

The Interpretation of the Modern Meaning of the Doctrine of the Mean

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Abstract: It has been more than a hundred years since western ideologies was introduced into China. From the Opium War to modern times, China has become a racetrack for all Western ideologies. The introduction of western thoughts also caused an impact on Chinese civilization. Since the reform and opening up, there has been another prevailing wave of Western ideologies. Various schools of thought have only led the way between decades. However, at present, there is a trend of thought to revive the traditional Chinese civilization. Some people think that the west is in decline, while China is rising, and the prosperity of Chinese ideologies is also an inevitable trend. Some people feel that Chinese civilization itself is not as bad as what the intellectuals said during the May Fourth Movement. Therefore, how Chinese civilization can be introduced into modern society not only requires people to sort out the historical context of traditional ideas, but also to think about the depths of human nature. This article intends to clarify the historical background of The Doctrine of the Mean in different eras from two perspectives: the book itself written by Zisi and Confucians' emphasis on the book in Song Dynasty. On this basis, we can explain the internal rationale of The Doctrine of the Mean, highlight the dimension of ritual and music civilization and the essence of "sincerity" in it, so as to explain the value and significance of The Doctrine of the Mean in the modern today.

1. Introduction

On the one hand, Zisi was in an era when the rules and regulations of ritual and music cultural were greatly destroyed, orthodox thoughts were declining, and the people did not follow the thoughts. Zisi saw this situation and wanted to set things right. In *The Doctrine of the Mean*, Chung-ni said: "The superior man embodies the course of the Mean; the mean man acts contrary to the course of the Mean." In Wang Fu-zhi's opinion, "The mean man is the one like the four demons in the Emperor Yao time and Shen Bu-hai, Shang Yang, the First Emperor of Qin." The mean man has no commentary or derogatory meanings at the secular level, but it is not the case if it is at the political level. That is to say, the mean man represents people like legalists and politicians with subject-object dichotomy thought who achieve their goals through setting traps and cunning plans. Zisi was in the chaos of the Warring States. He had been already aware of the imminent uneasy life and political ecology, and hoped to maintain a flourishing social state, so as to avoid a deadly rigid situation (such as the upcoming Qin Dynasty). He expected the society was with mobility, rather than a mess.

On the other hand, from the perspective of the history of thought, "Zisi was worried about the loss of such doctrines passed down from his grandfather... [1]" (Zhu Xi). In *Monograph on Literature of History of Han Dynasty*, it is recorded that "the exquisite remarks of Confucius were lost after his death, and the main ideas of his 72 disciples was also lost after their death". At the time of Zisi, Confucian orthodox thought was facing the crisis of losing its main ideas in the process of transmission. In a word, that Zisi wrote *The Doctrine of the Mean* is him to "be a follower of past predecessors and a trail blazer for future generations". "The reason why Zisi wrote *The Doctrine of the Mean* is to convey Confucians' thoughts and narrate the aspirations of the saints. [2]"

The reason why Confucians in Song Dynasty values the golden mean, especially Zhu Xi summarized the golden mean from the "Book of Rites" and compiled it as one of the Four Books, is

that in Song Confucianism, when Sui and Tang Dynasties were founded, the family management was terrible, the relatives were not close, and the human relations were bad. Although the society was flourishing for a while, they eventually stepped into chaos. The killings were frequent and the people were having miserable lives. Confucians in Song Dynasty found the root cause, believing that human nature was corrupted by Buddhism and Taoism, and the system of ritual and music civilization disappeared. Therefore, they were determined to promote the study of nature to save human mind and restore social structure. For example, Feng Dao served thirteen emperors in the Five Dynasties throughout his life. He was respected as Changlelao. Song Confucians criticized him.

What's more, Buddhism had already been flourishing at that time and occupied the thoughts of scholar-officials. For example, Zhu Xi had believed in Buddhism and was very interested in its doctrine. He once said that "although they are Buddhism and Taoism, I am still interested in understanding their tenets." After he passed the chin-shih exam, he claimed that he passed the exam with the answer taught by a monk. Zhu Xi once said that the Confucian classic *The Doctrine of the Mean* was essentially a response to Buddhism and Taoism. However, when he was 24 years old, he became a student of Li Tong. "I read books of Confucianism day after day, I feel that the words are interesting and afford for thought. When I look back at the words of Buddhism and Taoism, they are full of loopholes. [3]" From the before and after changes of Zhu Xi's thought, it can be seen that Zhu Xi gradually returned to Confucianism in thought. Its core lies in the fact that *The Doctrine of the Mean* talks about accomplishing oneself and then benefiting all things. Buddhism does not talk about "things" but advocates making "things" incapable or emptied, while the golden mean values and pursues the creation and achievement of "things". The 22nd chapter of *The Doctrine of the Mean* contains: "It is only he who is possessed of the most complete sincerity that can exist under heaven, who can give its full development to his nature. Able to give its full development to his own nature, he can do the same to the nature of other men. Able to give its full development to the nature of other men, he can give their full development to the natures and things. Able to give their full development to the natures of creatures and things, he can assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth. Able to assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth, he may with Heaven and Earth form a ternion. " Chapter 25: "The completing himself shows his perfect virtue. The completing other men and things shows his knowledge. But these are virtues belonging to the nature, and this is the way by which a union is effected of the external and internal. Therefore, whenever he-the entirely sincere man-employs them, -that is, these virtues, their action will be right."

2. Two Main Ideas of the Golden Mean: the Essence of "Rites and Music" and "Sincerity"

2.1 Rites and Music and "External Kingliness" Theory

"Zhong" is the ultimate kindness in the back and forth of differences. "Yong" is the conventional practice, respecting "plainness", "truth", "original nature, plain living world" ("Zhong Yong" means the golden mean). All of these are directly accessible to the human heart, so "Chang"(rules of the world) is often used. It is wrong to see the laws of the world as exactly as you think. We are facing the crisis of modernity. The so-called modernity is a kind of "presentness" from the perspective of time. We only see things in the present. Politics, technology and other aspects are using a kind of present consciousness to dominate the past and the future. Human beings are becoming more and more shortsighted. The transformation of modernity is more fundamentally a transformation of the way of feeling and thinking. However, all these transformations are deeply in crisis today. The extreme dualization of subject-object has caused some disadvantages, such as individualism, the broken state of feeling, and the nihilism of meaning. Facing all kinds of problems, it is necessary to rebuild the foundation of ritual and music culture. The inner meaning of "The Doctrine of the Mean" is the manifestation of ritual and music.

"Rites" is used to distinguish between class and social status. There are differences between superior and inferior; "music" is to break down class differences. People pursue same values, goals

in same ways. Especially in a democratic society, should the society distinguish between class and social status, and by what standard? Today's society seems to be equal, but the standard of difference lies in the hands of rich people and scientists. In *The Doctrine of the Mean*, Zisi proposed “respecting virtue”, which is to distinguish differences by virtue, rather than a single standard of production and knowledge. This established the basic characteristics of the history of Chinese civilization which is paying great attention to virtue and ethics. “Therefore, people with great virtue are committed to a great task.” “The main rule of ancient rites is the rule of the golden mean. The rules of actions in ancient ceremonies and the daily etiquette of dealing with people played a profound and subtle role.” (sayings by Wang Fu-zhi)

The problem facing here is what is the standard of unification and what to use for social integration. Modern society is in a kind of atomized individualism. The ritual and music civilization in *The Doctrine of the Mean* is to pursue an artistic state of existence, a sense of sublime, a sense of arts, and an existence state full of sacredness. It confronts the banality of society that Tocqueville and Nietzsche talk about. “Individuals are completely addicted to the small universe, and thus lose their insight into the big universe, which is society.” “The enthusiasm for welfare and comfortable material life, the relationship of personal interests and indifference to public welfare, and the inevitably trend towards mediocrity.” [4]

Zisi talked about “hope politics” in the environment where the rituals of the Warring States period collapsed, and he saw political hope in the cramped, miserable, consolidated, and lifeless social life. The gods in the golden mean are not commanders and givers in Western religions, such as the personality gods. The golden mean pursues sacred and artistic survival through rituals and music. The sacred is “sacrificing to ancestors is as if ancestors are really there, sacrificing to gods is as if gods are really there.” From “the virtue of ghosts and gods” to Chapter 20, “Let a man proceed in this way, and, though dull, he will surely become intelligent; though weak, he will surely become strong.”, Zisi expressed the merits of the ancestors and compared them with the heavens. He was expecting noble and virtuous people who can always be examples of others to tell the merits of Confucianism after Emperor Shun, Emperor Wen of Zhou Dynasty, Emperor Wu of Zhou Dynasty and the Duke of Zhou Dynasty. These words demonstrate the consistent inheritance, and emphasize law of the relationship between heaven and man from a historical perspective. Although Confucius was not in power during his lifetime, he could not work for the three kings and make laws for ritual and music, he expounded the highest level of moral cultivation in his doctrine and described the rules of governing the country. Thus, people have clean hearts, dress modestly, inherit the manners that represent their families, and worship him. All living beings who are full of vitality do not disrespect and do not get close to Confucius. He is a saint. Unknowingly, their virtues could match the saints, just like Emperor Yao, Emperor Shun, Emperor Wen of Zhou Dynasty and Emperor Wu of Zhou Dynasty. All these represent the solemn temperament of Chinese civilization. Society nowadays is in an ever-moving secular life, and there are few solemn experiences anymore. The orientation of political life is to lead the people toward elegance, demeanor, cultivation and wisdom, not to follow or even help promote the deteriorating public morals. Under the premise of understanding the mental illness of the current era, the connotation of the sacred in the golden mean is more and more profound. It can be seen from it that there is no lack of dignity and sacred temperament in the ideological system of Chinese civilization. To experience the serious literature of *The Doctrine of the Mean* in this context is really a baptism and a kind of adjustment. The influence of *The Doctrine of the Mean* on the times is very beneficial.

2.2 The Essence of “Sincerity” and the “Internal Sanctity” Theory

“Sincerity” was interpreted as “True and innocent, and the essence of nature” by Zhu Xi in Song Dynasty. A person who wants to have sincerity was interpreted as “cannot achieve complete true and innocent and possess the most entire sincerity, but will do everything to achieve this goal.” Zhu Xi's interpretation has shaped people's knowledge and understanding of “sincerity” for a long time. Later generations often paid attention to the difference between philosophy of heaven and philosophy of humanity, and made the ideal pursuit of the unity of nature and man. And Wang

Fu-zhi said that "'sincerity' is the pivot of benevolence, justice, etiquette, 'sincerity' is the pivot of wisdom, benevolence and courage. sincerity is the law of nature, and to have sincerity is the law of humanity. Those who want to have the most entire morality, on their way to understand the law of nature, need to realize the law of humanity through politics. [5]" Therefore, Zhu Xi distinguished between the heaven and the man, emphasized the abandonment of selfish desires. He was blinded by the happiness of the supramundane world without knowing the actual suspicion of the human world. He failed to discover the true essence of humanity. The disadvantage of Zhu Xi is that it is easy for everyone to lose empathy, which makes it hard to find direction. Wang Fu-zhi focuses on the development of human nature and promotes the status of self-esteem and self-respect. First, let the self-cultivation people have a sense of self-respect, know where to go, discover the "three virtues of wisdom, benevolence, and courage" that should be cultivated. He makes people use sincerity as the pivot, use morality to promote their political opinions, which echoes "Those who want to have the most entire morality need to realize the law of humanity through politics."

"When we have intelligence resulting from sincerity, this condition is to be ascribed to nature; when we have sincerity resulting from intelligence, this condition is to be ascribed to instruction. But given the sincerity, and there shall be the intelligence; given the intelligence, and there shall be the sincerity." However, Wang Fu-zhi believes that "the first two sentences are based on reasoning, and the next two sentences are based on things. Based on reasoning, nature and man are divided. Inbeing comes from heaven and is taught by humans; based on things, nature and man are unified. realizing the law of nature lies in man, and realizing the law of man lies in heaven. [6]" Therefore, in author's opinion, sincerity is a latent nature, which has been obscured and alienated by bad lifestyles and social systems in the process of growing up. Self-esteem and self-respect are consciously "sincerity". In the unification of heaven and man, the harmony of nature between man and nature, man and oneself is expected to be achieved. When human nature and nature are correspondingly matched, human nature is also united with nature's perfect goodness, sincerity, benevolence, and truth. People will return to themselves, and the light from heaven that exists in themselves will be on.

By "the characteristic of the most entire sincerity", humans can transcend their own finiteness to a certain extent, and may with Heaven and Earth form a tension. Humans can "transcend" and reach the transcendence of "foresight". The golden mean believes that with the characteristic of the most entire sincerity, one can with Heaven and Earth form a tension, and feel the transcendence inherent in Heaven and Earth and in the human heart. With the characteristic of the most entire sincerity, one can nurture all things and others, also nurture oneself, thereby realize the transformation of their own life. Through hard work, everyone can become a gentleman, a wise man, or even a saint with a hundred times, a thousand times hard work. Therefore, "people with sincerity make themselves." With the characteristic of the most entire sincerity, people can know beforehand, that is, foresee and fore-present in phenomenology.

3. The Cultural Significance of the Spirit of the Golden Mean

First of all, the time people are facing is like what Max Weber said, "In the modern age we are witnessing the disenchantment of the world with the rise of science and the declining influence of religion." "The disenchantment of the world" is the destiny of the time. Anyone who cannot bear this fate full of heroism can find refuge in the eternal embrace of the church, but those who do so will sacrifice his intellectual honesty. [7]

Secondly, people are in an era where cultural communication and cultural consciousness are fully intertwined. Huntington believes that "power is shifting from the long-dominated West to non-Western civilizations [8]". This is not only an objective narration and future prediction, but also a kind of worry by western elites. To explain oneself with an explanation system derived from one's own culture, that is, "cultural self-awareness". Mr. Fei Xiaotong put forward the idea of "cultural self-awareness". "Cultural self-awareness means that people living in a given culture have 'self-knowledge' of its culture, understand its origin, formation process, characteristics and development trends. Self-knowledge is to strengthen the ability to autonomy in cultural

transformation and obtain an autonomous position in deciding to adapt to the new environment and cultural choices in the new era. [9]"

Heidegger said in *Only One God Can Save Us <The Spiegel> Interview* in 1966: "I deeply believe that where the modern technological world appears in the world, a transformation can only be prepared from this place. I am convinced that this transformation cannot happen through the acceptance of Zen Buddhism or other Eastern world experience. The transformation of thinking requires the help of European traditions and innovations. Thoughts can only be changed by thinking with the same origin and mission. [10]" Heidegger connects with eastern thought here, but he is convinced that only with the help of local intellectual resources can changes occur. Since the end of Qing Dynasty, China has faced an ideological turning point of a major change unseen in three thousand years. It has connected ancient Greece philosophy, Christianity, and Marxism in its turn toward the west, which is what Mao Zedong said "seeking truth from the west". However, Chinese people should also be vigilant about the arrival of ancient Greece philosophy, Christianity, and Marxism, because the transformation of thought can only be done through the thought sharing the same origin. Therefore, contemporary ideas and culture need to connect to the foundation of Chinese civilization, that is, the civilization before the pre-Qin period. Among hundred schools of thought that emerged in the era of endless ideological and academic development in the pre-Qin period, it is only Confucianism that can not only achieve the world-country-family political system of Zhou Dynasty, but also maintain the uninterrupted inheritance of orthodoxy in the post-Qin history. Among the hundred schools of thought, Taoism tends to hide in the world, Legalists tend to be mean and unkind, Mohism is too ideal and difficult to practice. Most of the elites of the past dynasties in China were believers of Confucian culture. They paid attention to virtue and cared about the national economy and the people's livelihood. They took the world as their own duty. They didn't care about personal gains and losses, but were tolerant and loving others.

In the predicament of modernity and the evil consequences of modernity, the golden mean will use its own impartial and non-extreme mode of thinking, a neutral and peaceful value composition, to resist indulgence of emotional desires and injustice brought about by the thought of rationality only. It will insist on a dialectical view of society and life, analyze the weakness of human nature, make mankind reconsider the reasonable factors in eastern thought and avoid falling into the erroneous zone of modernity. The rationality of the era of "The Doctrine of the Mean" is greater than the limitations of history. The wonderful and lofty ideas in the book still dominate. Its oriental wisdom, which is different from the west, has shown spiritual charm today and is worthy of interpretation and development.

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