing Yuan's study of Zhao Puchu provides a concrete example: Zhao Puchu's philanthropic work was grounded in both Confucian familial virtue ("four generations of Hanlin academicians") and Buddhist compassion ("unconditional great compassion"), and it was precisely this dual grounding that enabled his charity to be both practically effective (rooted in concrete relationships and responsibilities) and ethically expansive (oriented toward the relief of all suffering)^[35].

5.2.2 Interreligious Dialogue: Compassion and Benevolence as a Shared Ethical Language

The dialogue between compassion and benevolence also provides a model for interreligious dialogue more broadly. Both concepts function as "ethical bridges"—they are central to their respective traditions yet share enough common ground to enable mutual understanding. The methodology of dialogical comparison developed in this paper (mutual interpretation, ethical complementarity, constructive retrieval) can be applied to other interreligious contexts.

Specifically, the recognition that compassion and benevolence are not diametrically opposed ("equal love" versus "graded love") but are mirror images of each other in their paths of extension suggests a model for interreligious dialogue that does not require the dissolution of differences. Each tradition retains its distinct identity while being enriched by the other—a model that may prove more fruitful than either relativism (all traditions are equally valid) or exclusivism (only one tradition is valid). Hamar's study of Chinese Buddhism's reinterpretation of filial piety as universal compassion provides a historical precedent for this model: rather than dissolving Confucian filial piety into Buddhist compassion, Chinese Buddhism showed how the former could be reinterpreted as a particular expression of the latter without losing its distinctive character^[17].

5.2.3 Global Ethics: A Non-Western-Centric Contribution

The dialogue between compassion and benevolence also contributes to the emerging field of global ethics. Much of the existing literature on global ethics draws on Western philosophical frameworks—Kantian universalism, utilitarian consequentialism, or rights-based approaches. The compassion-benevolence dialogue suggests an alternative: an ethical framework grounded in the concrete experience of suffering and the relational extension of care, rather than in abstract principles or individual rights.

Zou Lulin and Cai Caihong point out that the Confucian concept of "benevolence" forms a layered circle that continuously radiates from within to without, namely "loving others → loving people → harmonizing with all states," which "admirably combines Eastern Confucian 'benevolence' civilization with Western 'universal love' (*fraternité*)," cultivating shared Eastern and Western values from "benevolence" to "great love"^[38]. The graded extension of benevolence provides a practical ladder from the individual to the collective, while the Buddhist compassion of "great compassion of shared identity" provides this ladder with a metaphysical vision that transcends national and civilizational boundaries. Together, they offer an ethical pathway that is neither the abstract rights-based individualism of the West nor the boundary-defending stance of nationalism, but a relational ethics that begins with concrete care and extends toward universal concern.

Conclusion

This paper has employed "dialogue" as a method to reexamine the internal foundations and mutual relations of the two great ethical traditions of Buddhist compassion and Confucian benevolence. The research demonstrates three main claims.

First, the common dichotomy of "graded love versus equal love" is reductive. The primary-source analysis of the *Da Zhi Du Lun*, the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and Zhang Zai's *Ximing* reveals that both traditions internally contain the mechanism for transcending their starting points: benevolence moves from gradedness toward the oneness of "all people are my brothers," while compassion moves from non-differentiation through the graded practice of the three kinds of compassion.

They are mirror images of each other in their paths of extension—benevolence takes gradedness as its starting point and oneness as its ultimate end; compassion takes non-differentiation as its fundamental nature and differentiated appearances as skillful means.

Second, beneath the shared origin in commiseration and shared altruistic direction, compassion and benevolence are respectively grounded in different metaphysical paths—the theory of dependent origination versus the theory of mind-nature. This difference does not preclude convergence; rather, at the peaks of existential attainment in the two traditions, they reach the possibility of convergence at the metaphysical level, as demonstrated by the juxtaposition of Zhang Zai’s Ximing and the Mahayana “unconditional great compassion.”

Third, this convergence is not merely conceptual but has been historically enacted. Master Yuanying’s modern paradigm of “harmonizing Buddhism and Confucianism”—distinguished from the approaches of Taixu, Juzan, and Zhao Puchu by its grounding in mind-nature theory—demonstrates that the Buddhist-Confucian ethical dialogue extends beyond scholarly analysis and can be realized as concrete spiritual resources and social practice. The synergistic value of compassion and benevolence is analytically demonstrated in three domains: philanthropic ethics (the model of “graded universalism”), interreligious dialogue (compassion and benevolence as shared ethical language), and global ethics (a non-Western-centric contribution).

This study still has its limitations: the more specific historical details of Song-Ming Buddhist-Confucian interaction, the institutional transformation of compassion ethics in the modern Humanistic Buddhist context, and further comparison of compassion and benevolence in the context of contemporary East Asian ethics—all these topics merit further in-depth investigation.

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