

Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press

Key Concepts in Chinese Thought and Culture (1)

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“Key concepts in Chinese thought and culture” refers to keywords or phrases that the Chinese people have created or come to use and that are fundamentally pertinent to Chinese philosophy, humanistic spirit, way of thinking, and values. They represent the Chinese people’s exploration of and rational thinking about nature and society over thousands of years. Having stood the test of time, they may still be sources of inspiration for the progress of human civilization, even as science and technology renew more rapidly than ever before, and as society becomes ever more complex and changeable.

Since 2014, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) has organized more than 100 social science scholars, translators, and sinologists to sort, explain, and translate these concepts into foreign languages. So far 1000 of the concepts have been published in Chinese-English bilingual format. We are going to reprint the English version of 15 concepts (respectively from the fields of philosophy, literature and art, and history) in each issue. Interested readers may access the full text of the published concepts at www.chinesethought.cn.

1 History

1.1 Will of the People (民心)

This term refers to the evaluative judgment or view of the people in a country or region, on an issue, phenomenon or incident which touches on their common interest and which has broad societal meaning. Ancient Chinese often took the “mandate of heaven” to be the basis and highest concept for the legitimacy of political authority and for policymaking, but in fact they often regarded the

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“will of the people” to be the principal source, content, and manifestation of the “mandate of heaven.” They also considered it to be the fundamental principle of a country’s governance, and thought that having or losing the will of the people determined the rise or fall of a country and political power as well as the development of state affairs. It is the core of the Chinese concept of the people as the foundation of the state. All enlightened Chinese statesmen past and present have regarded the “will of the people” to be the most important factor in governance.

1.2 People Are the Foundation of the State (民惟邦本).

This term means that the people are the essence of the state or the foundation upon which it stands. Only when people live and work in peace and contentment can the state be peaceful and stable. This saying, which first appeared in the “Old Text” version of *The Book of History* as an instruction by Yu the Great, can be traced to Mencius’ (ca. 372 B.C.E.–289 B.C.E.) statement: “The essence of a state is the people, next come the god of land and the god of grain (which stand for state power), and the last the ruler,” and Xunzi’s (ca. 313 B.C.E.–238 B.C.E.) statement, “Just as water can float a boat, so can water overturn it.” This idea gave rise to the “people first” thought advocated by Confucianism.

1.3 Carry or Overturn the Boat/Make or Break (載舟覆舟)

Water can carry a boat, but can also overturn it. Here, water is compared to the people, while the boat is compared to the ruler. The phrase, “carry or overturn the boat,” reveals the importance of popular support: people are the critical force that decides the future of a regime and a country. This is consistent with such political doctrines as “people are the foundation of the state,” and “follow the mandate of heaven and comply with the wishes of the people.” Since ancient times, this term has served as a warning to the ruler, reminding him of the need to respect local conditions and popular will, to govern the country for the people, and to anticipate dangers in times of security.

1.4 To Silence the People Is More Harmful Than Blocking a River (防民之口, 甚于防川).

Silencing the people and preventing them from expressing their opinions is more damaging than blocking the course of a river and causing a flood. *Fang* (防) means “a dike” to stop water flowing, and its extended meaning is to “block,” “prevent,” or “stop.” Obstructing the river flow will make the water rise and wash away the dikes, causing uncontrollable flooding. The ancients used this analogy to describe the serious harm that could occur if the public was not allowed to express its opinions. Taken from a positive angle, it means that the public will is powerful and irresistible, and that a ruler should allow its expression, or else expect popular resistance. The idea is in line with such expressions as “people are the foundation of the state,” “people’s will is the foundation of the state,” and “people can float the boat (of state) or sink it.”

1.5 A Just Cause Enjoys Abundant Support while an Unjust Cause Finds Little (得道多助, 失道寡助).

The Chinese phrase *dedao* (得道) or “obtaining Dao” here refers to having “a just cause.” Since ancient times Chinese people have had a high esteem for justice and have thought of justice as a decisive factor determining success or failure in war and other enterprises. Only by upholding justice can one achieve internal unity and popular support, which are essential for the success of a war or a cause; otherwise, popular support is lost and the ruler or leader becomes too isolated and helpless to succeed. This is a specific expression of the Chinese notion of “governance based on virtue” and the spirit of “civilization.”

2 Philosophy

2.1 Dao (Way) (道)

In its original meaning, *dao* (道) is the way or path taken by people. It has three extended meanings: 1) the general laws followed by things in different spheres, e.g. the natural order by which the sun, moon and stars move is called the way of heaven; the rules that govern human activities are the way of man; 2) the universal patterns followed by all things and beings; and 3) the original source or ontological existence of things, which transcends form and constitutes the basis for the birth

and existence of all things, and for the activities of human beings. In their respective discussions of Dao, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism imbue it with very different connotations. While benevolence, righteousness, social norms, and music education form the basic content of the Confucian Dao, the Buddhist and Daoist Dao tends to emphasize *kong* (空 emptiness) and *wu* (无 void).

2.2 The Middle Way (中道)

The Middle Way manifests the principle of impartiality. It stands in contrast to partial behavior. Ancient Chinese believed that the existence and changes of all things in the universe obey a single basic law, which is shown through human action and conduct. This is the Middle Way. People should comply with the Middle Way in both speech and action. It can be achieved, Confucian scholars hold, by avoiding all excessive as well as inadequate words and actions, thus attaining impeccable morality. Buddhists advocate practicing the Middle Way in order to see things in their true light and break free of human suffering. Different schools of thought and religious sects vary in their understanding of the specific content of this concept.

2.3 *Zhongyong* (Golden Mean) (中庸)

Zhongyong (golden mean) was considered to be the highest level of virtue by Confucius (551 B.C.E.–479 B.C.E.) and Confucian scholars. *Zhong* (中) means moderate in one's words and deeds. Everything has its limits, and neither exceeding nor falling short of the limits is desirable. *Yong* (庸) has two meanings. One is common or ordinary and the other is unchanging. Moderation can be maintained for over a long time constantly only when one practices it in everyday life. *Zhongyong* means the standard of moderation that one should follow in dealing with others and in one's everyday conduct.

2.4 Going Too Far Is as Bad as Falling Short (过犹不及).

It is just as bad to go beyond a given standard as to fall short of it. Confucian scholars use rites as the standards both for individuals' words and actions, and for their relationship with everything in the world. They also judge people's words or actions against the requirements of the rites to see whether they have gone too far or fallen short. Confucius evaluated one of his students as "going too far" and another as "falling short," considering them to be the same in both failing the

requirements set by the rites. If a person can follow the middle way by not going too far or falling short, then he has achieved the virtue of “the Golden Mean.”

2.5 Proactive Versus Prudent (狂狷)

Proactive and prudent were used by Confucius to refer to two opposing attitudes and styles of behavior. Proactive persons tend to be radical and will not make any compromise in upholding moral principles and justice. Prudent persons, on the other hand, tend to be cautious and ready to make compromise but without sacrificing moral integrity. Confucius believed that the ideal conduct in life is keeping to the mean, neither going too far nor falling short. While proactive and prudent may be extreme to some extent, both have their own advantages as both adhere to moral principles and justice.

3 Literature and Art

3.1 You Will not Be Able to Talk Properly With Others Without Studying *The Book of Songs* (不学《诗》，无以言).

In Confucius' time, how well one understood *The Book of Songs* was a sign of his social status and cultural attainment. If one did not study it, one would find it difficult to improve one's ability to express oneself and to converse with people of high social status. Confucius' elaboration on the relationship between studying *The Book of Songs* and social interaction actually expounds on the importance of literature in education.

3.2 The Six Basic Elements (六义)

The six basic elements were drawn from *The Book of Songs* by scholars of the Han Dynasty to promote the state's governance, social enlightenment, and education. The six are: *feng* (ballad), which offers an insight into the influence of a sage's thinking on ordinary folk customs; *fu* (narrative), which directly states the goodness or evilness of court politics; *bi* (analogy), which criticizes mildly the inadequacies of court politics by comparing one thing with another; *xing* (association), which extols a virtue by making an indirect reference to some other laudable thing; *ya* (court hymn), which shows the proper way of acquitting oneself as a norm for posterity to follow; and *song* (eulogy), which praises and promotes

virtue. All the six elements were originally used by Confucian scholars to expound on the creative techniques in *The Book of Songs*. Later, they were used to emphasize creative styles of all works of poetry. They also served as essential principles of literary criticism.

3.3 Stimulation, Contemplation, Communication, and Criticism (兴观群怨)

According to Confucius, *The Book of Songs* served these four purposes, which summarize the basic functions and values of literature. “Stimulation” means that the appreciation of literary works arouses imagination, stimulates reflection on society and life, and inspires aspirations and interests. “Contemplation” means that reading leads to understanding nature, society, life, and politics. “Communication” means that reading encourages discussion with others, and exchange of thoughts and feelings. “Criticism” means learning how to critically express oneself about state affairs and voice inner feelings. These four functions are closely associated and involve the aesthetic, cognitive, and educational functions of literature. Later scholars have continued to make original contributions to the study of these themes.

3.4 Mild, Gentle, Sincere, and Broad-Minded (温柔敦厚)

This term refers to the mild and broad-minded manner with which the Confucian classic, *The Book of Songs*, edifies people. Confucian scholars during the Qin and Han dynasties believed that although some poems of *The Book of Songs* were satirical and remonstrative in tone, it still focused on persuading people instead of just reproving them. Most of the poems in the book were moderate in tone and meant to encourage the reader to learn to be moderate and honest. Encouraging people to be mild and gentle, sincere and broadminded is a manifestation of Confucian doctrine of the mean, and being fair and gentle is an aesthetic value, which is also a standard for literary and artistic style that stresses the need for being gentle in persuasion and for edification.

3.5 No Depraved Thoughts (思无邪)

This refers to a state of mind that is pure and proper with no depraved or evil thoughts. This is a well-known critique made by Confucius on *The Book of Songs*, a collection of 300 poems. In his opinion, these poems may be summarized as pure

and proper in thoughts with no depravity and is in keeping with the beauty of balanced harmony. This concept has always been held in high respect among scholars over the years because of the important position in history enjoyed by both Confucius and *The Book of Songs*. It is often used to judge and critique writers and writings, although some of the poems in *The Book of Songs* are not fully up to the standard of “no depraved thoughts” due to their unbridled feelings and candidness.