

Zhong Yong (Doctrine of the Mean)

Zhōngyōng 中庸

One of Confucianism's sacred texts, the *Zhong Yong* serves as a guide to achieving harmony—personal, social, and political—through a mind and self in a state of perfect equilibrium. Translated as *The Doctrine of the Mean*, it embodies many of the central themes of Confucianism.

The *Doctrine of the Mean* (the *Zhong Yong*) comprises two chapters in the *Classic of Rites* (*Li Ji*), one of the sets of books that form the canon of Confucian thought. During the early period of the Song dynasty (960–1279), it came to be regarded as a single text worthy of investigation and study on its own. Tradition maintains that it was written by Zisi (Kong Ji), who was the grandson of Confucius (551–479 BCE). The date of its composition is likely around 450 BCE.

The intellectual concerns of the Song period included, for the most part, an engagement with Buddhism, which advocated the understanding of the relationship that existed not between human beings but between human beings and the cosmos. This idea profoundly changed Song China, and more importantly, it forced the thinkers of the day to go back and reexamine traditional Chinese works of philosophy to see if they could find in them native traditions that also addressed the relationship vaunted by Buddhism. Thus, the *Zhong Yong* was read as a spiritual text first and foremost and only afterwards as a guide for bringing about a better and just society.

The work is written in an aphoristic style, with a student posing questions and a sage providing the answers. At first glance, these aphorisms seem to be unrelated, but a closer examination reveals that they address specific spiritual and philosophical themes, all of which seek to elucidate the spiritual content of Chinese culture, and not only its pragmatic concerns.

The larger aspect of externality is the cosmos, or heaven, and this too is linked with spiritual internality. Both heaven and the individual share the same reality; that is, perfection. But, whereas heaven does not deviate from its true reality, an individual does. This causes disharmony and strife, which devastate not only the individual but also society. A corrupt ruler corrupts those whom he rules, and a corrupt individual corrupts those that live with him in the community. It is only after intense struggle to attain moral rectitude (the state of perfection) that the harmony between heaven and the individual can once more be reestablished, and thus strife and disharmony are destroyed. Self-perfection, therefore, reaches outwards; first it perfects society, and then it joins with the eternal perfection that is contained in heaven. In effect, perfection is a virtue of heaven, which is also placed inside the individual; the task of the individual is to find and highlight this virtue in his or her own life.

The *Zhong Yong* thus offers a far more profound evaluation of perfectibility than that found in Buddhism. The goal is not solipsistic; it does not stay focused on the self; it is not, and never should be, an isolated event. Rather, the demand is for a person to become sincere so that she or he might know that his or her own perfectibility is an immense force for change, and for the better. And this

From *The Doctrine of the Mean*

What Heaven has endowed is called the nature. Following the nature is called the Way. Cultivating the Way is called instruction.

The Way cannot be departed from for so much as an instant. If it were possible to depart from, it would not be the Way.

Source: de Bary, W T. & Bloom, I. (1999). *Sources of Chinese tradition, Vol. 1*. New York: Columbia University Press, 334.

perfectibility is made manifest in moral rectitude, which creates and then sustains a perfected self living within a perfected community, all governed by the laws of a perfect cosmos. And this state of harmony is also the place where truth and justice easily endure.

In the *Zhong Yong*, Chinese intellectual culture found a thorough and complete system of personal and social life, which went farther than Buddhist tenets. For this reason, it became a central text for later Confucian thinkers who, throughout the breadth of Chinese history, turned to it again and again as a guide and methodology to attain and retain the Way of Confucianism.

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Further Reading:

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