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The enlightenment of “the doctrine of the mean” on the relationship between man and nature

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Abstract: The doctrine of the mean reflecting Confucian wisdom is an impartial, not extreme attitude and code of conduct, pursuing a mode characterized by stable, coordinated, and sustainable development. The doctrine of the mean emphasizes that people should “be kind to nature”. It attaches great importance to the building of a society in harmony with nature. Therefore, it has great enlightenment on the relationship between man and nature.

Keywords: the doctrine of the mean; harmony without uniformity; harmony between man and nature

Chinese culture is based on the doctrine of the mean or the golden mean. By mean or middle is meant a relative balance between the extremes, which is a dynamic balance, constantly adjusting itself with the changing time and space. The terms such as “keeping the middle” (守中) and “adhering to the middle” (执中) all highlight the significance of “the doctrine of the mean” in Chinese culture. The “middle way” has always been understood as the interpretation of the spirit and soul of Chinese culture, because it is the correct understanding and practical application of the truth of the universe and life.

1. The meaning of the doctrine of the mean

Xu Shen’s *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* says: “zhong (中), means inside; as in the Chinese character “中”, a vertical strike goes through the mouth (口).” The oracle bone script “zhong” means to string up the space where people are, and the vertical in the middle of the word “Zhong” is what supports people, that is, the way. “Yong” (庸) mostly means “use” in the *Book of Changes*. Zhu Zi sees “yong” as common yet not easy to change, and Cheng Zi explains “yong” as not changeable, indicating a rule that will not change. The word “zhong” is often seen as appropriate or moderate, more importantly, it signifies the spatial connection between heaven and earth and the temporal connection between the ancient and modern times. “zhong” is the correct understanding of the fundamental characteristics of things, while “yong” is the practical use of this understanding, that is, “practice”. To view and understand everything with the thought of “zhong” is called “the Middle Way”, and to put the philosophy of “the Middle Way” into action is called the doctrine of the mean or the golden mean. Therefore, the doctrine of the mean is the practical application of the view of the Middle Way. The doctrine of the mean is not limited to the personal career, but widely used in dealing with the relationships between people, families, societies

and countries. “zhong” and “yong” are two independent words with rich connotations in the early Spring and Autumn Period. Confucius combined them into a philosophical category. The word “zhong yong” first appeared in the *Analects of Confucius*. Confucius said: “Perfect is the virtue which is according to the Doctrine of the Mean. It’s a long time since people could put it into practice.” (*The Analects: Yongye*) As a supreme morality, people have been lacking it for a long time. Confucius valued “the middle way” as the highest virtue, which is “the organic integration of all virtues”. Confucius hoped that through the doctrine of the mean, people would consciously enhance their self-cultivation and constantly develop themselves, so as to better improve their virtues. It follows that the doctrine of the mean teaches people how to live a dignified life in the world. The doctrine of the mean is a state of appropriateness and perfection, and is also an impartial and not extreme attitude and behavior. According to the correct understanding of the essential law of the universe, the doctrine of the mean is used to guide one’s thoughts and codes of conduct with this correct understanding and make one’s thoughts and behavior conform to the essential law of the universe [Xu, W., & Ouyang, F. (2022).].

2. The value orientation of the doctrine of the mean

According to *The Book of Changes*, “Achieving equilibrium and harmony, heaven and earth will lie in their own position and all things will be nourished and flourish.” People should pursue inner balance in order to achieve a harmonious state with all things in the world, and this is the wisdom of “the doctrine of the mean”. The doctrine of the mean reveals the inherent laws of the operation of all things in the world and the highest realm of the gentleman’s self-cultivation. The sages of all ages are inspired by “harmony” and are committed to the realization of “harmonious” social relations. Because only harmonious relations can achieve lasting peace. “Harmony” is the core value of Chinese civilization. The concept of “harmony” and the way of thinking such as “valuing harmony and advocating the doctrine of the mean” have been affecting generations of Chinese people, and also breeding the Chinese national spirit—loving peace, which fully reflects the good wishes of Chinese people to achieve a harmonious society. Prior to Confucius, the doctrine of the mean is also reflected in the categories of “harmony” and “appropriateness”. Shi Bo holds the view that “harmony actually fosters new things and similarity doesn’t sustain.” and harmony makes all things grow and develop. “Harmony” is to coordinate and balance different things, and harmony can make all things develop; If you add the same things together, you will be finished when you have exhausted them. Since ancient time, the five elements of metal, wood, water, fire and earth have been considered as basic substances to constitute the universe and they are also indispensable for life. Therefore, harmony is a necessary condition for the survival and development of all things, and harmony can make all things grow [Zhang, C., Li, M., & Wu, D. (2022)]. Shi Bo emphasized “harmony without uniformity”. If the king governs the country by “rejecting differences and preferring the same views”, the country will have problems. For example, King You of Zhou excluded those who held different views and employed those who sowed discord and were insidious, which finally led to the eventual destruction of the Zhou Dynasty. Based on Shi Bo’s view, Yan Ying of the Qi

state further elaborated the importance of “harmony without uniformity”. “Harmony” is like cooking soup. You use water, fire and various condiments to cook fish and meat. The person in charge of the meals reconciles them and then tries to achieve a pleasant taste. The relationship between the king and his subjects is the same. The king should adopt different opinions, accommodate different views and avoid going to extremes. On the basis of his predecessors, Confucius not only raised the idea of “harmony without uniformity” to the height of abstract theory, but also explored the reasonable relationship between humanity and nature. He believed that only by guiding social practice in accordance with the requirements of natural laws can people achieve harmony between humanity and nature, protect nature and be kind to creature. On the relationship between people, Confucius emphasized the use of peaceful means to solve disputes and opposed forced conquest. In the relationship between body and mind, Confucius believed that the harmony of body and mind is an important part of social harmony. First, the harmony between man and nature. If people take too much from nature, ecological crisis will appear. So, the ancient Chinese people put forward the ecological principle of “taking in moderation and using in moderation”. For example, Yu the Great once issued a ban on “logging” in spring and “fishing” in summer. The “Law of the Land” of the Qin Dynasty is considered by the academic community as the world’s earliest environmental protection law. The proposition of taking care of resources and being thrifty is reflected in the thoughts of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Second, the harmony between people. From the perspective of “benevolence”, Confucius advocated that harmony is the most precious. Confucius hoped to build a harmonious world of “kings, ministers, fathers and sons”. The harmony between kings and ministers is the foundation, and the harmony between family members is the starting point of everyone’s harmony. Third, the harmony of self, namely the harmony of body and mind. In dealing with the harmony between man and self, Confucians pay attention to “the combination of two purposes” and “excess is not good enough”, which provides us with a way of understanding and cultivation[Sheng, H. (2024)].

3. The enlightenment on the relationship between man and nature

The “doctrine of the mean” emphasizes “treating nature well”, focusing on the establishment of a harmonious relationship between man and nature. It is imperative to protect the ecology and restrain the plunder of natural resources. It is necessary to thoroughly reflect on the unity of opposites between man and nature, establish a systematic thinking of harmony between man and nature, and treat man and nature as a sustainable system, so as to realize the common development of heaven, earth and mankind (Cai, 2024).

To survive and develop, human beings obtain material resources from nature, but they should follow and adapt to the laws of nature, care for all things in nature, and use natural resources with moderation. Between heaven and earth, human behavior should be felicitous, not endlessly taking from nature, but transform nature in a rational way, and make rational use of natural resources. The doctrine of the mean between heaven and earth is that people neither worship nature as a slave, nor destroy things as a master (Tam, 2024; Tianqi, 2024).

3.1. Respect life and love all things

All things in nature are an organic whole of symbiosis, coexistence, integration and common development. The Confucian “outlook on the world” includes the construction of a harmonious order of the whole human world, taking heaven, earth and human beings as a harmonious and unified whole, and forming the responsibility ethics between man and nature. Heaven, earth and man are an integral whole. Between heaven and earth, man’s reverence for life and respect for nature are equally important. Man should be kind to all things in nature, respect life, treat all things well, and value the existence of all living things. In this respect, Chinese Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist philosophies have some similarities. For example, Confucius proposed that “the benevolent man loves others”, hoping that people respect and help each other. Mencius advocated that “A benevolent man should love his family and other people, and love all things that belong to them”. Even people should have compassion for animals. It follows that Confucianism takes “benevolence” as the core of ethical thoughts, and extends the object of moral behavior to the natural world, from “benevolence to people” to “love of animals”. Lao Zi said, “The way of heaven is impartial. Though anyone should be equally treated, he who is benevolent has many to assist him.” The heavenly world has a selfless love for animals and people. Buddhism views all things in the world with compassion, and regards “no killing” as the foundation of good thoughts. This is an important source of ancient Chinese ecological ethics. The Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist cultures embody the benevolent attitude and moral concept towards nature and all things, showing a common ecological ethics, which enables people to recognize and abandon deliberate pursuit in accordance with the enduring mechanism of life and return to the endless cycle of life. We should re-examine the relationship between human and nature, and establish and follow the ecological ethics under the guidance of modern ecological civilization. First, we should establish a correct ecological ethics. Human beings should reflect on their production and lifestyle, put forward corresponding ethical norms, and determine the ecological obligations that human beings must undertake. On the premise of maintaining the balance of the ecosystem, appropriate access to animals and plants from the ecosystem, prohibit eating rare wild animals, and respect and protect biodiversity. Second, we should respect and care for life with a grateful heart. The doctrine of the mean plays a role in restricting and regulating people’s behavior. People should treat all things well, respect life, achieve harmony between human and nature, and realize the sustainable development of population, resources, environment and energy. People should treat nature well, give all life the right to exist, and use environmental ethics to restrict and regulate their behavior. Respecting life and treating all things well embodies the humanistic spirit of putting people first (Che, 2024; Duan, 2023; Hühn, 2022).

3.2. Pursuit harmony between man and nature, and act on the Tao

In Eastern philosophy, heaven means “nature”. In order to adapt to the changes of nature, people try to find the laws of nature, which belong to “Tao”. If people master the laws of “Tao” and act according to the laws of “Tao”, they can serve themselves. Zhuangzi said: “Heaven and earth coexists with me; all things and I are one.” Confucius proposed. The studies of everyday life can get high up into the Heaven.”

believing that there is a connection between man and heaven. Mencius proposed “taking heaven and earth as one”, and Dong Zhongshu proposed “the relationship between heaven and man”. Their views all reflect the holistic view of “the unity of heaven and man”. The thinker Zhang Zai formally proposed “the unity of man and nature. Laozi said: “Man rules the earth, earth rules the heaven, heaven rules Dao, and Dao rules nature.” The laws of “Tao” are natural laws, and all things in the heaven and earth must follow natural laws. Both Daoism and Confucianism advocate “the unity of heaven and man”, regarding man and all things in the heaven and earth as an interrelated organic whole, and pursuing harmony between man and nature. Nature is the source of life that breeds all things. Therefore, people should strive to understand and master the laws of nature. In the process of developing and utilizing nature, people should conform to the nature of all things, so that all things in the heaven and earth can better serve man. The unity of heaven and man is the premise for man to correctly understand the universe and life, and it is also the basis for the establishment of Confucian outlook on life. Confucians believe that human affairs must conform to the will of heaven. Only by transforming the laws of heaven into human principles and conforming to the laws of heaven can the country and people enjoy a peaceful and prosperous life. The idea of “harmony between man and nature” has important implications for reflecting on the conquest of nature and destruction of ecology in modern society. Building a harmonious relationship between man and nature is the best way for contemporary people to achieve the harmony between heaven and man. We draw on the wisdom of the ancients in “harmony between man and nature”, and try to change the view that ecological protection is in opposition to the development of productive forces. Man must transform nature in a rational way, make rational use of natural resources, and consciously promote green development. In the new era, we should respect nature, conform to nature, and protect nature, plan for development from the perspective of harmonious coexistence between man and nature, and accelerate the construction of ecological civilization. Ecological civilization follows the law of ecological balance and emphasizes systematic and integral nature. Based on the theory of sustainable development, ecological civilization aims at harmonious coexistence between people, people and society, and people and nature. It is also an ecological civilization that advocates nature, protects the environment, and promotes sustainable use of resources (Junhyun, 2024; Ren, 2023; Nazeer, 2023).

3.3. Everything is equal and everything exists in harmony

Taoism believes that man and all things are equal in inner nature. Everything in nature does not exist for human beings, but has its own value. Everything develops naturally according to the nature endowed by the Tao. Human beings should not interfere with the growth of everything at will. Human beings should treat all living creatures equally and respect the existence of all life, because they are created by the Tao just like human beings. That is to say, “Everything has its own Tao”. Therefore, everything has the same value and dignity as human beings. Lao Zi’s idea of “keeping the middle” emphasizes that people should respect the laws of nature. There is no distinction between high and low in everything. Everything is equal. Zhuang Zi said: “From the perspective of the Tao, there is no distinction between high and low.”

Although the forms of everything are different, they are all governed by the laws of the Tao. Therefore, there is no essential difference between everything. This is Zhuang Zi's view of equality of everything. Buddhism believes that everything is alive. From the perspective of life, Buddhism puts forward the concept of "quality of all living creatures", recognizing that all living creatures have their value of existence and should be respected and treated well. Therefore, since everything is equal, people should respect the life of all living creatures. The ancient agricultural civilization brought about the concept of "harmony". The ancestors realized that the harmonious relationship between heaven and earth can nourish the growth of everything; on the contrary, if the relationship between heaven and earth is not harmonious, it will violate the nature of everything, inevitably produce natural disasters and endanger human survival. The philosophy of "life" is an ecological philosophy, and its essence is to achieve harmony between humanity and nature. Man and nature are a community of life. Man cannot live without nature. Man and nature should maintain a harmonious relationship. Man and nature are inseparable and integrated. Man should live in accordance with nature. The Confucian classic *The Book of Rites* says, "If you ask the king about his wealth, you should count the land and the mountains." Mountains, forests and lakes are the main source of people's living materials and an important part of national wealth. Based on the Confucian concept of natural wealth, the idea of "lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets" has realized the upgrading of traditional ecological philosophy, namely China's path to modernization. China's path to modernization is the modernization of harmonious coexistence between man and nature. Promoting the harmonious coexistence between man and nature is the essential requirement of modernization (Nazeer, 2023; Wang, 2023; Zhang, 2023).

3.4. The way of heaven, earth and man, and green development

The Tao of Man is ranked equally with the Tao of Heaven and the Tao of Earth in *Zhouyi*, highlighting the equal importance of man and heaven and earth. In this system, heaven, earth and man form the space-time field and ecological circle for human reproduction and survival. Human activities should interact with heaven and earth and are closely connected with them. The theory on "heaven, earth and man" breeds the concept of heaven and earth, and the nature of things. The concept of timing is reflected in agriculture and hunting activities. Animals and plants are allowed to be collected and used only within a certain period and to a certain extent. It is forbidden to collect and hunt when they are germinating or young, and it is not allowed to drain the pond to get all the fish. The concept of soil fertility is mainly about the theory of traditional soil science. In the late Western Han Dynasty, Guo Wengong systematically put forward the theory of the soil veins, which profoundly revealed the dynamic conditions and variability of soil. Chen Jian in the Southern Song Dynasty put forward the theory on sustainable use of soil based on the theory of the soil veins. The working people in ancient China used the soil theory to transform bad land into good land, thus providing a solid foundation for the sustainable development of agriculture. The "view of variable nature" of traditional Chinese agriculture includes the variable nature of agricultural organisms themselves (biological inheritance and variation) and the variable relationship between agricultural organisms and the environment. Under the

guidance of the “view of variable nature”, the ancient Chinese people constantly cultivated new varieties and introduced new species, providing a bright future for the sustainable development of agriculture. From the ecological dimension, the foundation of China’s path to modernization has been laid. Ecological environment protection is a long way to go. It is necessary to continue to promote green development, step up the modernization of harmonious coexistence between man and nature, and enhance the transformation of the green development mode. Green development is the development mode that pursues the comprehensive progress of human society, is the sustainable development mode that respects, adapts to and protects nature, and is the development mode that maintains the harmonious coexistence of man and nature. Green production mode is “environmentally friendly, protects natural resources, and strengthens ecological restoration”. Its characteristics are based on the value orientation of ecological civilization and the pursuit of harmonious development between man and nature. This requires us to do as much as possible in the production process without pollution emissions, develop renewable resources scientifically and rationally, make renewable resources recycled, and work on conflicts between human development and resource shortage through recycling. The harmonious coexistence of man and nature is our only survival goal. Therefore, we should abandon the industrial production mode and create an ecological production mode to achieve the coordinated development between society, individuals and nature.

4. Conclusion

As a Chinese saying goes, “All beings flourish when they live in harmony and receive nourishment from Nature”. Man and nature form a community of life; we, as human beings, must respect nature, follow its ways, and protect it. Only by observing the laws of nature can humanity avoid costly blunders in its exploitation. Guided by the doctrine of the mean, we firmly believe that we can build a community of all life on Earth, and a clean and beautiful world for us all.

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