



Pre-BA assignment feedback form

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<i>Module Code: SICH3004</i> <i>Module title: An introduction to the Governing of Ancient China 360</i>	<i>Student number: 2006724</i>
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The Importance of Propriety in Self-cultivation

Word count: 2471

China has always been known as a land of propriety and righteousness, and Chinese people always emphasize the importance of propriety to the country, the nation and the individual. Just like *Yan Zi* 晏子 said, ‘The difference between human beings and animals is that human beings follow propriety’.¹ While the Venerable Master Chin Kung also said, ‘Without propriety, this society will be in chaos.’ Therefore, propriety is the guarantee of social order and stability. Because of this, we should always keep the thoughts of propriety, and do not leave it in any conditions.

In this essay, I will analyze the effects of propriety in our life and expound it from three aspects.

Chapter 1: In Terms of the Study

1.1 Restore the Pure Mind

The Venerable Master Chin Kung said, ‘Propriety is the standard that restricts physical behaviors; propriety is moderate, and propriety is social orders and rules.’ If we do not follow propriety and even indulge our desires, our heart would be unsettled.

However, I used to feel unsettled just because of the reason. Because my English grades

¹ *The Governing Principles of Ancient China—Based on 360 passages excerpted from the original compilation of Qunshu Zhiyao*, 2nd edn ((M) Bhd: Chung Hua Cultural Education Centre), p. 270.

are not up to the undergraduate standard, I still study English every day with the teacher from 2:00 p.m. We just need to tell the teacher that I am back to study, when we start studying. And then, the rest of the time mostly is individual study. The teacher's only requirement for us is to complete the daily study tasks. Some days, I was not on time for class, because I would not like to get up, and I thought that it was okay to be late. However, after I was late for days in a row, my heart was very unsettled. This is because I indulged my bad habit without following the sage's teaching. *Di Zi Gui* 弟子規 said, 'Whenever one speaks, trustworthiness comes first'.² In the end, I could not stand the moral condemnation, so I repented to the teacher, and my heart was at ease after that.

As far as Buddhism is concerned, it is the same. The Venerable Master Chin Kung said: 'Confucian propriety and Buddhist precepts are exactly the same in spirit and purpose. With propriety, people's body and mind will be at peace; if without propriety, people's bodies and minds will be in danger, and society will be unsettled. The same is true of learning Buddhism. If we obey the precepts, we can be stable in body and mind, that we can put more energy in our study and character building.' For example, the five precepts of Buddhism: killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and taking intoxicants. If we break these precepts, our body and mind would be unsettled, because it is not in line with our nature.

For example, in an anti-corruption feature film 'Zero Tolerance' broadcast by CCTV, one of the greedy officials said that before he was arrested, he lived in panic, and after he was arrested, he no longer hesitated. The mental state is much healthier than the past. Therefore, we can know after we violate propriety and laws, we are unsettled, and *The Summary of the Rules of Propriety* in *The Classic of Rites* states, 'If a man observe the rules of propriety, he is in a condition of security; If he do not, he is in one of danger'.³ and this is also the purpose of

² 李毓秀 [Li Yuxiu], English translation by 馮欣明 [Feng Xinming], *弟子規* [Di Zi Gui] <http://tsoidug.org/dizigui_trans_simp.php> [accessed 25 March 2022]

³ James Legge, *Summary of the Rules of Propriety Part 1* in *The Classic of Rites*, <<https://ctext.org/liji/qu-li>>

precepts.

Nowadays, most of the things that digital medium reported are related to killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and lying. This is bad for us, because we are easily affected by environments around us, and if we do not follow precepts, we could do something which violates propriety and disturb our pure mind. This is how I am. When I was in junior high school, I was addicted to the mobile phone, watching stars, watching variety shows, watching entertainment gossip. Those bad habits made me waste lots of time so that I cannot do what I should do. Therefore, I always feel anxious and think about many unproductive things every day. Although I had realized its negative effects, I could not control myself, until I learned the traditional culture.

I heard the Venerable Master Chin Kung's teaching in 'Ten Years of Following Mr. Li Bingnan's teachings': There are three conditions for learning well. The first condition is that you can only listen to the teaching taught by one teacher. The second is that the books you read must be approved by the teacher. The third is that you should give up what you have been learned before, and everything starts from scratch. Because I wanted to be a person who follows and practices teacher's teachings, and because my teacher kept stressing the importance, I made up my mind to give up my mobile phone. I would not watch TV and news, and only watch things related to study. After great effort, I can control a little bit of my desire to watch TV and news eventually, and only watch information related to learning. The Venerable Master Chin Kung said that after he obeyed the three conditions for about three months, his mind had become pure, and his annoyance had reduced and his wisdom had grown. After half a year, these changes are very obvious. Although I had not obviously felt that my mind became pure, I actually felt that I did focus on my study, and less thought of those entertainment gossips. But now, when I saw some fellow students did not do this, I was shaken, so that I gradually began

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to watch videos, Moments, news and so on against. I entered the vicious circle of inner unease against. Therefore, I really shall follow propriety and rules, and I must understand the meaning of precepts.

Precepts are not intended to restrain us and make us feel afraid, unfree, and uncomfortable. They are to let we truly understand that if we do not give up bad habits, we do have no way to prevent bad results from happening and you would suffer it yourself. If you truly give up these bad habits from your heart, you would get the pure mind. Therefore, following propriety is not just in form, but also you really follow it from heart, which could be useful. Buddhism emphasizes heart rather than form, but this is not to say that form is not important. It is also important, because firstly, when we do not reach the level yet in the beginning, we have to start with the form first, and after you work on the form for a long time, it will be internalized in our heart. Secondly, the form is performed for others, for the audience, not for ourselves, and it is to set a good example for all sentient beings. This shows the importance of propriety to our self-cultivation.

Chapter 2: In terms of daily life

2.1 keeping us health

There is an old saying goes, ‘The body is the capital of everything’. If we do not have a healthy body, we have no energy to study and live. *The Records of Rites* states, ‘ceremonies reflect the orderly distinctions (in the operations of) heaven and earth’.⁴ Also, if we follow the nature order and diet and sleep are regular, we will have a healthy body. For example, *Yellow Emperor’s Canon of Medicine • Spiritual Pivot II* said,

Qibo said, ‘Spring [is the season characterized by] resuscitation, summer [is the season characterized by] growth, autumn [is the season characterized by] harvest and winter [is the season characterized by] storage. This is the normal [changes of]

⁴ James Legge, *Record of music in The Classic of Rites*, < <https://ctext.org/liji/yue-ji/zh?en=en>> [accessed 25 March 2022]

Qi to which human body also responds. To divide one day into the four seasons, the morning corresponds to spring, the noon corresponds to summer, evening corresponds to autumn and midnight corresponds to winter.’⁵

This is the law of nature. From 3 a.m. to 9 a.m. is the spring of the day. During this time, we should get up, can do some activities, and work. Nine o'clock in the morning to three o'clock in the afternoon is the summer of the day. This is the time that Yang Qi is most vigorous. If you have not woken up at this time, no matter how long you have slept that day, you would still want to sleep without spirit. From three o'clock to nine o'clock in the afternoon is the autumn of the day. Autumn is the harvest, so you cannot do intense exercises at this time, because it would affect the quality of sleep at night. From nine o'clock in the evening to three o'clock in the morning is the winter of the day. In winter we should store energy, so this time is the best time to rest. Especially from eleven to one o'clock in the evening, which is the severe winter. If we do not sleep at this time, it will consume a lot of our energy and cause great harm to our body.

However, nowadays, so many people do not follow this rule. They have lots of health problems due to stay up late. In fact, I am also a person who often stays up late. Whenever I stay up late, my heart will feel uncomfortable. Then, if I have an early class the next day, I would feel my brain is out of control and felt I would pass out, so recently, I tried my best to lie in bed around 22:30, and after not staying up late, I felt that my mental state was indeed much better. Therefore, following propriety can also help us have a healthy body.

⁵ 劉希茹 [Liu Xiru] and 李照國 [Li Zhaoguo], *黃帝內經·靈樞：漢英對照 [Huangdi Neijing Liushu: Hanying Duizhao]* (Xian: Shijie tushu, 2008), vol. 2, p.558. 「岐伯曰春生，夏長，秋收，冬藏，是氣之常也，人亦應之，以一日分為四時，朝則為春，日中為夏，日入為秋，夜半為冬。」

Chapter 3: In Terms of Treating People and Dealing with Things

3.1 Building harmonious interpersonal relationships

The Analects of Confucius records, ‘If a gentleman attends to business and does not idle away his time, if he behaves with courtesy to others and observes the rules of ritual, then all within the Four Seas are his brothers’.⁶ So respecting others is a very important factor in a good interpersonal relationship. While the essence of propriety is respect. Just like *The Classic of Filial Piety* states: ‘The rules of propriety are simply (the development of) the principle of reverence’.⁷

While President Xi is an excellent example. There is a TV feature called ‘Meeting Xi Jinping’, which describes the evaluation of President Xi by some foreigners who had been in contact with President Xi, and they all highly appreciated President Xi. One of the episodes is about President Xi visiting a common family during he visited to Costa Rica. He gave them gifts, concerned about their life, and shared with them his experience as a farmer. They were all moved and encouraged. ‘There were many foreign leaders who came to Costa Rica, but I rarely met foreign leaders who visited ordinary families like ours, and very few national leaders would be proud of being a farmer.’ they said.

Moreover, the feature film ‘Major Country Diplomacy’ also shows the reasons why President Xi is respected. One of the scenes impressed me deeply. In August 2014, Zimbabwean President Mugabe who is over 90 years old visited China. When walking with President Mugabe, President Xi deliberately slowed his down to wait for him; During the talks, President Xi’s line of sight did not leave President Mugabe for a moment and he had been listening attentively to President Mugabe, an old man, telling his stories and expectations. In

⁶ 楊伯峻 [Yang Bojun] and 韋利 [Wei Li], *論語：漢英對照 [Lunyu Hanying Duizhao]* (Chansha: Hunan Renmin Chubanshe, 1999), p. 126.

⁷ James Legge, *The Classic of Filial Piety*, < <https://ctext.org/xiao-jing/zh?en=en> > [accessed 25 March 2022]

the welcome dinner, according to the diplomatic etiquette, when the dinner would end, the protocol officer usually would give a reminder. However, President Mugabe ate more slowly due to being older, so President Xi specifically told the protocol officer ‘Do not rush him, let him eat slowly, we wait for him.’ From these details, we can see President Xi’s respect and consideration for President Mugabe. President Mugabe also highly appreciates President Xi, saying that the President is ‘a man sent by God’.

In addition, after each visit, President Xi would shake hands with the ground staff at the airport to express his gratitude. During visiting to Brazil, this behavior by the President deeply moved the officers and soldiers of the Brazilian Air Force Base. They also called President Xi as ‘The most affable head of state ever to visit a Brazilian air force base’. We can see that China now has more and more friends and more and more high international prestige, all of which are inseparable from President Xi’s sincere, humble and respectful attitude towards others.

As Mencius said, ‘The benevolent man loves others. The man of propriety shows respect to others. He who respects others is constantly respected by them’.⁸

Furthermore, one point is also very important: everything needs to be just right. Following propriety will be no exception and it is also rude to be too polite, and it will make others think that you are so prim. I remember that when I was going back to school, my mother asked me to tell my grandmother about it. However, when I went to my grandmother’s house, she was not there, only my uncle was in. My uncle asked me, ‘what is the matter?’ and I said, ‘I want to tell grandma I am going back to school tomorrow.’ Then my uncle asked me, ‘Did I need to drive Grandma home?’ and I said, ‘Okay’. However, after my uncle left for a while, I realized that there is no need for grandma to come back. it is not a big deal. I only need ask my uncle to help me to tell grandmother, just fine.

⁸ James Legge, *The Works of Mencius*, < <https://ctext.org/mengzi/li-lou-ii/zh?en=en> > [accessed 25 March 2022]

In fact, the most important thing in propriety is the respectful heart. When we have the respectful heart, we will naturally behave politely. Therefore, propriety is the standard of living and the manners in life. It is definitely not the rules which the Buddha, Bodhisattva, and sages have set to let us obey. Because we lose our self-nature now, our minds, our words and our bodies become bad, the precepts and propriety are just to help us restore our nature. Therefore, only after knowing the precepts and propriety, we would like the precepts yet, be willing to accept the precepts and propriety, and we would truly follow the teachings and practice happily, so that we would not feel very restrained.

Chapter 4: In Conclusion

In practice, propriety can help us restore our pure heart and protect us from bad influences; In life, it can help us get a healthy body, so that we can study and live better; In treating people and dealing with things, it can help us to establish harmonious interpersonal relationships. It can be seen that propriety are all over our daily life, closely related to us, and inseparable. Therefore, knowing propriety, following propriety, and doing everything according to propriety, we can have a healthy and happy life.

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