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The Moral Crisis in China Part II – Traditional Chinese Culture

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Summary: The current moral crisis described in Part I, is not how China used to be. China has a proud heritage of 5,000 years as an “ancient civilization” with very high moral standards. Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism either originated in China or took root there. They flourished and were promulgated in a land whose people were devoted to achieving a oneness with heaven. The very concept of enlightenment originated in ancient China. Part II of the Moral Crisis series reviews the foundation of China’s morality in ancient times. Without understanding the heritage of China’s traditional cultural and the height China’s moral standards attained in history, we would not have a clear understanding of how profoundly China has been severed from its past, its own true cultural heritage.

The Moral Crisis in China

Part II – Traditional Chinese Culture

In “Part I - Seven Areas that Showcase China’s Moral Crisis,” we gave examples of the great moral deterioration that has taken place in China. From officials raping an innocent child and then declaring her a prostitute to doctors treating a beggar to a nice meal and then killing him to harvest and sell his organs; from Chinese netizens singing eulogies to bin Laden after the U.S. killed him to the series of frauds that China perpetrated on the public at the Beijing Olympics, we saw the extent of China’s current moral crisis.

This is not how China used to be. China has a proud heritage of 5,000 years as an “ancient civilization” with very high moral standards. Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism either originated in China or took root there. They flourished and were promulgated in a land whose people were devoted to achieving a oneness with heaven. The very concept of enlightenment originated in ancient China. Part II of the Moral Crisis series reviews the foundation of China’s morality in ancient times. Without understanding the heritage of China’s traditional cultural and the height China’s moral standards attained in history, we would not have a clear understanding of how profoundly China has been severed from its past, its own true cultural heritage.

Traditional Chinese Culture – Seeking the Relationship between Mankind and Divine Beings

China, which always called itself the “Divine Land” (神州), has long been aware of the relationship between the human world and the divine. Historically, Chinese believed there were higher beings; that man should follow these higher beings; and through cultivation practice, that man can reach the level of the divine.

In talking about traditional Chinese culture, people tend to think of the three main schools of teaching: Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. However, even before that, Chinese legends were filled with elements of the divine.

For example, Nü Wa (女娲) [1], a goddess in ancient Chinese mythology, created mankind from clay. Later on, the water god, Gonggong (共工), smashed his head

against Buzhou Mountain, the pillar that supported the sky, and knocked it down. The sky collapsed, and the sky's waters poured into the human world. Nü Wa, being compassionate to mankind, repaired the sky and set up a new pillar. The flood dissipated. [2] When there were ten suns in the sky, creating unbearable heat for mankind, Houyi (后羿), the god of archery, was sent to earth to make them stop. He used his arrows to shoot down nine of the suns, and thus lost his immortality. [3] Houyi did not want to die and was eventually given two elixirs that would have made him and his wife immortal. Not knowing what they were, Houyi's wife (嫦娥) drank them both herself and flew to the moon. [4]

Also, in many tales from ancient Chinese civilization gods came down from the heavens to teach man. Sui renshi (燧人氏) taught people to create fire by rubbing two sticks together. [5] Fuxi (伏羲) taught people how to make clothes, how to knit a net to fish, and how to throw a spear to hunt. He also invented the eight trigrams (八卦). [6] Shennong (神农) taught people agriculture. He tasted hundreds of herbs to find what could be used for medicinal healing. [7]

As the civilization proceeded, Chinese people not only fully embraced the concept of the oneness of man and heaven (man is here; heaven is in another realm; man should follow heaven), but they also explored how man becomes one with heaven and how man finds his true self. In the Chinese language, the way to do that is called “cultivation practice” or “seeking enlightenment.” It is a generic term for the practice of mind and body transcendence.

Throughout Chinese history there were many different schools that taught cultivation practice. Most were taught in private or secretly, but three schools taught their students in public. Those three schools are: Taoism – taught by Laozi (老子) [8], Buddhism – taught by Siddhartha Gautama, also known as Shakyamuni [9], and Confucianism – taught by Confucius (孔子) [10]. Whether it was mere coincidence or arranged for a purpose, Laozi, Shakyamuni, and Confucius lived at about the same time. Shakyamuni was born in 566 B.C. and Confucius in 551 B.C.

Laozi's birth date is unknown, but we do know that he lived in that era, since Confucius went to consult with him. These three teachings contributed greatly to the Chinese people's wisdom and understanding.

Laozi wrote *Tao Te Ching* (道德经), the main book of Taoism, in 478 B.C. It is one of the most influential books in history. After the Bible, it is the book most often translated into English.

Laozi taught people the meaning of the "Tao" (道), or "the Way," a term variously used by Chinese philosophers to connote man's means of becoming one with the essential, unnamable process of the universe. The Tao was associated with the complex concept of De (德) "virtue, integrity." In the course of cultivating the Tao, a person must seek the truth, practice De (being virtuous), and eventually return to one's original, true self.

Laozi characterized the relationship between man, Heaven, and the ultimate Tao as "Man models himself after Earth, Earth models itself after Heaven, Heaven models itself after the Tao, and the Tao models itself after its Nature." (人法地,

地法天, 天法道, 道法自然。) [11] The well-known concept of yin and yang originated in Taoism. Yin and yang "are not opposing forces (dualities), but complementary opposites, that interact within a greater whole, as part of a dynamic system. Everything has both yin and yang aspects, as light cannot exist without darkness and vice-versa, but either of these aspects may manifest more strongly in particular objects, and may ebb or flow over time." [12]

Buddhism was imported into China during the Han dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.). It is based largely on the teachings of Shakyamuni. Cultivating benevolence is the core of Buddhism. In China, Buddhism reached its peak during the Tang Dynasty (618 A.D. – 907 A.D.). From the Emperor to ordinary people, many worshipped Buddha and chanted Buddhist scriptures for their whole lives. Many of them were lay disciples (as distinguished from clergy; non-professional) since they cultivated Buddhism at home (instead of becoming a monk in a temple). Many famous poets in the Tang Dynasty and the Song Dynasty (960 A.D. – 1279 A.D.) used pen names

that identified themselves as “lay Buddhists,” a demonstration of the popularity of the practice at that time.

The three practices of Buddhism, using the original words from the teaching, are sila (precept – “戒”), samadhi (meditation – “定”), and panya (wisdom – “慧”).

Sila is generally translated as "virtuous behavior," "morality," or "ethics." Thus Buddhism provided a solid foundation in promoting not only the peace of mind of the cultivator, which is internal, but also peace in the community, which is external.

Buddhism had a great influence on Chinese culture. It taught people the concept of “good begets good” and “evil begets evil”: a person would reincarnate among the six realms; what he experienced in his current life was the result of what he did in his previous lives; what he did in his current life would determine what he would get in his next life.

Confucianism, the third major teaching, was the mainstream ideology for society and governance in China for 2,000 years.

Confucius studied the *Book of Changes*, a book written 3,000 years ago and considered the oldest extant book of divination in China. [13] He also consulted Laozi on the Tao. He said “If a person hears the Tao in the morning, he has nothing, even death in the evening, to be afraid of.” [14] Confucius’ teaching included the Tao, but it was too profound for his disciples to understand. Zigong, one of Confucius’ disciples said, “Teacher’s explanation of books, we can hear and understand; Teacher’s talk on human nature and the heaven’s Tao, we cannot understand.” [15] Ranqiu, another disciple, said, “It is not that I don’t like Teacher’s Dao teaching, it is that I am unable to do it.” [16]

Most of Confucius’ teaching, as recorded by his disciples, was about developing one’s character, or virtual ethics, in the mundane world. These moral teachings emphasized self-cultivation, emulation of moral exemplars, and the attainment of skilled judgment rather than a knowledge of rules. Some core values that

Confucius stressed were: Ren (仁) (benevolence or humaneness), Li (禮) (actions committed by a person to build the ideal society), Yi (義) (righteousness) and

Zhongyong (中庸) (maintaining balance and harmony by directing the mind to maintain a state of constant equilibrium).

Confucius' teaching emphasized cultivating one's own virtues. Confucius said, "If the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame. If they be led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of the shame, and moreover will become good." ("导之以政，

齐之以德，民免而无耻。导之以德，齐之以礼，有耻且格。") [17] "If you are upright, things will go well without your giving orders. But if you are not

upright, even if you give orders, no one will follow them." ("其身正，不令而行；

其身不正，虽令不从。") [18] Confucius also left a maxim for generations of

Chinese intellectuals to achieve greatness in the following order: start with a righteous thought, have a sincere determination, cultivate oneself, put family in

order, govern the state, and pacify the world (正心、诚意、修身、齐家、治国、

平天下). [19]

These three main teachings in China set the tone of Chinese culture: seeking the relationship between man and higher beings.

Even the political system in China was based on divine culture. In ancient China, people believed the emperor's power was bestowed upon him by gods. The

emperor was called "Heaven's Son" (天子). On the surface this belief conveyed

sacredness and power, but on a deeper level, it also conveyed the limitations on that power. The ultimate authority is Heaven or higher beings, not the emperor.

The higher beings loved people. Therefore, if an emperor was not benevolent to his people, he would lose the gods' blessings, and subsequently lose his legitimacy.

When the emperor made mistakes, Heaven gave him a warning or punished him by causing a calamity to occur in the human world, such as a flood or famine. The emperor would recognize the connection and then issue an edict of self criticism

(罪己诏).

The “Evaluate and Recommend” system selected persons with good personal cultivation to be government officials. In the sixth year of his rule, Emperor Han Wu (156 B.C. – 87 B.C.) ordered each city to recommend one person who had filial piety (孝) and another person who was honest and uncorrupted (廉). This formally established the “Evaluate and Recommend” system. Local officials were required to evaluate candidates, identify their characteristics, recommend those who had great merit, and then try them out by giving them temporary official assignments. Under this system, the path to becoming an official became one of personal cultivation (improvement).

Everyday people who did not practice cultivation still respected divine beings. They believed in a “Heavenly God” (老天爷), where, in Chinese culture, Heaven is a god. There are many Chinese expressions and idioms relating to this belief:

天意 – Heaven’s Will.

谋事在人，成事在天 - Man proposes, God disposes.

听天由命 – To submit to the will of Heaven.

Thus, Chinese culture was, in essence, a culture based on religious or spiritual beliefs and placed De, or virtue, in high regard.

Stories of Cultivation

Stories of cultivation are legion. Chinese civilization was so infused with them that they became part of the quintessential nature of the Chinese people. The story of Eight Immortals is especially well-known. [20] They represent people from all walks of life: men, women, young, old, rich, poor, officials, and ordinary citizens. Their legends signify that anyone can practice cultivation if they want to.

Qin Gao was a cultivator of the Tao in the state of Zhao during the Warring States period (475 B.C. – 221 B.C.). On completing his cultivation, he jumped into Lake

Zhuo to look for dragons. He made arrangements with his disciples for when he would return. On that day, Qin Gao came out from the water, riding on a red carp. [21]

Zhao Sheng, a seeker of Tao, traveled a long distance to Sichuan Province in western China to cultivate the Tao under Zhang Daoling, an Eastern Han Dynasty Taoist hermit who founded the Way of the Celestial Masters sect of Taoism, which is also known as the Way of the Five Pecks of Rice. Zhao went through a series of tests, including rejection, being cursed, hardship, sexual seduction, the temptation of gold, fear, being wrongfully accused, and facing a filthy beggar, all of which Zhang Daoling arranged in order to test Zhao Sheng's determination to pursue the Tao. In the end, Zhao became Zhang's disciple. [22]

Huineng [23], the sixth patriarch in Zen Buddhism, demonstrated the supernatural ability of precognition. A monk who envied him promised ten lings (a ling is 50 grams) of gold to a layman, Zhang Xiangchang, if he would create trouble for Huineng. Huineng saw a person with murderous thoughts approach his temple. That night, Zhang tried to stab Huineng three times. Each time his knife bounced back as if it had hit a rock. Huineng then said to him, "I owe you only ten lings of gold, but not a life!" [24]

The story of Sun Jingde shows that Buddha blesses those who worship him sincerely. [25] Sun lived in the Eastern Wei Period (534 A.D. - 550 A.D.), which was in the Southern and Northern Dynasties' period (420 A.D. - 589 A.D.). He built a statue of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara and worshipped it every day. Later, he was framed and imprisoned. Unable to bear the torture, he admitted to things he did not do and was sentenced to death. On the day of his execution, he kept chanting "Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, the Savior." He repeated the chant over 1,000 times. When the executioner's knife hit his neck, it broke into three pieces. The same thing happened three times. Sun was thus granted amnesty. After going home, he saw three knife cuts on the Bodhisattva statue's neck. It was Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara who bore the knife cuts for him!

Such stories are unbelievable nowadays, but they were a regular occurrence in ancient China. They filled volumes of ancient writings and books. A great number of historic figures who contributed to shaping Chinese history were practitioners of cultivation. In fact, they were able to make those contributions because they practiced cultivation. The first ever emperor of China, the Yellow Emperor [26];

Emperor Yongzheng [27] of the Qing dynasty, China's last dynasty; and many great prime ministers, governors, generals, advisors, inventors, and poets all practiced cultivation.

Respect for Divine Beings and Cultivation Practice Was the Basis for China's High Moral Standards

The essence of culture lies in its values or principles. The *Book of Changes* said, "things perceivable and tangible are containers; things invisible and intangible are Tao." Just as the highest level of martial arts is not the "perceivable and tangible" movements but "invisible and intangible" cultivation practice, Chinese medicine, astronomy, dance, music, painting, calligraphy, sculpture, military strategy, literature, poetry, food and drink, and construction—when they reach their highest level, all follow the philosophy of Buddhism, Taoism, or Confucianism. That is how deeply rooted cultivation is in traditional Chinese culture.

Therefore, the religious beliefs that came from ancient legends about higher beings and the inner work inherent in cultivation have formed a strong, rich traditional culture, which then played an essential role in establishing and shaping morality in China. For thousands of years, the Chinese people knew to respect divine beings, to believe that "good begets good" and "evil begets evil," and to emphasize De or virtue in their daily lives.

Respecting the higher beings enabled Chinese to be self-disciplined, to do the right thing, and not to do the wrong thing, even when there was no one else around who would know. One of his students brought Yang Zhen, a governor of the East Han Dynasty (25 A.D. – 220 A.D.), a bag of gold and said that if he took it, no one would know about it. Yang replied, "What do you mean no one will know about it? Heaven will know, Earth will know, you will know, and I will know." This famous Chinese saying, "Heaven knows, Earth knows, you know, and I know" (天知、地知、你知、我知) illustrates the Chinese philosophy when it came to choosing between right and wrong.

Because of this, the values that traditional culture conveyed and the moral standards that traditional culture carried were so strong and cohesive that they remained largely unchanged throughout Chinese history. In the last 2,000 years,

China went through nearly 100 different regimes with 503 emperors and 735 kings. Of those, 203 of them were not of Han ethnicity (the main ethnic group in China), but because the Chinese culture was based on deep spiritual beliefs, which are above the human world, regime changes did not substantially change people's principles and moral standards.

Stories That Reflect a High Level of Virtue and Moral Standards

Many stories from Chinese history exhibit the high level of virtue and moral standards that people had. These stories served as examples for society to follow.

Maintaining Moral Integrity: Once Confucius passed a spring called the "Thieves' Spring." It got the name because some thieves once drank from the spring. Though Confucius was thirsty, he refused to drink the water from the spring to draw a clean line between himself and the activities of the thieves.

Honoring a Promise: Marquis Wen of Wei (? -396 B.C.) was a leader of the state of Wei in the Warring States Period (475 B.C. – 221 B.C.). He once made an appointment with a low-ranking official to go hunting. On the day of the hunt, he first went to a banquet with government officials. During the banquet, it rained heavily. Marquis Wei left the table for his appointment. Other officials asked him to stay since it was pouring rain. He replied, "Though it is pleasant to be here, how can I break my promise?" He then left. Because he treated others with honesty and conviction, the state of Wei prospered quickly under his administration. [28]

Honesty: Meng Xin was an official under Emperor Xiaowu of the Song in the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420 A.D. - 589 A.D.). He was free from corruption at his official post. When he lost his position, he became very poor and had difficulty just feeding his family. His only possession was a feeble old ox. One day while he was out, his nephew tried to sell the ox to buy some food. Meng Xin happened to return home and found out about the deal. He told the truth to the prospective buyer, "This ox is sick and is unable to do even light labor. It will be useless to you." The buyer wanted to help him, so he insisted that he would buy the ox anyway, but no matter how he begged for the ox, Meng Xin refused to sell it to him. The prospective buyer finally gave up. [29]

Forgiveness: Di Renjie (630 A.D. – 700 A.D.) [30], was an official of the Tang Dynasty and Wu Zetian's Zhou Dynasty [31]. Once an official said bad things

about him to Wu Zetian. Wu Zetian then demoted him to a city far away from the capital city, Chang'an. Later Di returned to Chang'an. To make up for her mistake, Wu Zetian said to him, "I demoted you due to someone's badmouthing you. Do you want to know who that person is?" Di Renjie replied, "If I made mistake, I should fix it; if I didn't make mistake, I am at peace in my heart already. Why bother to know who badmouthed me?"

Unselfishness: Qi Xi (599 B.C. – 532 B.C.) was an official in the state of Jin in the Spring and Autumn Period. When he got old, King Daogong asked him who he would suggest to be his successor. Qi Xi recommended Xie Hu. Daogong was surprised, "Isn't Xie Hu your enemy? Why do you recommend him?" Qi Xi replied, "You asked me who could take over my position. You didn't ask me who my enemy was." Daogong then said, "Who would be a good military commander?" Qi Li recommended Qi Wu. Daogong was surprised again: "If I remember correctly, isn't Qi Wu your son?" Qi Xi replied, "You asked me who could fill the position. You didn't ask who my son was." As it turned out, the two men performed well in their positions. [32]

Adhering to Principles: In the Spring and Autumn Period, Cui Zhu, a top official of the state of Qi, killed his king. The official historian, who was responsible for recording the state's history, wrote in the book, "Cui Zhu killed his king." Cui was furious and killed the historian. The official's first younger brother took over his position and wrote in the book "Cui Zhu killed his king." He was then killed. The second younger brother did the same thing and was also killed. The third younger brother took over the position and wrote the same sentence again. Seeing he was not able to force people to change history, Cui Zhu left him and the history book alone. [33]

Accepting Criticism: In the eighteenth year (644 A.D.) of the Zhenguan era (626 A.D. – 649 A.D.) of the Tang dynasty, Emperor Taizong asked his ministers to criticize him. Changsun Wuji and several other ministers praised Taizong and said that he could not possibly make any mistakes. Li Ji, a middle ranking official disagreed: "Your Majesty's sage-like virtue is indeed as immense as Changsun Wuji explained. However, recently someone submitted a written suggestion that did not please Your Majesty. Your Majesty scolded and interrogated the official in front of everyone. The official stepped back in line, overcome with shame. This approach does not encourage officials to offer constructive criticism." Taizong was pleased and said, "What you said is correct. Mark my word that I will correct it!" [34]

Respecting higher beings and pursuing cultivation or personal enlightenment made ancient China a country of great moral standards. One example illustrates the level of morality that China had reached: In the sixth year of the Zhenguan era (632 A.D.), Emperor Taizong reviewed the criminal cases. He felt sorry for the people to be executed, so he gave orders that all those scheduled to be executed be allowed to go home to spend some time with their families and return in the fall of the following year for execution. The next year, although no one monitored them, all 390 people sentenced to be executed returned on time. Not a single one ran away. Seeing they still had basic moral standards (the ability to keep a promise), Taizong pardoned all of them. [35]

It was indeed an incredible achievement, especially in comparison to the moral problems and the extent of corruption in today's China. One might ask, "What changed China from a country of such high moral standards to a country with such low standards?" We will explore this issue more in China's Moral Crisis – Part III.

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[16] *Analects* (论语), “Number Six – Yongye ([雍也第六](#)).”

[17] *Analects* (论语), “Number Two – Wei Zheng ([为政第二](#)).”

[18] *Analects* (论语), “Number Thirteen – Zilu ([子路第十三](#)).”

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