

Litang Cui: Social Codes Represented in Eight Chinese Characters

Excerpt from chapter 1 of

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I was particularly thankful to Litang Cui, an instructor in English, Chinese, and communication in China, for kindly sharing with me in 2013 his views on honour and dignity in China.¹ He explained that as in other world regions, also in China the notion of honour came first and that of dignity much later, with linguistic expressions of human dignity arriving in Chinese only in the early years of last century.² All the while, Cui reports, ‘the broad concept of human dignity has been around since Zhuang Zi (369–286 Before the Common Era, BCE)³’.⁴ Zhuang Zi (Master Zhuang, also Zhuangzi, Zhuang Zhou, or Chuang Tzu) was an influential Chinese philosopher during the period of the Hundred Schools of Thought, a peak time of Chinese philosophy, and he is credited with writing — in part or in whole — the foundational texts of Taoism. Zhuang Zi communicated an idea that is similar to the Western concept of human dignity, Cui explains, albeit with significant differences, as he is comparing ‘stems and branches as one relating to the other over the social distances between the mass and mandarin, the saint and the self-denied, the free and unfettered, and the lofty’.⁵ Cui also points at Confucius (551–479 BCE), the thinker who, deeply rooted in Chinese culture, shapes the Chinese mindset until today. Confucius is hailed as the first Chinese philosopher to address notions related to human worthiness comprehensively, namely, in his *Analects*. At the core of Confucian humanism ‘is the belief that human beings are teachable, improvable, and perfectible through personal and communal endeavour, especially through self-cultivation and self-creation, focussing on the cultivation of virtue and maintenance of ethics’.⁶

The basics are centred on social codes represented in eight Chinese characters, Cui explains:

1. *zhong* (loyalty/commitment/devotion to family, friend, ruler, master, community, and country)
2. *xiao* (filial piety to one’s parents practiced by the young)
3. *ren* (virtuousness/kindness/benevolence/love as an obligation of altruism and humaneness for other individuals within a community)
4. *ai* (patience/love/tolerance)
5. *li* (ceremony/ritual/rites/posture/presents as a system of norms and propriety that determines how a person should properly act within a community, for example, ‘you can never be too polite’)
6. *yi* (posture/practice of benevolence/obligation of friendliness as the upholding of righteousness and moral disposition)
7. *lian* (straight/square/correctness/uncrooked as a quality of being honest, clean, righteous and uncorrupted: ‘if the upper beam is crooked, the one below is necessarily so’)
8. *chi* (shame/loss of face, ‘that might come on your ears and is felt at your heart’, as a complex resulting from the failure to practice the above of *zhong*, *xiao*, *ren*, *ai*, *li*, *yi* and *lian* — that is, ‘loss of face is loss of honour’)⁷

Psychologist David Yau Fai Ho wrote to me later and added that in Chinese social relations and everyday speech, *face* refers to the social perceptions of a person’s prestige and authority — *mianzi*, Chinese 面子 — and to the confidence and trust in a person’s moral character within a social network — *lian*, in Traditional Chinese 臉, and in Simplified Chinese 脸.⁸ Engaging in what is called polite lies is therefore not just acceptable behaviour but expected.

References

- Ho, David Yau Fai (1976). "On the concept of face." In *American Journal of Sociology*, 81 (4), pp. 867–84. doi: 10.1086/226145. www.jstor.org/stable/2777600.
- Ho, David Yau Fai (2014). *Enlightened or mad? A psychologist glimpses into mystical magnanimity*. Lake Oswego, OR: Dignity Press.

Notes

¹ Cui Litang or Litang Cui (Cui is the family name) is an instructor in English, Chinese, and Communication at the Guangzhou Nanyang Polytechnic College in China, and I thank Francisco Gomes de Matos and Michael Prosser for having brought him to our dignity work. He wrote in a personal communication, 16th December 2013:

Dear Francisco and Evelin ... Any further discussion or elaboration on this subject would take extensive study and research, and instead I focussed on the very core to Confucian humanism as reflected in the Analects where the concept of human dignity is really taught frequently, which is traditionally summarised in eight Chinese conceptualised characters. Please see the attached document file. This can be put in the public domain to solicit comparative analysis and study... Thank you and best wishes! Cui Litang.

² Cui Litang in a personal communication, 16th December 2013.

³ BCE stands for Before the Common Era, and is equivalent to BC, which means Before Christ.

⁴ Cui Litang in a personal communication, 16th December 2013.

⁵ Cui Litang in a personal communication, 16th December 2013.

⁶ Cui Litang in a personal communication, 16th December 2013.

⁷ Cui Litang in a personal communication, 16th December 2013.

⁸ Ho, 1976. Professor David Yau-fai Ho introduced clinical psychology to Hong Kong and served as Director of the Clinical Psychology Programme at the University of Hong Kong from 1971 to 1996. It is a privilege to have David Yau-fai Ho as an esteemed member in the global advisory board of our Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies community, and to have his book *Enlightened or mad* be published in Dignity Press. See Ho, 2014.