

Research on the Concept of Righteousness and Benefit in Traditional Confucian Commercial Culture in China

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Abstract: The traditional Confucian business concept of benevolence and Taoism was formed by the ancient Confucian merchants, and is the core of the traditional Confucian business culture. Confucianism is benevolence, and the concept of benevolence and Taoism with benevolence and humanism as the main content is the core ideology and value of Confucianism. The Confucianist ideology on justice and interest requires businessmen to be socialized individuals, be of benevolence, righteousness and morality, and can not be mercenary. The Confucianist ideology on justice and interest reflects the cultural orientation of Confucian business culture based on righteousness and emphasizes value rationality, which is different from the cultural orientation of Western business culture which is profit-oriented and emphasizes instrumental rationality. This essay highlights the universal value of traditional Confucian business culture and has important implications for the reconstruction of contemporary Confucian business culture.

1. Introduction

As the core of Confucian business culture, the Confucianist ideology on justice and interest requires businessmen to be socialized individuals, pay attention to benevolence, righteousness and morality, and cannot be mercenary. Confucianism talks about "distinguishing between righteousness and benefit", and its core idea is nothing more than putting righteousness before profit, valuing righteousness over profit, and taking righteousness as profit. Modern businessmen gradually gave new interpretations and new ideas to the Confucian concept of righteousness and benefit in their business activities, advocating the use of righteousness to seek profit, to take advantage of righteousness, to turn profit into righteousness, and to be anxious for justice and righteousness.^[1]The so-called righteousness actually refers to the foundation of morality and the principle of ethics, and the so-called profit actually refers to the material benefits obtained. Therefore, it is said that "the gentleman is in righteousness, and the villain is in profit." Confucius regarded righteousness and profit as the criterion for distinguishing a gentleman from a villain, while a Confucian merchant "is a businessman who takes Confucianism as a business management criterion and life guide, has good moral character and professional knowledge, and has achieved success in business operations."Therefore, in order to study the Confucianist ideology on justice and interest, it is necessary to take the Confucianist ideology on justice and interest as the premise.^[2]Confucianism's emphasis on the "distinction between righteousness and benefit" requires businessmen to give way to righteousness and private interests in commercial activities, and this concept of righteousness and benefit played a decisive role in the construction of the Confucian concept of righteousness and benefit in the later period.

Regarding the deeper relationship between righteousness and benefit, the pre-Qin Confucian classics have a more incisive exposition of it. In *Yi Chuan-Wenyan Chuan-Qianwen Yan*, it is mentioned that "the righteous are the sum of benefits... Profit is sufficient for righteousness." ^[3]Here is a profound embodiment of the pre-Qin culture in the idea of righteousness, after prosperity, profit and righteousness will follow. In the interpretation of the benefit, the *Book of Changes* also talks about the meaning of harmony, which refers to the benefits to be fair to share, and to that fair

reasonable, will be harmonious. Profit is in righteousness, and at the same time, righteousness is greater than profit, and a good balance between the profit and the righteousness can create the supreme state of "righteousness and profit", which is also the "harmony" pursued by future generations of Confucian merchants.^[4]

According to incomplete statistics, the Confucian business tradition can be traced back to the pre-Qin period. During the pre-Qin, Qin and Han dynasties, Qilu merchants were influenced by the mercantile trend of Qilu culture, and generally reflected the value orientation of upholding righteousness and pursuing profit. With the academic trend of Confucianism in the Han Dynasty, the influence of Confucianism among merchants "up to a higher level", and many local merchants reread Confucianism and used Confucianism as a moral indicator of business behaviors.^[5] From the Han Dynasty to the Ming and Qing dynasties, with the realization of the imperial examination system, "ordinary people turned into prime ministers" was no longer a dream, and ordinary people also had the opportunity to go to the court, thus cultivating a huge class of scholars. As "the main way of upward social change in China", the negative impact of the imperial examination system is not discussed, but to a certain extent, it has greatly enhanced the influence of Confucianism, and the Confucianist ideology on justice and interest has also influenced the merchant class more widely and profoundly. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, due to the continuous development of the commodity economy and the continuous expansion of the population base, the difficulty of scholars in seeking fame continued to increase. Many capable people with lofty ideals studied hard for more than ten years in order to gain fame, but they often end up repeatedly failing in the exam. At the same time, some scholars realized that the road to the imperial examination was not feasible and that they had to change the track if they wanted to make a difference. As a result, the trend of "abandoning Confucianism and engaging in business" has been set off, and the moral behavior of the merchant class in the past has been uneven, and after experiencing the "great change" of Confucianism and the merchant group, the cultural literacy of the merchant group has been improved to a certain extent: When Confucian scholars changed their identity to businessmen, they did not forget to regulate their business behavior with Confucian ideology and morality. They valued righteousness over profit, cherished their own reputation, and did not forget to give back to the society after they became famous. Since then, the construction of traditional Confucian business culture began to take shape.

In ancient times, the hierarchical structure of the "four peoples" of scholars, farmers, industrialists, and merchants endowed scholars with social superiority over ordinary people. In the Ming Dynasty, the identity of scholars began to break through the restrictions of "learning" and "occupation", and the theory of "four people" appeared the first turn, which was marked by Wang Yangming's words: "Although the four professions of scholars, farmers, workers, and merchants are different in terms of specific work content and methods, their ultimate goals and directions are the same, and they are all for the benefit of the people's life and development." The introduction of this concept means that scholars, farmers, industrialists, and merchants have attained a completely equal status in front of the "Tao". During the Ming and Qing dynasties, with the rapid development of the commodity economy, Confucian business culture gradually developed into the mainstream commercial culture. At this time, the traditional concept of the four peoples began to lose its importance and the merchants were no longer a group to be despised and excluded, but more became the first choice for many scholars to find another way out. Politically, the policy of valuing agriculture and suppressing commerce gradually wavered. Economically, the commodity economy flourished. Culturally, the imperial examination system walked down from the altar, all of which created a fertile soil for the development of Confucian merchant groups in the Ming and Qing dynasties, and the traditional Confucian business culture also gradually had the following characteristics.

2. Abiding by discipline

The former residence of Hu Xueyan in Jixi, Anhui Province has "four virtues of Confucian merchants: Genuine, Price-for-money, zeal and trustworthiness." This is the best summary of the

basic principles of Confucian business activities. Hu Qing Yu Tang Chinese Medicine is also known as Hu Qing Yu Tang. It was built at the thirteenth year of Tongzhi in the Qing Dynasty (1874), by the late Qing Dynasty "red-topped merchant" Hu Xueyan to "help the world and the people" in the fourth year of Guangxu in the Dajing Lane, he officially opened the pharmacy. In the Huqing Yutang complex, there are a considerable number of plaques, couplets and medicine plates. At the entrance of Hu Qingyu Hall, you can see a plaque engraved with the words "This is the strategy of implementing benevolent government".^[6] This quote comes from Mencius: King Hui of Liang "Chinese medicine is an excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation". The practice of medicine and saving lives and helping the injured is in line with the benevolence advocated by Confucianism and is a measure with a benevolent heart, so it is said that opening a pharmaceutical industry is an act of doing good deeds. In the traditional Chinese concept, the doctor has a lofty status, "not for a good appearance, then for a good doctor", is the ideal of life pursued by many scholars, and its root is the core idea that runs through the ancient Chinese Confucian society -- benevolence. In Confucian culture, there is the concept of "being poor is good for oneself, and being good is good for the world", and the latter is a manifestation of benevolence. When Hu Xueyan was in full swing in his career, he spent a lot of money to establish Hu Qingyutang, naturally not for his economic interests, but to realize his ideal of "helping the world at the same time". This is also the reason why Hu Qingyutang was successful and famous for future generations.

There are two plaques in Hu Qingyutang, one is the "true price" for customers -- that is, to make a promise to customers that Hu Qingyutang's medicines are not fake. The other piece is the "No fraud" written by Hu Xueyan himself, and the plaque says: "All trades are not allowed to be deceived, and as the pharmaceutical industry is related to life and death, it especially should not have frauds. "I want to help the masses from the bottom of my heart, and I vow not to sell fake and shoddy drugs to make huge profits from them, and I hope that everyone will work together with me to procure and practice the truth, and not to deceive the world. " Over the past 100 years, Hu Qingyutang has been honest and not deceiving, abiding by integrity, and not making and selling fake and shoddy goods to harm the people, which shows respect and reverence for life. This is the foundation of Hu Xueyan's business, and it is also the secret of Hu Qingyutang, the "King of Jiangnan Medicine".

3. Putting Integrity first

"People do not stand without trust, and business does not prosper without trust", Confucian businessmen must abide by integrity and stand majestically between heaven and earth. In business activities, Confucian businessmen adhere to the principle of "treating people with integrity" and "treating business with morality", putting integrity first, and being good and righteous.^[6]

During the Ming Dynasty, there was a grain merchant named Hu Renzhi from Shexian County. While doing business during the Jiahe period, he happened to encounter a poor harvest in the local area, where a bushel of rice could be sold for a high price of one thousand wen. People who were doing business with him requested that he add some inferior grain to the good rice for sale, but he firmly refused. Later on, he instructed his descendants in a timely manner, saying, "I have wholeheartedly believed in the two words of "heavenly principles "spoken by Neo Confucianism scholars throughout my life. ^[7] The five moral standards of Confucianism, namely benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faith, as well as all good behavior, are all derived from these two words." During the Xiuning period of the Ming Dynasty, there was a grain merchant named Wang Pingshan who wandered between Anqing, Qianyang, and Tongcheng for business. However, during the Zhengde period, he encountered a great famine. ^[3] Wang Pingshan had already stored a lot of grain, and if he sold it at a higher price at this time, he would definitely be able to double his profit. But not only did he not sell at a higher price, but he also took all the food he had stored with him to the impoverished disaster victims, and did not want their return. Therefore, the villagers far or near felt that he was a person of noble character. Throughout history, in the eyes of the world, merchants have always seemed to be driven by profit, with the pursuit of profit as the primary goal, and everything else can be taken second. "Merchants value profit over separation," Bai Juyi's

timeless legacy seems to confirm this viewpoint. However, Confucian merchants are an exception. The Confucian merchant community advocates benevolence as the foundation, valuing righteousness over profit, profiting from righteousness, and being sincere and trustworthy.

4. Putting righteousness first and balancing righteousness and benefit

Confucian merchants were deeply influenced by the Confucian philosophy of "cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the country, and pacifying the world." Their commercial activities often pursued a higher-level goal: seeking justice. Obtaining commercial benefits is not the only goal for Confucian merchants to engage in commercial activities, but seeking justice through profit is their more profound pursuit. This pursuit motivates Confucian merchants to keep their original intentions in mind, actively strive for progress, endure hardship, and strive for excellence in their commercial activities, avoiding any "unscrupulous" commercial behavior. Jing Yuanshan (1841-1903), formerly known as Gao Quan and also known as Lianshan (later known as Lianshan), was known as Juyi Zi and Juyi Jushi. In his later years, he was also known as the Deaf Old Man of Yanxi and was originally from Shangyu, Zhejiang. Jing Yuanshan can be regarded as one of the most famous philanthropists among the Confucian business community, and he fully implemented the Confucian concept of "reaching the goal of benefiting the world". In 1857, at the age of 17, Jing Yuanshan took over the "Renyuan Bank" and other properties that his father Jing Wei (styled Qinggui, styled Fangzhou) had worked hard to acquire; In 1866, Jing Yuanshan was appointed as a director of Shanghai Tongren Fuyuan Hall, using the financial resources of merchants and philanthropists to spare no effort in helping the world and saving the people. His acts of kindness included administering medicine, caring for the elderly, and so on. From 1877 to 1879, the northern region suffered from a severe drought, causing people to struggle and suffer from starvation. Jing Yuanshan immediately opened a charity campaign with his friends and even closed down his ancestral property "Renyuan Bank" to help the people. He established a "relief office" on the spot, and also widely published a notice in the "Declaration" calling on people to donate funds for disaster relief.

5. Conclusion

The traditional Confucian business culture was formed by the Confucian business group under a specific historical background, on the one hand, drawing nourishment from Confucianism through commercial activities.

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