Transcendence in Ordinariness:
Zhu Xi’s Reinterpretation of the
Zhongyong.

Junghwan Lee
Humanities Korea Research Professor,
Asiatic Research Institute,
Korea University
Intro.

• An intellectual shift in coincidence with the Northern- and Southern-Song political and social transition

• The history of “interpretation” of the Zhongyong

• “Moral agency” and “Perspective”
Main Sources of Analysis

• Northern Song

• Southern Song
  – Zhu Xi (朱熹: 1130–1200). Zhongyong Zhangju 中庸章句 and Zhongyong Huowen 中庸或問
Moral Transformation from the Emperor-Centered Perspective 1


• “the transformation of the world” (tianxia zhi hua 天下之化) and “teaching [the people] to transform them” (jiaohua 敎化)

• tonghao 同好 and tonggui 同貴

• “the one person” (yiren 一人)

• the unity of political power and moral authority
Moral Transformation from the Emperor-Centered Perspective 2

  • “heavenly principles disappear and cardinal human relations disordered” (天理將滅而人倫不紀)
  • The eight things: rites, music, penal law, and governance 禮樂形政 and benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom 仁義禮智
  • “huangji” (皇極: August Ultimate or “the sovereign” [jun 君] as “the ultimate standard of the empire” [tianxia zhiji zhi biaozhun 天下至極之標準])
  • “the substance of governance” (zhiti 治體)
Governance or rulership (zheng 政) in the Zhongyong

- “nine cardinal principles for maintaining order in the world as a whole and in all the states therein” (wei tianxia guojia you jiujing 爲天下國家有九經) in Chapter 20
- “reign as king in all the world” (wang tianxia 王天下) in Chapter 29
- “putting into perfect order the great cardinal principles of the universe” (jinglun tianxia zhi dajing 經綸天下之大經) in Chapter 32.
Zhu Xi: Transcendental Values in Ordinariness

• “Yong 庸” in the Zhongyong 中庸：
  – Constancy, Consistency, and Ordinariness
• Triviality and Morality
• Cheng 誠: the crux (shuniu 樞紐) of the Zhongyong
  – Transcendental Values in Trivial Actions
“Yong 庸” as “Pingchang 平常”

(Q1) [Question:] Why do you interpret the meaning of the “yong 庸” as “pingchang 平常,” which Master Cheng defined as “unchanging [or unchangeable] (buyi 不易)”?

[Reply:] ① Only those in the state of “pingchang” can be constant and unchanging. Alarming or astonishing affairs can take place temporarily but not constantly. Even though the two interpretations seem different, they converge on the same meaning. ② Nonetheless, when rendering it into unchanging, [it implies that] a long-time period is necessarily required to detect it (jiu er hou jian 久而後見.). Therefore, this is not better than defining it as pingchang, which includes the connotation of immediately verifying [the veracity of cases considered] on the basis of not having falsehood or oddities (zhi yan yu jin zhi wu suo gui yi 直驗於今之無所詭異), and also signifies being constant and unchanging. ③ On top of that, the Zhongyong presents it by contrast with “the greatest height and brilliancy” (gaoming 高明) on the one hand, and with “having no caution” (wu jidan 無忌憚) on the other. ④ [The Zhongyong] also mentions, “In practicing the ordinary virtues and in the exercise of care in ordinary conversations,” (yongde zhi xing 庸德之行, yongyan zhi jin 庸言之謹) and therewith shows that even the minute and infinitesimal [things] (xiwei 細微) should not be neglected. Then, [to convey] the meaning of the title of this work [properly], how could unchanging be comparable to the keenness of pingchang?

(Q2) [Question:] Then, [according to your interpretation,] doesn’t so-called “pingchang” become mediocre and commonplace? (qianjin 淺近)

[Reply:] It is not the case. ⑤ So-called “pingchang” means no other than the ought-ness of lis of affairs (shili zhi dangran 事理之當然) that have no falsehood or oddities. ⑥ This indeed does not include extraordinarily lofty or extremely difficult affairs (shengao nanxing zhi shi 甚高難行之事). Nonetheless, how can it mean being intermingled with shallow-minded [persons] (tongliu hewu 同流合汙)? ⑦ To say ought-ness, from the constancy of the ordinary course of an ordinary life (riyong zhi chang 日用之常) such as the relations of ruler-minister and father-son ⑧ to [the exceptional cases such as] the abdications of Yao and Shun and the conquests of Tang and Wu, its variations are infinite, but there is nothing that is not pingchang.
Q1: Outlining *li* 理 through Conceptualizing the “*yong*”

* *Yong* is that from which specific criteria to discern proper *lis* from quasi ones derives (Part 1)
* which determines the proper attitude of an agent in searching for *li* (Part 2)
* with which is demarcated the *focal* space, in contrast with peripheral or abnormal situations, in which an agent is entitled to act upon it (Parts 3 and 4)

Q2: an Axiological and Sociocultural Issue

* “*Pingchang* 平常 (ordinariness, normality, routine, constancy)
* “mediocre and commonplace (*qianjin* 浅近)”
Yong is that from which specific criteria to discern proper *lis* from quasi ones derives (Part 1)

- (Q1) [Question:] Why do you interpret the meaning of the “yong庸” as “pingchang平常,” which Master Cheng defined as “unchanging [or unchangeable] (buyi不易)”?
- [Reply:] “① Only those in the state of “pingchang” can be constant and unchanging. Alarming or astonishing affairs can take place temporarily but not constantly. Even though the two interpretations seem different, they converge on the same meaning.”
- …
- “⑦ To say ought-ness, from the constancy of the ordinary course of an ordinary life (*riyong zhi chang*日用之常) such as the relations of ruler-minister and father-son ⑧ to [the exceptional cases such as] the abdications of Yao and Shun and the conquests of Tang and Wu, its variations are infinite, but there is nothing that is not pingchang.”
Yong which determines the proper attitude in searching for *li* (Part 2)

- “② Nonetheless, when rendering it into unchanging, [it implies that] a long-time period is necessarily required to detect it (*jiu er hou jian* 久而後見). Therefore, this is not better than defining it as *pingchang*, which includes the connotation of immediately verifying [the veracity of cases considered] on the basis of not having falsehood or oddities (*zhi yan yu jin zhi wu suo gui yi* 直驗於今之無所詭異), and also signifies being constant and unchanging.”

- “⑦ To say ought-ness, from the constancy of the ordinary course of an ordinary life (*riyong zhi chang* 日用之常) such as the relations of ruler-minister and father-son ⑧ to [the exceptional cases such as] the abdications of Yao and Shun and the conquests of Tang and Wu, its variations are infinite, but there is nothing that is not *pingchang*. ”
Ordinariness in terms of the Quality of an Agent (Parts 3)

• “③ On top of that, the Zhongyong presents it by contrast with “the greatest height and brilliancy” (gaoming 高明) on the one hand, and with “having no caution” (wu jidan 無忌憚) on the other.”
Triviality and the Independence of Morality (part 4 and Q2)

• “④ [The Zhongyong] also mentions, “In practicing the ordinary virtues and in the exercise of care in ordinary conversations,” (yongde zhi xing庸德之行. yongyan zhi jin庸言之謹) and therewith shows that even the minute and infinitesimal [things] (xiwei細微) should not be neglected. …”

• “(Q2) [Question:] Then, [according to your interpretation,] doesn’t so-called “pingchang” become mediocre and commonplace? (qianjin淺近)”

• [Reply:] “It is not the case. ⑤ So-called “pingchang” means no other than the ought-ness of lis of affairs (shili zhi dangran事理之當然) that have no falsehood or oddities. ⑥ This indeed does not include extraordinarily lofty or extremely difficult affairs (shengao nanxing zhi shi甚高難行之事). Nonetheless, how can it mean being intermingled with shallow-minded [persons] (tongliu hewu同流合汙)?”
Triviality and Moral Motivation

• Chapter 4 of the Zhongyong
  – “Kongzi said, ‘I know why the Way is not pursued. The intelligent go beyond it and the stupid do not come up to it. I know why the Way is not illuminated. The worthy go beyond it and the unworthy do not come up to it,.’”

• “Errors” (guo 過: lit., excessiveness) relating to “the intelligent” and “the worthy”
  – bu zu xing 不足行 and bu zu zhi 不足知
Transcendental Values in Trivial Actions: *Cheng* 誠

• “Saying it from the meaning of the word, it refers to “true reality and freedom from [the state of] mala fides.” (*zhenshi wuwang* 真實無妄) Even though there are variances according to the significance of affairs (*daxiao* 大小) under consideration, if the *lis* of affairs are characterized by this word, they can be commonly characterized by the meaning of “true reality and freedom from [the state of] mala fides.”

• Generally speaking, when talking about *lis* in the natural realm (*ziran zhi li* 自然之理), the Heavenly *li* of Heaven and Earth is real at the utmost and free from [the state of] mala fides, so that the Heavenly *li* is identified with *cheng*. For example, “the Heavenly Way” and the virtue of *guishen* [in the *Zhongyong*] belong to this.

• When saying about *virtues* [of human beings] (*de* 德), the mind of sages among all the sentient beings is real at the utmost and free from [the state of] mala fides, so that sages are identified with *cheng*. For example, [the quality of] “hitting upon what is right without efforts and apprehending without deliberations” belongs to this.

• When talking about particular affairs, the reality of *one thought* is also *cheng*; the reality of *one saying* is also *cheng*; and the reality of *one action* is also *cheng*. ”
The Reality of Li and the Reality of the Mind

• “To the phrase that “Cheng is the beginning and end of things; without cheng there would be nothing” (wu zhi zhongshi 物之終始, bucheng wuwu 不誠無物) [also needs to be approached from these two different angles.]

• When saying it from the angle of li (yili yanzhi 以理言之), the lis of Heaven and Earth are real to the utmost and never slips into the state of mala fides even in a moment. …

• When saying it from the angle of the mind (yixin yanzhi 以心言之), the mind of sages is also real to the utmost and never slips into the state of mala fides even in a moment, therefore, from birth to death, there is no affair that is not real. And in the case of one affair, it is that which the real mind has done from the beginning to the end. This is what “cheng is the beginning and end of things” means.

• If one has not reached the stage of sages, the reality of one’s original mind cannot avoid abeyances (jinaduan 間斷). Yet, from the moment when [one] really has the primordial state of the mind to the moment when abeyances have not occurred, there is nothing that [one] has done is unreal. During the abeyances from the moment when an abeyance has occurred to the moment when [re-]connection (jiexu 接續) has not been achieved, however, one’s sayings and doings cannot be qualified as real. Then, even if affairs have been done, it is not different from that nothing has been done. (cont.,)
The Reality of Li and the Reality of the Mind

• (cont.,) A day or a month while [one] has reached [reality], one’s doings [during that time-span] are all real; when being distanced from it, [one’s doings] cannot avoid being unreal. [The time-span] of from the beginning to the end of having reached it corresponds to [the period] from the beginning to the end of things. This is what “without cheng there would be nothing” means.

• [When saying about cheng] from this point of view, there is no li that is originally unreal in the realm of Heaven. … In the human realm, there is no mind that is originally unreal. Therefore, in the case of things that come into being through the mind, only when there is the reality of the mind (xin zhi shi 心之實), the thing then really (lit., the reality of that thing) comes into being (wu zhi shi 物之實). It is impossible that there is no reality of the mind but the reality of a thing comes into being. This is, in essence, what Master Cheng called “penetration from the head to the tail” (chetou chewei 徹頭徹尾).

• Except for [Master Cheng,] in brief, those who have interpreted [this chapter] know that cheng in the realm of Heaven is a real li, but do not know that [cheng] in the human realm is the real mind. Therefore, their accounts are too lofty (taigao 太高) and often make contradictions, thus missing the original import of this classic.”
## Classifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Criterion of Perfection</th>
<th>Spheres</th>
<th>The Sort of the Agent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Heavenly Way (Being <em>Cheng</em>)</td>
<td>The Sphere of Heaven</td>
<td>The Reality of <em>Li</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Sphere of Sages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Human Way (Desire to be <em>Cheng</em>)</td>
<td>The Sphere of Ordinary Human Beings</td>
<td>The Reality of the Mind</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reading a Book to Realize the Transcendental Value of Cheng

• “Cheng is the beginning and end of things. Without cheng there would be nothing.’ Cheng is the beginning and end of an affair. If not for cheng, there will be little difference from not-having-done-that-affair. Let’s take an example of reading a book. Suppose that [I] read it from the first chapter through the third without the mind, read from the fourth through the seventh with the mind, and again [read] the eighth chapter without the mind. Then, the third chapter and its previous ones and the eighth chapter are like not-having-read-it.”
Conclusion

• *Cheng* 誠 and Moral agency—from the state represented by the sage-rulers to ordinary individuals

• From “Teaching” (*jiao* 敎) to “Learning” (*xue* 學)

• How to reconcile moral (and therefore universal and non-discriminative) values based on a theory of human nature with the socio-cultural and discriminatory values of learning as the bedrock for literati identification with a superior place in society

• The Transition from the center to peripheral “ordinary” spaces and the *legitimacy of actions*