

# Cognitive Interpretation of Confucianism

Youguo Duan<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Studies, Yangtze University, Jingzhou, China

## Email Address

278572778@qq.com (Youguo Duan)

\*Correspondence: 278572778@qq.com

Received: 20 June 2021; Accepted: 19 July 2021; Published: 5 August 2021

## Abstract:

Being important part of Chinese traditional thoughts, Confucianism, is crucial ideological weapons used to govern, civilize and confine the public in feudal times. Till today, the essential ideas in Confucianism have become a paragon in the new period of Chinese culture construction. As for the dross in Confucianism, we must abandon it to exert positive influence on the later generations. The core and essence of Confucianism, benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, trustworthiness, forgiveness, faithfulness, and filial piety, are the supreme ideal and criteria of social politics and ethics in feudal times. Based on the interpretation of important figures and books and records of Confucianism, the paper works to promote better understanding of Confucianism. Most of all, in modern times, Confucianism should be functioning in the ideological formation and developing.

## Keywords:

Confucianism, Core, Cognitive, Interpretation

## 1. Introduction

The greatest sage and teacher, Confucian, as the founder of Confucianism, was the main stream among the various thoughts in Pre-Qin times. It was respected as Confucianism, which possessed intact expression of political and thoughtful value and had profound influence in eastern Asian countries, even throughout the world. Outstanding from the fierce contention of a hundred schools of thoughts, Confucianism has had profound influence on both the ruling class and other walks of life. The interpretation of the ideas of Confucianism, like political education, school construction to show respect for Confucianism, the ideas of men are superior to women or loyalty, filial piety and etiquette, has had profound influence on the later generations.

According to the Paraphrasing Texts and Words (Shuo Wen Jie Zi), Confucianism means softness, referring to warlocks. Ideologically speaking, Confucianism bears the requirement of society and guiding quality, and should be carried by each class of the society. Professionally speaking, the idea of attaching much importance to death and the etiquettes of funeral makes the original idea of Confucianism. In Disciple Gauge, Confucius told his disciples to be a Confucian like a gentleman, but not like a base person, meaning that they should assist a ruler in governing a country, or work as

professional marshals in a governmental agencies to break away from their low social status.

By citing the book Bielu, Yiwenzhi of Hanshu mentioned that the Confucians most possibly originated from Officer of Situ (the Ministers over the Masses), working mainly to help emperor to govern the country, conform to Yin and Yang, and carry on its education. Commonly speaking, they functioned to assist the emperors to ensure the political correctness, educate the masses to abide by the law and behave themselves and to be content with things as they are. From three Emperors and five Sovereigns in ancient China, from political and military achievements, from Shang Dynasty to Ming Dynasty, the above functions of Confucianism had their complete expressions all the time.

As mentioned above, the Confucians might originated from ministers over the masses, who was the epitome of the division of labor in society, also was the reflection of personal styles in moral aspect and the moral aspect in rituals. The early school of Confucianism is the remold and innovation in higher level based on the assimilation of the positive ideas of Lao Tseu.

Using traditional thoughts of the State of Lu for reference, Confucius founded Confucianism. The book Zuo Zhuan recorded that, "In spring, Duke of Jin appointed Han Xuanzi to send a Letter of Appointment for political purpose, calling etiquette. Seeing books like Yi, Xiang, and Lu Chunqiu when Han Xuanzi visited Zhou Taishi, he said, 'State Lu has all the etiquettes that State Zhou has. Till now, I know what virtues Emperor Zhou has, and understand why Zhou people have him the emperor'". The institutions of Western Zhou Dynasty laid systematic foundation for Confucianism.

Viewing from the angle of social foundation, as a descendant of a noble in Shang Dynasty, the Confucian airs Confucius had in taking charge of funerals showed that he had directly inherited the humble hereditary careers of survivors of Shang Dynasty, and in the humble careers, Confucianism accumulated its elements and thoughts through institutions and etiquettes. As for how many followers Confucian School had at that time, the famous sentence "Among the 3,000 disciples, 72 are pretty good at six arts" is a good proof.

By admiring and learning Emperor Zhou, Confucius and Xuncius laid the foundation of Confucianism in Western Zhou Dynasty. Later, based on the thoughts of rites and music of Western Zhou Dynasty, the world view, political philosophy and moral virtue of Confucianism were bred.

## 2. Core of Confucianism

The sayings, six skills (ritual, music, archery, chariot-riding, calligraphy and mathematics) are basic requirements for Confucians, and nine schools of thought stem from the royal palace, are judgments made by Confucians in Han Dynasty and modern scholars. The interpretation of Confucianism in Ancient Religions and Ethics is truly systematic understanding of Confucianism based on its evolution. In the development process in Western Zhou Dynasty, it not only laid deep basis of Confucianism, including thoughts in witches, ethics and rites and music, but also merged with various thoughts in different regions of central plains, displaying its political thought, religious beliefs, and moral feelings, leading to the forming of Confucianism system. In the trend of solid political thought construction, it finally became Confucianism system consisting of political thought, ethical thought, ritual

and musical thought, belief in existence and humanistic approach, which is characteristic of virtue-praised and people-valued, gentle, unity of nature and man, and deity-alienated-and-people-intimate. The core and essence of Confucianism are benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom, credibility, forgiveness, loyalty, filial piety, and fraternal duty. The tradition handed down and spiritual temperament nourished is an integration of Confucianism and other traditional Chinese thoughts.

### **3. Cognitive Interpretation of Confucianism**

#### **3.1. Benevolence**

Benevolence, the basic concept in ancient Chinese ethics, is a crucial moral standard stemmed from Confucianism, exerting profound influence on personality realm and philosophical concept [1]. Benevolence shows one's care and love for others based on the admission of one's own interest, being the glory of human nature starting from oneself. Benevolence means that in the pursuit of personal life value, one has to spare no efforts to take moral responsibilities endowed by one's family, the society and the nature if he wants to realize his dreams, improve social status and win respect from others.

Take the first chapter of *The Scholars* as an example. At the end of the Yuan Dynasty, Wang Mian, a young man from Zhuji County, willingly fled to Kuaiji Mountain to live under an assumed name, although he was well-read, brilliant and uninterested in fame and fortune. Ever since the founding of Ming Dynasty, what he did, like shaking head with the recruitment system through eight-part essay performed then, and excused himself from the offer of a post of staff officer from King Zhu Yuanzhang, satisfied the principles of knowledge, morality, being an official and retiring from public life, especially the so-called noble and righteous act by willing to be in poor condition, which were widely carried by ancient Chinese scholars.

#### **3.2. Righteousness**

In moral sense of Confucianism, Guan Zhong thought that "Courtesy, righteousness, incorruption and sense of shame are the four criteria for morality and performance". Zhu Xi held that "Righteousness should be the standard used to restrict one's mind, which is good for world fairness". And Confucius argued that "By nature, men are similar to one another. But learning and practice make the difference". By advocating "Righteousness", Confucians mean to practice their good nature in performers, practice and performance style, moral culture, and their externalized personality in their daily life and the boundless extension of personal behavior and morality. Acquired learning and practice are crucial to one's personality, which Mencius defined as "sense of shame", which, together with benevolence, wisdom, courtesy, constitute human nature, exerting profound influence on the forming and development of Confucian righteousness. The *Analects of Confucius* emphasizes that "The gentleman sees righteousness, while the petty see profit", which means the gentleman weighs righteousness over benefit. The Confucian righteousness is the leading power for the everlasting of ethical thoughts of Confucianism, and for the improvement of moral cultivation and character of modern people. In the development of moral practice, the establishment of moral gentlemen and models should be consistent with the practical righteousness of one's morality, cultivation and character.

#### **3.3. Courtesy**

In comparing traditional legal thoughts between China and western world, ancient Chinese history was worshiped by a line of rulers because of its Chinese typical legal thought of “Rule of Morality and Policy of Benevolence” and spiritual brand. Based on the legal construction with features from Confucianism, like “Combination of both Courtesy and Laws; and Virtue Primary and Punishment Secondary”, and following the rules of “Moral Education other than Hasty Punishment”, and “More Education and Less Punishment”, ancient China at last formed its typical ruling model with the combination of Confucianism, Confucian morality and ethics, and legal systems [2]. After the Opium Wars, China had to rejoin the world after long seclusion. In Hundred Days’ Reform, traditional outstanding thought was abandoned completely. China turned to accept and spread western cultivation, flaunting democracy, constitutionalism and rule of law. The failure of the Reform proved that western system did not fit China. The codes of conduct of “Coexistence of Confucianism and Laws” and “Punishment assisting Virtue”, which represent its class will and satisfy the need of governing the country, continue today. Confucianism regards benevolence and benevolent government as the center of regime. Later, Mencius developed the simple humanistic thought into systematic policy of benevolence. Shang Yang introduced a new rule of governing, which required strict laws and decrees while burning Book of Songs and Book of History. This change resulted with his miserable ending of being torn by five carts (a punishment of ancient China). Xuncius’ new doctrine of “Grand Courtesy and Solemn Law” by “Introducing Courtesy into Law” formed a system of formal criminal law in China’s feudal society. In Han Dynasty, which had strong national power, Confucianism flourished unprecedentedly.

### **3.4. Wisdom**

The wise should be erudite, knowledgeable, know-all, know-well and limitless, meaning a wise man knows everything in the past and the present. Wisdom belongs to moral norms. Wisdom played a crucial role in the construction of moral system in the Pre-Qin Period. It was also an important quality of ideal character and quality. Beginning as sparks in Western Zhou Dynasty, developing into a prairie fire, wisdom became widely accepted code of ethics. As a practitioner, Confucius mixed moral norms, moral quality and moral sentiments together. Finally, wisdom worked together with benevolence and courage as criteria used to define a man of noble character. In deciding moral activities, the criteria experienced lasting development and became the so-called “The wise man has no perplexity; Man of virtue are free from anxiety; The courageous admit of no fear” [3,4].

### **3.5. Credibility**

Credibility, existing not only in Five Virtues (Benevolence, Righteousness, Courtesy, Wisdom, Credibility), but also in Eight Virtues (Filial Piety, Love for one’s Older Brother, Loyalty, Credibility, Courtesy, Righteousness, Sense of Honor, Sense of Shame), is an important concept in Confucianism. What’s more, credibility is commonly acknowledged standard of value and basic virtue. It requires the consistency of both what one says and does, and what one says and what one thinks. Therefore, credibility is regarded as the best model for people to interact with others, the base of moral cultivation, the key element of improving one’s virtue and refining one’s achievements, and key principle of governing and loving people. Despite the obscurity and abstraction of its implication, we have to admit its significance as traditional ideology and its profound and practical value in more times [5].

### **3.6. Forgiveness**

According to Confucianism, Forgiveness gets best interpretation in the sayings, like “Don’t do to others what you don’t want others to do to you”; “Help others to develop themselves while you want to improve your own life. Treat others the same as how you like others to treat yourself”; “Treat others generously”, which explain “Forgiveness” of Confucianism very vividly [3]. Zhu Geliang’s famous story of “Capturing and releasing Meng Huo for seven times when he led the army invaded Mountain Qi for six times”, and the story about his successor, Jiang Wan, failing to acquire individual interest while he was in power, or to use his position to get even with Yang Min for a private grudge, show the true meaning of forgiveness. Both of them were thought highly of in later times. Li Shimin, Emperor Taizhong of Tang Dynasty, corrected his mistakes when he found out them, which finally led to the establishment of flourishing Tang Dynasty.

### **3.7. Loyalty**

Loyalty in Confucianism is centered on emperor-respecting, faith-in-king and the three cardinal guides (ruler guides subject, father guides son and husband guides wife), and was expressed through the supreme power of monarchy, the separatist regime set up by local forces and the lessons learned from their destruction of world peace, on account of which, Dong Zhongshu in Eastern Han Dynasty proposed that in order to intensify centralization of authority, the government should strengthen ideological control on people by “Banning from hundred philosophers, venerate Confucianism”, which developed Confucianism into a new stage. In order to satisfy the need of “Grand Unification”, Confucianism assimilated the ideas in Daoism, Yin-yang School, Legalism, to form Neo-Confucianism. Emperor Wu employed the proposal of “Deposed 100, only Confucianism”, which determined the leading role of Confucianism in ideological field in Eastern Han Dynasty and later times.

### **3.8. Filial Piety**

According to the understanding of Disciple Gauge using Evaluation Theory, humans should first show filial obedience to their parents and their older brothers; then they should be do things carefully, speak honestly and follow their own words. Just as what is said in Disciple Gauge, “When my parents call me, I will answer them right away. When they ask me to for something, I will do it quickly. When my parents instruct me, I will listen respectfully. When my parents reproach me, I will obey and accept their scolding. I will try hard to change and improve myself, to start anew”, which is a good expression of “Filial piety is the foundation of all virtues”, also an ideal way to avoid the situation of “The sons may want to support their parents but their parents don't await that day, just like the trees may prefer stillness but the wind will not cease”. Filial piety is strongly advocated by traditional Chinese thought, in which, obedience to the wills of parents, the elders of the family and the conscientiousness and aspiration of their ancestors and avoiding taking the wrong path are regarded as a stable manifestation of family relationship. Countless proofs undoubtedly manifest Chinese virtues of respecting the elder, from what was recorded in the inscriptions on the bones or tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty to what was interpreted in Paraphrasing Texts and Words, from obeying to and supporting parents to the touching stories displayed in the Twenty-four Dutifulness Pictures [6].

## 4. Conclusions

According to Confucianism, eight virtues consist of benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom, reliability, forgiveness, loyalty, and filial piety. Moderation and Three Principles and Five Virtues, the best parts of Confucianism, used to be ideological weapons serving the ruling classes in feudal society. Either the birth or the development off Confucianism, whichever dynasty it was in, Confucianism was stamped time brand. Brief words of the Three Principles and Five Virtues of Confucianism can elaborate the rules of how Chinese conduct themselves and handle affairs, which is quite impossible in any other nation. Therefore, any Chinese should be proud.

As for how to inherit and carry forward Confucianism nowadays, it should be “Take the essence but discard the dregs” because it occupies an important position in the world, which should it play a leading role in modern society and deserve a wider application.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

## Funding

This work is supported by the *Philosophy and Social Science Research Project* of Hubei Provincial Department of Education, “Research on the Implementation of Confucianism in Cultivation of English Talents in Higher Education.” (20ZD038).

## References

- [1] Li, H.Q. The Scholars, An image textbook for Cognition of Chinese traditional thoughts. *Jianghuai Tribune*, 2015, 21(1), 11-16.
- [2] Bao, G.Y. Difference of traditional legal thoughts between Chia and western world. *People’s Tribune*, 2016, 24(8), 108-110.
- [3] Liu, F. Excellent traditional cultural values trend and cultivation of socialist core values of college students, Tianjin University of Commerce, 2016.
- [4] Li, H.; Wang, D.M. The plus and minus of teaching content design of culture history—exemplified by the formation of Confucianism and contention of 100 schools of thoughts. *Journal of Mudanjiang College of Education*, 2017, 34(3), 55-57, 65.
- [5] Chen, Y.L. Conceptual metaphors of reliability in Confucianism—exemplified by reliability in The Four Books, Southwest, 2016.
- [6] Xiao, C.K.; Interpretation of the attitude in Disciple Gauge using evaluation theory. *South Wind*, 2017, 15(2), 92.



© 2021 by the author(s); licensee International Technology and Science Publications (ITS), this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)