

The Contemporary Significance of Ancient Chinese Value of “Propriety, Righteousness, Integrity and Honor”

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ABSTRACT: The value of “propriety, righteousness, integrity and honor” is of fundamental importance among the values in Chinese culture. *The Analects of Guan Zhong*, a classical Chinese philosophy work, advocates the rule of law as well as the regulatory function of morality. The value of “propriety, righteousness, integrity and honor” expressed in this book has great significance on building moral values today, from which we can learn that, in order to build up an excellent moral environment, we should strengthen the building of a moral values system and adopt both law and morality in administrating.

KEYWORD: “Propriety, Righteousness, Integrity and Honor”; Foundation of a Country; Moral Environment; Giving Equal Importance to Law and Moral

1 INTRODUCTION

The value of propriety, righteousness, integrity and honor is of fundamental importance among the values in Chinese culture. It touches the most internal content of moral system in traditional Chinese culture and connects people’s view with belief, reason with sensation. Hence it involves elements of both emotion and reason and directly lays the base of one’s temperament. In the works of the school of Confucius and Zisi-Mencius in pre-Qin period of ancient China, such as *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of Moderation* in *The Book of Rites*, the constructing of integrity and honor, the human nature and the building of moral value are focal content, and these issues are also emphasized in moulding people’s proper behaviors. Especially when culture and moral confront challenges, the value of propriety, righteousness, integrity and honor often shoulders the important duty of restoring moral bottom line and resurrecting human nature.

As an influential statesman and thinker in the Spring and Autumn Period, Guan Zhong developed a profound theory that advocates “incorrupt government”. Especially his thoughts of “propriety, righteousness, integrity and honor”, “common people form the basis of a country” and “clean government” acted as powerful impetus to the development of social politics, and still functions as reference and research object for modern China’s construction of incorrupt government.

2 THE FOUR DIMENSIONS, “PROPRIETY, RIGHTEOUSNESS, INTEGRITY AND HONOR”, CONSTITUTE THE FOUNDATION OF A COUNTRY

The Analects of Guan Zhong holds that building up the four dimensions of propriety, righteousness, integrity and honor is the principle way of governing a country, and maintaining “propriety, righteousness, integrity and honor” is indispensable for civilizing people and keeping a country’s stability and unity. It’s so crucial for a country to uphold the four dimensions since it concerns the country’s survival and prosperity. As quoted in the book: “A country has four dimensions. Lacking one of them, the country will be unstable; lacking two of them, the country will be in danger; lacking three of them, the country will be subverted; lacking all of them, the country will perish. And the unstable state can be rectified; the dangerous state can be saved; the subverted throne can be restored; but nothing can be done when a country perished.” (*The Analects of Guan Zhong: On governing subjects*) [1](P24—27) So, any of the four dimensions is indispensable, and the lack of any of them will result in undesirable state of unstable and danger. The four dimensions correlate with the destination of a country and its people. For this reason, the “four dimensions” are not only given top priority in regulating, but serve as standard in judging social moral and people’s behaviors.

The theory of “four dimensions” consists of two levels, namely, from the level of country or society,

the value of “four dimension” is employed to govern all subjects; from the level of individual person, the value is used to mould a lofty character. *The Analects of Guan Zhong: On governing subjects* discusses the function of the “four dimensions” as following: when one possesses a good sense of propriety, he will behave in a refrained way for fear of breaching social norm; when one observes righteousness, he will not attempt to seize unjust gain; when one keeps integrity, he will not tolerate evil; when one cherishes honor, he will not conspire with vicious people. The book further expounds: as a social norm, “propriety” can make people behave within his own rank, because “propriety” serves as reference for people from which they learn what are proper for their rank and identity so that they can abide by disciplines and laws; as a common value for justice, “righteousness” can avoid people’s “unjust efforts”, because “righteousness” can check people’s fraudulent desire and prevent them from pursuing interest and fame through unjust means; as a lofty character, “integrity” can give people “zero tolerance” toward evil things, because without selfish desire, one’s behavior will naturally become virtuous; as a sense of reputation, “honor” can prevent people from conspiring with the vicious guys, because once people feel shame with certain things, they will spontaneously resist going with those vicious guys and as a result, evil things can not spread around. Therefore, with the “four dimensions”, obsolete customs and manners can be transformed and a country can achieve a stable, prosperous and incorrupt state, as explained in *The Analects of Guan Zhong: On governing subjects*: if people behave according to their own rank and keep orders, the throne can keep secure; if people don’t pursue unjust gains, fraudulent activities will disappear in society; if people don’t tolerate evil, their behaviors will become virtuous; if people don’t follow vicious guys, there will be no soil for evil things. (*The Analects of Guan Zhong: On governing subjects*) [1](P28)

As moral and ethical standard that define people’s exterior behaviors and interior value, the “four dimensions” are interrelated and mutual complementary. Meanwhile, they are different and each has particular emphasis. In Guan Zhong’s view, the four has equal importance and the lack of any of them will lead to disastrous consequences, and the right way of governing people lies in upholding the “four dimensions”. This shows that *The Analects of Guan Zhong* holds that the “propriety” and “righteousness” derive from a country’s fundamental policy of governing its subjects while the “integrity” and “honor”, serving as the basis and premise for the former part, originate from the need of cultivating lofty individual people. In a country’s political life, carrying out the “four dimensions” is an interactive process between the two parts. By completing the process a country builds up the “four dimensions” and an orderly state can be established: throne is

secure; fraudulence disappears; virtue becomes common and no evil exists.

The Analects of Guan Zhong holds that, as moral ideal, the “four dimensions” must build on material life. This view can be seen in many parts of this book. “Those impoverished know no shame.”(*The Analects of Guan Zhong: on making wealth*) “Being well fed and well clad comes before etiquette.” (*The Analects of Guan Zhong: On governing subjects*) “The right way of ruling a nation lies in enriching the people.” (*The Analects of Guan Zhong: on ruling a nation*) Therefore, Guan Zhong believes that a king must win people’s loyalty before he can win their support, and the loyalty must be paid with material benefits. So he emphasizes that a ruler must concern common people’s livelihood and lessen their burden as far as possible. He states: “People must not be over exploited;” (*The Analects of Guan Zhong: on self-restraint*) “Less taxation, less starvation. Less severity in punishment, less fright for death penalty; More order in employing people, more stable living they get.”(*The Analects of Guan Zhong: on the form of a powerful country*) “Low taxation makes people rich.”(*The Analects of Guan Zhong: on strategy of making a powerful country*) [1](P57—60) These views reflect Guan Zhong’s dialectical thinking over the relationship between law and ethics, between material wellbeing and spiritual progress. It’s really estimable in ancient times.

3 THE MODERN SIGNIFICANCE OF THE THEORY OF THE “FOUR DIMENSIONS”

The theory of the “four dimensions” plays such an important role in maintaining social and political order that it matters a country’s survival. In this sense, it’s especially necessary and significant to probe the contemporary value of the “four dimensions” and endow traditional ethics with modern meaning.

3.1 *Creating Conducive Moral Environment is Essential in Governing a Country.*

In essential, the “four dimensions” belong to ethics. The theory was given top priority as to determine a country’s survival and written into *On governing subjects*, the first passage of *The Analects of Guan Zhong*. This shows that Guan Zhong highly emphasized the important influence of ethics on administering a country. Guan Zhong’s theory of the “four dimensions” exhibits a lot of conformity with Confucianism that also upholds the function of moralizing. For example, *The Analects of Confucius: on Politics* says that “The basis of administering lies in noble morality.” This shows that Confucianism also takes ethics as the chief measure in governing country and subjects. Confucian holds that: “By guiding with morality and educating with ritual,

people can become aware of shame and able to improve their manners accordingly.” (*The Analects of Confucius: on Politics*) This statement explains the function of morality and etiquette, namely, giving people awareness of shame and preventing them of making any illegal behavior. “As for the strategy of governing a country, Confucius firmly believed that civilizing people by morality and etiquette is far better than ruling by law enforcement, because the former can change people into active guardians of order rather than passive law abiders and improve the administrating in an all-round way.”[2](P57—60) If Confucius discussed the function of morality and etiquette from a micro prospective of preventing people from committing unlawful behavior, then Guan Zhong’s perspective was a macro one of preventing a country from falling. Their views can be mutually complementary.

In essence, ruling a country and on governing subjects are consistent to each other. It’s especially true in settings of traditional Chinese society that features a unified power structure between country and individual family, whereupon the statement came into being: “If individual families are well managed, a country’s effective rule will follow.” *The Analects of Guan Zhong* states that the first step of on governing subjects is to make people “observe rituals and establish awareness of honor and disgrace”. (*The Analects of Guan Zhong: On governing subjects*) In this sense, emphasizing the function of morality is an important aspect of Guan Zhong’s political thought. Furthermore, Guan Zhong held that ruler’s virtue is crucial in paving the ground for a country’s stability, and a country’s governing must be entrusted to virtuous rulers. As stated in the book, “To build a longlasting country, the ruling power must be given to a virtuous ruler”. (*The Analects of Guan Zhong: On governing subjects*)

Just like Mencius’ belief of “Kindness, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and trustworthiness”, the theory of the “four dimensions” belongs to the category of morality. And the “four dimensions” cover two aspects: individual person’s own morality and a country’s moralizing effort upon people.

The moral attribute of the “four dimensions” reveals that we should, in the first place, strengthen the educating of such traditional Chinese ethics in order to create a good moral environment. Of the “four dimensions”, the “propriety” means to set up proper etiquette according to people’s common emotions and direct people to proper manners. The purport of “propriety” is to guide people to abide by etiquette and order rather than contend for “undeserved” things so a harmonious state can be achieved. In terms of the moral effect, “propriety” can regulate personal relationships, such as the relationship between a ruler and his ministers, that between a husband and his wife, that between father and son as well as that between brothers. And it also

serves as an approach to a range of issues, big as ruling a country or small as individual people’s feelings. So the “propriety” is not only a country’s foundation but also a person’s measure without which one’s reputation and even career can not be established. Therefore, the moral function of “propriety” centers on two aspects: the governing of a country and the making of an individual, just as the following quotation goes: ““Propriety” serves a country’s governing; secures a stable ruling power; gives people an orderly life and benefits future generations.” (*the Chronicle of Zuo: the eighth year of Yin Gong of Lu*) [3](P46—48)

Secondly, we should build a solid material foundation to guarantee the moral construction. Above mentioned quotations from Guan Zhong’s work vividly reveal the relationship between material progress and the cultural and ideological development. Government should create conducive conditions for economic development so as to offer enough material guarantees for moral construction. In all, every effort should be made to create a superior material and cultural environment, in order to dispel negative influence of unhealthy ideology from outside and speed the making of a harmonious society.

3.2 *Strengthening the building of a moral value system in administration is the premise of purifying the political environment.*

The theory of “four dimensions” considers “integrity” belongs to the individual moral cultivation, which includes the integrity of official and that of ordinary people, and the former is the basis and premise of the latter. “Therefore, what the upper class fond of will be more popular with the lower one. As a consequence, wise governors should get more about the people’s ideas and have it as the uppermost thoughts. So laws and manners are needed to regulate governors when governors want to use it to regulate others. If the governors deviate from the laws, the people will follow their suits.”(*The Analects of Guan Zhong: on enforcing law*) In terms of the integrity of official, Guan Zhong writes that the key to govern officials and educate people lies in that the upper governors must possess the honorable virtue. (*The Analects of Guan Zhong: on the right way of being a ruler and an official*) Guan Zhong also believes that the ruler should discipline himself and behave as models for his subjects. If both the ruler and subjects are not honest, then the nation will be dangerous. “As a ruler high above, if he shows no virtue, the ruled people won’t obey him, then innumerable revolts and evil will ensue. What’s worse, the ruler’s power and prestige will wane accordingly.”(*The Analects of Guan Zhong: on making a stable country*) If the ruler himself is not honest and is not keen to corruptive things, he can’t stop violence, so evil and riots will spread which diminish the ruler’s power and

prestige, and eventually political crisis occur. So Guan Zhong concludes in his book: the key to govern officials and educate people lies in that the upper governors must possess the honorable virtue. (*The Analects of Guan Zhong: on the right way of being a ruler and an official*) And he also convicted an incorrupt society: on the one hand, “as a ruler, one should pay homage to past sages and employ righteous officials. By holding justice a generally accepted, everyone will behave in elegant manner.” (*The Analects of Guan Zhong: on four types of ruler and official*) On the other hand, “as an official, one should be loyally serve his king wherever he is. And he should deal people with righteous and incorrupt behaviors, and try his best to fulfill his duty.” (*The Analects of Guan Zhong: on four types of ruler and official*) [4](P42—45)

Guan Zhong regards “incorruptness” as an important standard in selecting officials. By making “righteousness” and “integrity” the principle in dealing one’s official duty and personal affairs, an incorrupt bureaucracy can be made and an incorrupt political state would follow. The incorruptness is an exterior ethic for people’s behaviors. It stands for justice, uprightness, impartiality and the rejecting of graft. It is not only a basic principle for officials conducting themselves but also a manifestation of their moral integrity. To be just and incorrupt is not only requirement for officials but a guideline for ordinary people. By common people’s upholding and spreading in their daily routine, the principle of incorruptness can be applied further to important state affairs.

As written in Guan Zhong’s book, “the key to governing official and educating people lies in the upper governors.” (*The Analects of Guan Zhong: on the right way of being a ruler and an official*) To strengthen the constructing of incorrupt politics, government officials must the first to practise incorruption. Chairman Mao Zedong began to crack corruption down in the early years of new China. He once said that to govern the country is to govern officials. The propriety, righteousness, integrity and honor are the nation’s “four dimensions”. If the four dimensions can’t be upheld, then the country won’t be a country. At present, an important aspect of strengthening the construction of administrative ethics system is to draw useful resources from Chinese traditional culture and carry the excellent Chinese traditional culture of integrity forward. To this end, we need to strengthen the cultivating the consciousness of incorruptness in our society and building an incorrupt atmosphere to serve the people, and develop an incorrupt culture in accordance with the changing time.

The so-called “honor” is a kind of mental activity and psychological feeling under the effect of the sense of shame, which keeps one’s behaviors justified and away from evil. As afore mentioned, Guan Zhong holds that the sense of shame is based on certain material—“Being well fed and well clad

comes before etiquette.” “Those with excessive wealth can not be employed, while those impoverished know no shame.” (*The Analects of Guan Zhong: on making wealth*) A small thing is a good beginning for the people to know the sense of their shame. “He who wants to govern his people must make his people have the sense to feel ashamed first. And if the governor wants to let the people have the sense of shame, then their little shame must be corrected. When the little shame can’t be made right in the country, it will be difficult to demand the people to feel ashamed for their big misconduct.” (*The Analects of Guan Zhong: on the art of using power*) Obviously the book holds that one who is governing the whole country must make the people in his country have the sense of shame for certain misconducts. To realize this purpose, trivial misconducts must be rectified. Only when people feel ashamed for the trivial misconducts and correct them, can they know what big shames refer to. It is impossible for governors to demand people not to commit big shame without rectifying their little shame. [5](P23—25)

Why is it hard for China to crack down corruption? One cause is the lack of a cultural atmosphere with shame-awareness. The lack of enough administrative morality in present administration will inevitably sap, even corrupt people’s good will and mislead their behaviors. At present, whether the goal of constructing a harmonious society and realizing Chinese dream can be achieved mainly depends on how the party and government administrate and what images can be present to people. In the strategy of “ruling with morality”, the party and the government should take the moral function of the traditional “propriety, righteousness, integrity and honor” as the impetus. Externally, we should use the “four dimensions” to build “a harmonious world” to create a harmonious external environment for the cause of Chinese Dream; internally, we should use the “four dimensions” to regulate people’s market behaviors and build up trust in market economy. At the same time, during the construction of political ecology, the administrative morality based on “four dimensions” requires the officials to be just and clean-handed, to put an end to corruption, to build a political environment dominated by law and democracy, and to construct an administrative morality system that takes the “four dimensions” as the basic behavioral norm. [6](P132—134)

3.3 Upholding the rule of law and the rule of morality at the same time is an important measure for the realization of Chinese Dream.

In “four dimensions” theory, Guan Zhong insists that propriety and righteousness are the basic rule to regulate people, while integrity and honor are the basic chastity to cultivate people. These four dimensions are conceptions in people’s mind, but

they exert an important effect on the economic foundation (administration of a country). "If the four dimensions can't be upheld, the country would be perished." In this sense, Guan Zhong regards the "four dimensions" as decisive to a country's prosperity and stability, thus upholding the "four dimensions" is the basic principle of governing a country. Being directly related to the survival of the state power, moral construction can never be overlooked. As the "four dimensions" closely influences the fate of a country, as a result, the "four dimensions" become the highest standards for a country's ritual practice and social moral. Among the "four dimensions", propriety and righteousness is consistent with each other, "the former being the outer shape and the latter being the inner essence." (*The Book of Rites: the origin and function of rites*) Righteousness attaches more to people's obligation and owns a strong subjectivity, while the propriety reflected more on rites and regulation system, demanding more compliance from people's behavior.

As moral norm and moral sense, "four dimensions" has its outer behavioral norm—"Propriety and Righteousness" and its inner expression of mentality, "Integrity and Honor". On one hand, the outer behavioral norm and the inner expression of mentality are interlinked and mutual complementary. On the other hand, the "four dimensions" also has its emphasis and specific content. And in a combined form, it influences all walks of life in society, from courtiers high above to common people down below. Therefore, from the point of straightening the social order, "the fundamental rule of governing a country lies in cultivating people's "propriety, righteousness, integrity and honor" and forbidding their misconducts from trivial things. (*The Analects of Guan Zhong: on the art of using power*) And the basic requirement for cultivating individual person is to practice the "four dimensions" in behaviors.

Chinese Dream, proposed by Xi Jinping is an important guiding ideology and ruling idea, which embodies China's richness, mightiness, rejuvenation and people's happiness. The strategy of this dream is to carry on socialism with Chinese characteristics, adhere to the theoretical system of socialism with Chinese characteristics, carry forward the national spirit and collaborate to build a powerful China. The approach to this dream is to develop China in an all-round way, in politics, economy, culture, society and ecological civilization. The theory of "four dimensions" aims to pursue a highly prosperous society, which is the collective achievement of cultivating people and regulating people, and which premise is to lay equal stress on both the rule of law and morality. This coincides with the five-in-one goal of Chinese Dream, namely, pushing forward the development of politics, economy, culture, society and ecological civilization. Socialist law and morality have the same value orientation and

functions. To develop our harmonious society and productivity, we must have appropriate superstructure, a good social order and economic base. We also need to improve the security of the legal system and a good moral environment, without which the regulation of economic activities would result in disorder.

Law and morality belong to superstructure. The rule of law is subject to political construction while morality is part of spiritual civilization. Governing the country by both law and morality not only reflects the trend of advanced social culture but also becomes a reliable guarantee of advanced culture. Only by combining the rule of law and morality, taking advantage of the authority of law and its compulsory means to regulate social members' behavior, and using the moral influence to foster social members' moral consciousness, can a favorable environment be created to guarantee the development of an orderly and harmonious society.

4 CONCLUSION

During the cultural development modern China, the "May Fourth Movement", the "New Culture Movement" and the "Cultural Revolution" separate Chinese people from their traditional culture to a certain extent. Moreover, influenced by diversified values under the condition of market economy, the traditional concept of propriety in the contemporary society gradually faded. In the education of the traditional moral culture, we should eliminate the feudal ethical elements of traditional propriety and carry forward its rational essence. This requires us to infuse new moral content into traditional moral ethics to meet the demand of the current needs of constructing Chinese core values, so as to make the "propriety" and "four dimensions" theory serve as a theoretical support and a positive contribution of the Chinese traditional culture to the construction of a harmonious China and the realization of the Chinese dream.

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