

Social Values

Shèhuì jiàzhí 社会价值

A sense of the social values of propriety, justice, honesty, and honor is a perennial and universal concern, and given China's historical sweep and contemporary complexity, the country is clearly no exception. Indeed, consideration of such values has occupied many of China's most prominent thinkers throughout its long history.

In some societies, propriety, justice, honesty, and honor must be extracted from behavior. In others well-developed textual canons exist. China has both explicit intellectual considerations of these values and the actual behavior of both ordinary people and leaders. Further, these values have figured prominently in many of China's collective, imperial, and national projects. That is, they operate in two dual arenas: intellectual/behavioral and individual/collective.

All societies profess a variety of moral ideals, and all struggle to contain breaches of these ideals. In some cases evidence of the sense of ideal behavior can be found in the responses to perceived breaches. They are connected to the ways each society views human beings.

Propriety

A sense of propriety is a sense of acting properly, fittingly, in accordance with social expectations and decorum.

China has a long, passionate, and subtle history of consideration of propriety. Early in China's historic civilizations, *li* (rites) emerged as a preeminent concern. Cultural precursors saw their role as involved in shaping the workings of the universe and affecting the outcome of both human and natural events. What emerged from this principle was the idea of model emulation, in which certain idealized figures provided exemplars of behavior.

The Chinese philosopher Confucius (Kongzi, 551–479 BCE) and other Ruist (Confucian) philosophers wrote (spoke) at length of the proper rituals. The *li* include guidelines for how people are to act with regard to other people and to the rituals handed down from the past. Confucius, in the *Analects*, wrote “I follow the Zhou” (*Analects* 3.14); this has been taken to indicate that in a situation of alternative rituals, he pursued those established by the Duke of Zhou.

The late Warring States period (475–221 BCE) text, the *Zhou Li* (Rites of Zhou), codified some rituals. A Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) text, the *Liji* (Book of Rites), specified ways of acting, recipes, manners, and a miscellany of detailed instructions regarding propriety. From the Warring States period on, debates in China centered on whether it is preferable to follow the example of a charismatic authority, such as Confucius, or the law.

Propriety includes relations among the sexes, sexual behavior, and many other aspects of social interaction. All these were governed by public orders as well as private guidelines. During imperial China laws governing behavior and extolling virtue were read aloud in villages. Those who maintained exemplary behavior—such as

widows who remained unmarried for decades—were honored through gateways and pillars pointing out their impressive accomplishments. The Kangxi emperor’s “Sacred Edict” of 1670, promulgating sixteen principles of moral behavior, was read in villages. One principle explicitly called for “propriety.” The Qing dynasty (1644–1912) government attempted to combine the legal and moral or charismatic aspects of leadership.

When Westerners first encountered Chinese, they found them to be governed by specific and detailed guidelines about behavior (notably different from their own) and often remarked on the Chinese focus on propriety (ritual, politeness, social status).

From the founding of the People’s Republic of China (1949) until the end of the Cultural Revolution

(1966–1976) questions of propriety, whether individual or collective, were the subject of prominent public activity: Don’t use titles; don’t pay attention to status differences; treat people as equal; don’t be polite; be blunt; don’t be deferential; sacrifice yourself for the greater good, like the model worker, Lei Feng; tell the truth at all times; be selfless; be self-deprecating; don’t flatter others; don’t give honor to others.

Essentially a war on propriety was waged. The campaign to criticize Confucius (*pi-Lin pi-Kong*) was intended in part to criticize the traditional focus on manners; the Cultural Revolution clearly targeted proper roles, mores, niceties, and everything that had been part of earlier prescriptions for behavior.

Since the end of the rule of Chinese Communist Party

A propaganda poster from the “Learn from Lei Feng” campaign, titled; “Uncle Lei Feng tells Revolutionary stories” (1965). The image of Lei Feng has served as the model worker/martyr/saint of the Communist party for over 40 years.

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leader Mao Zedong, a reversion to norms of polite behavior has taken place in private, with attention paid to relative status, relationships, and decorum.

During the 1980s and 1990s campaigns such as that for “socialist spiritual civilization” (*shèhuì zhuyì wénmíng jīngshén*) focused on behaving properly, as was evident in campaigns against spitting and unruly public behavior. In the 1990s people emphasized *suzhi* (quality). Sometimes sexual morality has been the focus, with pornography the target. Sometimes the focus has been on *limao* (politeness).

A national campaign to advance a “socialist harmonious society” was launched in spring 2005 by Hu Jintao, general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, advocating a society in which human relations are honest, just, fair, and harmonious. In 2006 he proposed “Eight Do’s and Eight Don’ts” (honors and disgraces) of proper behavior.

In the years leading up to the 2008 Olympics, struggles about propriety were renewed. Some focused on boasting, corruption, inequality, spitting, and waiting in line. Taxi drivers, as hosts, were trained to speak correct English as an example of proper behavior. It is safe to predict that debate over propriety will remain part of Chinese public discourse in coming years.

Justice

Justice has to do with what is just, fair (*gongping*), and right (*zheng*). In some places some of these terms conflict with one another; what is right may not universally be impartial. People’s sense of justice guides the way they regard merit, reward, and punishment. Justice may be sought through law and the workings of the state, through the operations of a moral universe, or through individuals’ and groups’ interactions with one another. It can be substantive in individual relations or formal in law.

For millennia relationships have been regarded as inherently unequal and bring with them expectations about power, responsibility, and justice. We can see traces of China’s earliest sense of justice in its detailed codification of laws and punishments.

Not all punishments or convictions were regarded as just, but people often held the idea that in the divine realm, the truth of people’s innocence would be known

because the universe operates according to principles of justice, reciprocity, and exchange.

The Chinese philosopher Mencius wrote of how natural it is to harbor different feelings for relatives and strangers. It would be proper and correct to treat individuals as nonequivalent. The law codified this social value.

In the three entities called “gods, ghosts, and ancestors” the idea of exchange—which involves just turn-taking—rules interactions. Exchange, as the anthropologist Marcel Mauss described, governs these interactions. Human beings provide for the spiritual needs of ancestors. People burn incense and bow to gods. Gods and ancestors, in turn, make sure devotees pass examinations, get well, get promotions, and so forth. The term for filiality, *xiao*, comes from “feeding the dead.” Misfortune is often explained by healers as stemming from people’s failure to reciprocate. Ghosts are especially threatening because they do not recognize the obligations that govern other relationships. Further, the universe operates according to impersonal powers, such as operations of the underworld. The Buddhist idea of a karmic balance, held by most Chinese in imperial times, reinforces the idea of just rewards for righteous actions—eventually.

In terms of the legal system, in imperial times people turned to the courts and the legal system only when personal intervention and what would now be called “mediation” failed to yield acceptable results. The state attempted to counter the prevailing sense that it is right to favor one’s relatives and associates through its system of assigning magistrates to districts away from home and of rotating their posts every three years.

The twentieth-century revolutions revolved in part around the notion of economic justice. It was seen as unjust that a small proportion of the society owned most of the resources. The redistribution of land and other goods in the 1950s reflected a changed notion of what a just society would look like.

From the 1950s to the late 1970s the law was suspended on the grounds that it was bourgeois. Mediation was encouraged in the case of disputes. The legal system was restored in the 1980s and especially the 1990s. The penal and carceral sense of justice in recent years has been tempered by an emerging civil code, with the shift from “rule by law” to “rule of law.” Many people look hopefully at the legal system as a way of combating widespread corruption and favoritism. The legal assumption has been

that a criminal is guilty unless proven innocent. The vast majority of all trials end in conviction.

Films such as Zhang Yimou's *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992) reflect citizens' sense that securing justice from local officials is difficult and that somewhere in the center a dispenser of justice exists.

Many of the most fraught events in twentieth- and twenty-first-century China are connected with the sense of justice: human rights (both societal and individual rights), environmental justice, and economic justice.

Honesty

A sense of honesty must be part of the morality of every human society, along with the recognition that human beings are skilled at manipulating truth. Chinese society is no different; it places a premium on honesty while recognizing that honesty may not always be possible or even desirable in every context.

One commonly told story of an honest person is that of Qu Yuan (332–296 BCE). He was a loyal official of the state of Chu, one of the Warring States (475–221 BCE), who criticized his ruler, King Huai. Despite being exiled, Qu Yuan persisted in stating his views. He eventually committed suicide in the Miluo River out of despair. To honor his memory, the Dragon Boat Festival is held every year. People throw triangular, rice- and meat-filled bamboo leaves to feed the spirit of Qu Yuan. His poems include “Li Sao” (Lament) and “Tian Wen” (Questions Addressed to Heaven), collected in the *Chuci*. His name is synonymous with that of any spurned advisor; the danger of stating the truth is always warned against.

Confucius similarly roamed from state to state offering his version of the truth about how to act. His teaching was not always desired; many rulers were reluctant to listen to someone who did not tell them flattering and pleasant things. But Confucius had the integrity to persist in his message, rarely being honored for it.

The *Sunzi Bingfa* (Sunzi's *Art of War*), one of many war manuals, advocated the use of deception in order to bring about a greater good, which was the avoidance of physical warfare. When one cleverly manipulates appearances and anticipates one's enemies' responses to one's own actions, the good can triumph. In this sense, views of truthfulness are shaded by pragmatic concerns.

In contemporary China many ordinary citizens wholeheartedly desire honesty. They often feel, however, that the government manipulates the truth in order to preserve its power and to manipulate people into acting a certain way. Censorship and the blocking of information (the Internet especially, but in prior decades the blocking of books and other media) are seen as necessary for preserving public morality, for preserving the honor of the nation, and for preventing undesirable information from circulating. The fact that citizens and the government are involved in a continuous struggle to gain or restrict information suggests an individual hunger for honesty alongside a political fear of it.

In ordinary day-to-day life many individuals feel that they cannot be completely honest, especially in financial or political affairs. People fear corruption or manipulation of information, and to protect themselves individuals may not be entirely forthright.

Honesty has to do with saying what is true. The whole truth is rarely urged by any society. So the question revolves around constraints on the full truth.

Honor

Honor (*guang*) is related to face (reputation), which is in turn related to politeness. Honor requires keeping one's reputation intact in others' eyes, a guiding value in China for millennia. A metaphor of light and shining, of visibility, of being seen, is connected with honor. Its opposite is being shamed and losing face. Honor can be gained by individuals or by collectivities, from the family to the nation-state.

Greetings provide an opportunity to bolster someone's honor: “*Jiu yang*” (“I have long heard of your illustrious reputation”). Banquets permit public display of honor among peers and comrades as people are toasted with honorific expressions (“*Wo jing ni*,” “I honor you”). The roles played give a framework for honor. Relationships (*guanxi*) similarly have the potential for increasing or threatening someone's honor.

During late imperial times China lost its sense of national honor and was shamed through the experience of semicolonialism as Western powers carved up China's territory among themselves in the form of treaty ports and extraterritoriality. This period is recalled as China's

“century of humiliation.” China suffered as the “sick man of Asia” because of its opium addiction and loss of currency to Western powers.

In gaining World Trade Organization (WTO) status in 2001 and in hosting the 2008 Olympics, China sees itself as gaining honor in the eyes of the world as it regains its rightful place as a nation of superlatives. China has attempted to build the tallest buildings, the longest bridges, and the highest railway line (in Tibet). Each of these accomplishments adds honor to China; people believe that the twenty-first century surely will tell the tale of China’s recognition as worthy of admiration.

China’s revolutions—political, cultural, social, and economic—have revolved in part around the sense of propriety, justice, honesty, and honor. In the early twenty-first century resolution has not yet been achieved. But much debate has occurred in private and public, in explicit examination of principles, and in implicit concern about the proper moral directions to take.

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