

# “THE CONFUCIAN ETHOS: A CULTURE OF ROLES AND RELATIONS”

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## THE *ZHONGYONG* 中庸: *FOCUSING THE FAMILIAR*

- I. Interpreting Chinese Culture: What China is NOT.
  1. Recent archaeological finds
  2. Europe’s Christianized “interpretation” of China: *tian*天 “Heaven,” *yi* 義 “righteousness,” *dao* 道 “*the Way*,” *li* 禮 “ritual,” *ren* 仁 “benevolence,” *li* 理 “principle”
  3. Orientalism as a corrective: despotic, mystical, backward, occult, collective, pagan
  4. Barnes and Noble, Borders: “Eastern Religions”
  5. Western academy: Chinese philosophy is *not* “philosophy”—taught in religion/Asian studies departments
  6. Two conflicting terms: (1) aestheticism (holism) (2) transcendence
  7. Marcel Granet:  
“Chinese wisdom has no need for the idea of God.”
  8. Tang Junyi 唐君毅:

中國民族無含超絕意義的天的觀念。中國人對天有個普遍的觀點：就是天與地是分不開的。

**“The Chinese as a people have not embraced a concept of “Heaven (*tian*)” that has transcendent meaning. The pervasive idea that Chinese have with respect to *tian* is that it is inseparable from the world.”**

**9. A.C. Graham:**

**“In the Chinese cosmos all things are interdependent, without transcendent principles by which to explain them or a transcendent origin from which they derive. . . . A novelty in this position which greatly impresses me is that it exposes a preconception of Western interpreters that such concepts as *Tian* “Heaven” and *Dao* “Way” must have the transcendence of our own ultimate principles; it is hard for us to grasp that even the Way is interdependent with man.”**

**10. Joseph Needham:**

**“Chinese ideals involved neither God nor Law. . . . Thus the mechanical and the quantitative, the forced and the externally imposed, were all absent. The notion of Order excluded the notion of Law.”**

**11. What is “God?” Single-source, cosmotic thinking. An independent, foundational, permanent, and determinative element in religion (God), Newtonian mechanical science (natural laws), morality (irrecusable moral principles), philosophy (the logic of the**

**changeless): apodictic knowledge, person (soul, human nature, human “beings”).**

**12. 唐君毅：中國文化之根本精神即 [將部分與全體交融互攝] 之精神；自認識上言之，即不自全體中劃出部分之精神（此自中國人之宇宙觀中最可見之）；自情意上言之，即努力以部分實現全體之精神（此自中國人之人生態度中可見之）。**

**Tang Junyi: The basic spirit of Chinese culture is the spirit of symbiosis and mutuality between particulars and totality. From the perspective of understanding this means the spirit of being unwilling to isolate the particular from the totality (this is most evident in the cosmology of the Chinese people), and from the perspective of ties of feeling and affection, it means the spirit of the particular in doing its best to realize the totality (this is most evident in the attitude of the Chinese people toward daily life).**

**13. William James: “The low thermometer to-day, for instance, is supposed to come from something called the ‘climate.’ Climate is really only the name for a certain group of days, but it is treated as if it lay *behind* the day, and in general we place the name, as if it were a being, behind the facts it is the name of. But the phenomenal properties of things . . . do not inhere in anything. They adhere, or cohere, rather, with each other, and the notion of a substance inaccessible to us, which we think accounts for such cohesion by supporting it, as cement might support pieces of a mosaic, must be abandoned. The fact of the bare cohesion itself is all the notion of the substance signifies. Behind that fact is nothing.”**

14. *Lex parsimoniae*: shaving with Ockum's razor twice: Chinese wisdom has no need for either the idea of "God" or the idea of the human "soul"

II. Taking Chinese culture on its own terms

1. Pope: "What can we reason but from what we know."
2. Thoreau: "We track ourselves through life's narrative"
3. Frost: "What is lost in translation is the poetry."
4. "Appreciating" China: Confucian role ethics

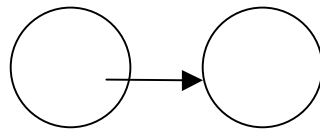
III. The Chinese Focus-field "Self"

1. Shaving with Ockum's razor twice:

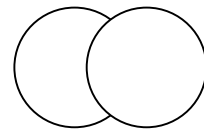
"Soul" autonomy vs. "virtuosic relationality,"  
rationalization of the tradition (systematic philosophy)

2. "Everybody" vs. "big family 大家請站起來":  
"family" as the governing metaphor for all relations

3. *Ren* 仁 as "consummate" person/conduct: "*consumma*"



Autonomous Individuals    Unique Individuality



4. *Ren* 仁 as "self-loving 自愛"

5. "Human becomings" rather than "beings"

## 6. The *Great Learning* 大學: personal cultivation as the source of cosmic meaning

物格而後知至，知至而後意誠，意誠而後心正，心正而後身修，身修而後家齊，家齊而後國治，國治而後天下平。自天子以至於庶人，壹是皆以修身為本。其本亂而末治者否矣，其所厚者薄，而其所薄者厚，未之有也！此謂知本，此謂知之至也。

**Once they saw how things fit together most productively, their wisdom reached its heights. Once their wisdom reached its heights, their thoughts were sincere. Once their thoughts were sincere, their hearts-and-mind knew what is proper. Once their hearts-and-mind knew what is proper, their persons were cultivated. Once their person were cultivated, their families were set right. Once their families were set right, their state was properly ordered. And once their state was properly ordered, there was peace in the world. From the emperor down to the common folk, everything is rooted in personal cultivation. There can be no healthy canopy when the roots are not properly set and it would never do for priorities to be reversed between what should be invested with importance and what should be treated more lightly. This is called both the root and the height of wisdom.**

### 7. Where does meaning come from?

#### IV. What is the *Zhongyong*?

1. ***The Book of Ritual (Liji 禮記)*: canonized once**
2. **Zhu Xi (1130-1200) 朱熹 and the *Four Books* 四書: canonized twice**
3. **The Zisizi vocabulary: *tian* 天, *ming* 命, *xing* 性, *xin* 心, *qing* 情.**
4. **子思子: 天命之謂性，率性之謂道，修道之謂教。**

**Congregationalist James Legge:**

**What Heaven has conferred is called THE NATURE; an accordance with this nature is called THE PATH of duty; the regulation of this path is called INSTRUCTION.**

5. **The main argument: 天人合一 the continuity between *tian* and the human world, and the responsibility of the human being as a co-creator.**

## **V. The structure of the *Zhongyong***

1. **Confucius: What does 中庸 mean?**
2. **Sage kings and cultural heroes**
3. ***Mencius* 孟子 4A12 誠者天之道也，思誠者人之道也 “Sincerity/honesty/integrity (“co-creativity”) is the way of tian; reflecting upon co-creativity is the human way.”**
4. ***Book of Songs* 詩經**

## **VI. *Zhongyong* and Human-centered Religiousness**

## **1. *Focusing the Familiar (Zhongyong 中庸) 1:***

天命之謂性，率性之謂道，修道之謂教。道也者，不可須臾離也，可離非道也。是故君子戒慎乎其所不睹，恐懼乎其所不聞。莫見乎隱，莫顯乎微。故君子慎其獨也。喜怒哀樂之未發，謂之中；發而皆中節，謂之和；中也者，天下之大本也；和也者，天下之達道也。致中和，天地位焉，萬物育焉。

**What *tian* commands is called natural tendencies; drawing out these natural tendencies is called the proper way; improving upon this way is called education. As for this proper way, we cannot quit it even for an instant. Could we quit it, it would not be the proper way. It is for this reason that exemplary persons are so concerned about what is not seen, and so anxious about what is not heard. There is nothing more present than what is imminent, and nothing more manifest than what is inchoate. Thus exemplary persons are ever concerned about their solitariness.**

**The moment at which joy and anger, grief and pleasure, have yet to arise is called a nascent equilibrium; once the emotions have arisen, that they are all brought into proper focus is called harmony. This notion of equilibrium and focus is the great root of the world; harmony then is the advancing of the proper way in the world. When equilibrium and focus are sustained and harmony is fully realized, the heavens and the earth maintain their proper places and all things flourish in the world.**

## **2. *Zhongyong 3:***

子曰：“中庸其至矣乎！民鮮能久矣！”

**The Master said: “Focusing the familiar affairs of the day is a task of the highest order. It is rare among the common people to be able to sustain it for long.”**

### **3. Zhongyong 5:**

子曰：“道其不行矣夫。”

**The Master said, "This proper way, alas, is not being traveled at all!"**

### **4. Zhongyong 8:**

子曰：“回之為人也，擇乎中庸，得一善，則拳拳服膺而弗失之矣。”

**The Master said: “Yan Hui chose the path of focusing the familiar affairs of the day, and on gaining something worthwhile from doing so, would clasp it tightly to his breast and not lose it—such was the likes of Yan Hui.”**

### **5. Zhongyong 17:**

子曰：“舜其大孝也與！德為聖人，尊為天子，富有四海之內。宗廟饗之，子孫保之。故大德必得其位，必得其祿，必得其名，必得其壽。故天之生物，必因其材而篤焉。故栽者培之，傾者覆之。《詩》曰：‘嘉樂君子，憲憲令德！宜民宜人，受祿于天。保佑命之，自天申之！’故大德者必受命。”



The Master said: “Now Shun—there was a person of great family reverence. His virtuosity was that of a sage, he was venerated as the son of *tian*, and his wealth encompassed everything in the world. In the ancestral hall he received sacrifices, and generation after generation of progeny past on his name. Thus, those of greatest virtuosity are certain to gain status, emoluments, reputation, and longevity. For the generosity of *tian* in engendering and nurturing things is certain to be in response to the quality of things themselves. It is thus those trees that are planted properly find nourishment while those that are not are toppled. The *Book of Songs* says:

So good and happy is the ruler:  
Such an abundant display of virtuosity.  
He treats the common people appropriately;  
He treats his clansmen appropriately.  
He receives his emoluments from *tian*;  
*Tian* protects him in office and bestows on him its charge.  
It is from *tian* that all of this is redoubled.

Those of the greatest virtuosity are thus certain to receive *tian*'s charge.

#### 6. *Zhongyong* 25:

誠者自成也，而道自道也。誠者物之終始，不誠無物。是故君子誠之為貴。誠者非自成己而已也，所以成物也。成己，仁也；成物，知也。性之德也，合外內之道也，故時措之宜也。

**Co-creativity (*cheng* 誠) is self-consummating and its way is self-directing. Co-creativity is a process taken from its beginning to its end, and without this co-creativity, nothing would happen. It is thus that, for exemplary persons, it is co-creativity that is prized. But co-creativity is not simply the self-consummating of one's own person; it is what consummates everything. Realizing oneself is becoming consummate in one's conduct (*ren* 仁); realizing the world is wisdom (*zhi* 知). Such is the virtuosity of one's natural tendencies and the way of integrating what is more internal and what is more external. Thus whenever one applies this virtuosity it is fitting.**

### **7. *Zhongyong* 30:**

仲尼祖述堯、舜，憲章文、武；上律天時，下襲水土。辟如天地之無不持載，無不覆幬，辟如四時之錯行，如日月之代明。萬物并育而不相害，道并行而不相悖，小德川流，大德敦化，此天地之所以為大也。

**Confucius revered Yao and Shun as his ancestors and carried on their ways; he emulated and made illustrious the way of Kings Wen and Wu. He modeled himself above on the rhythm of the turning seasons, and below he was attuned to the patterns of water and earth. He is comparable to the heavens and the earth, sheltering and supporting everything that is. He is comparable to the progress of the four seasons, and the alternating brightness of the sun and the moon. All things are nurtured together and do not cause injury to one another; the various ways are traveled together and are not conflicted. Their lesser virtuosity is to be seen as flowing streams; their greater virtuosity is to be seen as**

massive transformations. This is why the heavens and the earth are so grand.

### 8. *Zhongyong* 31:

唯天下至聖 . . . 溥博淵泉，而時出之。溥博如天，淵泉如淵。見而民莫不敬，言而民莫不信，行而民莫不說。是以聲名洋溢乎中國，施及蠻貊；舟車所至，人力所通，天之所覆，地之所載，日月所照，霜露所隊；凡有血氣者，莫不尊親，故曰配天。

**Only those of utmost sagacity in the world: . . . .**

**So broad, expansive, and profoundly deep, they demonstrate these several qualities whenever needed. So broad and expansive like the heavens themselves; so profoundly deep like a bottomless abyss: they appear and all defer to them; they speak and all have confidence in what they say; they act and all find pleasure in what they do.**

**It is for this reason that their fame spreads out over the Central States, extending to the Man and Mo barbarians in the south and north. Everywhere that boats and carriages ply, everywhere that human strength penetrates, everywhere that is sheltered by the heavens and is borne up by the earth, everywhere that is illumined by sun and moon, everywhere that the frosts and dew settle--all creatures that have breath and blood revere and love them. Thus it is said that they are the complement of *tian* 配天.**

### 9. Andrew Plaks: *On the Practice of the Mean* (Penguin 2003)

**“The key to integrating the disparate elements of the text lies in grasping and consistently applying the reasoning implied at the very outset and reinforced in each of the subsequent contexts of discussion. This is the essential distinction between the cosmic and the sublunar planes of being and the assigning of primary significance to the concerted acts of human striving required for the ordering and perfecting of the latter realm.”**

**10. James Legge on having translated *Zhongyong*:**

**“It begins sufficiently well, but the author has hardly enunciated his preliminary apophthegms, when he conducts into an obscurity where we can hardly grope our way, and when we emerge from that, it is to be bewildered by his gorgeous but unsubstantial pictures of sagely perfection. He has eminently contributed to nourish the pride of his countrymen. He has exalted their sages above all that is called God or is worshipped, and taught the masses of the people that with them they have need of nothing from without. In the meantime it is antagonistic to Christianity. By-and-by, when Christianity has prevailed in China, men will refer to it as a striking proof how their fathers by their wisdom knew neither God nor themselves.”**

**VII. Human-centered religiousness vs. transcendental religion**

- 1. A-theistic Confucianism: “Retrospective idealities versus prospective ideas”**
- 2. God-centered culture**
- 3. Rationalized harmony as law, obedience, permanence**

- 4. Soul as the form of human “beings,” logic as the form of thinking, God, US constitution, principled morality**
- 5. Human-centered religiousness: gods are dead people**
- 6. Culture: a legacy of truth, beauty, and goodness**
- 7. Enchanting the ordinary: the kitchen table as altar**
- 8. The inspired community as the source of spirituality**
- 9. Religiousness as the flower of the thriving community**