

# The Contemporary Mission of Confucianism

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## Abstract:

Confucianism's evolution can have an intellectual basis thanks to the formulation of *Yili*. Confucianism can be practiced with vivid subjects drawn from the education and cultivation of the populace. Criticism of society can provide a method for demonstrating the spirit of Confucianism. The implementation of values is the ultimate goal of Confucianism. Therefore, if society wants to develop Confucianism, practice Confucianism, display the spirit of Confucianism, and achieve the ultimate goal of Confucianism, the elaboration of philosophical principles, the education of the people, criticism of the society, and the implementation of values should naturally become the four major missions of contemporary Confucianism.

## Keywords:

Confucianism  
Yili  
Education

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## 1. Introduction

The “four missions” discussed in this paper do not imply that these “missions” are limited to the modern era. Emphasizing their contemporary nature only means that these missions have not been fully highlighted in the present day, and some are even “invisible.” Therefore, it is necessary to awaken contemporary Confucian scholars and all those who care about the fate of Confucianism, as the responsibility towards present-day Confucianism is extremely significant and urgent.

## 2. The Elaboration of Yili of Confucianism

Why “the elaboration of *Yili* of Confucianism” is considered the current goal of Confucianism? Is not much

of the current Confucian scholarship focused on this? Yes, the academic work of many of our Confucian scholars is indeed part of the effort to elaborate Confucian principles. Unfortunately, several events suggest that the efforts to elaborate Confucian concepts have fallen well short. First and foremost, many debates related to Confucianism arise from a lack of clarity on fundamental principles. For instance, does Confucianism count as a system of thought with a humanistic concern? Some scholars firmly deny this. Because, in their view, the principles of “the three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues”, the theory of Yin and Yang, and the ritual system, all support authoritarianism, hierarchy, and despotism. How could there be humanistic care within Confucianism? Furthermore, does Confucianism value justice more or

place greater emphasis on familial affection? Debates like these are not without academic significance, but if there is a clearer understanding of the systematic structure of Confucian principles, it is believed that such debates would not arise.

The core concept that the foundational classics of Confucianism aim to express and pursue is “Shengsheng” which can be elaborated as the creation of life, nurturing of life, protection of life, fulfillment of life, respect for life, and the harmonious integration of life. In other words, the Confucian system of principles is centered around this main axis. Therefore, Confucian thought embodies the spirit of humanism and also advocates for justice.

Naturally, this should not be seen as denying the presence of the negative aspects of Confucian thought, as it can even be said that many people are quite alienated from Confucian thought. For example, a president and professor of a university in the U.S. was once asked for his views on the establishment of “Confucius Institutes” in the U.S. and the American understanding of Confucianism. To the author’s amazement, he said “NO” multiple times before finishing the query. He informed the author that Americans are not interested in Confucianism, especially American women. In their view, the “Yin and Yang” concept represents hierarchy and is discriminatory against women. It is true that the concept of “Yin and Yang” does encompass an awareness of hierarchy, but the rich connotations of the “Yin and Yang” concept are far from “hierarchy” alone.

Thirdly, regarding the contemporary development of Confucianism, only by grasping Confucian principles can one find direction. Numerous scholars have put forth a range of highly insightful responses, but it appears challenging to amalgamate them into a unified ideology. The development of Confucianism itself can only come from an accurate understanding of Confucian thought. To enhance Confucian philosophy, it is imperative to comprehend precisely its limitations and merits. For example, what should people do with the “aristocratic” consciousness in Confucian thought? How should people deal with the concept of “discrimination against knowledge” within Confucian thought? These are issues to be addressed. However, the resolutions to these questions can only be obtained by a grasp of the Confucian system of principles. Therefore organizing and

clarifying Confucian principles is an urgent mission of Confucian studies today.

The task of distinguishing and examining Confucian concepts can be categorized into three components. First, comprehensively present the system of Confucian thought. This involves a thorough study of Confucian thought. Second, to clarify the logical threads and structure of Confucian thought. Third, to identify and discern issues within Confucian principles. This requires revealing deficiencies or problems within the Confucian system of principles. These are the academic missions of contemporary Confucianism. The development and innovation of Confucianism are closely related to the organization of Confucian principles.

### 3. The education and cultivation of the people

Here the term “people” encompasses everyone, including the high-ranking officials and the common masses. Therefore, this paper particularly cannot agree with Dong Zhongshu’s discriminatory teaching of “the nature of the sage, the nature of the common man, and the petty nature”, but rather supports Confucius’ egalitarian and inclusive principle of “teaching without discrimination”<sup>[1]</sup>.

Why “the education and cultivation of the people” is considered a mission of contemporary Confucianism? This can be analyzed from multiple perspectives. First, “educating and cultivating the people” is the continuation of Confucianism’s traditional mission. Confucius believed that morality and rites are meant for education and cultivation: “Guide them with virtue, regulate them with ritual, and the people will know shame and stand corrected”<sup>[2]</sup>. Mencius believed that establishing schools was for the moral education of the people. He said, “Schools should be established to teach the principles of filial and fraternal duty so that white-haired men will not be seen carrying burdens on the roads”<sup>[3]</sup>. Therefore, the writer of the Book of Han accurately positioned the responsibilities of Confucianism as education and cultivation: “The Confucian school, presumably originating from the officials of the Minister of Education, assists the ruler in following the principles of Yin and Yang, and extends education and cultivation”<sup>[4]</sup>. Before the late Qing Dynasty, Confucianism had always

been the basic ideological resource of China for the education and cultivation of the people. It is evident that for Confucianism, “educating and cultivating the people” is indeed its inherent mission. Today, the traditional Confucian mission of “educating and cultivating the people” should not only be inherited but also promoted.

Second, “educating and cultivating the people” is how fundamental concepts of Confucianism are implemented. Confucius dedicated his life to integrating Confucianism into the hearts of rulers and the ruled. It is said, “When the music is played in the ancestral temples, and the ruler and his subjects listen to it together, harmony and respect prevail; when played among the elders and the young in the community, harmony, and obedience are the result; when played within the family, harmony and closeness among fathers, sons, and brothers are fostered”<sup>[5]</sup>. Because he understood that only when Confucianism is accepted by people can it be transformed into action. However, both the wise and the foolish, as well as the virtuous and the wicked, may miss the “Dao” of Confucianism for various reasons. It is said, “I know Dao will not be followed: the wise go beyond it, the foolish fall short. I understand that Dao may not be easily comprehensible to everyone: those who possess virtue surpass it, while others who lack worthiness fall behind”<sup>[6]</sup>. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt various methods to educate and cultivate the people.

During ancient times, the main educational materials used in schools were the Confucian classics. The imperial examination system greatly intensified the scholars’ enthusiasm for studying these classics. Through systematic learning and their efforts to prepare for the imperial examinations, they were profoundly influenced by Confucianism.

Academies were also a means of Confucian education and cultivation for the people. The Song and Ming dynasties were a period of vigorous development for academic education. Academy teachings were generally led by great Confucian scholars, such as Zhu Xi, Lu Jiuyuan, and Lv Zuqian. For example, the teachings at the Bailudong Academy included the following principles: the educational objectives were “harmony between father and son, righteousness between ruler and subject, the distinction between husband and wife, order between elder and younger, and trust between friends”; the order of learning was “to study extensively, to inquire earnestly,

to think carefully, to discriminate clearly, and to practice sincerely”; the key points for self-cultivation were “to speak with loyalty and trustworthiness, to act with seriousness and respect, to discipline one’s anger and desires, and to correct one’s errors and improve”; the principles for handling affairs were “to uphold righteousness rather than to seek benefit, to follow the Dao rather than to calculate achievements”; and the method for interacting with others was “do not impose on others what you do not wish for yourself, and when practice does not yield results, turn inward and examine oneself”<sup>[7]</sup>. Moreover, the academies were open to students regardless of their background or social status. Since the education and cultivation of the people is the pathway through which the fundamental concepts of Confucianism are implemented, it naturally follows that if the people wish for the basic principles of Confucianism to be widely disseminated and effectively realized, they must take up the education and cultivation of the people as a cause to pursue.

Third, contemporary society is in urgent need of moral education. How can it be that someone who has fallen and been injured, then helped and rescued would turn around and demand compensation from their benefactor? How can a professor who has plagiarized the work of others still have the audacity to accuse others with a straight face? How can a senior official, known for his wrongdoings, stand before a trial and smile with no sign of remorse? How can a businessman, responsible for the harm and loss of many lives due to his deceit, defend his crimes with boastful confidence? On the relationship between righteousness and profit, Confucianism advocates prioritizing righteousness over profit, as the saying goes, “Riches and honors obtained through unrighteousness are to me as a passing cloud”<sup>[8]</sup>. In personal conduct, Confucianism advocates “integrity above all”, despising falsehood and abhorring deceitful actions. In dealing with the vulnerable, Confucianism advocates benevolence among and care for the people, as in the saying, “Cultivate oneself to bring peace to others, and thereby bring peace to the people.” In the attitude towards mistakes, Confucianism advocates a sense of shame. One needs to correct mistakes immediately after they are found and should consider not feeling ashamed of one’s shame as the greatest shame. These fundamental propositions and concepts of Confucianism have a

cautionary and educational significance for the ugly phenomena in today's society. However, the author must regretfully say that in the current society, Confucianism remains an awkward onlooker. The educational function of Confucianism is not manifested at all.

#### 4. Criticism of society

This paper emphasizes “criticism of society” as a contemporary mission of Confucianism because it is part of its intrinsic spirit.

Firstly, the negation and critique of the current social conditions are part of the intrinsic spirit of Confucianism. The paper can look at some of the fundamental concepts of Confucian thought. The ideal society envisioned by Confucianism is the one where “the great way prevails, and the world is for the public. The virtuous and the capable are selected, and trust and harmony are promoted. People do not only care for their own kin, nor only favor their children. The elderly have a peaceful and honored end. The able is employed, and the young has the opportunity to grow. Widows, widowers, orphans, the childless, the disabled, and the sick are all provided for. Men have their roles, and women have their places. Resources are treasured but not hoarded, nor is labor exploited for personal gain. As a result, there is no scheming, no theft, no chaos, and no need to close doors at night. This is the ‘Great Harmony’”<sup>[9]</sup>. If the society contradicts with ideal society described by him, it will inevitably be criticized.

Furthermore, Confucianism believes that the way to govern a country is through the “Wang Dao” rather than the “Ba Dao”. The so-called “Wang Dao” is to govern with “benevolence”, to inspire and win over people through virtue, to achieve the effect of “encouraging the virtuous, the officials, the common people, the various craftsmen, the distant peoples, and winning the hearts of the feudal lords.” If a country or the world is established this way, it is not only intolerable but also despised by Confucian scholars.

Secondly, Confucian scholars have never given up on criticizing society. Confucianism has its value system to judge society. Confucius found that the rites were in disarray and thus sought to restore “ritual propriety (*li*)”, and upon discovering a lack of care, he proposed the concept of “benevolence (*ren*)”. In other words, the introduction of Confucius's concepts of “benevolence”

and “ritual propriety” was a critique of society. Mencius observed that the reason for wars between states was the absence of “benevolence”, and thus he put forward the idea of “benevolent governance.” Why did Zhang Zai propose the idea of “establishing the heart for heaven and earth, determining the destiny for the people, continuing the teachings of the sages, and opening up a grand peace for all future generations” ? Was it not because the conscience of heaven and earth was lost? Was it not because the common people could not find a place to live and make a living? Was it not because the teachings of the sages were not being passed down and promoted? Was it not because society was in turmoil and chaos? Is this not a strong critique of society? Lu Jiuyuan criticized the imperial examination system, believing that many people participated in it merely for the sake of profit, seeking only “official ranks and salaries”, with no real concern for “national affairs and the well-being of the people.” Wang Yangming criticized some people for “dividing knowledge (*zhi*) from action (*xing*)”, saying, “The doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action is specifically for those scholars who divide knowledge and action into two, insisting on using the effort of knowledge before taking action, thus leading to a lifetime of inaction.” Therefore, this paper had to make this statement to correct the bias and remedy the problem. Scholars cannot practice what they preach and instead get entangled in words, thus getting further and further away from *Dao*<sup>[10]</sup>.

Li Zhi's criticism was particularly sharp, as he challenged the gender hierarchy by saying, “I, in my humble opinion, believe that when discussing the profoundness or shallowness of one's views, one should not simply consider a woman's perspective as inherently limited. It is acceptable to acknowledge the existence of men and women, but is it acceptable to categorize perspectives as male or female? It is acceptable to say that perspectives vary in profoundness, but to claim that all men's views are superior while all women's views are inferior — is that acceptable?”<sup>[11]</sup>. It is evident that Confucianism is inherently critical.

Thirdly, contemporary society requires the critique that Confucianism can provide. Confucianism emphasizes governing the country with virtue, advocating for self-cultivation and introspection. For officials, this means integrity. However, in today's civil service, the concept of

“integrity” is merely a term found in the dictionaries of some officials. Confucianism advocates for the acquisition of wealth and honor through proper means and appropriate methods. Yet, in today’s society, counterfeit and substandard products are rampant. Confucianism stands for fairness and justice. Just as the saying goes, “Heaven’s mandate is not constant; only virtue can assist it.” Confucianism advocates for equity and righteousness, asserting that all activities should be performed with an unbiased mindset. Confucianism should unsheathe its critical sword and launch a relentless denunciation and critique of the society. This is the mission that Confucianism must fulfill, a form of its engagement with the secular world.

## 5. Implementation of values

Confucianism is both a world of values or meanings and a practical discipline for managing the affairs of the world. This means the value system of Confucianism is not satisfied with merely constructing concepts. Instead, it aims to materialize their values. Therefore, the implementation of Confucian values is an inevitable part of the internal logic of Confucianism.

For example, the Confucian concept of “benevolence” (*ren*) is manifested in material life as the improvement of people’s material well-being. Mencius said, “Therefore, a wise ruler, in regulating the livelihood of the people, must ensure that they can adequately provide for their parents and support their wives and children. In good years, they will have enough to eat; in bad years, they will be spared from death... A home of five acres, planted with mulberry trees around it, can allow a person of fifty to wear silk. The breeding of chickens, pigs, and dogs at the right times can allow a person of seventy to eat meat. A hundred acres of land, if not taken away from its proper use, can ensure that a family of several mouths will not go hungry”<sup>[12]</sup>.

In terms of spiritual life, “benevolence” (*ren*) is reflected in the enhancement of people’s spiritual existence. Confucius said, “My greatest concern is that people do not cultivate their virtue, do not engage in learning, do not strive to do what is just upon hearing of it, and do not correct their wrongdoings”<sup>[13]</sup>.

In public life, “benevolence” (*ren*) advocates the reform of public life. It is said, “Ritual (*li*) is what determines closeness and distance in relationships,

resolves doubts, distinguishes between the same and the different, and clarifies right and wrong. Ritual (*li*) does not speak falsely about people, does not waste words, does not exceed limits, does not invade or insult, and does not indulge in undue familiarity”<sup>[14]</sup>. The improvement, enhancement, and reform of material life, spiritual life, and public life are all concrete implementations of the spirit of “benevolence” (*ren*) in Confucianism.

So, what Confucian values to implement? The core concepts of Confucianism include benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), propriety (*li*), trustworthiness (*xin*), and harmony (*he*). “Benevolence (*ren*)” means to love and care for people; “Righteousness (*yi*)” means to be appropriate, just, and decent; “Propriety (*li*)” means to abide by laws and regulations, not to steal, not to lie, and not to disrupt order; “Trustworthiness (*xin*)” means to be honest and act with integrity, without deception; “Harmony (*he*)” means to be inclusive of others, allowing for the coexistence of all things without harm and the parallel development of different paths without conflict.

Are these values present? Of course, it cannot be said that they are not. However, from the perspective of real life, the authors are still shocked by many facts! For example, Confucianism speaks of benevolence. Yet, when one sees street vendors being chased away by city management in a state of chaos, they cannot say that there is “benevolence” present, can they?

The “propriety (*li*)” of Confucianism is not feasible to be reproduced in contemporary culture. However, the spirit of abiding by laws and regulations is necessary. In modern society, many regulations cover all industries. Yet, many people do not take these regulations seriously, engaging in illegal and disorderly conduct. For example, the succession of corrupt officials raises the question of why they trample the law at will. It is because they fail to practice the spirit of “propriety (*li*).” Readers have probably consumed toxic food to varying degrees. These business people, knowing full well the harm these products cause to health, still take risks for the sake of wealth at the expense of benevolence. The concept of integrity should also be of great practical significance.

Confucianism advocates the concept of “harmony (*he*)”, as in the saying, “A gentleman seeks harmony but not uniformity; a petty man seeks uniformity but not harmony.” In the lives of the people, it seems that

there is a lot of “harmony.” However, in many areas, true “harmony” is still unattainable. For instance, there is often only one voice allowed in society, and dissent is not tolerated. When dissent arises, it would be cruelly eliminated. Therefore, the Confucian concept of “harmony” is not reflected in people’s lives.

## 6. Conclusion

In summary, in today’s society, the values or significance of Confucianism are not adequately demonstrated, and the traces of Confucianism are nowhere to be found. Therefore, one of the contemporary missions

of Confucianism is to ensure the implementation of Confucian values, integrate the concepts and values of Confucianism into life, and become part of people’s minds and practices. In short, the implementation of Confucian values should become a contemporary mission.

The elaboration of the Confucianism principles (*li*) can provide an academic basis for the development of Confucianism. The education of the people can provide a living subject for the practice of Confucianism. Social criticism can provide a way to demonstrate the spirit of Confucianism. The implementation of values is the ultimate goal of Confucianism. Hence, these are the four major missions of contemporary Confucianism.

### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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