

PREPRINT

THE GONGFU OF FRED ROGERS

A CONFUCIAN SYNTHESIS OF ROGERS' PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

David Samuel Meyer (꽃기린)

Department of Education, Yonsei University, Seoul, Korea

ORCID: 0000-0001-6773-9991

<https://giraffleur.org>

dr.goat@giraffleur.org

Educational Philosophy and Theory, April 2025 (forthcoming),
[10.1080/00131857.2025.2494587](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2025.2494587).

Received 19 Dec 2024, Accepted 02 Apr 2025, Published online: 22 Apr 2025

preprint first published on 2025-07-14

VERSION Nº [f8a191b](#) || last modified on 2025-07-22

CC0 1.0 Universal (Public Domain)

abstract || This article interprets Fred Rogers' philosophy of education from a Confucian point-of-view. Namely, it attempts to synthesize an account of his educational ideas and practices as a form of gongfu (工夫); or as "gongfu recommendations." The concept of gongfu is analyzed to provide a conceptual framework for interpreting Rogers' ideas as gongfu. Rogers' philosophy of education is synthesized through an analysis of his own work within this framework; specifically in the context of ren (仁) and li (禮). A terse summary of Rogers' gongfu and its significance for educational theory and practice is discussed in conclusion.

keywords | Fred Rogers, Confucianism, gongfu

INTRODUCTION

Fred McFeely Rogers is renowned as the creator and host of the widely praised children's television program, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (MRN). MRN aired for over thirty years in the US and Canada as syndicated programming for non-profit public broadcasting networks; most notably PBS in the United States. Between 1968 and 2001, Rogers produced nearly one thousand episodes of MRN which continue to be rerun on many public broadcasting networks even after the show ceased to be officially syndicated by PBS in 2008. Rogers himself remains a cultural icon long after his death in 2003; remembered as “the world's nicest grownup,”¹ a champion of educational public broadcasting,² and sometimes even elevated to the status of spiritual guru.³

Since his passing in 2003, Rogers and his program have gained attention from an increasing number of researchers working in various disciplines. In the existing literature, the most comprehensive analysis relevant to what may be called Rogers' educational philosophy may be found in the work of Klarén;⁴ a significant portion of which notably interprets Rogers' thought in the context of care ethics and the phenomenological dialogics of Martin Buber. Apart from Klarén's work, research about Rogers' educational philosophy specifically is still rather sparse. Rogers himself wrote a number of books and articles during his long life, but nowhere did he formally disclose his philosophical positions in an academic capacity. Furthermore, interpreting Rogers' views is somewhat challenging because they were very eclectic and nuanced. To fully appreciate and disclose the educational philosophy of this highly original and insightful thinker may therefore require a plurality of interpretations that are just as eclectic and nuanced.

1 Bishop, “The World's Nicest Grown-up”.

2 Cikovic, “Rethinking the Collective Memory”.

3 Perry and Roesch, “He's in a New Neighborhood Now”.

4 “Invisible to the Eye”; “Won't You Be My Neighbor?”; *On Becoming Neighbors*.

This paper will examine the Confucian concept of gongfu (工夫) to construct a conceptual framework for interpreting Rogers' philosophy of education. Part of the reason for approaching the study of Rogers' philosophy of education in the context of gongfu—the Confucian art of living—is to enrich the conceptual tools we have for understanding his views themselves and their significance in the field of educational philosophy. Perhaps most importantly, approaching Rogers' work in this way aims to disclose its significance as a highly influential and effective force of informal education. Fred Rogers was not a student of Confucianism per se, nevertheless, it would not be an exaggeration to say that his personality and life's work demonstrate a kind of gongfu mastery. The philosophies at the heart of gongfu have much in common with the ideas, values, and practices of Fred Rogers. Their analysis has the benefit of not only sketching the contours of Rogers' philosophy of education, but also providing some real-life, cross-cultural examples of gongfu living in the wild.

CONFUCIAN GONGFU AS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

Over the past several decades, many scholars of Chinese philosophy have sought to separate the ideas found in the classic literature from the dogmatic doctrines associated with Confucianism.⁵ Among these various efforts to reinterpret the Confucian classics in the context of contemporary philosophical discourse, Peimin Ni has argued for a gongfu reconstruction of Confucianism—a reconstruction which Li⁶ refers to as “the aesthetic turn” in Confucian philosophy. Ni's interpretation is notable for its identification of gongfu as the generic

5 Ni, “Rectify the Heart-Mind for the Art of Living,” 340.

6 “Interpreting Confucius”.

orientation of Confucianism, which he recognizes as a unique contribution that the Chinese tradition can make to world philosophy.⁷

It is true that gongfu has long since been a core idea of Confucianism; Neo-confucianism in particular. Originally—as early as the Han and Jin periods—gongfu referred to human labor,⁸ especially in the sense of “manpower,” but by the time of the Song and Ming dynasties it came to denote devoted effort and the methods or instructions for making such an effort.⁹ In the process of reinterpreting the Confucian tradition and establishing their metaphysical orthodoxies, the Neo-confucians famously established gongfu as the foundation of Confucian philosophy and civilization. In spite of its centrality in Confucian thought, Ni¹⁰ asserts that a thoroughgoing gongfu reconstruction of Confucianism is warranted for the sake of re-establishing a practical rationality to ground philosophy in the world of human life. Reconstructing Confucianism “on the basis of its own resources” not only makes it available in addressing our contemporary problems,¹¹ but it discloses the significance and relevance of the Confucian gongfu orientation as a unique philosophy of education, and thereby makes it available as a conceptual framework for further philosophical inquiry. In order to construct and apply such a framework to a synthesis of the educational philosophy of Fred Rogers, I will survey what distinguishes the gongfu orientation in general.

RECOMMENDATIONS RATHER THAN REQUIREMENTS

What is distinctive about the gongfu orientation is that it understands learning to be the art of living, and furthermore, that it identifies this art

7 Ni, “Toward a Gongfu Reconstruction of Confucianism —Responses to Comments by Huang Yong, Fan Ruiping, and Wang Qingjie,” 252.

8 In the English-speaking world, gongfu is known popularly as kung-fu (功夫). This association with martial arts is a relatively recent and specialized use of the term.

9 Ni, “Rectify the Heart-Mind for the Art of Living,” 353.

10 “Philosophy of Gongfu Revealed Through Confucius,” 252.

11 Ni, “Toward a Gongfu Reconstruction of Confucianism —Responses to Comments by Huang Yong, Fan Ruiping, and Wang Qingjie,” 245.

as the paradigm and telos of human life.¹² Elevating the aesthetic as the ultimate ideal contrasts with the conventional reading of Confucianism that understands its ultimate aim to be moral perfection.¹³

Consequently, gongfu is concerned not with the mastery of prescribed forms or techniques of a particular style per se, but with artistry itself; specifically, with virtuosity in the arts of life.¹⁴ What characterizes the Confucian sage is not the perfect application or embodiment of moral principles, but a “cultivated spontaneity”¹⁵ —a sensitivity and responsiveness to the situations in which one is actually immersed.¹⁶ In other words, learning as gongfu involves the active cultivation of one’s capacity to be as present in and perceptive to the situations, interactions, and relationships *through which* one exists, thereby striving to make them more meaningful.

Consequently, gongfu is notably performative in nature; that is, it is not something you are or possess, but something you do. This is most clearly demonstrated by the supreme human virtue, ren (仁), which Confucius himself tirelessly emphasized is not a state or character one attains,¹⁷ but something one embodies or practices concretely in real-life situations and interactions.¹⁸ In the context of learning, then, one’s gongfu would not refer exclusively to the net accumulation of knowledge and skills at one’s disposal, nor to a particular scheme or methodology per se. One’s gongfu would more accurately be identified with the wisdom to which these contribute; the ways one applies oneself meaningfully in real-life situations and the effects realized in consequence. The performativity of gongfu is an important corollary of

12 Meyer, “The Confucian Concept of Learning and the Aesthetics of Human Experience”; Ni, “Life as Aesthetic Creativity and Appreciation”.

13 Ni, “Life as Aesthetic Creativity and Appreciation,” 171.

14 論語, 7:6.

15 Ni, *Confucius*, 96.

16 Meyer, “The Confucian Concept of Learning and the Aesthetics of Human Experience,” 53–54.

17 論語, 1:3, 3:1–3, 5:5, 5:8, 5:19, 17:17.

18 Meyer, “The Confucian Concept of Learning and the Aesthetics of Human Experience,” 51–52.

Confucian ontology, which understands situations and relations to be the primary reality.¹⁹ All human activity is embedded in these, and so Confucian discourse tends to take the form of instructions for being present and tending to the conditions of real life affairs.

The performativity of gongfu means that it cannot be reduced to normative prescriptions themselves, and furthermore that its prescriptive function is one of *recommendation*; a suggested stance, attitude, or course of action to serve in the process of cultivating one's own gongfu. Even the most rigid of prescriptions would still require one to actually apply it in real life, and its efficacy would still depend on one's virtuosity. Indeed, preserving the performative integrity of gongfu and preventing it from becoming mechanistic was a perennial concern for Confucians. For example, commenting on the rules he established for his White Deer Hollow Academy, Zhuxi (朱熹)²⁰ laments that contrary to the teachings of the sages and wise men of old, learning in his day had become formalistic and had been reduced to a means for attaining reputation and material wealth. He presents the rules for his own academy not as rules per se, but as recommendations for making one's gongfu more gongfu-like.

A notable consequence of gongfu's performativity is that there is no universalizability criterion. In the absence of universal normativity, and given the fact that gongfu strives for virtuosity, it is inevitable that different gongfu masters would have different and even incompatible gongfu. In the context of gongfu, this difference is better understood as a difference in lifestyles, art styles, or tastes.²¹ These differences represent unique and spontaneous responses to a problem, and the nature of this difference, Ni²² explains, is more akin to the way two pianists may differently interpret a piece of music. This lack of

19 Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*; Ames, "Collaterality in Early Chinese Cosmology"; Ames, "'Bodyheartminding'(Xin 心)"; Meyer, "The Confucian Concept of Learning and the Aesthetics of Human Experience".

20 朱子大全 (中), 2:74:22, p. 758.

21 Ni, "Philosophy of Gongfu Revealed Through Confucius," 274.

22 273.

universalizability resists codification and identification of gongfu with a particular ideology or orthodoxy, and forces us to prioritize concrete situations and experiences. As a conceptual framework for educational philosophy, gongfu's strength lay partly in this stubborn location of education in actual human experiences. The benefit of considering the philosophies of others in the context of gongfu is that it challenges us to extract wisdom from others' examples by remaining open to and reflecting on the potential value and meaning they could have in our own gongfu if appropriated.

ROGERS' PHILOSOPHIES AS GONGFU RECOMMENDATIONS

Rather than merely prescribing his values dogmatically, Rogers tried to get others—as many as possible—to actively appreciate, cultivate, and care for themselves and their worlds. This approach itself is arguably very Confucian in nature, and indeed many aspects of Rogers' philosophy are strikingly gongfu-like. As an interpretive framework, gongfu allows us to synthesize a comprehensive view of his philosophy as it was embodied in the content of his show and the way it was produced, and most importantly in the way Rogers himself modeled his own gongfu for millions of viewers, or “television neighbors.”

ROGERS' REN (仁)

In Confucian philosophy, ren is the supreme human virtue, but it is notably not a code of ethics or a transcendental ideal. It is more accurately an artistry or a quality that encompasses the entirety of one's existence as the interactive expression or realization of one's personhood in the concrete relationships and affairs of one's life experience.²³ Cultivating this sort of ren artistry, or virtuosity in the art

23 Confucius, *The analects of Confucius*, 49; Meyer, “The Confucian Concept of Learning and the Aesthetics of Human Experience,” 51; Ni, *Confucius*, 34.

of living is what Confucians understood as learning, or xue (學), itself.²⁴ Understood in this way, learning involves a receptivity to and sincere appreciation of what is immediate in one's life,²⁵ and as the process of striving to develop such virtuosity in the art of living, we may observe that practicing ren is itself the core of gongfu and learning in Confucian philosophy. That is, not only is ren the foundation of learning, but its continual practice is the open-ended, self-enrichment of learning and life generally. The centrality of this kind of love—broadly construed—in gongfu philosophy is a significant point of contact with Rogers' views, where we find a profound love for oneself, others, life, and the world in general as the basis and priority of all learning.

According to Rogers,²⁶ what allows us to be human is being loved and loving in return. For Rogers, this applies to all humans without exception. Even our most detested of enemies are “inherently good and deserving of care and concern.”²⁷ In Rogers' words: “how sad is it to think that we would give up on any other creature who's just like us.”²⁸ This profound love at the heart of Rogers' philosophy was rooted in his “progressive spirituality, his abiding faith in a God of unconditional love”²⁹ and his lifelong mission to realize this love in every aspect of his work and life.³⁰ To Rogers, God is not only “The Great Appreciator” who “loves you just the way you are,”³¹ but contrary to mainstream Christianity, God also learns and grows just as humans do.³² As part of God, our growth and learning necessitates cultivating our capacity to love and appreciate ourselves and others unconditionally; just as God does. However, realizing God's love on Earth, for Rogers, is not a private

24 Meyer, “The Confucian Concept of Learning and the Aesthetics of Human Experience”.

25 Meyer, 50–51.

26 *Many Ways to Say I Love You*, “Many Ways of Loving Each Other” §4.

27 Long, *Peaceful Neighbor*, 15.

28 Rothbart, “A Friend in the Neighborhood”.

29 Long, *Peaceful Neighbor*, 25.

30 Long, *Peaceful Neighbor*, xv; Tuttle, *Exactly as You Are*, 4–5.

31 Borsuk, “Everybody's Neighbor”.

32 Long, *Peaceful Neighbor*, 28.

affair, but one that necessarily involves striving to appreciate and express how that love exists in oneself, in others, and in the world.³³

In his own work—*Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*—the priority was to get as many children as possible to grasp and appreciate this love in themselves and their world so that they could most fully participate in and contribute to it. “I am absolutely convinced that the sense of feeling worthwhile, the sense of being able to express who we are inside, is essential to living. My main emphasis is to try to give an idea of the innate worth of each human being.”³⁴ Being grounded in this understanding of love’s foundational role in learning, MRN prioritized social and emotional development, and focused its content on the realization of self-worth, self-care, and healthy communication and interpersonal relationships. These themes factored into every aspect of the program’s design, and were reaffirmed at the beginning of every episode with the invitational song, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” which reiterates for each viewer that they are a lovable member of Rogers’ neighborhood: “I have always wanted a neighbor just like you / I have always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you.”

Of Rogers’ numerous songs featured on the program, perhaps “It’s You I Like” most directly expresses the spirit of Rogers’ gongfu; or, what we might call the ren of Fred Rogers. Not only do the lyrics of this song firmly assert that the listener *is not* deficient and only worthy of love conditionally, but it is itself an example of Rogers *doing* or *performing* his gongfu. That is, its message not only communicates the values of Rogers’ gongfu directly to the listener, but the song itself is a demonstration or performance of his art of living. In a 1984 episode, Rogers explains that he likes to express himself musically and that this song in particular is one he likes to sing for people he really cares about, then he proceeds to perform it for his “television neighbors.” Of course, Rogers did not know each of his millions of viewers personally, yet his

³³ Long, 41.

³⁴ Rogers, “Communicating with Children Through Television,” 456.

message was nonetheless sincere—that unconditional love for oneself and others is the beginning and end of personal and collective growth.

In Rogers' gongfu, before anyone can be “taught social or cognitive lessons,” their self-worth must first be recognized and established.³⁵ “Children are not just brains into which we pour facts, then at test time, out come the facts”—feelings come first³⁶ and are more fundamental than facts or knowledge. Rogers is not advocating, however, some kind of hedonistic indulgence or romantic exaggeration of the ego. Rogers asserts the primacy of feelings because he observes that not only are we immersed in them—that on the most basic level we experience the world through them—but also that we *are* our relationships; our very existence is embedded in our relationships and the way we relate to others and the world. “Children do not develop in a healthy way unless they have the feeling that they are needed—that they enhance the life of someone else, that they have value apart from anything that they own or any skill that they learn.”³⁷ “What matters most is how children feel about their uniqueness, once they do begin to realize that they are different from everyone else. How each one of us comes to feel about our individual uniqueness has a strong influence on how we feel about everyone's uniqueness” (ibid.). In other words, not only do we learn and grow best through relationships³⁸ because we are our relationships, it is through our capacity to “love others as we first loved ourselves” that “true neighborliness” or community grows.³⁹

Not only does MRN explicitly address these ideas about care and relationships in ways that young children can understand, but, more notably, Rogers performs or embodies them in the design and production of the show. Being a show primarily for children, Rogers understandably does not make explicit reference to care ethics or the

35 Klarén, “‘Won't You Be My Neighbor?’” 75.

36 Rogers, “Mister Rogers on Kids and Technology,” 9.

37 Rogers, *Many Ways to Say I Love You*, “Growing as Children.”

38 Rogers, “Mister Rogers on Kids and Technology,” 9.

39 Rogers, *Many Ways to Say I Love You*, “Growing as Children.”

phenomenological dialogue of Buber,⁴⁰ yet it is apparent that his gongfu—as it is performed through MRN—incorporates some familiar aspects of them nonetheless. Valentine⁴¹ observes that Rogers’ program demonstrates how care is a relationship; that caring de-centers us and that our impulse to care is mediated by the other person involved. Rogers intended MRN to be “an experience of sharing existence”⁴² that engaged his audience of “television neighbors” in a phenomenological dialogue whereby their inclusion and membership in the community would be affirmed. The key point here, however, is that this experience of care and the affirmation of self-worth and community membership are neither passive nor automatic occurrences. While we may concede that watching a television program is a relatively virtual or even vicarious experience, it is, indeed, a real experience, and the dialogical “in-between” space into which Rogers invites his viewers is entered voluntarily—and most importantly, imaginatively. It is through the imagination that one may be “de-centered” enough to enter into a dialogical relationship in the first place, and whatever meanings might be possible within that phenomenological space would require one to wonder and imagine actively if they are to be appreciated and communicated at all.

ROGERS’ LI (禮)

Understood in this way, ren, as a kind of love or care for life, naturally entails both a profound wonder about the world in which one lives as well as the imaginative play within it. To actually appreciate the worth of oneself and others requires being receptive and responsive to the possibilities incipient in each unique situation, rather than just behaving in a way that aligns with some notion of what ren or a love for life would look like. Indeed, virtuosity in any art entails being open to *actual conditions* and being able to imaginatively explore the possibilities one

⁴⁰ For an in-depth and thought-provoking treatment of Rogers’ philosophy in this context, see Klarén, *On Becoming Neighbors*.

⁴¹ “The Feelings We Feel,” 81.

⁴² Klarén, ““Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”” 61.

perceives these to suggest—this is what virtuosity denotes in the first place. In this sense, what is distinct about virtuosity may be illustrated by the difference between a scripted dialogue and an actual conversation. While the former is predetermined, perhaps with the exception of its actual delivery, the latter is open-ended and creative by its very nature. The content of the conversation and the course it takes are determined in situ through the activity itself as it develops over time. Its ends and means are internal to the activity, and are thus mutually entailing and mutable. As such, to regard virtuosity as the generic aim of learning is to say that the aims of learning must be internal to that very process; in other words, that learning—most generally speaking—is self-enriching and autotelic. In both the gongfu of Rogers and Confucianism generally, we may observe that the ends and means of learning are integrated in the creative and imaginative appropriation of meaning in even the most mundane affairs of life.

In the gongfu of Confucius himself, this appropriation of meaning was conceived as *li* (禮); or, the ritualization of life. If we assume moral perfection to be the ultimate ideal of Confucianism, then we might read *li* no deeper than its literal meaning as rites, ceremony, or “propriety.” Indeed, this dimension of *li* is not irrelevant, for this is the role it played for centuries in the history of Confucian civilization. In the context of Confucius’ own philosophy, however, *li*’s significance as a virtue exceeds this relatively narrow definition; a point which is especially apparent from the gongfu perspective. That is, if we grant that the ultimate ideal of Confucianism is aesthetic rather than moral—that its aim is a virtuosity in the arts of life rather than moral perfection—then, as a virtue, *li* functions not to assimilate or conform to some prescribed code of ethics, but rather to remain open to and immersed in the immediate situation to make all aspects of life as artful as possible.⁴³

This openness or immersion in the immediate situation is a cornerstone of Confucian philosophy, and well demonstrated by two of its most

43 Meyer, “The Confucian Concept of Learning and the Aesthetics of Human Experience,” 53.

famous gongfu recommendations: kè jǐ fù lǐ wéi rén (克己復禮爲仁) and zhōng yōng (中庸). A roughly literal translation of kè jǐ fù lǐ wéi rén would be, “overcome oneself, recover li, practice ren,” which when read moralistically seems to suggest that one should discipline oneself by adhering to the so-called rules of propriety (li) to pursue a morally superior and ascetic way of life (ren). However, the “self” referred to here is not the familiar ego-self—which did not exist in classical Confucian thought—but an “inchoate, incipient, radically embedded ‘self’”.⁴⁴ Therefore, given the interpretations of li and ren discussed thus far, this recommendation may be understood as describing gongfu as a matter of imaginatively overcoming the particular, narrowly mediated experience of the “self” in order to be sensitive to (恕) and immerse oneself in (忠) the common, immediate situation in which the “self” is embedded. Zhōng yōng refers to the centering or grounding of ourselves in this immediate field of interactivity. As we so expand our sensitivity and responsiveness to experience a greater depth and breadth of the situations we inhabit, our guiding ideal becomes one of integrity (誠) in that remaining “centered” or “focused” among those diverse dynamics requires being able to *integrate* them as an aesthetically unified whole. According to Ni,⁴⁵ the function of this integrity is the consummation (成) of oneself as well as the others involved—human or otherwise. It is, in other words, the practice of ren; or as Confucius described it, standing oneself up while helping others to stand also”.⁴⁶

We can see in Rogers’ consistent emphasis on wonder and imagination a strikingly similar perception of their function in learning, life, and society. This is apparent in the context of MRN’s focus on social and emotional development, but also in Rogers’ views more generally. In an address presented to the 91st Congress of the United States in 1969, Rogers argued not only that “creative work is absolutely essential to the healthy growth and development of the human personality,” but also

44 Confucius, *The analects of Confucius*, 250.

45 “Reading Zhongyong as a gongfu instruction,” 197.

46 論語, 6:30.

that this “is the mode by which new solutions for every field evolve.”⁴⁷ In this address, Rogers describes the relationship between creativity and individual and collective growth in terms analogous to li and ren. That is, in the absence of wonder and imagination—or, aesthetic integrity in one’s experience—the potential of an individual and her community cannot be realized or even recognized. Rogers⁴⁸ identifies this tragic neglect of the individual’s imagination and her capacity to wonder in favor of assimilation as a primary cause of social degeneration at the time. “The youth who are in revolt today,” he explains, have been taught “that the creative work of growing from within and appreciating each unique endowment was not the way to succeed.”

For Rogers, respecting and nurturing wonder means that the aims of education must remain internal to the learning of individuals, but it also entails that learning must be grounded in the open-ended development of caring relationships with others and one’s world more generally. “Overcoming oneself” (克己) or being “de-centered” and entering into an indeterminate “in-between” space with others not only amounts to a kind of imaginative play or practice of wonder in itself, but it is also an opportunity to appreciate the prosocial dimension of these creative capacities. Conversely, limiting wonder and imagination in favor of formalization or the prescription of remote ends minimizes, diminishes, or at worst dehumanizes a person. It prevents a child from appreciating her self-worth, because it leads her to believe that her worth is conditional. Not only does this rob her of the opportunity to understand herself, but in so doing it prevents her exploring and benefiting from her “unique endowment.”⁴⁹ As Rogers describes in the quote above, society also suffers a loss from so neglecting the creative potential of individuals. If a child is dissuaded from wondering about who he is and how he is in this world, he will struggle to cultivate his virtuosity in continually re-creating himself and his world. If rather than engage

⁴⁷ Rogers, “Opportunity for Creative Work Needed in Our Country’s Educational System,” 21307.

⁴⁸ Rogers, 21307.

⁴⁹ Rogers, 21307.

children in creative relationships we prescribe arbitrary (from their point of view) conditions, criteria, norms, etc. remote to their actual curiosities and interests, then we will end up with technicians performing specific tasks rather than artists creating and performing their own work.

In his address,⁵⁰ Rogers suggests that attenuating these issues in education would involve learning from the gongfu of “creative adults of all kinds,” by which he mean artists, craftspeople, or “anyone who uses his craft as a creative mode of expression and finds deep satisfaction in it.” Rogers desired for education to give children “as many contacts as possible with these creative adults.” The intentionally predictable structure of the program always includes a segment in which Rogers visits someone on location to learn about them and their craft or trade, or a segment of interesting neighbors visiting his home. During these segments, Rogers models the behavior of a curious learner and caring neighbor by wondering out loud, asking questions, complimenting the guests and expressing sincere respect and gratitude for them as people. He frames every experience as an opportunity to learn and grow to inspire viewers to open their minds (and hearts) and wonder about their worlds.

The neighborhood of MRN is itself a demonstration of how we learn and grow in a loving community, and while its message and tone are overwhelmingly positive, the show does in fact address many serious topics and social issues—from racism and prejudice to war and poverty.⁵¹ But rather than prescribing solutions or telling viewers what to think about these things, he invites them to wonder for themselves. He does this in the context of his make-believe community in which everyone cares for and is cared-for by everyone else; a community where everyone practices *ren*. His fictional neighborhood demonstrates what the world might feel like when we help ourselves and each other to be more receptive and responsive to it. By engaging his audience

⁵⁰ 21308.

⁵¹ Long, *Peaceful Neighbor* .

directly—by inviting them into the neighborhood—he encourages them to see for themselves and wonder what might be possible in their own world. In this way, he challenges his audience to develop their own gongfu rather than simply evangelizing his own, for as Rogers himself says—or sings, rather—“did you know when you wonder you’re learning?”

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have attempted to synthesize an account of Fred Rogers’ philosophy of education as a kind of gongfu. Rogers’ view is distinctly gongfu-like in its appreciation of learning as a process of cultivating virtuosity in the arts of life. The preceding section demonstrates this through a discussion of his views in the context of the Confucian concepts of ren and li specifically.

The ren of Rogers’ gongfu is perhaps what he and his program are best known for; namely, the unconditional appreciation of the worth of every human being. This self-care and understanding is not only the foundation for appreciating and realizing one’s potential, but being that we are our relationships—that we exist through the interactive situations we inhabit—it necessarily involves understanding and caring for others. To really practice this ren, to actually feel and not just know that you are capable of loving and are worthy of being loved unconditionally is to embody a sincere love for life and to immerse oneself in it wholeheartedly. The special significance of this in the context of gongfu is that, developing or practicing virtuosity in the arts of life entails just such a focused immersion in one’s immediate experience, because virtuosity itself necessarily involves a sensitivity and responsiveness to the immediate, real conditions relevant to the activity in question.

The primacy of ren in Rogers’ gongfu entails that the ends and means of learning are internal to the process itself. Li refers to the creative play

that internalizes and selectively determines an activity's ends and means, thereby appropriating its meaning through one's direct experience of the actual and potential conditions of concrete life situations. Specifically, it involves an openness to as much of the situation as possible in order to integrate as much of it into an expression of its perceived meaning. In Rogers' gongfu, this establishment of aesthetic integrity in one's experience, or *li*, is observed in his elevation of wonder, imagination, and creativity as necessary for individual and collective growth generally. All learning and growth is prospective in that it involves going beyond ourselves or being "de-centered" into an unknown space which we make sense of by means of imagination. When imagination, wonder, and creative expression are suppressed, our ability and motivation to understand and appreciate ourselves and others becomes inhibited, ultimately dissuading us from considering how conditions are and how they could be—thereby precluding the development and practice of our own gongfu.

Rogers' gongfu is noteworthy for its uncompromising effort to enable as many people as possible to practice their own gongfu. Rogers remained true to his gongfu in that his priority and focus was always to empower children by inspiring them to wonder for themselves about what they might be capable of. That is, rather than telling viewers what to think or how to be, he invited them to see for themselves that we are all capable and deserving of unconditional love, and that this love is itself a creative power. The actual impact Rogers had on his millions of viewers is difficult to assess, but the significance of his modest contribution to the informal education of those millions of children (and adults) is hard to deny. This is especially true when we consider the fact that MRN's production coincided with the growing influence of neoliberalism in education. The message of MRN stood in stark contrast with the free-market agenda of commercialism (among other things) which implies that "you need something other than yourself to get along."⁵² In this context, Rogers' gongfu offers itself as way to combat

⁵² Rogers, "Communicating with Children Through Television," 457.

the inhumane and even dehumanizing forces of a world preoccupied with products rather than people. To invoke the popular meaning of gongfu as a martial art, Rogers' gongfu remains relevant as a viable means of self-defense in an increasingly precarious and unpredictable world. It recommends itself as a peaceful alternative—or intervention—that provides us with the opportunity to reorient our world toward more peaceful ends using peaceful, loving means. In the 21st century, what skills will remain valuable to the future selves of children today? The *competencies* in demand by Fortune 500 companies, or gongfu for loving the world into a habitable neighborhood?

REFERENCES

- Ames, Roger T. “‘Bodyheartminding’ (Xin 心): Reconceiving the Inner Self and the Outer World in the Language of Holographic Focus and Field.” *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 10, no. 2 (2015): 167–80.
- . “Collaterality in Early Chinese Cosmology: An Argument for Confucian Harmony (He 和) as Creatio in Situ.” *Early China* 37 (December 2014): 445–70. <https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2014.2>.
- . *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010.
- Bishop, Ronald. “The World's Nicest Grown-up: A Fantasy Theme Analysis of News Media Coverage of Fred Rogers.” *Journal of Communication* 53, no. 1 (March 2003): 16–31. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2003.tb03002.x>.
- Borsuk, Alan. “Everybody's Neighbor.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 2001.
- Cikovic, Matt. “Rethinking the Collective Memory: Mister Rogers, Senator Pastore, and Public Broadcasting.” *American Journalism* 39 (2022): 248–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08821127.2022.2098204>.

- Confucius. *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*. Translated by Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont. 1st trade pbk. ed. Classics of ancient China. New York: Ballantine Books, 1999.
- Klarén, Alexandra Castro. “‘Invisible to the Eye’: Rhetorics of Ethical Emotionality in “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood”.” PhD thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 2016.
- . *On Becoming Neighbors: The Communication Ethics of Fred Rogers*. Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019.
- . “‘Won’t You Be My Neighbor?’: Intergenerational Dialogics in Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood Viewer Mail.” *Communication Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2017): 60–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2016.1176944>.
- Li, Chenyang. “Interpreting Confucius: The Aesthetic Turn and Its Challenges.” *Dao* 17, no. 2 (June 2018): 247–55. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-018-9604-z>.
- Long, Michael G. *Peaceful Neighbor : Discovering the Countercultural Mister Rogers*. First edition. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press Louisville, Kentucky, 2015.
- Meyer, David Samuel. “The Confucian Concept of Learning and the Aesthetics of Human Experience: An Eco-Ontological Interpretation.” *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 31, no. 1 (2024): 43–57. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1112310ar>.
- Ni, Peimin. *Confucius: The Man and the Way of Gongfu*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.
- . “Life as Aesthetic Creativity and Appreciation: The Confucian Aim of Learning.” In *Human Beings or Human Becomings? A Conversation with Confucianism on the Concept of Person*, edited by Peter D. Herschok and Roger T. Ames, 169–86. SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021.

- . “Philosophy of Gongfu Revealed Through Confucius: Responses to Chenyang Li and Huaiyu Wang’s Comments on My Book Confucius: The Man and the Way of Gongfu.” *Dao-a Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (June 2018): 267–76. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-018-9606-x>.
- . “Reading Zhongyong as a Gongfu Instruction: Comments on Focusing the Familiar.” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (June 2004): 189–203. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org.access.yonsei.ac.kr:8080/10.1007/BF02856662>.
- . “Rectify the Heart-Mind for the Art of Living: A Gongfu Perspective on the Confucian Approach to Desire.” *Philosophy East and West* 64, no. 2 (2014): 340–59. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2014.0030>.
- . “Toward a Gongfu Reconstruction of Confucianism — Responses to Comments by Huang Yong, Fan Ruiping, and Wang Qingjie.” *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 13, no. 2 (2018): 240–53.
- Perry, Stephen D, and Amanda L Roesch. “He’s in a New Neighborhood Now: Religious Fantasy Themes about Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.” *Journal of Media and Religion* 3, no. 4 (2004): 199–218. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15328415jmr0304_2.
- Rogers, Fred. “Communicating with Children Through Television.” *Clinical Pediatrics* 10, no. 8 (August 1971): 456–58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000992287101000813>.
- . *Many Ways to Say I Love You: Wisdom for Parents and Children from Mister Rogers*. Hachette Books, 2006.
- . “Mister Rogers on Kids and Technology.” *The Education Digest* 62, no. 8 (1997): 8.
- . “Opportunity for Creative Work Needed in Our Country’s Educational System.” U.S. Congress, July 1969.
- Rothbart, Davy. “A Friend in the Neighborhood.” *The New York Times*, February 2003.

Tuttle, Shea. *Exactly as You Are: The Life and Faith of Mister Rogers*.
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019.

Valentine, Riley Clare. “The Feelings We Feel: Care and Community in
Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.” *Open Philosophy* 5 (2021): 75–89.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2020-0153>.

朱熹. *朱子大全 (中)*. Vol. 2. 서울: 保景文化社, 1984.

論語, n.d.



This preprint and its source are dedicated to the [public domain \(CC0 1.0 Universal\)](#).

Typeset in Cooper Hewitt and Source Han Sans using [typst](#) and [pandoc](#).

VERSION N° [f8a191b](#) || last modified on [2025-07-22](#)

source: <https://codeberg.org/dsm/blog-posts/commits/branch/main/content/gongfu-of-fred-rogers.md>