

# An Experimental Discussion on the Shaping of Confucian Business Spirit by The Great Learning

Lang Jie Jia Yang

Sichuan Yakang (Luxi) Expressway Company Limited, Chengdu 610000, China.

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that the great learning contains profound management wisdom, and under the influence of this wisdom, the unique management characteristics of Confucian businessmen are formed, that is, self-management of cultivation and prudence and affectionate team management. Finally, it focuses on the contemporary value of Confucian business spirit, which is mainly reflected in the construction of the framework of “heaven and earth, group and self”, i.e., balancing the three benefits (economic, social and ecological benefits), handling the three relationships (the relationship between the pursuit of economic benefits and the regulation of business activities, the relationship between the utilization of natural resources and the protection of natural resources, and the relationship between the entrepreneur’s own ecological construction and the construction of the natural ecological construction), and attaining a realm (“stopping at the highest goodness”, as mentioned in the book of “The Great Learning”).

**Keywords:** The great learning; Ren; Economic ethics; Management thought; Confucian business

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At present, China has entered a new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and the main contradiction in society has changed to the contradiction between the people’s growing needs for a better life and unbalanced and insufficient development. Nearly forty years of reform and opening up has brought particularly fruitful results, directly sending China into the world’s second largest economy, but in the specific economic practices there are still more “unbalanced and inadequate” phenomenon, and gradually become one of the main factors hindering the pursuit of a better life of the general public.

## 1. Examination of the historical origins of Confucian merchants and their spirits

Since the 1980s, mainly due to the special experience of economic growth in East Asia (including Japan, Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, China, South Korea and Singapore), many sociologists and economists have begun to notice the positive utility of Confucian ethics. The economic prosperity of the so-called East Asian Confucian Cultural Circle countries and regions, especially Mainland China with thousands of years of Confucian cultural tradition, has become the second largest economy in the world after nearly forty years of reform and opening up. People have studied the essence of the economic phenomenon of “unique scenery” in the world and put forward some research topics such as “Confucian business” and “Confucian business spirit”, and the research and discussion centered around these topics have been very successful. The research and discussion around these topics are in the ascendant.

### 1.1 Meaning of Confucianism and its Spirit

Before clarifying Confucian merchants and their spirit, I think we should ask two questions: Are Confucian merchants businessmen or Confucian scholars? Is his behavior in the businessman or in the Confucian? In fact, the center of the problem is the main body of Confucian merchants, is it a merchant or a Confucian? With the current literature and related research, it is difficult to confirm the exact origin of the term “Confucian businessman”, and the academic community is also divided on the definition of “Confucian businessman”, so far there is no uniform statement.

### 1.2 Historical lineage and developmental evolution of Confucian merchants and their spirits

After sorting out the definition of Confucian merchants and their spirit, we should go back to history to explore the origin. As Mr. Yang Liansheng said in his preface to *The Religious Ethics of Modern China and the Spirit of Merchants* by Prof. Yu Yingshi, first of all, we have to go back to the “original merchants”. According to the literature, such as the pre-Qin literature in the “Guanzi”, “Strategy of the Warring States”, etc., and does not appear directly “Confucian businessmen” two words. However, we can find from the “Shiji - Cargo Shares Biogra-

phy” after the pre-Qin period that Sima Qian, according to the merchants’ daily transportation, For example, the “Three Great Sages of Cargo Sharing” - Tao Zhu Gong (Fan Li), Zigong (Duanmu Zhi), and Bai Gui - made the distinction and categorization of “honest merchants”, “good merchants”, “greedy merchants”, etc. For example, he pointed out that “greedy merchants are three, and good merchants are five”, which relates to the moral and ethical spirit of merchants, and this is a very important historical clue for the later use of the term “Confucianism” to describe the term “merchants”.

## **2. The Shaping of Confucian Business Spirit by the Economic Ethics Thought of the great learning**

In Principles of Ethical Economics, Peter Koslowski says that economic ethics, as a moral doctrine of economic behavior, supplements the theory of possessions and the quality of value with formal rules as well as the ideal of universalization and the ideal of coordination.

Indeed, when economics and ethics are merged and talked about together, it inevitably involves the moral cognition and moral choices of human beings in economic activities. In fact, economics and ethics are the relationship between desire and morality. For example, the famous economist Adam Smith wrote both *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and some scholars have even argued that Adam Smith was not an economist but a moral scholar. Eiichi Shibusawa, the father of Japanese industrialists, developed the concept of “Scholar’s Soul and Business Talent” and wrote “*The Analects of Confucius and the Abacus*”, using the *Analects* as his bible for doing business.

### **2.1 The main contents of the economic ethical thought of the great learning**

The Great Learning said, “There is a way to generate wealth; those who give birth to it are many, those who eat it are few, those who work for it are sick, those who use it are comfortable, and then the wealth is always sufficient.” This passage has at least three layers of meaning.

The first level of meaning is economic, advocating “joyful living and low desire” and “open source of income and reduce expenditure”. In the production of social wealth, people should be enthusiastic and “over-ambitious”, the more people produce, the better; in the enjoyment of social wealth, people should be humble and fearful of avoiding each other, the fewer people enjoy, the better. When opening up sources of wealth, the higher the efficiency, the better; when enjoying social wealth, pay attention to economize, the slower the better. If this is the case, there will be no worry about the lack of wealth.

The second level of meaning is the ethical level: “life” should be “many”, “desire” should be “few”, “work” should be “fast”, and “use” should be “comfortable”. “To be” should be “fast” and “to use” should be “comfortable”. For production to pay, from the heart to produce love, and become a kind of behavioral self-awareness; for enjoyment to ask for, clear mindedness before others, and form a kind of consciousness self-awareness. These concepts are the core of the ethical thinking of Confucianism, especially the great learning, which aims to form an interpersonal relationship in which “subjectively I am all for one, and objectively all for me”.

The third level of meaning is philosophical, that is, “there is a way to make money”. What is the “way” of “generating wealth”? “Those who generate it are many, those who eat it are few, those who work for it are fast, and those who use it are comfortable”.

#### *2.1.1 The concept of wealth distribution in which wealth is dispersed and gathered by the people*

The great learning said: “Therefore, when wealth is gathered, the people are dispersed. If the wealth is scattered, then the people will gather. “If the above “physical relationship” between virtue and property is a more conceptualized category, then the “dispersal of wealth and the gathering of people” is directly related to the actual distribution of property after acquisition. In fact, The Great Learning uses dialectical thinking to explain the “relationship between wealth and people” involved in the distribution of property. When wealth is gathered, people are dispersed; when wealth is dispersed, people are gathered; one yin and one yang, one and one relaxation, just as Zhang Shuo, a famous minister of the Tang Dynasty, said in the book “*Qian Ben Cao*”, “One accumulation and one dispersal is called the Way”. In fact, we all know the reasoning, a person to get more property, it also means that he possesses more resources than others, more out of that part of the resources is in fact plundering others “indicators”, others certainly alienate him. However, when he is willing to share his resources with others, his relationship with them will naturally be strong. The result of the dispersal of wealth is that the people will gather together and become numerous,

and “if you gain the many, you gain the state”, while the result of the gathering of wealth is that the people will disperse, and the consequence is that “if you yag the many, you yag the state”.

#### *2.1.2 A paradoxical view of the causes and consequences of wealth*

The great learning said, “Therefore, those who say it is perverse to go out are also perverse to go in; those who say it is perverse to go in are also perverse to go out.”The word “disobedient” here means contrary to, and against, the Way. The great learning teaches that if you utter words that are contrary to the Way, then you will suffer the same retribution because of them; and that wealth amassed by means that are contrary to the Way will eventually be paid back in an unexpected way. Sow melon and you get melon, sow beans and you get beans, “The so-called “Ping Wei” in the rule of his country, on the old and the people are filial piety, on the elder and the people are younger, on the elder and the people are younger, on the orphans and the people are not doubled, that is why the gentleman has a pros and cons way.” If the king emphasizes the way of filial piety and fraternal duty and respects the old and the elders, then the people will also promote the way of filial piety and fraternal duty, and if the king cares for the orphans and widows, then the people will follow suit to care for them, and then this will not violate human ethics and moral principles. This reasoning is not only suitable for the way of governance, also suitable for the way of business, it reflects a kind of upward and downward effect of cause and effect relationship, just on the paradoxical into the paradoxical out of the counter-evidence. And “there is no one who is good at benevolence but not good at righteousness, and there is no one who is good at righteousness but not at the end of his business”, which precisely shows that cause and effect will not be reversed, and explains once again the wealth and cause and effect view of the “Da Xue” which is contrary to what is in and contrary to what is out.

### **3. Contemporary Value of Confucian Business Spirit**

In essence, the concept of Confucian business is still based on the word “business”, only that Confucian businessmen take the spirit of traditional Chinese culture, with Confucianism as the main body, as their soul in their business practices. Of course, the source of this soul can be found directly in the economic and ethical thinking and management wisdom contained in The Great Learning.

#### **3.1 “Virtue” and “Cultivation” to improve character and purify the air of the business market**

With the reform and opening up of mainland China for nearly 40 years, the socialist market economy has developed to a new level and a series of brilliant achievements have been made. At the same time, we can still find a number of unscrupulous businessmen who are profit-oriented and will do anything to obtain high profits. In commercial activities, some business operators have disordered values, ethical and moral failures, lack of rational behavior, moral slippage, credibility crisis. The infamous “trichlorocyanine incident”, “gutter oil incident” and other typical cases are representative of the endless scandals in business operations. This kind of bottomless money worship directly affects the interests of consumers, deeply pollutes the air of the commercial market, and seriously disrupts the healthy development of the economy and society as a whole.

#### **3.2 “Economic and social welfare” and the promotion of social harmony and stability**

“To help the people through the world” is an important element of the spirit of Confucianism and commerce, and the purpose of Confucian merchants’ diligence in business is to realize the ambition of “helping the people through the world”. Take Zigong, the originator of the Confucian businessman, for example, although his “family is tired of thousands of dollars”, but “rich but not proud”, and “rich but good manners”, often help the poor and needy, such as subsidizing Confucius to travel around the world and ransom the slaves of the state of Lu. He often helped the poor and the needy, such as subsidizing Confucius to travel around the world and redeeming slaves in Lu. The ideal of “making the world a better place for the people” in the spirit of Confucianism, and the concept of righteousness and profitability of Confucian businessmen, which is “gained from society and used in society”, are conducive to the formation of new Confucian businessmen and the creation of a responsible group, which is conducive to the harmonious development of “righteousness” and “profit” in a balanced manner. Responsible group, conducive to the creation of a “warm-hearted public welfare” climate, conducive to “righteousness” and “profit” in a balanced and harmonious development. The spirit of Confucian businessmen emphasizes that in the process of pursuing benefits, businessmen should take “righteousness” as the criterion, and after obtaining benefits, they should maximize the return to society and realize social values,

such as strengthening the country and enriching the people, donating funds to promote education and helping the poor and the weak, etc. In this way, it helps contemporary people to go beyond the boundaries of “righteousness” and “profit”. In this way, it helps people of today to transcend their own narrow economic interests and develop the concept of common prosperity, and through “giving to the people”, the people of the world are able to live and work in peace and contentment in their own way.

## **Summary**

Starting from the conceptual analysis of Confucian merchants and their spirit as well as the historical sorting, this paper argues that Confucian merchants mainly refer to those groups who consciously combine the traditional Chinese culture centered on Confucianism with their business practices in the countries and regions of the East Asian Confucian Cultural Circle, and who practice Confucianism and promote Confucianism with their own behavior. At the same time, Confucian merchants and their spirit are a group of At the same time, Confucian business and its spirit is the result of a long period of formation, roughly through the pre-Qin period of the germ stage - the Ming and Qing period of the molding stage - the modern period of innovation and development of the stage of three phases.

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