

THE DOCTRINE OF THE MEAN: CONFUCIAN SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

Zhang Guangxing

The Doctrine of the Mean, as an important cultural heritage, has not only influenced the Chinese people but also has lasting effects on many nations of Asia. Aristotle* the well-known philosopher of ancient Greece advocated it, and divided human's intense emotion and behavior into three conditions: excessive, inadequate and moderate. He maintained that every one in human society ought to observe the code of the Golden Mean. As he saw it, evil conduct was characterized by being excessive or inadequate. Virtue on the other hand incorporated the moderate behavior of the Golden Mean. It has also become an important ethical code and aesthetic principle in many countries of Asia such as Japan, India, South and North Korea. This philosophy, however, has its long history and this theory has been developed for perfection from time to time in China that displays many unique features, which are not found in other countries of the world. This paper is designed to give some brief introduction of the Confucian idea of Mean with three perspectives such as its development, major contents and its significance in real life.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE DOCTRINE

Confucius, though the creator of this philosophy developed the idea on inspiration from his Chinese predecessors. The ideas of the Doctrine of the Mean contain, for example, the contradictory categories produced by Laou-tsze* such as fortune and misfortune, beauty and ugliness, good and evil, positive and negative, etc. The contribution of Confucius* lies' in the fact that he managed to find out an efficient way to reconcile these contradictions.¹

* Aristotle (384-322B.C), a famous philosopher and scientist in ancient Greece, the student of Plato and the teachers of Alexander the Great.

+ Laou-tsze, or Lao Dan, (the years of his birth and death are not known), was a thinker and founder of Taoist School of thought.

In the Analects -Yong Ye, he described that the Golden Mean, as an ethical code, has been the most noble ideal. Zi Si* Confucius' grandson, in the book-The Golden Mean, praised the ancient Emperor Shun for his moderate conduct in dealing with his subjects. It is quite evident that this philosophy in this context manifests dual meaning, one of which represents as measurement of moral character and the other as the law of conduct. On 'one hand, Confucius hoped that men would lay stress on the formation of the ideal of the golden mean and not go to extremes either in their actions towards individuals or things. This would help to maintain the moral order of society. He once pointed out in the book of the Analects Tai Bo that we can hate bitterly those who are inhumane, unjust and un-virtuous, but we must not be too excessive, otherwise the conflicts in society will be intensified, and will result in chaos. He, therefore, required a person to maintain a state of mind that could be described as medium, balanced and harmonious. On the other hand, he hoped that individuals could keep themselves within the bounds of the golden mean, which is to say that superiors should bestow favour to inferiors instead of exerting tyranny; that the inferiors should be absolutely obedient to the superiors instead of struggling against the superiors and staging armed rebellion. Among people there should be harmony instead of hostility toward one another. Furthermore, Confucius perused the golden mean in the domain of the appreciation of art and advocated the celebrated aesthetic principle of "the mean and beauty."²

In brief the Golden Mean had become an important foundation of the Confucianist philosophy and greatly affected later generations since it was propounded by Confucius. All the later Confucian scholars strived to elucidate this philosophy from various angles and aspects. Some stressed it as ethics and some advocated for aesthetic aspect, but all of them were based on the proposition of Confucius.

* Confucius (named Kong Qiu 551-479B.C.), the great thinker, statesman, educator and the founder of the Confucian school of thought.

+ Zi Si (named Kong Ji, 483-402B.C.), a philosopher in the early Warring Status Period. The Golden Mean compiled by him that perfected and deepened Confucian theory on the Doctrine of the Mean.

During the early Qin Dynasty, Mencius*, Hsun-Tsze⁺ and so-forth, all gave interpretation of the idea of the golden mean based on Confucius' philosophy. Among them the most representative one was Zi Si (his grandson), who was given the honorable title of "Accounting Sage" by later generations. Faithfully inheriting the mantle of the ancestors and taking "Clear Virtue of the Saint Forefather" as his own task, he perfected and deepened the beliefs of Confucius by writing the book-Golden Mean. He advanced in his book the statement that moderation in normal human feelings is fundamental to keep the human society in good working order; and harmony should be the code throughout the world. When moderation and harmony are realized, society can enjoy a good order for which everything in the world thrives. The Golden Mean may not only be discussed from the moral point of view but also be seen as code of conduct. It should be promoted worldwide with philosophical outlook so that it may become an important code of life for the people to follow.

In the Han Dynasty, the Confucian school of thought reached a period of great prosperity under Dong Zhong-shu⁺⁺. He suggested for the dismissal of hundreds of thoughts and respect for only the Confucian school. As a result the Confucian school strengthened its status in the political sphere of that time. Although he did not clearly elucidate the Golden Mean, his thesis of the three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues as specified in the feudal ethical code, and his principle of pacifying others with benevolence and correcting oneself with righteousness, recognized by the scholars to be the heritage and extension of Confucian thought.³

* Mencius (named Meng Ke, with his family name "Meng" and given name "Ke", about 372-389 B.C.), a thinker, statesman, educator, Zi Si's disciple and faithful successor of Confucian School of Thought.

+ Hsun-Tsze (named Xun Kuang, 313-238 B.C.), a thinker and educator in the Warring State period, critically summarized academic thought of the predecessors and developed ancient materialism.

++ Dong Zhong-shu (179-104 B.C.) was the well-known philosopher, master of Li Shu and representative figure of the Confucian School of Thought in the Han Dynasty.

THE MAIN CONTENT OF THE DOCTRINE

As time goes on the idea of the Doctrine of the Mean is transforming into an independent system of thought. The intensive and wide spread work on this idea, by various rulers and scholars in ancient and modern China, has put in immense influence on the culture and living condition of the Chinese people. In order to explore this philosophical belief of the Doctrine of Mean, its important points are discussed below to understand its basic concept in broader sense:

First of all, the Doctrine of the Mean manifests the moral criterion, which is closely linked to social politics. Confucius lived at the end of the Spring and Autumn period (551-BC-479-BC). It was the period when the slave system of China was tending toward decline and the feudal system was brewing in the embryonic stage. Consequently, the society was in a state of chaos. So Confucius felt extremely anxious about the situation, in which rites were collapsing, music was becoming spoiled and public morality was not what it used to be. In the Kingdom of Lu, his hometown, for instance, the head of the Ji family had eight rows of dancers and singers each performing in his courtyard. According to the rituals of the Zhou dynasty, it was only the son of heaven i.e. the king who could do this at ceremonies. Princes had six rows, whereas senior officials could have only four. The head of the Ji family, a senior official, had eight rows, which was a serious affront to the hierarchy of feudal society. Therefore, Confucius raised the clarion call, "deny self and return to propriety". The propriety, here referring to that of the Zhou Dynasty, was a set of social system and the human relationship and principle of government established in the Western Zhou Dynasty (911-771-BC). It seemed to Confucius that nothing could be more perfect than the slave society of the Western Zhou Dynasty. So, in his opinion people should strictly restrain themselves in order to restore the social situation to that of the Western Zhou Dynasty, and the Golden Mean was the most efficient way to restrain oneself.⁴

The Golden Mean was the expression of the code of life. Initially that Confucius put forward it not only to display

his goodwill for denying self and returning to propriety, but also reflected his political stand that the benevolent would love others. It was what he wrote in the Analects-As One Learns, that "use of rites, harmony above all" In other words, people's ideas and behavior should be controlled in accordance with the rites of the Zhou Dynasty so that all individuals, may commune together forever. For thousands of years, the idea of harmony above all, deeply settling in the hearts of Chinese people, has become an important law of life.⁵

The Doctrine of the Mean is also an important principle of aesthetics. The Confucian school of thought paid close attention to feudal ethics, so as to standardize people's ideology, words and deeds. However, absolute powers regarding ruling and controlling will possibly cause ordinary people to divide loyalty for rulers, and what is more, cause an un-filial state of mind and make matters worse. Confucius, knowing this very well, proposed to establish the corresponding mechanism of social education. That is to adjust people's mental state by aesthetic education in poetry and music so as to intensify moral concepts.⁶

SIGNIFICANCE IN REAL LIFE

Although the time in which Confucius lived was more than 2000 years ago, the Doctrine of the Mean put forward by him, instead of being forgotten or abandoned, has settled more and more deeply in people's hearts. Whether as a proposition in philosophy of ethics or behavior, it is brimming with vigor, which is a more important reason for its close relation in real life.

Analyzing from the relations of human beings the Doctrine of the Mean with the restraining effect of ethics may impel people continuously to strengthen self-cultivation so as to realize self-surpassing. In everyone's life, there are two most distressing habits, one is to forget oneself in the moment of success; the other is to be crestfallen in the moment of failure. While the Doctrine of the Mean is just the effective prescription for the two strains. It may always remind you not be excited for the moment's success or failure. It will warn you to always bear in mind the motto: not dizzy with success, nor discouraged by

failure and always remain in a calm and natural state of mind. If you keep on conducting this way, the purification of your mood will be gained, your psychological defeat will be gradually remedied and mental misunderstanding will be removed, thereby overcoming, surpassing and perfecting yourself.⁷

Looking from the relationship among different individuals, the Doctrine of the Mean, with a nice adjusting effect, keeps you in a good interpersonal circumstances. Chinese people at present all appreciate two words i.e. tolerance and harmony, which are really filled with beautiful artistic conception. Among all social connections, the most complicated, and difficult to handle is relations among people. There are many factors hindering interpersonal relations, for instance, jealousy, hatred, harshness, considering oneself as a superior being, and so forth. They are all incompatible with this doctrine. If every member of the society could change jealousy into admiration, hatred into sympathy, harshness into leniency, and the attitude of thinking of oneself as a superior being into modesty and amiability, the world would save a lot of trouble. Furthermore, if everyone could manage to be considerate, or even more, to sacrifice his personal interest for others, but not to hurt others over petty profits, the world will shine brightly.⁸

Also assessing from the relations between human and nature, the Doctrine of the Mean has the considerable effect on regulation, control and adoption of the society. In the relation between human and nature, the worst is the terrible desire that is too eager to crave instant success and benefit. The individual, therefore, ought to hold and control itself, and not advance crazily, to disturb the natural code of societal system of peace and harmony for petty benefits.⁹

CONCLUSION

Indeed the Doctrine of the Mean is one of the greatest and most profound philosophies, which has left deep impression on five thousand year long civilization of Chinese nation. It has not only developed the measurement of moral character of the human beings but has also influenced the ethical codes

through poetry and music to establish customs, rituals and laws of the conduct of the people.

It stresses that while taking any action the state of mind of the individual should be well balanced and peaceful. The attitude towards inhumane and unvirtuous persons should be bitter but may not be too excessive, as he feared that with such actions conflicts in the society will be intensified and will result in chaos. The principle of pacifying others with benevolence and correcting oneself with righteousness is still regarded as very valuable heritage and extension of the aesthetic principle of Confucian thought that helped a lot in maintaining the ethical codes of the daily life of the Chinese people.

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