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# HOLINESS AND SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION IN CONFUCIAN TRADITION

## 儒家传统中的圣洁和精神改造

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### ABSTRACT

In the philosophical context, the term “holiness” can refer to spiritual excellence or wholeness. In classical Confucianism, “holiness” could be expressed using the virtue of *cheng* since it contains the meaning of integrity or wholeness. The process of spiritual transformation unfolds over three stages according to a traditional Christian understanding. Beginners go through the purgative stage, the proficient undergo the illuminative stage while the perfect pass through the unitive stage. Similarly, spiritual transformation is described in three stages in the *Daxue* (*The Great Learning*). Beginners manifest the brightness of virtue in themselves, the proficient restore the brightness of virtue in others and the perfect attain utmost goodness. The *Daxue* also presents a detailed outline of eight steps required for spiritual transformation, namely, investigation of things, perfection of knowledge, formation of holy intentions, rectification of the mind, cultivation of the self, regulation of the household, good governance of the state and attainment of world peace. On this account, the purgative stage requires the first five steps while the illuminative stage requires the last three steps. The unitive stage involves a profound repetition of the entire eight steps.

## Holiness in Classical Confucianism

In a religious sense, “holiness” can refer to the state of being dedicated to God or consecrated for a sacred purpose. In a philosophical sense, “holiness” can refer to the state of excellence in the moral or spiritual dimension (Soanes and Hawker 2005, 482-483). The concept of “holiness” is said to be derived from the way that human beings experience the world, which is framed in terms of the “sacred” and the “secular”. “Holiness” as perfection or wholeness and “unholiness” as imperfection or uncleanness underlies the distinction between the sacred and the secular (Bowker 2000, 498).

## Three Stages of Spiritual Transformation

In the Christian tradition the process of spiritual transformation is normally divided into three distinct and progressive stages, namely, the purgative, the illuminative and the unitive. These three stages are probably derived from Pseudo-Dionysius, but they may originate from Origen. The purgative stage is characterised by the conversion of one’s life away from sin. The illuminative stage is characterised by growth in one’s knowledge of revelation and doctrine. The unitive stage is characterised by joining oneself to God through prayer and the sacraments (Ashley 1995, 89-90).

Christian tradition presents spiritual transformation in terms of three stages, namely, the purgative (beginners), the illuminative (proficient) and the unitive (perfect). On this account, the process of spiritual transformation is understood largely in terms of one’s personal relationship with God. The intended outcomes of the three stages refer to a gradual increase in one’s charity as expressed in the development of one’s love for and commitment to God to a supreme degree.

The term *cheng* 誠 (sincerity, integrity) is used in a significant and spiritual way in classical Confucian texts like the *Daxue* 大學 (*The Great Learning*). The character *cheng* comprises of the classifier *yan* 言 (speech) and the cognate *cheng* 成 (to consummate, to complete). Hence *cheng* could mean “sincerity” in the sense of “lack of duplicity”. More importantly it could also refer to “integrity” in the sense of “completeness” or “wholeness” and thus conveys the idea of “holiness” (Ames and Hall 2001, 61-62). Thus “holiness” refers to a state of spiritual excellence or wholeness and the Confucian conception of *cheng* 誠 expresses the corresponding meaning of integrity or wholeness.

Thomas Aquinas refers to those in the purgative stage as “beginners”, those in the illuminative stage as “proficient” and those in the unitive stage as “perfect”. The successive stages of spiritual transformation are seen in terms of increasing degrees of charity. The main concern of the beginner is to avoid doing evil and to fight against evil inclinations. The purpose is to establish the virtue of charity. The main concern of the proficient is to make progress in doing good and the purpose is to enhance the virtue of charity. The main concern of the perfect is to fulfil the virtue of charity by uniting themselves with God and enjoying God’s presence (*Summa Theologiae* II-II.24.9).

Therefore the Christian tradition presents spiritual transformation in terms of three stages, namely, the purgative (beginners), the illuminative (proficient) and the unitive (perfect). On this account, the process of spiritual transformation is understood largely in terms of one's personal relationship with God. The intended outcomes of the three stages refer to a gradual increase in one's charity as expressed in the development of one's love for and commitment to God to a supreme degree.

### Three Stages in the *Daxue*

大學之道，在明明德，在親民，在止於至善 (*Daxue zhangju* 大學章句 1).

“The Way of greater learning lies in manifesting the original brightness of innate virtue; it lies in restoring the original brightness of that virtue in the people generally; it lies in coming to rest in the utmost goodness” (Johnston and Wang 2012, 135).

The classical Confucian tradition presents spiritual transformation in terms of a learning process. The process is divided into three distinct stages, and they involve fostering the inherent and natural goodness found in human beings.

(1) Purgative stage: “The Way of greater learning lies in manifesting the original brightness of innate virtue”.

According to the commentary of Zhu Xi, bright virtue is part of human nature. This original goodness becomes darkened due to one's disposition or desires (*Daxue zhangju zhu* 大學章句注 1). “Therefore, the learner ought to rely on what it gives out and subsequently let it shine forth, so restoring it to what it was at the beginning” (Johnston and Wang 2012, 137). The main concern of the *beginner* is to fight against selfish desires. The purpose is to restore the original goodness found in one's nature.

(2) Illuminative stage: “It lies in restoring the original brightness of that virtue in the people generally”.

The main concern of the *proficient* is to make progress by promoting goodness in others after having restored one's own goodness. Zhu explains: “This says that once one has let one's own innate virtue shine forth, one also ought to extend it to others, letting them also find a way to rid themselves of the stains of old impurities” (Johnston and Wang 2012, 137).

(3) Unitive stage: “It lies in coming to rest in the utmost goodness”.

Zhu explains that “manifesting the original brightness of innate virtue and restoring the original brightness of that virtue in the people should, in both cases, come to rest in a place of perfect goodness and not shift” (Johnston and Wang 2012, 137). The main concern of the *perfect* is to accomplish the promotion of goodness through the cultivation of virtue. This implies the consummation or completion of the process by attaining perfect goodness. The quest to complete the process of spiritual transformation by seeking perfect goodness is powered by the virtue of *cheng* 誠 as the Confucian expression of holiness.

Therefore the Confucian conception of spiritual transformation is also presented in the three stages of the purgative (*mingmingde* 明明德) manifesting the brightness of virtue, the illuminative (*qinmin* 親民) restoring the brightness of virtue in the people and the unitive (*zhiyuzhishan* 止於至善) coming to rest in the utmost goodness.

### Process of Spiritual Transformation in the *Daxue*

物格而後知至，知至而後意誠，意誠而後心正，心正而後身修，身修而後家齊，家齊而後國治，國治而後天下平 (*Daxue zhangju* 大學章句 5).

“Investigate things and then knowledge is perfected. When knowledge is perfected, then intentions become *cheng* 誠. When intentions are *cheng* 誠, then the mind is rectified. Rectify the mind and the self is cultivated. Cultivate the self and the household is regulated. Only after the household is regulated is the state well ordered. Only after the state is well ordered is the world at peace” (Johnston and Wang 2012, 137).

The learning process of spiritual transformation is carried out in eight steps as follows:

1. *gewu* 格物 investigating things
2. *zhizhi* 知至 perfecting knowledge
3. *chengyi* 誠意 forming holy intentions
4. *zhengxin* 正心 rectifying the mind
5. *xiushen* 修身 cultivating the self
6. *qijia* 齊家 regulating the household
7. *zhiguo* 治國 ordering the state well
8. *pingtianxia* 平天下 bringing peace to the world

*cheng* 意誠 (intentions are made *cheng* 誠) down is, then, all about the sequence of attaining a place to come to rest” (Johnston and Wang 2012, 139).

Firstly, according to Zhu, the purgative stage of *mingmingde* 明明德 requires five steps:

1. *gewu* 格物 investigating things
2. *zhizhi* 知至 perfecting knowledge
3. *chengyi* 誠意 forming holy intentions
4. *zhengxin* 正心 rectifying the mind
5. *xiushen* 修身 cultivating the self

The main task of the purgative stage is to restore the original goodness found in one’s human nature by removing the obstacles that prevent the brightness of one’s virtue from shining forth. The purification required of beginners is to purify themselves of selfish desires. The purpose of learning at this stage is to grow in knowledge of the good through the investigation of things and the perfection of knowledge. This makes

In the Confucian tradition, then, the process of spiritual transformation is understood largely in terms of one’s relationship with self and others. On the one hand, growth in holiness in the purgative stage involves the cultivation of virtue for oneself and the illuminative stage involves the cultivation of virtue for others. On the other hand, the unitive stage involves the pursuit of holiness expressed as love for and commitment to the supreme goodness by striving for moral and spiritual excellence in everyone.

According to Zhu’s interpretation, these eight steps are an elaboration of the three stages presented at the beginning of the *Daxue*:

“Down to *xiu shen* 修身 (cultivating the self) is about the matter of manifesting the original brightness of innate virtue. From *qi jia* 齊家 (regulating the household) on is about the matter of renewing the people. If one investigates (gets to the core of) things, and knowledge is perfected, then one knows where to rest. From *yi*

the application of moral knowledge possible through the formation of holy intentions and the rectification of the mind. It culminates in the cultivation of virtues in oneself.

Secondly, in Zhu’s interpretation, the illuminative stage of *qinmin* 親民 requires three steps:

1. *qijia* 齊家 regulating the household
2. *zhiguo* 治國 ordering the state well
3. *pingtianxia* 平天下 bringing peace to the world

The major task of the illuminative stage is to restore the state of original goodness in others. The illumination required of the proficient is to guide others along the path of cultivating virtues. The purpose of learning at this stage is use one's knowledge of the good for the sake of others. Those who are proficient learn to apply their moral knowledge by caring for others in the family, the country, and the world. It culminates in the cultivation of virtues in others.

Thirdly, Zhu understands the unitive stage of *zhiyuzhishan* 止於至善 as a repetition and deepening of the learning process of spiritual transformation.

It begins with knowing where to rest in two steps:

1. *gewu* 格物 investigating things
2. *zhizhi* 知至 perfecting knowledge

It continues with attaining a place to come to rest in six steps:

1. *chengyi* 誠意 forming holy intentions
2. *zhengxin* 正心 rectifying the mind
3. *xiushen* 修身 cultivating the self
4. *qijia* 齊家 regulating the household
5. *zhiguo* 治國 ordering the state well
6. *pingtianxia* 平天下 bringing peace to the world

The objectives of the purgative and illuminative stages are the restoration of the original goodness in oneself and others by the cultivation of virtue. The objective of the unitive stage is to bring this goodness to completion by the attainment of holiness. The union required of the perfect is to commit themselves firmly to supreme goodness by striving for moral and spiritual excellence in themselves and others. The great mission of the unitive stage is two-fold in nature. The first task is to acquire knowledge of the nature of utmost goodness while the second task is to go about the achievement of utmost goodness.

Regarding the first task, the purpose of learning at this stage is to develop one's understanding of the supreme good through the investigation of things and the perfection of knowledge. Regarding the second task, one's commitment to the supreme goodness is founded on the formation of holy intentions and the rectification of the mind. The pursuit of holiness is manifested in the personal, familial, social, and global dimensions. Holiness culminates in the attainment of the supreme good understood as moral and spiritual excellence within oneself as well as others.

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