

# On the Cultivation of Confucian Moral Practices\*

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In this paper, Confucian moral practices will be analyzed through three typical cases. First, Cheng Yi's "laying emphasis on earnestness". Cheng Yi said, "Spiritual cultivation requires the application of earnestness, and the advancement of learning lies in the extension of knowledge". Second, Wang Yangming's "extending the intuitive knowledge". This is a summary of his idea after a lifetime practice. The key is the "extending", a process of development and accumulation. Third, Liu Jishan's "being cautious when one is alone". Liu Jishan raised the concept of "sincere intentions" and considered everything is good of no evil, and are issued from and dominated by the mandate of heaven. Therefore, the most fundamental moral practice method of Liu Jishan is to make efforts in the "sincere intentions", that is, to be "being cautious when one is alone".

*Keywords:* Confucianism, moral practice, laying emphasis on earnestness, extending the intuitive knowledge, being cautious when one is alone

## Introduction

Confucian moral practices follow the principle of self-discipline. As Confucius said, the practice of perfect virtue is from a man himself instead of others. In other words, human being's morality is decided by their inner drive rather than external factors. Unlike Christianity that has a transeunt and transcendent entity as the moral standard, Confucian gives less attention to religious spirit, which is one of Confucian characteristics. Their ultimate concern is human being, aiming at absolute perfection through self-cultivation and moral practices. After such moral practices, some cognition on the essence of life and cosmos is brought, exemplifying the transcendent value of Confucian moral practices. In terms of the transcendence of Chinese philosophy, there is a famous saying by Mou Zongsan, the new Confucian philosopher,

The way of heaven being high above connotes transcendence. When the way of heaven pervades the human person, being immanent in this person, it becomes one's nature. At this time, the way of heaven is also immanent. This being the case, we can use an expression that Kant was fond of using and say that the way of heaven on the one hand is transcendent, and on the other hand is imminent (transcendent and immanent are opposites). When the way of heaven is both transcendent and immanent, it can be said to have both religious and moral import: Religion stresses the transcendent meaning while the morality stresses the immanent. (Mou, 1984, pp. 30-31)

Thus, transcendence largely becomes human being's self-transcendence and a kind of display and improvement of subject values (state) (Zheng, 2001). Such views on transcendental value are also reflected in the follower philosophers' thoughts: Mencius: "Human nature flows to the good, just as water's nature flows

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down”; Cheng Yi: “Man and all things form one body”; Zhu Xi: “All things are brought into being by the union”; and Wang Yangming: “Innate knowledge is the spirit of the nature” (Zhang, 2006, p. 48).

Meanwhile, compared with other schools of thought and Western thoughts, the most significant feature of Confucianism is the cultivation of moral. It is the cultivation that makes human person realize transcendence through moral practices with a free will and reach the perfection. Although some Confucian philosophers advocate mysticism, they consider that principle and “Dao” (the Way) are not mysterious but reasonable. Especially in the Song and Ming Dynasties, Confucians of different schools put a strong emphasis on the cultivation during study and analysis. In this paper, the cultivation works of three Confucian philosophers are studied, that are: Cheng Yi, Wang Yangming, and Liu Jishan.

### **Cheng Yi: Laying Emphasis on Earnestness**

Cheng Yi, courtesy name “Zhengshu”, also known as “Mr Yichuan”, born in Luoyang, Henan, was the cofounder, with his elder brother Cheng Hao, of the Neo-Confucianism. They were so called “the Two Ch’eng”.

To cultivate in principle of earnestness firstly appears in *The Analects · Zilu*, saying that “daily living shall be dignified and working shall be earnestness” (Zhu, 1983, p. 147). Here, earnestness means cautious. Mou Zongsan (1984) deemed that the concept of earnestness had appeared before Confucius’s books. This concept is concerned with Chinese people’s awareness of unexpected development, which is manifested by fear before things happen, thus earnestness appears to advocate the altitude of being mindful and apprehensive. As the saying go in the Chapter I of *Commentary on the Doctrine of Mean*, “The superior man does not wait till he sees things, to be cautious, nor till he hears things, to be apprehensive” (Zhu, 1983, p. 17), which also mentions the cautiousness. Till the Song and Ming dynasties, Cheng Hao firstly emphasized the concept of earnestness. He advocated that the cultivation of earnestness can overcome all false and wrong things (H. Cheng & Y. Cheng, 1981, p. 119). Then, Cheng Yi developed it for self-cultivation.

As Cheng Yi said, “Earnestness is the approach to defending evils. To defend evils has its way. They look like two things but also are the one thing. Defending evils proves one’s virtue” (H. Cheng & Y. Cheng, 1981, p. 185). In this saying, Cheng Hao emphasized the importance of defending evils. This is what he said, “Clearness inherently belongs to water, while mud is only externally mixed in, and therefore, can be eliminated from water” (H. Cheng & Y. Cheng, 1981, p. 10). If a person can defend those bad things, this person’s goodness can be manifested naturally. In his opinion, defending evils and goodness is the one thing, implicating his view that human nature is good, and goodness is the nature of all things and exists naturally. Evil is just a veil that we can remove to manifest our goodness.

Cheng Yi concluded his cultivation approach into two sayings: “Spiritual cultivation requires the application of earnestness and the advancement of learning lies in the extension of knowledge” (H. Cheng & Y. Cheng, 1981, p. 188). Self-cultivation is not the meditation with things putting away and intelligence abandoning that Buddhist advocates, but the contemplation by perceiving all things in the world to let the mind settle down. As for the meaning of earnestness, Cheng Yi pointed out that “earnestness means laying emphasis on ‘One’” (H. Cheng & Y. Cheng, 1981, p. 188). To realize laying emphasis on “One” first the meaning of the two words shall be analyzed firstly. Laying emphasis is a single-minded state of concentration during moral practices. Only single-minded concentration is not enough, and a foothold is required. Thus, Cheng Yi further raised that “‘One’ means adapting to all” (H. Cheng & Y. Cheng, 1981, p. 169). Adapting to all is no concrete

objects, and being “One” is to renounce distracting thoughts and stay self-restraint of no indulgence. Just as Cheng Hao said, “The heart shall be in the place where it shall be” (H. Cheng & Y. Cheng, 1981, p. 96). It is to say our inner shall be upright, so that we can use the rightness to square one’s external action and understand the universal law.

In sum, Cheng Yi’s cultivation of laying emphasis on earnestness is rich in connotations and feasibilities. He has developed the theories of earnestness and laid a foundation for the development of the Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming period.

### **Wang Yangming: Extending the Intuitive Knowledge**

Wang Shouren, courtesy name “Bo’an”, was from Shaoxing, Zhejiang. Since he had lived in the Yangming Dong in Kuaiji Mountain, he was known as “Yangming Zi” or “Mr Yangming”, also called “Wang Yangming”.

Wang Yangming’s philosophical idea “extending the intuitive knowledge” is in his later life and a summary of his moral practices. The concept of “intuitive knowledge” firstly appeared in *Mencius*, saying that “The ability possessed by men without having been acquired by learning is intuitive ability, and the knowledge possessed by them without the exercise of thought is intuitive knowledge” (Zhu, 1983, p. 360). “Intuitive” here means innate, so “intuitive knowledge” refers to the moral awareness and feeling that person were born with, which does not require learning, that is the sense of rightness and wrongness. Thus, Wang Yangming pointed out that “Mencius’s sense of rightness and wrongness is knowledge and human persons all have the sense of rightness and wrongness, which is the intuitive knowledge” (Wang, 1992, p. 189). The concept of “intuitive knowledge” is not difficult to understand while the meaning of “extending” is crucial. In Wang Yangming’s book *The Great Learning*, he claimed that “As my knowledge has no deficiency or concealment in my knowledge, it reaches the peak of perfection” (Wang, 1992, p. 972). Obviously, “extending the intuitive knowledge” has two meanings: On the one hand, it is an action or a process from one stage to another. On the other hand, it refers to the peak stage or the peak that person tends to reach. From the perspective of moral practice, everyone has the innate knowledge but to become a perfect person, one shall maximize the knowledge.

Therefore, Wang Yangming raised the idea of “filling to the extreme”. He once gave an example: “The child knows to love his kin, to respect his brother without knowing it, but this power of spirit is not covered by desire, and is full to the extreme, and is his essence” (Wang, 1992, p. 34). Children had the innate knowledge when he was born and knew respecting the family and the elder, but their innate knowledge shall be extended rather than being sheltered, so that they can fully show the innate knowledge. In Confucian opinion, “extending the intuitive knowledge” is the process of moral practice which can be divided into two aspects: One is to abandon the selfish desire, and the other is to extend the knowledge. From the perspective of externalization, it is the process of moral development to reach perfection.

How is the “extending” underscored in the moral practice? Wang Yangming had raised several approaches regarding this, for example, “mindfulness and apprehension”, “elimination of human desires and the preservation of the principle of Heaven”, and “introspection and correction”. However, to reach the perfection, the ideas of Wang Yangming’s “Four-Sentences Doctrine” shall be comprehended. In Chen Lai’s book *You and Wu*, he explained that:

Its meaning is not to deny the difference between goodness and evil but to discuss different problems that morality and ethics face. The mind essentially has rigidity, which is the basis of the realization of ideal unrestrained state. (Chen,

1991, p. 212)

In other word, extending is to implement the knowledge of goodness and evil into actions to take actions with intelligence and patience. Throughout the lifetime of Wang Yangming, he had suffered many hardships and dangers but escaped from death thanks to his high intelligence and cultivation. His intelligence and cultivation are not developed from books but experiences. Thus, we can conclude that “extending innate knowledge” is to implement the knowledge into actions by everyone regarding everything and to keep and manifest the virtue in every moment, even in the very beginning of the action.

### **Liu Jishan: Being Cautious When one is Alone**

Liu Zongzhou, firstly named “Xianzhang”, courtesy name “Qidong”, was born in Shanyin, Zhejiang. He later taught in the North Jishan School, Shanyin, Zhejiang, and thus was called “Mr Jishan”. He was regarded as “The third of the Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming period”.

Regarding his idea, Huang Zongxi, one of his talented students’ thinks highly of it had explained it clearly in his writing, “*Zi Liuzi Xingzhuang*”.

My teacher’ idea is “being cautious when one is alone”. He firstly studied “laying emphasis on earnestness” and the focused on the cultivation of “being cautious when one is alone” since his middle age. Being prudent is to be serious, and being serious is to be sincere. During his later years, he became more prudent and plain. Noumenon is one thing and cultivation is “gongfu” (practices), but he did not distinguish the two. He successfully made a rise in an arduous and plain life. (Huang & Wu, 2012, p. 39)

Regarding “being cautious when one is alone”, Liu Jishan claimed that “the learning approach can be summarized in two words, ‘being cautious when one is alone’, which is emphasized in *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean*” (Huang & Shen, 2008, p. 1528). From the perspective of noumenon and practice, independence is the noumenon while prudence and independence is the practice. Independent entities are subtle. To cultivate prudence and independence, the focus shall be put on subtlety” (Wu & Liu, 2012, p. 393). The “independent entity” is the subtlest “principle”, which is only known by oneself, and therefore, named as “‘du’ (independence)”. Liu Jishan once pointed out that,

What is good and what is an evil are the heart’s movement. What loves the good and despises the evil is the tranquility of the “sincere intentions”. What knows the good and know the evil is the “intuitive knowledge”. What is good without evil is rule of reality.

The four notions are totally different from Wang Yangming’s “Four-Sentences Doctrine”. He put an emphasis on “sincere intentions” that are not evil but good. “Being cautious when one is alone”, as a practice, is to make “sincere intentions” manifest from the subtlety. The content of “sincere intentions” is to love the good and despise the evil. All thoughts in our mind are controlled by the “sincere intentions”. Thus, “sincere intentions” does not mean the comments after action but refers to the thought before it happens. “Sincere intentions” is contained in the mind and innate when one was born. In Liu Jishan’s opinion on “sincere intentions”, everything is good without evils. “Sincere intentions” is an original conation, so efforts shall be concentrated in the “sincere intentions” and prudent and independent things.

We can compare Liu Jishan’s “sincere intentions” of “being cautious when one is alone” with Kant’s central thought of moral philosophy, “good will”. “In the world or outside the world, except the good will, nothing can be considered as the good thing without any conditions”. Kant’s moral practices are of good will.

Good will is the beginning of his metaphysics thoughts. In this world, only good will does not need any precondition. Things with moral values are not the will from the god or human nature or authority. It is the good will that can rightly guide people's mind and action meeting with general principle. There is nothing comparable to the value of good will. It is not the only and total goodness, but it is the highest goodness. Good will is a rational goodness with unconditional innate value. He thinks that only reason can lead people to pursue higher purpose and value. The ultimate task of reason is to produce good will.

Therefore, there are similarities between Liu Jishan's "sincere intentions" and good will. Firstly, they are both innate with no need of acquired learning. Secondly, they are goodness without any preconditions. Regarding this, we can conclude their difference. Liu Jishan's "sincere intentions" covers the content of goodness without evil and express its control ability, which shows the nature of noumenon and "gongfu" (practices) and Confucian value. Besides, it also provides a clear cultivation way for moral practices.

### Conclusion

The concept of Confucian moral practices since the Song dynasty is widely applied. In Confucian opinion, if the spread of classical theories in real world is required, practices are the key. Theories shall be converted into cultivations. From Cheng Yichuan's "laying emphasis on earnestness" to Wang Yangming's "extending the intuitive knowledge" and Liu Jishan's "being cautious when one is alone", Confucians learn from the Buddhist and Taoist about the cultivation and learning approaches, and oriented by Confucian value system, pursue harmony, freeness, and calmness in their mind, and finally, achieve the supreme goodness.

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