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The Learning on Feili Zhili (非禮之禮) and Real Propriety

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Respected provost and Ms. Deng, good morning! My name is Siyao Zeng. Today I would like to share with you the topic on Feili Zhili (非禮之禮)——The acts of propriety which are not real propriety.

First, I would like to give you a brief introduction and the general meaning of Li (禮) and Feili Zhili (非禮之禮). Then, I will explain the principle and expedient of propriety. Next, I would talk about how to identify Feili Zhili (非禮之禮). At last, I shall talk about in what way that we could avoid acting Feili Zhili (非禮之禮).

Introduction

In China, we can often see parents scolding their children in many occasions and saying, “Be polite! You can't be rude to others!” In Chinese daily lives, most people comply with the traditional spirit of “Courtesy demands reciprocity”, as well as “All doors open to courtesy.”

As a matter of fact, the Chinese word “Li” (禮), which literally means propriety, does not only mean to the smiles as greeting, the etiquette at meals and the considerate manner when entertaining friends, but also a richer connotation and a moral significance -- for example, the standard of interaction with others, a mind of respectfulness and benevolence, love and consideration. On the contrary, when an act of propriety is lack of benevolence and respectfulness, it is regarded as “Feili Zhili” (非禮之禮).

Now please allow me to read the text in Chinese first.

孟子曰：「非礼之礼,非义之义,大人弗为。」¹

Mencius once stated, “The acts of propriety which are not really proper, and the acts of

¹ Meng Ke, 孟軻, *Mencius* 《孟子》 (Xiamen: Xiamen University Press, 2008) ,p.128.

righteousness which are not really righteous, are the things that great man does not do.” To further explain, we should first comprehend the significance of propriety.

孔子曰：「礼云，礼云！玉帛云乎哉！」²

The paraphrase of this teaching is, the ancient people used to show their propriety by jades and silks, however, is propriety only meant by jades and silks? Thus, the propriety that Confucius mentioned is supposed to contain a greater implication. To find out, let's see a conversation in *Meng Zi*.

The Principle and Expedient

Someone asked Mencius, “According to etiquette, the actions between men and women who are non-marital should not be intimate. But if a man sees his sister-in-law is drowning, should he grasp her hand to save her from drowning?” Mencius replied, “It is bestial that not to save his sister-in-law when he sees her drowning, because he has lost his benevolence, which is the fundamental of propriety. In terms of courtesy, body contact is not allowed between men and women. But if in extreme cases, such as an emergency like this, a man must reach out to save his sister-in-law. It is a kind of expedient for helping those who are in distress and in danger.”³

Benevolence -- the Core of Propriety

The dialogue shows that benevolence is the fundamental principle of propriety. Confucius also pointed out in chapter three in *the Analects*, it is stated, “One without benevolence is not able to show his or her courtesy genuinely.”⁴ It could be seen that benevolence is the prerequisite of courtesy and propriety.

Professor Li Bingnan further explained, “Without benevolence, the virtues of modesty,

² Zeng Shen, 曾參, Zi Si and others, 子思等, *The Analects, The Doctrine of The Mean and The Great Learning* 《學庸論語》 (Xiamen: Xiamen University Press, 2008) ,p.141.

³ Meng Ke, 孟軻, *Mencius* 《孟子》 (Xiamen: Xiamen University Press, 2008) ,p.120.

⁴ Zeng Shen, 曾參, Zi Si and others, 子思等, *The Analects, The Doctrine of The Mean and The Great Learning* 《學庸論語》 (Xiamen: Xiamen University Press, 2008) ,p.44.

respectfulness and comity would not exist. Without benevolence, although people act politely and talk politely, their actions are essentially meaningless.”⁵ Therefore, we could comprehend Feili Zhili (非禮之禮) as the propriety without respectfulness and benevolence. According to Mencius, when proprieties are conflict with our benevolence, for the better result of the overall situation, we should do the opposite of the common regulations, to give priority and to follow our benevolence. Therefore, when encountering an emergency, we should act bravely for the conscience and a just cause, rather than stick to conventions. This also a reflection of benevolence.

Consideration -- the Expedient of Propriety

In *Changli Juyao Jiangji*, it is stated, “Propriety is flexible, rather than stuck in a rut. As long as we abide by the principle of propriety, to be honest, to be polite, then we should consider the likes and dislikes of others.”⁶

For example, it is a traditional courtesy in Chinese that when our friends come a long way to visit us, we should entertain them with a good meal. However, we should not be obstinate on it. If our friends express, “Oh, sorry, we feel tired and we just need to take a rest.” or say, “We are sorry that we have no intention of having a meal now.” In this case, we should respect our guest’s opinion and consider their needs, then make another plan to satisfied both sides.

This example shows a daily expedient of propriety, which is for the reason of consideration and respectfulness. As for those who take expedients for the sake of personal purposes, or even do something specious but contrary to benevolence, that they are hypocritical and fraudulent, which have nothing to do with expedients.

Identify Feili Zhili (非禮之禮)

⁵ Li Bingnan 李炳南, *the Essence Teachings of the Analects of Confucius* 《論語講要》 (Taiwan: Shyh Hyah International, 2016), p.739.

⁶ Xu Xingmin 徐醒民, *Changli Juyao Jiangji* 《常禮舉要講記》 (Unity Press, 2018), p.139.

How exactly do we know whether a person is acting Feili Zhili (非禮之禮)? Here, motivation comes first.

There is a Chinese saying that “Distance tests the strength of a horse; and time reveals the sincerity of a person.” Therefore, a person’s motive of respecting others could be identified through a long-term observation and interaction.

Second, Confucius had said, “Listen to what one says and observe what one does.”⁷ Some people are polite on the surface and easy to say yes. However, we may find that their actions cannot catch up with their words because of their neglect and slight. Generally, we should see whether what one says is in accordance with what one does.

The third point is right from wrong, good and evil. Confucius stated, “When most people like a man, we should investigate why they like him; when most people dislike a man, we should also investigate why they dislike him.”⁸ This statement illustrates that we should judge a person by right from wrong, sense of good and evil, instead of according to the common from the multitudes. The reason is, some people look irreproachable and honest, and they might behave politely and decently without offending any one. But actually, they are likely conniving with injustices and violating morality. But the multitudes might not be aware of it, even regarding this kind of persons as good persons. This will do harms with the people whom are really moral, as well as the real propriety itself.

These are the key point to identify Feili Zhili (非禮之禮).

Avoid acting Feili Zhili (非禮之禮)

Now, how can we ourselves avoid acting Feili Zhili (非禮之禮)?

⁷ Zeng Shen, 曾參, Zi Si and others, 子思等, *The Analects, The Doctrine of The Mean and The Great Learning* 《學庸論語》 (Xiamen: Xiamen University Press, 2008), p.43.

⁸ Li Bingnan 李炳南, *the Essence Teachings of the Analects of Confucius* 《論語講要》 (Taiwan: Shyh Hyah International, 2016), p.656.

First, we should set a sincerely benevolent and respectful mind. This is the root of all proprieties and good deeds. Without this mindset, propriety would be meaningless.

Second, we should establish a correct view of right from wrong, sense of good and evil. It is necessary that establish our view and values by learning Chinese classical texts and reading historical books. Because the teachings that embedded in classical texts are so huge and wise that could help us to build a correct view of right from wrong, sense of good and evil.

Third, we should be brave to adhere the principles. Sometimes we want to abide by the principle of our views and values, but it might go against or even break some established rules in some circumstances. At this time, we should do the righteous deed courageously in accordance with right from wrong, good and evil, rather than shrinking away. This is a protection and respect for our conscience.

Fourth, neither being self-abased nor arrogant. The purpose of propriety is to love people, while respecting others is also a way to love people. Therefore, we should treat everyone equally polite. When we are being courteous not for the sake of personal purpose, there is no need to be servile, then the virtue of real propriety would be carried out.

Conclusion

In *the Book of Rites*, it is stated, “Without propriety, the virtues of benevolence, righteousness and morality cannot be fully carried out.”⁹ Besides, in my opinion, propriety is a bridge to transform our innate virtue into tangible benefits in real life. It is also a channel for others to realize our knowledge, self-cultivation and values.

In conclusion, *the Doctrine of the Mean* teaches, “Tao (道) may not be left for an instant. If it

⁹ Dai Sheng, 戴聖, *The Book of Rites* 《禮記》
<https://ctext.org/liji?searchu=%E9%81%93%E5%BE%B7%E4%BB%81%E7%BE%A9>, 16 November 2020.

could be left, it would not be Tao.”¹⁰ According to this , we could say, if benevolence and respectfulness are meant to be the Tao (道) of propriety, then similarly, the Tao (道) of propriety could not be left for a moment. If it could be left, it is not real propriety.

That’s all for my presentation today, thank you for your listening!

¹⁰ Zeng Shen, 曾參, Zi Si and others, 子思等, *The Analects, The Doctrine of The Mean and The Great Learning* 《學庸論語》 (Xiamen: Xiamen University Press, 2008) , P.13.

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