

THE CONCEPT OF *CHENG* AND CONFUCIAN RELIGIOSITY

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Abstract: To conceptualize Confucian religiosity is to reveal the ultimate concern contained in the Confucian concept of life. Conceptually, ultimate concern connotes an understanding of the foundation of life, the ultimate goal of life, and the way to it. Based on this perspective, this paper attempts to analyze existentially the concept of cheng (诚), the central concept of the Zhongyong. I will endeavor to demonstrate that cheng expresses a religious feeling that sustains Confucianism. Conceptually, cheng is a disposition of feeling in which one is able to see the Tian-endowed nature, free from internal and external influences. Since the Tian-endowed nature is the foundation of human existence, it is the primary sustaining force for human beings. To be in touch with this force and follow its drive are then the ultimate concern for Confucians. In the Zhongyong, we can read a systematical effort to reveal the fundamental disposition of human existence in terms of cheng, from which a Confucian's religiosity is nurtured.

THIS ESSAY considers a Confucian religiosity framed by the *Zhongyong*, one of four most significant Confucian books.¹ Traditionally this book has been the focus of much interest and scholarship in the past.² However, the fundamental concept in the *Zhongyong*, *cheng* (诚),³ though it has been exerting a tremendous influence on Confucian personality, seems not very attracted to current discussions of Confucian religiousness.⁴ Although the increasing interest in Confucian religiousness is an

¹Zhu Xi (朱熹), a most influent Confucian in Song Dynasty (12th century), selected four books as the frameworks of Confucianism. The selection has been confirmed along history without serious challenge. These four books are the *Analects* (论语), the *Mengzi* (孟子), the *Great Learning* (大学), and the *Zhongyong* (中庸). The phrase *Zhongyong* has many translations, such as “doctrine of the mean,” “centrality and commonality,” “focusing the familiar,” etc. I do not foresee any uniform translation, and therefore in this essay would rather use its pinyin form.

² In English scholarship, Tu Weiming presents a good study on the book: *Centrality and Commonality*, revised edition (See Tu). Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, employing the Whiteheadian cosmology in their interpretation of the *Zhongyong*, offer an intriguing interpretation of the book. See Ames and Hall. Korean scholarship has been attracted to the book and sees *cheng* as the fundamental concept. See Ro, 75-110.

³ The translations of *cheng* vary, to name a few: honesty, sincerity, reality, etc. See Tu Weiming's discussions (Tu, 71-73). Ames and Hall, on the other hand, translate it as “creativity” in the context of the Whiteheadian cosmology (Ames/Hall, pp. 32-33). Also cf. Yanming An's discussion in his *The Idea of Cheng (Sincerity/Reality) in The History of Chinese Philosophy*, New York: Global Scholarly Publication, 2005. For more discussions about the translation, see Wen Haiming, “From Substance Language to Vocabularies of Process and Change: Translations of Key Philosophical Terms in the *Zhongyong*,” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (June 2004): 217-233.

⁴ There is an issue of *Philosophy East & West* (vol. 48, 1-1998), which collects three articles about Confucian religiosity or religiousness. The concept of *cheng* is not even mentioned in

encouraging sign;⁵ the ignorance of the concept of *cheng* hinders our appreciation of it. Even worse, some discussions lead in the wrong direction. For example, Confucian religiousness is appreciated in the light of Western conceptions of religion.⁶ It is noteworthy that Wing-tsit Chan perceives well the significant role of *cheng* in his documenting Song's neo-Confucianism.⁷ However, his emphasis on the concept does not stimulate much attention to the importance of Confucian religiousness in English scholarship.

The thesis of this essay is an attempt to illuminate Confucian religiosity in terms of the fundamental concept of *cheng*. As a religious sentiment, *cheng* refers to the ultimate disposition in which the Tian-endowed nature manifests itself and, once it has transformed into human consciousness, it impels human existence to move on. To be a Confucian, one must be in *cheng* from the beginning to the end.

I. The Issue of Human Nature

The *Zhongyong* begins with these words:

The heaven endowment is called the nature; following the nature is called the way; cultivating the way is called education. Without the way, no one can live on even for a moment, and therefore anything without which human beings can still live on is not the way. (1)⁸

their discussions. Readers may receive an impression that the concept of *cheng* plays at least not an essential role in a Confucian religious life, if there indeed is such a life. And when Ames/Hall translate the term as creativity, they seem concerned with its cosmological sense rather than its religious implication. Cf. Ames/Hall, pp.30-35. I should mention that Ames/Hall discuss Confucian religiousness in the treatment of ritual propriety. Ibid., p.52. But the ritual issues in Confucianism are involved solely with politic and morality.

⁵ See Berthrong, John: "Trends in Interpretation of Confucian Religiosity" (Berthrong 1991, 226-254), and "Confucian Piety and the Religious Dimension of Japanese Confucianism" (Berthrong 1998, 58-68). Also see Neville.

⁶ Even Tu Weiming's defense for Confucian religiousness cannot escape this trap. Tu defines Confucian religiousness in these words: "We can define the Confucian way of being religious as *ultimate self-transformation as a communal act and as a faithful dialogical response to the transcendent*" (Tu, p.95). A western context may connote well-defined concepts of "the transcendent" and "faithful". However, they are alien to Confucians. Particularly, "faithful" in the Confucian context refers to a good relationship between friends, and conveys no message about a relationship between the transcendent and a human being. Consequently, the expression "*a faithful dialogical response to the transcendent*" can be understood only in a western context. Of course, in the shadow of the Western conception of religion Tu may easily understand the concepts of transcendence and faith, and so be able to conceive its religious significance. But this is not a Confucian religiosity.

⁷ See the introduction to chapters 28-32 in Chan.

⁸ All quotations from the *Zhongyong* in this paper will be my translation, consulting with Chai, Chan, Legge, and Ames/Hall; and the paragraph arrangement follows Zhu Xi's edition.

Confucius respected heaven, yet regarded it as not directly intervening in human affairs. The *Zhongyong* adheres to this tradition. In the *Zhongyong*, however, Confucius' respect toward heaven transforms into a conception of the divine heaven and arrived at a notion that this heaven is the origin of human beings. It is noteworthy that, unlike the Hebrew scripture where divine revelation plays an essential role in the relation between God and human beings, the *Zhongyong* sees this world as regularly ordered by heaven. What humans need to do is simply follow this order. This understanding excludes the heaven's interruption of orderly human life and leaves human life governed by humans alone. In agriculture, which was the primary economy in ancient China, the Chinese diligently observed the movements of the seasons and designed a very detailed agricultural calendar guiding their agricultural activities. The 'calendar' of human inner life is much more difficult to sketch. It appears that, to observe the progress of a human being from birth to death, one must have a way to go. As the agricultural calendar must observe the natural movements of four seasons, the human calendar must follow human nature, which has been endowed upon us by the heaven. Consequently, the ordering of human life must be based upon the knowledge of the endowed human nature.

The *Zhongyong* claims that human beings should follow their endowed nature, and it is the right way for them to live. Surprisingly, the *Zhongyong* seems uninterested in discussing the issue of human nature. As we know, the issue in question was a much discussed topic by the time the book was written. A well-known debate exists between the good-nature theory and the evil-nature theory, respectively represented by Mengzi (390 - 305 BCE) and Xunzi (298 - 238 BCE). In proposing the good-nature theory, Mengzi defended that good human nature is necessary for morality as well as for a good society. On the other hand, Xunzi wrote a treatise, entitled "On the Evil Human Nature", arguing that human nature is selfish and greedy, and therefore is evil. In order to create a good society, this evil nature must be cultured and educated by the sages to become moral.⁹ The debate cannot find its place in the *Zhongyong*, as there is no mention of this argument.

This observation brings up the issue of dating the *Zhongyong*. In fact, the date of publication is still an unsolved problem. A traditional view holds that it was written before the *Mengzi* and the *Xunzi*. However, some modern linguistic studies have revealed that the *Zhongyong* contains versions that could not have been written before the Qin Dynasty. They then assert that the book was written later.¹⁰ The dating issue is not a major concern in this paper. The following analysis of the internal structure of the book supports the latter proposal. Put aside the chronological issue, I

⁹ Mengzi's position can be found in his discourse with Gaozi in the *Mengzi*; and Xunzi's treatise is in the *Xunzi*. For detailed discussions of the subject, cf. Nivison: chapters 10 and 13.

¹⁰ For example, the following version can have been written only after the Qin Dynasty: "Now we have the same tracks for all vehicles, the same characters for all writings, and the same norms for all behaviors." (The *Zhongyong*: 33) As to the chronological relationship among the *Zhongyong*, the *Mengzi*, and the *Xunzi*, see Qu, pp.27-30, and Tu, chapter 1. It is arguable that the *Zhongyong* was written in the early Han dynasty (202 BCE – 8), much later than the other two books.

would suggest that the author of the book was aware of the debate, as the notions of the debate might exist before they were addressed by Mengzi and Xunzi.

In fact, the “ignorance” of the debate seems to deliver a keen insight by the author, that is, the debate over good or evil nature was improperly addressed. Both sides of the debate had observed the inevitability of moral disagreements and conflicts. Human beings must judge and choose to live, and their judgments start with a certain perspective yet judge universally.¹¹ Since moral disagreements are intractable, insisting on a certain perspective will result in endless debate but a solution.

If we look into the arguments provided by Mengzi and Xunzi, we may find that they both were worried by the same social problem, i.e., disordering of the rites and spreading of immoral behaviors. Further, they actually shared the same idealism, that is, to establish a good and moral society. The only difference between them was their different explanations of the cause of the problems as well as of the motivation to establish the good and moral society. Taking into a consideration of their commonality, their difference is not essential. Indeed, the difference will disappear when the ideal society is reached. From a progressive viewpoint, we may conclude that the debate contains no essential conflict at all.

The *Zhongyong*’s understanding of human nature is a progressive viewpoint. We may apply it to review the debate. Regardless of good or evil, human nature is endowed on us by birth. In his dialogues with Gaozi, who agrees with Mengzi that human nature is given by birth, Mengzi defends that human nature is born with a good tendency. On the other hand, Xunzi grants that human nature comes along with birth, but insists that they are born evil. Respectively, Mengzi explains that good nature provides a foundation upon which we are able to attain morality. And Xunzi argues that morality is necessary to cultivate and cover our evil nature so that a good society can be established. They attempt to locate the driving force that prompts us to the same ideal morality. Whatever the driving force is, it is endowed on us from the very beginning of our existence and we have no power to alter it. Whether our nature is good or evil, it is given by birth, and it is our nature (good or evil) that motivates us to establish ideal morality. Logically, if we retain the position that our nature is endowed by birth, we may then dismiss the issue of good or evil. This is indeed the *Zhongyong*’s treatment.¹²

Now, if we fix our eyes on the goal of the good and moral society as well as the principle that the nature is endowed by birth, we see no conflict but the same

¹¹ I appeal to Kant’s categorical imperative here: a moral law must be universal. I do not say that those people involved in the debate were conscious of this categorical imperative. Yet, a moral judgment must be a categorical imperative.

¹² A Song Neo-Confucian, Wang Yangming, may be the first one to perceive the significance of this treatment. In his conversation with his student, Xue Kan (Hsueh K’an), Wang makes a statement: “The state of having neither good nor evil is that of principle in tranquillity”(Chan, 677. Extended discussion may be found in 677-679). In Wang’s terminology, tranquillity is the state of *cheng*. In this interpretation, the issue of good and evil can be dismissed in the concept of *cheng*.

assumption. That is, with our endowed nature we need to improve ourselves to establish a good and moral society. As we have introduced the theme of improvement, we may call it the progressive viewpoint. The *Zhongyong* is in this viewpoint. With the statement that “Following the nature is called the way”, the book emphasizes on the way, which should be on track all the times from beginning to end. The progressive viewpoint admits that our present life is not perfect and our current notion of good has yet to improve. It is reasonable to infer that a reflection on the imperfect and incomplete human life can only conceptualize a partial human nature. When one insist on the completeness of a certain understanding of one’s endowed nature, which in fact are incomplete, then, one will inevitably encounter conflicts with others. If our understanding of the endowed nature is a progressive process, the concern is then shifted to that of improvement, rather than that of argument.

The book’s progressive viewpoint fosters a non-adversarial attitude. As we know, the argumentative-style in communication was prevailing among different schools in the Warring States period. This non-adversarial attitude does not demand that others adopt what is right or wrong, but simply demonstrates what we should do and how we can do it if we want to be good in a long run. The theme of the book is to explore the way to be a good human being. It begins with this assumption: the Tian-endowed nature is in our existence all the times, but our conception of it may appear differently at different stages of life. Consequently, we are not in a position to argue with others, as none of us hold a complete understanding of our endowed nature.

Based on this progressive viewpoint, the book strategically addresses these three questions: What is the concept of *junzi*?¹³ What is concerned in a *junzi*’s life? And what is *junzi*’s life in fulfillment?¹⁴ To answer these questions is to demonstrate Confucian religiosity.

II. Who is Junzi?

The first half of the text combines a variety of Confucius’s sayings with brief comments and statements. The purpose is to provide a reflection on human nature as it has been perceived in light of Confucius’s teaching. However, this lengthy discussion can divert the reader’s attention. At first glance, this part of the book offers observations about ideal social relations (political and moral), as well as the ideal personality, from Confucian perspectives. One may be led to the opinion that the book deals only with ethical and political. Further reading may reveal that some of the so-called ideal social relations obviously have become obsolete for a modern

¹³ I leave this term in its pinyin form without translation and will discuss it in the following section. Some translate it as “superior person” or “exemplary person”, I do not feel satisfied with them.

¹⁴ As a comparison, I may mention Tu Wei-ming’s conceiving the book by three categories: the profound person, the fiduciary community, and the moral metaphysics. See Tu Wei-ming: introduction and chapter 1. I share Tu Wei-ming’s evaluation that the *Zhongyong* has an “internal structure,” rather than just a collection of aphorisms, though I perceive the internal structure differently.

reader, such as “honor high ranking ministers” and “be considerate to hired officials.” (20) Readers may then lose interest in reading and reflecting on the book. Indeed, the importance of the book has been denounced for decades in contemporary Chinese scholarship since the May Fourth Movement of 1919. This is of course a lamentable misleading.

To explore Confucian religiosity, we have to understand the concept of *junzi* delineated by the *Zhongyong*. It says: “A *junzi* is in *zhongyong*” (2:1). In Chinese, the term *zhongyong* combines *zhong* and *yong*. *Zhong* means, literally, the middle, center, or proper; *yong* means employment, application. When combined, it refers to a proper application or a right action. If forced to translate it into English, I prefer to “proper action”. So the title of the *Zhongyong* may be translated as *On the Proper Action*. A *junzi* is a person who acts properly. But according to what is it proper? It says: “Therefore, being a *junzi*, one cannot but cultivate himself. To cultivate himself, one cannot but serve his kin. To serve his kin, one cannot be ignorant of human beings. To know human beings, one cannot be ignorant of the Tian.” (20:7) A *junzi* is described as a person who cultivates himself, and this cultivation includes serving his kin, knowing humanity and the Tian. Clearly, when a *junzi* lives a life properly, it means to live a life according to the knowledge of the Tian-endowed nature.

A *junzi* is a person who is able to follow the Tian-endowed nature. To be able to follow it, one must have the knowledge of it. And to have this knowledge, one must self-cultivate. Consequently, self-cultivation is the way of *junzi*.

Being the way of *junzi*, self-cultivation imposes two issues. First, what is the foundation of self-cultivation? And secondly, what does he cultivate? To address these two issues, the book categorizes two kinds of good. Let us read the following:

When people in inferior positions do not win over the confidence of the sovereign, the government cannot be in order. There is a way to win over the confidence of the sovereign; but if they cannot be trusted by their friends, they cannot win over the confidence of the sovereign. There is a way to be trusted by their friends, but if they do not obey their parents, they cannot be trusted by their friends. There is a way to be obedient to their parents, but if they cannot be in *cheng* when they are alone, they cannot be obedient to their parents. There is a way to be in *cheng*, but without seeing the good, they are not in *cheng* (20:17).

We have a couple of translation issues to explain. The last sentence connects the good and *cheng*. Most English translations use the future tense to indicate a causal relationship between “not seeing the good” and “not in *cheng*.” For example, Ames/Hall translate it as: “If one does not understand efficacy [the good], one will not find creativity (*cheng*) in one’s person.”¹⁵ Such a translation implies that the understanding of the good is the precondition for being *cheng*; or that the understanding of the good is the foundation of being *cheng*. This is a misreading. The passage depicts an existential state in which when one is in *cheng* one sees the good simultaneously. Or when one sees the good, at the same time, one is in *cheng*. The

¹⁵ See Ames/Hall, p.104.

good is present or manifests itself in *cheng*, and *cheng* is featured in the manifestation of the good. Lacking of either of them, the other cannot exist.

Linguistically, *cheng* conveys a disposition or an attitude of being honest, sincere, truthful, and real with oneself. Most English translators use “sincerity” for *cheng*. In English, “sincerity” can be defined in the context of morality of a community. However, the *Zhongyong* employs the term *cheng* to refer to a disposition in which one is true to oneself; so it further indicates an existence in which one is immediate with one’s own nature. It can be a disposition when one is alone, having nothing to do with others. If forced to translate, “being true to oneself” may be suitable.

The quoted passage traces the foundation of a *junzi*’s life and reaches the good which manifests itself in *cheng*. Once in *cheng*, one directly sees the good. In other words, the good is immediately revealed when one is in *cheng*. As *cheng* is a disposition immediate with one’s nature, the manifesting good in *cheng* is the Tian-endowed nature, i.e., the natural good. In this thinking, the book continues: “*Cheng* is the way of the Tian.” (20:18) Later on, it says: “The manifestation through *cheng* is called the nature; to be towards *cheng* through manifestation is called the education.” (21) In these two sayings, *cheng* is connected with Tian and nature. It is inferred that which manifests (the good) in *cheng* is the Tian-endowed nature. This good comes from the Tian and will be in human existence from the beginning to the end.

There is another kind of good, however. Human beings judge and choose to live. According to the book, when seeing the good in *cheng*, one will follow it. But one cannot follow it by instincts. Rather, being a human, one has to catch it, make it an idea of good, and then use it to judge and choose. It says: “To start with *cheng* is the way of human existence. ... When starting with *cheng*, one judges the good and holds on to it firmly” (20:18).¹⁶ This “good” occurs in the context of judgment. Compared to the good seen in *cheng*, the good in judgment is only a human-made idea. It is a conceptualization of the good seen in *cheng*, and therefore is secondary and changeable (or improvable).¹⁷

Right after proposing the idea of good, the book advises: “Of something unlearned, you have learned it yet are unable to learn it, do not quit. Of something untouched, you have questioned it yet are unable to know it, do not quit. Of something never thought of, you have thought of it yet are unable to understand it, do not quit. Of something unclear, you have clarified it yet are unable to distinguish it, do not quit. Of something not done, you have done it yet are unable to fulfill it, do

¹⁶ Compare with Ames/Hall’s translation: “creating is the proper way of becoming human. Creating is selecting what is efficacious and holding on to it firmly.” Here Ames/Hall translate 誠之者 as creating in an understanding that the sentence implies a starting point. I agree with this interpretation.

¹⁷ The book does not mention the good too many times. Most of them refer to the good in judgment. For example, in chapter 8, it says: “Yanhui is such a person: He wants to be in *zhongyong*; when receiving a good, he holds to it tightly and follows it, not losing it.” In chapter 24, it says: “When something of disaster or blessing is to come, if good, one knows it in advance; and if not good, one knows it in advance. Therefore, who is in full *cheng* is like omniscient.” In both contexts, the good refers to the good in judgment.

not quit... Following this way, the dull will surely become bright, the weak will surely become the strong.” (20:20-21). The intent of these words is to encourage people to strive ceaselessly to improve themselves. But what they can improve is not the good seen in *cheng*, which was endowed by the Tian and cannot be changed; but the good in judgment, namely, the idea of good.

We see two kinds of good here, namely, the natural good (the good seen in *cheng*) and the idea of good (a conceptualization of the former). The distinction between these two goods is crucial to understand the concept of *junzi*. We may categorize two concepts as follows: According to the book, the Tian endows human beings with natures. When people are true to themselves, they are able to see their endowed natures. This is the good seen in *cheng*, which is the natural good, and it will not change throughout the whole life. Meanwhile, people must judge and choose to exist. When they see the good in *cheng*, they have to conceptualize this good and use it as the foundation for their judgments and decision-making. In this way, the natural good, which manifests itself in *cheng*, transforms into an idea of good, which functions as the starting point of judgment. The natural good is endowed by the Tian and exists in a human life from the beginning to the end. It is beyond human effort to change it. The idea of good, however, is conceptualization of the good seen in *cheng*. In such a conceptualization, it may rightly conform to the good seen in *cheng*; meanwhile, it may also mistake it. Once the mistake is discerned, the idea of good will change (improve) accordingly.

With this distinction between two concepts of good, we are able to define *junzi*. When one keeps being true to oneself, one is able to see the natural good and conceptualize it in an idea of good, based on which one judges and chooses. Since the natural good manifests itself in *cheng*, it is necessary for one to be in *cheng* at all times so that once the difference between the natural good and the idea of good occurs, one can improve the idea of good to conform to the natural good. The foundation of *junzi*'s self-cultivation is the good seen in *cheng*, and that which a *junzi* cultivates is his idea of good which is the conceptualization of the Tian-endowed nature. This is the process of self-cultivation. In the Confucian tradition, a *junzi*'s life is a life of “Improving the self by cultivating the nature.” (修身养性)

III. *Cheng*: Truthful to What?

In presenting two kinds of good, the book connects them with *cheng*. As we have discussed, *cheng* indicates a disposition of feeling: that of being truthful to oneself. But to be truthful to oneself is not an easy issue. For example, one may be under an external influence or control, and therefore cannot be truthful to oneself. One may also become stubborn with a certain ideology and so cannot be truthful to oneself. Since the natural good manifests itself only in *cheng*, to maintain an existential state of being in *cheng* becomes crucial for one to be a *junzi*.

We need some discussion about this disposition. Let us consider this paragraph:

Cheng is the way of the Tian; to start with *cheng* is the way of human beings.
Cheng is that in which you do not need to endeavor to conform to it; nor to think to

get it; and you are on the right way as a sage. When starting with *cheng*, one judges the good and holds on to it firmly. (20:18)

In this paragraph, we encounter two usages of *cheng*, one is the way of the Tian, and the other is the way of human beings. The difference in language is very small. It is *zhi* (之) added to the latter. *Zhi* can be understood as a pronoun referring to *cheng*. The sentence of *cheng zhi zhe* (诚之者) may then be read as *cheng cheng* (诚诚). Grammatically, the first *cheng* becomes a verb. In English, I translate it as “starting with *cheng*”.

Let us examine the first usage. The way of the Tian does not refer to something irrelevant to human existence, since the word *cheng* connotes something relative to speech. In my understanding, it refers to the Tian-endowed nature. We have discussed that this nature manifests itself in *cheng*. To a human being, only being in *cheng*, can one see and then follow the Tian-endowed nature. To follow the nature is to follow the way of the Tian. In this sense, *cheng* is the way of the Tian.

Since the endowed nature is at the very beginning of human existence, and this nature manifests itself in *cheng*, it can then be inferred that all human beings start their lives with *cheng*. This is the way of human existence. Here, the book conceives *cheng* as the starting point of human existence. Being the starting point, *cheng* is not an ideal stage of human existence one endeavors to enter. Anything one has to make an effort to get is not the starting point. The book stresses this point and says: “you do not need to endeavor to conform to it.” Further, you do not even have to think of it to reach an understanding of *cheng* and then to be in *cheng*. Actually, if you think of it to get in *cheng*, your thought will be the starting point and *cheng* is at most an ideal stage of human existence. But in actuality, as a human being, you must be in *cheng* first and then think. All thoughts come out of *cheng*. Therefore, you do not have to “think to get it.”¹⁸

It is true that people have thoughts and ideas. These thoughts can be either formulated by one’s own observation and thinking, or informed by others. However, in our actual lives, if we trace back all the way to the beginning, we will find this fact, i.e., no one starts with these thoughts and ideas. On the contrary, all thoughts and ideas come out in a later stage of life. In this consideration, once in *cheng*, you are following the way of the Tian, and therefore you are actually a sage.

However, human beings are different from other animals. They have to judge and choose to live. In the previous section, we have discussed that the *Zhongyong* has categorized two goods. The natural good seen in *cheng* is the Tian-endowed nature, which can be in touch only in *cheng*. The idea of good, on the other hand, is the good in judgment. It is a conceptual transformation of the endowed nature and functions as the foundation of judgments of good and bad. When one starts with *cheng*, one will have to conceptualize the good seen in *cheng* and hold fast to it. The conceptualized

¹⁸ Mengzi had a similar saying: “*Cheng* is the way of the Tian; to think of *cheng* is the way of human beings.” See the *Mengzi*, 7:12. This statement in fact deprives *cheng* of its function as the starting point, as one enters *cheng* through thinking of it.

good is the idea of good. As the idea of good exists only in human consciousness, it guides one's judging and choosing. This is the second usage of *cheng*.

Let us summarize it. When *cheng* is a noun, it refers to the way of the Tian, as one is able to see the endowed nature in *cheng*. When *cheng* is a verb, it refers to the way of human beings, in which people formulate their ideas of good and use them to judge and choose the good to live. The former is the foundation of human existence; and the latter is the application deriving from the foundation. Wang Yangming profoundly perceives these two usages of *cheng*. He says: "To put the heart in the right place is to return to the foundation; and to cultivate the self is to apply it in action."¹⁹ The distinction between the foundation and application (ti yong zhi bian, 体用之辩) is actually involved these two usages of *cheng*.²⁰

We should consider this possibility in human existence. Human beings need the idea of good to judge and choose to live. Although this good is secondary, it is possible for people to take it as the foundation for the further judgment and choosing. For example, a man may judge an apple as food by its color and taste. He then considers that a thing with such a color and taste is food. Based on this idea of good, he will judge and choose things for food by their certain color and taste. He can do it without appealing to the good seen in his *cheng*. In his existence, the idea of good becomes the sole foundation and *cheng* may be seen as obsolete. In such an existence, he is following a certain idea of good and has nothing to do with the good seen in *cheng*. According to the book, this is not the correct way. Although there are many ways for human beings to live, however, the only right way is to follow the Tian endowed nature. Since the nature manifests itself in *cheng*, to live in the right way people must maintain their lives in *cheng*. With this possibility in mind, the subject of *cheng* had been extensively discussed in Confucianism in history to secure the right way,²¹ and these discussions had been fostering Confucian religiosity.

In fact, the possibility of living by a certain idea of good is the major dilemma which human beings encounter. The book describes this type of life thusly: "Being dull yet loving to make decisions; being lowly yet loving to be arbitrary; living in today's world, yet loving to behave like living in ancient times" (28:1). When we say someone is dull, we mean that this person is making decisions he does not know. In other words, he stubbornly relies on his idea of good to make decisions. Supposedly, we should not make decisions about things we do not know. Similarly, those who are in a lowly social status may boast that they can do whatever they want. Their boasting depends on their self-central thoughts. Since these self-central thoughts may bring damages to others, their arbitrary actions will fail eventually. And it is

¹⁹ See Wang Yangming's Preface to the Ancient Edition of the Great Learning, in Wang, III.1.

²⁰ Chen Yun, in his article, "Revealing the Dao of Heaven through the Dao of humans: Sincerity in The Doctrine of the Mean", attempts to discern two approaches to *cheng*. This attempt, though emphasizes too much on the metaphysical meaning of the way of the Tian, touches the issue in a similar way. See Yun Chen.

²¹ Cf. An. Although I cannot share with An's conclusion that *cheng* lost its momentum in Chinese thought, his documenting and discussing of the term is still a reference. Also see Wenyu Xie's review of An's book in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 7 (2), 2008.

observable that, with the changing times, people may have developed different understandings of good. Yet, some people may insist on those understandings in the past and apply them in their contemporary lives. These people belong to a category of *xiaoren*. Although the book does not offer much discussion about the *xiaoren*, it definitely considers that this is a type of life we should avoid. That is, *xiaoren* represents a lowly life, which should be discouraged.

Further, it is impossible for one to improve his idea of good if one's understanding of good is only that from his idea of good. In such an existence, the idea of good is the starting point of judgment. Anything conforming to the idea of good will be judged as good. Since the idea of good is treated as the sole standard of judging, it contains final authority in judgment of good and evil. In this consideration, this person has no other resources to improve his ideas of good.

As we have pointed out, the *Zhongyong* contains a progressive theme, the book's intent is clear, that is, *junzi*'s life is to be promoted, as a *junzi* is improving his idea of good according to the good seen in *cheng*; and *xiaoren*'s life should be avoided. Yet, to be a *junzi* is to maintain one's life in *cheng*. Now, how to maintain being 'in *cheng*' is the core issue for Confucianism.

IV. The Fulfillment of *Cheng*: The Ultimate Disposition in Confucianism

Let us follow the concept of human existence in the *Zhongyong*. Each human being is endowed by the Tian with a nature. Following this nature is the right way for each human being to live. This nature manifests itself only in *cheng*. The word *cheng* indicates a disposition that is truthful to one's self. Consequently, if one is truthful to oneself, one is in *cheng* and is able to see the Tian-endowed nature, and then follow it. Actually, all human beings start their lives in *cheng*, as they grow up from their infancy in which they had yet to formulate their ideas of good respectively. When the idea of good has been established, although it is secondary, it functions as the standard of judgment. To some people, the idea of good may be seen as the only good, and they then become dependent on it. This is of course not a right way and should be avoided. Now, the right way is to follow the endowed nature manifest in *cheng*. It follows that we should remain in *cheng* all the time. When we say "being *cheng* all the time", to a human existence it means the utmost *cheng* (*zhi cheng*, 至诚).

The Chinese word *zhi* (至) indicates something in its fulfillment. What is then *cheng* in its fulfillment? In chapter 26, we read these words: "The utmost *cheng* is ceaseless." I would interpret this word in terms of time. That is, the fulfillment of *cheng* is to be in *cheng* all the time to the end. The book says:

Only those people in the world who are in the utmost *cheng* are able to fulfill their own natures. Being able to fulfill their own natures, they are able to fulfill the nature of human beings. Being able to fulfill the nature of human beings, they are able to fulfill the natures of things. Being able to fulfill the natures of things, they are able to participate in the transformation and nurturing of heaven-earth. Being able to participate in the transformation and nurturing of heaven-earth, they are able to correlate with heaven-earth (22).

In this context, the book defines utmost *cheng* in terms of fulfillment. It demands a *junzi* to be in *cheng* in each moment. The nature manifests itself in *cheng*. When one is in *cheng*, one is able to see and grasp the nature and follows it to realize it. Meanwhile, when one is not in *cheng*, one becomes blind to the nature and cannot follow it. The momentum of the nature then meets the opposite force. In human life, it is possible for one to make decisions against natural demands, which is what a *xiaoren* may do. This is the opposite force. However, when one is in *cheng*, natural demands will be effective; and when one is in *cheng* all the time, natural demands will be effective all the time. Being in *cheng* all the time is to be in utmost *cheng*.

The primary force in human existence is the natural demand, which demonstrates itself as a disposition of *cheng*. In this observation, the endowed nature in a human being exerts its power only when this person is in *cheng*. Although the natural demand consistently propels human existence, it may be oppressed or restrained so that it becomes idle in a state of non-function. Since the right way for a human being to live is to follow the nature, and since this can be done only when one is in *cheng*, the fulfillment of the natural demand requires a person to be in *cheng* constantly without interruption, that is, to be in utmost *cheng*.

Utmost *cheng* is a ceaseless process. Confucians call it *self-cultivation*, and it is an ever-improving process. In the very beginning, a human being is born without any idea of good. As such a baby simply follows the natural drive to live. At a later stage, he or she has gained the idea of good and then faces an intersection: to follow the nature or to follow the idea of good. This requires efforts. One must remain to be in *cheng* to follow nature, and then become a *junzi*. Yet, to make a choice to follow the idea of good, one may see it as the sole good in life and thereby becomes a *xiaoren*. As *junzi*'s life is to be encouraged and advocated in Confucianism, the effort to be in *cheng* is the key to be a *junzi*. Throughout history, Confucians have established a tradition of self-cultivation, in which the improvement through changing the idea of good in *cheng* is the main theme.

It is noteworthy that "self-cultivation" is not an isolated process. Rather, it is a social and open process. It says:

Therefore, this is the way of *junzi*: depending upon his own self, attesting [his thought and action] through consulting with ordinary people, proving them by comparing to what the Three Kings [had done], establishing them in conformation with heaven-earth, confirming it with ghosts and spirits to erase doubts, and making sure that they will not be contrary to what the sages [would think and do] in a hundred generations.

As we see, being in *cheng* is an individual issue and cannot be forced by an external push. However, it does not mean that a *junzi* should isolate him. Instead, he is open to the external world. In fact, an isolated self-cultivation will result in an illusion of perfection, in which one may be deluded that he has attained the fulfillment of the Tian-endowed nature. Such an illusion may lead him to become a *xiaoren*, seeing his idea of good as the sole good and resist to any change. A *junzi* depends on his own

self to cultivate, yet his thought and decision must be in communication with the outside world, including ordinary people and sages of the past and future.

V. Confucian Religiosity in *Cheng*

In dealing with the religiosity contained in Confucianism, scholars are often puzzled by its lack of the type of faith-system found in western-style religions. The *Zhongyong* has some discussions about trust and friendship. However, the issue is treated as a derived subject. The term “trust” in this treatment indicates a relation among people, and has little to do with heaven-human relationship. Trust is a character of a *junzi*, but it is not the essential character. It says: “Therefore, a *junzi* holds respect without defending; holds trust without persuading.”(33-3) Indeed, the *Zhongyong* never raises the issue of trust and faith as expressed in the Judaic-Christian context. Christian faith fosters a disposition to depend on God’s redemption. It demands that the believer trust in God, an outside force. An absolute trust in God is to prevail in a Christian’s life. In a contrast, although the *Zhongyong* sees the Tian as the provider of human nature, it never regards it as an independent force upon which our lives should rely. As we read on, the book gives no hint as to whether the Tian may come to help us, or whether we may appeal to it for help. In the *Zhongyong*, there is no place for faith such as we find in God-human relations in the Judaic-Christian system.

There is another treatment, that is, Confucian religiosity has been appreciated as morality.²² Morality prevails in human relationship. An isolated individual does not need human morality, though he or she may get involved with the morality relating to the environment. The moral sense of the *Zhongyong* is the most discussed subject in scholarship, and the central term of *cheng* is presented as moral term referring to the sincere relation among people. Such a treatment ignores completely the religious sense of *cheng*, and the words “sincerity” and “honesty” is seen as the proper words for understanding *cheng*.²³ It is impossible to demonstrate Confucian religiosity in such a treatment.

We may analyze this treatment further. Sincerity or honesty is part of moral language. Morally, a sincere or honest person is a *junzi* as long as this person has an integrity regarding thoughts, speeches, and actions. By contrast, those who cheat, deceive, or betray are not sincere or honest persons. Moral characteristics can only exist and be displayed in the context of social relations. In other words, sincere persons must show their sincerity in different social and public settings. They should not deceive the public for any reason. Otherwise, they are not sincere. However, this

²² It has become a tradition to categorize Confucianism in terms of ethics and politics in Western scholarship. Following this tradition, Tu Wei-ming defends the idea that Confucianism can be conceived in terms of ethico-religion (Tu, 96). Such an interpretation prevents readers from perceiving its pure religious claim.

²³ After having compared various translations of *cheng*, Tu Wei-ming decides that “sincerity” may best fit the meaning of the word, though he also insists that an explanation must be accompanied (Tu, 71-73).

framework cannot fit in a true Confucian, who can be true to his own self even though he may consciously hide his actual thoughts and plans by deceiving others. His actual thoughts and plans express his understanding of the Tian-endowed nature. For example, when a *junzi* lives in a dirty political world, he may have no choice but to speak about what his heart does not want to speak. He may then deceive the public. Yet he is still truthful to his own self. In Confucianism, as far as he is in *cheng*, he will receive high praise after he finally steps out as a *junzi*. Even if he may not have a chance to step out, he will still be regarded as a *junzi* if he is in *cheng* ceaselessly. In Chinese literature, a description of *junzi* of this type is the well-known comparison of a lotus coming out of mud without being contaminated. We have a popular Confucian saying: Step forward to share the good with the world, and step back to keep the good to his own (兼善天下与独善其身). Clearly, when a *junzi* is at presence, we may not judge him in terms of his moral sincerity or honesty. Rather, it is the religious power of *cheng* that sustains his ultimate commitment in life.²⁴

To understand Confucian religiosity in *cheng*, we need to look into the reliability of *cheng*. A Confucian's life is driven by the endowed nature manifest in *cheng*. As long as he is in *cheng*, he is able to follow the drive. But his following contains these steps: first, he must be in *cheng* and see the natural good; second, he has to conceptualize it in form of the idea of good and use it to judge and choose; third, once the difference between the natural good and the idea of good occurs, he must change the idea of good accordingly; and fourth, in so doing, he must continue to be in *cheng* all the time. Granted that the Tian-endowed nature is the beginning of a human being, no matter what it is, to follow this nature is then demanded of all human beings from within. *Cheng* is a disposition truthful to this nature, and then secures a human being to follow it. From a human point of view, what he must do is choose to continue to be in *cheng*. There is no other way for a human being to be in touch with the endowed nature.²⁵

It is observed that in actuality there are two ways for human beings to live, that is, the *junzi*'s and the *xiaoren*'s. Our discussion has shown that a *xiaoren* follows a certain idea of good. To this person, the idea of good is the sole good, and he seriously considers that he is living a good life based on it. Now, we may ask: Which way is more reliable for living a good life? An idea of good, no matter how perfect it may appear, is only an understanding of good. It is limited to a certain perspective.

²⁴ The good example is Liu Bei (a *junzi* or a superior person image) in the Period of Three Warring States. His tactic to cooperate with Cao Cao (a *xiaoren* or a mean person image) and to cheat the public is praised by the Confucian tradition as a good tactic, called "to survive by patiently waiting for chance" (韬晦之计). This is an influential tactic in the Confucian construction of personality.

²⁵ Confucian religiosity has been addressed in terms of self-cultivation, as expressed by these terms: "ultimate self-transformation" (Tu Wei-ming), "inner and outer harmony" (Mary Evelyn Tucker 1998), and "the transformative process" (Rodney L. Taylor). Unfortunately, these discussions seem ignorant of the fact that the endowed nature manifest in *cheng* is the primary force, that is, they do not address Confucian religiosity in the light of *cheng*.

That is, it is reliable only in this perspective. The book considers this way as a disaster (28). It is then inferred that the *junzi*'s way is reliable.

Being truthful to our selves does not mean that we are already perfect, but it does indicate that we are on the right track to be good. The *Zhongyong* never wants to say that perfection comes to us instantly. The issue is, lacking the disposition of *cheng*, we are not able to perceive the endowed nature; rather, we are deceived by a certain idea of good, and then remain without change in incompleteness, such as in selfishness, short-sightedness, and arrogance. We are living a good life only when we are following the endowed nature in *cheng*, in which we are able to improve the idea of good accordingly. In this way and in utmost *cheng*, we are on the right way to perfection. This is self-cultivation. In this lineage, to persevere in *cheng* through self-cultivation is a religious commitment. In a word, conceptually, the disposition of *cheng* expresses Confucian religiosity.

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