

Core Socialist Values • Keywords

Chief Editor: Han Zhen

Integrity

Liu Xiang Xue Gang

Translated by Shao Xueping



China Renmin University Press

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Integrity

Integrity

Chapter One

The Origin of *Chengxin* (Integrity)

1

The Origin of *Chengxin*(Integrity)

Chengxin (integrity) is often considered a phrase indicating honesty and good faith, two basic guidelines for conducting oneself in the society. As early as the Eastern Han Dynasty (25A. D. – 220A. D.), Xu Shen (58A. D. – 147A. D.) explained in his *Origin of Chinese Characters* how *cheng* (honesty) and *xin* (trustworthiness) explained each other, “composed of a radical, *yan* 讠 (words), and a character, *cheng* 成 (to live up to), the character of *cheng* 诚 means *xin* 信”; “composed of a radical, *ren* 亻, and a character, *yan* (言), the character of *xin* 信 means *cheng* 诚.” Although they are two characters, *cheng* (honesty) and *xin* (trustworthiness) interrelate with and differ from each other in meaning.

Section One *Cheng*, a Self-referring Imperative

The character “*cheng*” first appeared in the *Book of History*, but it was first used as a notional word in “to be perspicacious, trustworthy, straightforward and loyal” in *Zuo’s Commentary*. The commentary for “to be perspicacious, trustworthy, straightforward and loyal” is “*cheng* 诚 means *shi* 实 (being true)”. “The Record of Wen Yan” in *The Book of Changes* admonishes people “to guard against depravity to preserve their honesty” and “to value self-cultivation to nourish honesty”. The commentary for “to guard against depravity to preserve their honesty” and “to value self-cultivation to nourish honesty” reads, “*cheng* means *chengshi* 诚实 (honesty)”. “The Record on the Subject of Music” in the *Book of Rites* emphasizes “valuing frankness and despising hypocrisy”, for which the commentary notes that *cheng* means *chengxin* 诚信 (integrity). On

the whole, *cheng* bears four kinds of meaning: 1. to tell the truth, or to deceive no one; 2. being true, as in opposition to “being false”; 3. to fulfill, achieve, complete; 4. to be respectful and prudent, as “Great Learning” in *The Book of Rites* argues, “wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts” .

Cheng, which has much to do with one's inner self, refers to a real and sincere attitude and quality. Compared with *xin* 信, *cheng* 诚 is more concerned with the individual as a personal requirement for one's moral standard and code of conduct, revealing a concern over what kind of person one is to be. The definition of *cheng* 诚 in *Mencius* reads, “*Cheng* is the Way of nature; striving for *cheng* is the Way of man” . *Mencius* (372B. C – 289 B. C.) regarded *cheng* as the Way of nature, or the most fundamental moral attribute defined by heavenly principles. He also believed that human beings, the most brilliant creatures made by heaven and earth as well as the wisest of all living beings, must act according to the Way of nature by understanding, reflecting on and practicing *cheng*. In *Mencius*' opinion, taking the strife for *cheng* as the Way of man is the most fundamental norm of ethics and morality. In this sense, *cheng* underlines the individual character, especially the innate truthfulness and its manifestation. This is the reason why Zhu Xi (1130A. D. – 1200A. D.) stated that *cheng* meant “maintaining the inward (correctness) with self-reverence, righteous adjustment of behavior, and...eradication of self-deception and lies.” Self-reverence means no snubbing or dissipating in Zhu Xi's opinion. (Quoted from “A Noble Man Without Gravitas Inspires No Awe” in *The Complete Works of Zhu Xi*.)

The historical origin of the notion of *cheng* lies in people's worship of ghosts and gods. *Cheng* is the attitude towards the deity people should

have, the feelings they display when offering sacrifices to ancestors, and the request of the Way of nature on the Way of man. As an integral part of the daily life of ancient people, the worship ceremony is not only an order of culture and life, but also an institutional and cultural phenomenon. Only when the ancients, actuated by the purpose of praying for blessings and averting certain disaster or repaying a favor of the deity, were extremely deferential and devout in worshipping, could their sacrifices be accepted by gods, their wishes be realized and spiritual comfort be granted. According to “Utensils for Rites” in *The Book of Rites*, “the noble man will do his utmost, act with prudence and show the greatest respect and sincerity to avoid breaching rites.” Obviously, people’s *cheng*, which mostly stemmed from their reverence for the deity, can be boiled down to the individual pursuit of life and security.

Further reading

Story 1: The Jade of the He Family

Translation: Bian He, a man of the State of Chu during the Spring and Autumn Period (700B. C. – 476B. C.), happened to find a piece of uncut jade in the Chushan Mountain and presented it to his Emperor Li. Li had his jeweler examine the raw gemstone. The jeweler said, “Why, it is a stone!” Emperor Li, who mistook Bian He for a cheater, had his left foot cut off. With the death of Emperor Li, Emperor Wu came to the throne. Bian He presented the raw gemstone to the new Emperor. Wu had his jeweler examine the stone. The jeweler said, “It is merely a stone.” Then, Emperor Wu had the right foot of Bian He cut off as a punishment. After the demise of Emperor Wu, Emperor Wen’s reign began. Bian He carried the piece of uncut jade to the foot of the Chushan Mountain and

kept wailing there for three days and three nights till blood, instead of tears, streamed down his face. Upon hearing the news, Emperor Wen sent his men to ask him, “Why, when many had their feet cut off, are you grieving so inconsolably?” “I’m not wailing for my feet! I’m wailing for the wrongs that a precious jade was overlooked as stone, and an honest man, punished as a cheater. That is why I feel deeply grieved!” replied He. Being informed of this, Emperor Wen had his jeweler cut the stone open. A rare gem was found nestling inside. In light of this, Emperor Wen named the jade *He Shi Bi* (the Jade of the He Family) in honor of Bian He’s honesty.

Comments: Bian He presented the priceless jade to the Emperors of the State of Chu three times and manifested his honesty and loyalty at the cost of both feet. The Jade of the He Family, whose name has remained immortal, later played an important role in the historical story of “Returning the Jade Intact to the State of Zhao”. It has been universally acknowledged as an invaluable asset since then. The recognition of its value came at the cost of Bian He’s unrelenting struggle, for which one cannot help but sighing. As far as an individual is concerned, *cheng* generally means to have a clear conscience, never confusing right and wrong, never compromising or echoing blindly what others have said, but sticking to one’s own belief. Bian He lived under the reign of three generations of emperors and suffered from untold hardship, but he never gave up the wish of presenting the precious stone to the monarch. If his faith in the value of the gem had not been so firm, he would have given up his idea long ago.

Story 2: Yan Shu's Honesty

Translation: As a teenager, Yan Shu (991A. D. – 1055AD) was recommended to the court by Zhang Zhibai (? – 1028A. D.), whose posthumous title was Wenjie. Emperor Zhenzong (968A. D. – 1022A. D.) of the Song Dynasty (960A. D – 1279A. D.) called him in and ordered him to participate in the final imperial examination together with over a thousand of candidates for official positions. Yan Shu said, “I have written on the same topic before. The old draft is with me. Please give me another topic.” The emperor valued his honesty very much. When Yan Shu was in office, peace had made hedonic enjoyment a common practice throughout the nation. In their spare time, courtiers usually indulged in merry-making in restaurants. Since he could not afford to idle away in seeking pleasure, Yan Shu always stayed at home, busy himself with reading classics and teaching poems to his brothers. One day, Emperor Zhenzong appointed Yan Shu as the tutor of the crown prince unexpectedly. Knowing the court was puzzled at this appointment, Zhenzong explained, “It’s said that most of you have been indulging in pleasure and wine, while Yan Shu shuts himself up at home and devoted himself to reading. He is so prudent and self-disciplined that he is the very person to accompany the crown prince.” Yan Shu accepted this position with gratitude. Emperor Zhenzong again praised him for his rare diligence. Yan Shu said frankly, “I did shut myself up at home reading, but this is not because I am unwilling to seek pleasure, but because I am too poor to do so.” His reply made the emperor value his honesty and frankness all the more. When Emperor Renzong (1010A. D. – 1063A. D.) was in power, Yan Shu was put in an important position at last.

Comments: Yan Shu was a renowned official and celebrated *ci*-

poet in the Northern Song Dynasty (960A. D. - 1127A. D.) . “Helpless to see flowers wither and fall; it’s time for the return of swallows that I seem to have met before” is his most famous line. In the position of the prime minister, he was known for his uprightness and frankness. His *cheng* is mostly manifested by his honest, frank and straightforward way of doing things.

Section Two *Xin*: Other-referring Imperative

The written records of *xin* 信 (trustworthiness) emerged earlier than *cheng* 诚 (honesty) . It first appeared in the inscriptions on ancient bronze utensils made in the late Shang Dynasty (1600B. C. - 1100 B. C.) . For instance, characters like “I know his *zhongxin* 忠信 (loyalty and good faith)” were casted on the Emperor Zhongshan Tripod made in the Warring States Period (475B. C. - 221B. C.) . A great many records concerning the term *xin* (trustworthiness) can be found in the Four Books and Five Classics, for example, “He gave me a solemn promise” in a poem entitled “A Cloth Peddler” in the *Airs of Wei* in *The Book of Songs*, “sincerity even affects pigs and fishes” in “Mutual Sincerity” in *The Book of Changes*, and “They chose the virtuous and capable as leaders, promoted *xin* and established good neighborly relations” in “The Rise and Reform of Rites” in *The Book of Rites*. *Xin* was also commonly used in the daily expressions of the ancient Chinese. For instance, there are *xinwu* (a token of faith), *yinxin* (ancient official stamps, probably like the official seal today), *xinfeng* (the wind rises as expected), *xinyong* (credit) and *xinshi* (objective and authentic historical records), so

on and so forth.

Xin involving one's words and deeds as well as interpersonal influence exists only in the relation at least between two persons. The focus of *cheng* is on oneself, while the focus of *xin* is on others, especially on the influence of one's words and deeds on others. Hence, *xin*, as an ethical code based on inter-subjectivity, is not just related to the honesty of an individual.

Like *cheng*, the notion of *xin* is also embodied in people's attitude towards deities. During the Pre-Qin period (the period before 221B. C.), against a cultural background heavily colored by the theory of fatality, the oaths of alliance of states originated from primitive curses or spells were no more than promises and pledges made to deities. For instance, "The Records of the Events in the 1st Year of Duke Yin of Lu" in *Zuo's Commentary* notes, "...Smearing the mouth with the blood of a sacrifice and vowing to the deity to make an alliance means to invite the deity to punish anyone who goes back on his words and condemn him as a beast slaughtered for sacrifice." Resorting to gods for confirming the oaths of alliance is the ancient way of guaranteeing the achievement the goal of making a covenant by combining moral power with religious power. Later, such a notion of *xin* has developed into a fundamental norm disciplining interpersonal relationship.

Further reading

Story 1: Granting a Fiefdom with a Leaf of a Chinese Parasol Tree

Translation : In the Western Zhou Dynasty (1045B. C. - 771B. C.), Emperor Cheng (1042B. C. - 1006B. C.) once amused himself with his younger brother, Shuyu. He cut a leaf of a Chinese parasol tree into the shape of an elongated pointed jade tablet and handed it to Shuyu, saying,

“Hereby we confer a fiefdom on you.” The court recorder (or maybe the Duke of Zhou) then petitioned Emperor Cheng to pick an auspicious day to confer Shuyu a fiefdom. Emperor Cheng said, “We are joking. We are playing games.” But the recorder insisted, “An Emperor’s words always carry weight. Once uttered, they will be recorded in the history and echoed by rites and music. How can they be trifled with?” Thereupon, the emperor granted his brother the fiefdom of Tang (in the area of today’s Yicheng of Shanxi Province).

Comments: The granting of a fiefdom with a leaf of a Chinese parasol tree took place when Emperor Cheng was twelve or thirteen years old. It was meant to be a common game or joke among children. The recorder, however, pointed out in time that an emperor should not be perfidious and that he must suit his action to his words. He also helped Emperor Cheng realize that an emperor who couldn’t live up to his words would be mocked by the people and hence lose his prestige. Upholding *chengxin* (integrity) is the foundation of the social status of an individual and the stability of a country. Internalization of the admonishment enabled Emperor Cheng to usher in the Golden Years in the Reigns of Emperor Cheng & Emperor Cheng Kang after he took over the reins of government at the age of twenty.

Story 2: Making Fun of the Dukes with the Beacon Fire

Translation: Emperor You (795B. C. – 771B. C.) of the Western Zhou Dynasty (1100B. C. – 771B. C.) doted on a most beautiful concubine named Baosi (that is, Si from the State of Bao). Baosi was melancholic and seldom smiled. In order to coax a smile from her, Emperor You racked his brains, but all in vain. At that time, the Western Zhou Dynasty set up a beacon-fire alarm system to prevent the invasion of the minorities such as the *Quanrong* nomads. As soon as the

enemy was spotted, the beacon fire would be lit to alert nearby vassal states, urging them to send troops to the aid of Zhou. Hoping to amuse Baosi, Emperor You had the beacon fire lit when there was no enemy. Baosi laughed heartily when she saw the dukes cut a sorry figure. Since then, Emperor Zhou pleased Baosi like this again and again and lost the trust of the nobles. One day, when Zhou was under attack from the *Quanrong*, the emperor had the beacon fire lit in a hurry. But the neighboring vassals did not come to his rescue for fear of being fooled again. As a result, Emperor Zhou was killed by the *Quanrong* at the foot of the Lishan Mountain, Baosi was reduced to a captive, and the Kingdom of Zhou was despoiled of all its treasures.

Comments: The Western Zhou Dynasty drew to an end with the death of Emperor Zhou. He ruled the kingdom for eleven years, but achieved nothing for his debauchery. “Making Fun of the Dukes with the Beacon Fire” was the most notorious thing he did. Doubtlessly, this is an upgraded version of the story of “Crying Wolf”. A shepherd boy who lost the trust of neighbors ended with losing a flock of sheep, while an emperor who lost the trust of his subjects suffered more terribly and tragically. Nowadays, the internet transmits miscellaneous information in double-quick time. Given the circumstances, maintaining credibility of its government has become a hot issue, for which each nation has to actively seek for a solution.

Story 3: A Covenant of Chrysanthemum

Translation: In the reign of Emperor Ming (28A. D. – 75A. D.) of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25A. D. – 220A. D.), there was a scholar called Fan Juqing. He was seriously ill and was confined to bed in an inn on his way to Luoyang to take the imperial examination. The