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The Internalization of *Yong*: Zhu Xi's Transformation of the Confucian Concept of Courage

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1. Introduction

Within Confucianism, the concept of *yong* began with Confucius and was further developed in *the Analects*, *the Doctrine of the Mean*, and *the Mencius*. These four books are the foundation of the Confucianist idea system. For many centuries, commentators on the Four Books largely sought to clarify the classical texts rather than to redefine the concept of courage itself.

Over time, conceptual changes emerged. Beginning in the Song–Ming period, a new form of Confucianism—Neo-Confucianism (*lixue* 理學)—transformed the understanding of courage. Xinyan Jiang argued, “It was Neo-Confucians in the Song–Ming period but not Confucius who connected courage with internal self-criticism and self-correction”¹.

The object of this essay is that through a textual analysis of the relevant sources, to reexamine Xinyan Jiang's claim and to reach a reaffirmed conclusion.

2. Early Confucian Conceptions of *Yong*

The concept of *yong* 勇, translated to courage, also known as bravery, boldness, and valour, has a long and enduring history in the Chinese tradition. Early lexicographical sources indicated its original meaning. The *Shuowen jiezi* defines *yong* simply as a form of energy (*qi*)², whereas the *Erya* interprets it as the act of springing forward when

¹ Xinyan Jiang, ‘Confucius's View of Courage’, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 39.1 (2012), pp. 44–59, doi:10.1163/15406253-03901005.

² 《說文解字·力部》勇：氣也。从力甬聲。

confronting an opponent³. *Yong* originally referred to a kinetic force of vigour rather than a fixed moral virtue, which was mostly shown on military occasions.

The Confucian conception of *yong* (courage) originated from Confucius. In the *Analects*, Confucius said that the courageous person is free from fear⁴, and regards courage as a necessary part of the way to be a perfect person⁵. However, Confucius often emphasized that courage must be constrict or accompanied by other virtues such as ritual, rightness and eagerness to learn.⁶ Xinyan Jiang concludes that Confucius regards courage as both a martial and civic virtue and allows the possibility for courage to serve evil⁷. Courage has a dual nature, whether the courage is moral or not depends on the purpose. However, to act rightly in situations where one risks losing what is most precious requires courage; without it, an exemplary person (*junzi* 君子) cannot fulfil what righteousness demands. Therefore, courage—the passion for adventure—is indispensable for an exemplary person.

Afterwards, in the text of *zhongyong* 中庸, courage is one of the three cardinal virtues (*san dade* 三达德) which include wisdom (*zhi* 知), humanity (*ren* 仁), and courage. This definition further reinforces the significance of courage's positive function. Yet this does not indicate that courage had become a wholly moralised virtue.

Furthermore, Mencius made a typological analysis of courage into the courage of the ordinary man (*pifu zhi yong* 匹夫之勇) and great courage (*dayong* 大勇)⁸ on Confucian grounds. And he further articulates *haoran zhi qi* as a form of vital energy that is pure, upright, and fully consonant with moral righteousness.

From the pre-Qin period onwards, major commentators on the Four Books—such as He Yan (190–249) on the *Analects*, Zheng Xuan (127–200) and Kong Yingda (574–648) on the *Doctrine of the Mean*, and Zhao Qi (108–201) on the *Mencius*—did not

³ 《爾雅·釋言語》勇，踴也。遇敵踴躍，欲擊之也。

⁴ See the *Analects*, 9.29. 子曰：「知者不惑，仁者不憂，勇者不懼。」

⁵ *Analects*, 14.12. 子路問成人。子曰：「若臧武仲之知，公綽之不欲，卞莊子之勇，冉求之藝，文之以禮樂，亦可以為成人矣。」

⁶ See the texts in *Analects*, 17.8, 17.23, 17.24.

⁷ Jiang, 'Confucius's View of Courage'.

⁸ This meaning of great courage mentioned by Mencius is from rightness motivation such as saving the common people around the world.

significantly depart from the original textual meaning in their explanations of *yong*, basically remaining within the conception of the classical meaning.

To summarize, in the background of the pre-Qin period Confucianism, the positive courage is conceived as rooted in *ren* 仁 (humanity), constrained by *yi* 義 (rightness), standard by ritual *li* 禮 (ritual), discerned through *zhi* 知 (wisdom), and orientated toward the guiding ideal of the *zhongyong* 中庸 (the center of harmony).⁹ Yet this does not indicate that courage had become a wholly moralised virtue.

3. Zhu Xi's Reinterpretation and Internalization of Courage

Since the Song dynasty, Confucian scholars made extensive use of the doctrinal resources of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, producing a synthesising and innovative intellectual system of Confucian thought—Song – Ming Neo-Confucianism.¹⁰ In this section, based on the text resource from *the Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注 (Zhu Xi's *Collected Commentaries on the Four Books*) and *the Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類, we examine whether Neo-Confucian thinkers represented by Zhu Xi transformed traditional Confucian conceptions of courage and shaped the inward moral orientation that Jiang Xinyan mentioned.

3.1 Dividing courage into ethical and physical aspects

In the *Zhongyong*, *yong* had already settled in the three cardinal virtues (*san dade* 三达德) which include benevolence, wisdom and courage (*zhi, ren, yong* 智仁勇). Zhu Xi provides a new explication of the concept of *yong* in his comments of the *Zhongyong*, dividing it into dividing it into *yili zhi yong* (courage grounded in ethical principle) and *xueqi zhi qiang* (strength rooted in physical temperament). Which provided a metaphysical distinction of *yong*.

9 祝传佳‘论先秦儒家勇德的基本内容’, n.d.

10 宋志明, ‘论宋明理学的成因和变迁’, 吉林大学社会科学学报, 49.6 (2009), pp. 86–91, 156, doi:10.15939/j.jujss.2009.06.007.

In Zhu's Collected Commentaries of the Analects, He further clarifies:

“A so-called courageous person may simply be one whose physical vigour is strong.”¹¹

He also mentioned on his comment for Confucius's “The courageous are free from Fear”¹²:

“Those who possess courage are firm in resolve, and for this reason they do not succumb to fear.”¹³

From Zhu Xi's interpretation of courage, we can see that Neo-Confucianism had developed its own distinctive system.

3.2 Strength of Perseverance

In Zhu Xi's view, courage, as one of the three virtues, lies in its ability to hold on. Zhu Xi regards courage as a kind of strength of perseverance. He said:

“One who studies the great way of the sages must hold the vigour and will. Only when one's resolute and vigorous courage remains unmoved by the gains and losses, calamities and fortunes of the world can one truly stand firm.”¹⁴

He also mentioned:

“In the gentleman's pursuit of learning, once he undertakes something, he must bring it to completion, hence he always applies himself with a hundredfold effort. This struggling to know and striving to act is the work of courage.”

These texts show us the reason that why Zhu Xi cherished courage.

3.3 Set Yan Hui as an Exemplary Figure of Great Courage

¹¹ zhu xi, *si shu zhang ju ji zhu*, xin bian zhu zi ji cheng, 第 2 版 (bei jing, 2012). In the comment under *the Analects* 14.4, 子曰：「有德者，必有言。有言者，不必有德。仁者，必有勇。勇者，不必有仁。」

¹² In *The Analects* 9.29, 子曰：「知者不惑，仁者不憂，勇者不懼。」

¹³ Zhu xi 朱熹, *si shu zhang ju ji zhu* 四書章句集注, (Zhonghua shuju, 2012).

¹⁴ Zhu xi 朱熹 autho, Huang Shiyi 黃士毅, Xu Shiyi 徐時儀 and Yang Yan 楊艷 ed., *Zhu zi yulei huijiao*[宋] 黃士毅編；徐時儀，楊艷彙校. and 朱熹, 1130-1200, author, *朱子語類彙校*, ed. by 黃士毅，徐時儀, and 楊艷, Di 1 ban (上海古籍出版社, 2014). “学圣入之道者，须是有胆志。其决烈勇猛，于世间祸福利害得丧不足以动其心，方能立得脚住。”

The above two interpretations of "courage" tend to be abstract concepts. Furthermore, Zhu Xi gives an example of a person as a representative of "great courage". He argued, "Nowadays, most people regard Yan Zi as a gentle and kind person. They do not realise that Yan Hui was actually a man of great courage. His firmness was fine-grained and restrained, never outwardly displayed. He was like a person of great physical strength who never needs to use it; yet no one is able to match him."¹⁵

4. Conclusion

Zhu Xi characterises Yan Hui as possessing "great courage", but this attribution is not found in Confucius's own words, nor does any other text in the Four Books and its earlier comments. As it was well known, Yan Hui is an example of *ren* (仁). In Confucianism, *ren* is a significant moral virtue, and Confucius had mentioned, "To be human-hearted is dependent on oneself"¹⁶. Which excluded that *ren* is an internal self-cultivation. By contrast, *yong* was typically viewed as a quality that reveals itself under conditions of external risk. However, Zhu Xi connected Yan Hui with the great courage (*dayong* 大勇). In some respects, he incorporates into his definition of "great courage" the inward standards that traditionally belong to the virtue of *ren*. Moreover, Zhu Xi offers a metaphysical analysis of *yong*, dividing it into *yili zhi qiang* (strength grounded in ethical principle) and *xueqi zhi yong* (courage rooted in physical temperament).

Ultimately, the conclusion we arrive at is consistent with Jiang Xinyan's argument. It was the Neo-Confucians in the Song-Ming period with Zhu Xi as their representative synthesiser, led an internal direction into the concept of courage. For them, the emphasis in courage falls not on valour under conditions of external risk but on inner perseverance and bravery in self-correction.

再寫結論

Afterwards, the concept of courage consolidated with external and internal. In today's

¹⁵ Zhuzi yulei 朱子語類, "如今人多將顏子做個柔善底人看。殊不知顏子乃是大勇, 反是他剛果得來細密, 不發露。如個有大力底人, 都不使出, 只是無人抵得他。"

¹⁶ In the Analects 12.1, "為仁由己", trans by Peimin Ni.

understanding, is a strength made people dare to risk something like what one holds such as life, career, reputation, fortune, etc to do what they should or want to achieve. Courage is commonly regarded as a matter of overcoming fear and standing firm against what is fearful. Courage is commonly regarded as a matter of overcoming fear and standing firm against what is fearful.

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