

Research on Dong Zhongshu's Moral Education Thought

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ABSTRACT

Dong Zhongshu, as an important representative figure of Confucianism in the Western Han Dynasty, had a profound influence on the moral education thought in the history of Chinese thought. The formation of Dong Zhongshu's moral education thought was a product of the combined effects of social changes, political patterns, and cultural trends in the early Western Han Dynasty. Dong Zhongshu inherited and developed the traditional thinking of pre Qin Confucianism, proposing a moral education system centered on the "Three Obediences and Five Constants", emphasizing the importance of moral education as the foundation and punishment as the supplement, and focusing on individual moral cultivation and the maintenance of social order. His moral education ideology not only had a profound impact on the politics, economy, and culture of the Han Dynasty, but also established the dominant position of Confucianism in feudal society through the policy of "exclusive respect for Confucianism", becoming an important theoretical basis for moral education in later generations.

In the vast history of Chinese thought, Dong Zhongshu is undoubtedly a milestone thinker. As a master of Confucianism during the Western Han Dynasty, he not only inherited the traditional ideas of pre Qin Confucianism, but also innovated and developed on this basis, forming a new Confucian system that adapted to the social needs of that time. Among them, his moral education philosophy is a treasure in his ideological system, which has had a profound impact on future generations.

1. The Background of the Formation of Dong Zhongshu's Moral Education Thought

1.1 Social and historical background

The formation of Dong Zhongshu's moral education thought was rooted in the complex and profound social

and historical background of the early Western Han Dynasty. The social changes, political landscape, and cultural trends of this period collectively nurtured Dong Zhongshu's unique moral education concept.

The establishment of the Western Han Dynasty marked the beginning of a new era in Chinese history. After a long period of war, the country urgently needs a stable and effective governance concept to rebuild social order. In the early years of the Western Han Dynasty, the failed attempt to implement a parallel system of prefectures and states prompted the ruling class to deeply contemplate the concept of governing the country. At this time, the Huang Lao School gradually declined, and although its concept of governing by inaction and resting with the people helped stabilize the regime in the early stages, its limitations became increasingly apparent with the development of

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the country. Confucianism, as the core of ancient Chinese traditional culture, is facing the opportunity of revival. Dong Zhongshu keenly seized this opportunity to reform and develop Confucianism, forming his own unique moral education ideological system.

The social atmosphere in the early Western Han Dynasty also had a profound impact on the formation of Dong Zhongshu's moral education thought. The style of wandering scholars still exists, and the scholar class is particularly active in exploring the concept of governing the country. They aspire to contribute to the prosperity and stability of the country through their own knowledge and wisdom. This social atmosphere provided a broad stage for Confucian scholars such as Dong Zhongshu to put their ideas into practice.

1.2 Ideological and cultural background

The formation of Dong Zhongshu's moral education thought was not only deeply influenced by the political environment at that time, but also closely linked to the rich ideological and cultural background of the Western Han Dynasty. In the early years of the Western Han Dynasty, not far from the Warring States period, the trend of wandering scholars still existed, and various theories and ideologies intertwined and collided, providing fertile soil for Dong Zhongshu's moral education thought.

In terms of academic atmosphere, in the early Western Han Dynasty, with the gradual decline of Huang Laoxue's teachings, Confucianism ushered in an opportunity for revival. Dong Zhongshu keenly seized this opportunity and carried out in-depth reforms and developments in Confucianism. He inherited the traditional moral concepts of Confucianism, such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness, and innovated on this basis, proposing a moral education system centered on the "Three Obediences and Five Constants". This system not only emphasizes the moral norms of social relationships such as monarchs and ministers, fathers and sons, and spouses, but also pays attention to the principles and methods of individual moral cultivation, laying a solid foundation for moral education in later generations.

Meanwhile, the cultural environment during the Western Han Dynasty also had a significant impact on Dong Zhongshu's moral education philosophy. At that time, with the stability of the national government and the development of the social economy, people's demand for culture was increasing day by day. Dong Zhongshu deeply understands the importance of culture for national stability and social harmony, therefore his moral education ideas contain rich cultural connotations. He emphasized the inheritance and promotion of traditional culture through

education, so that people can appreciate the charm of traditional culture while receiving moral education, thereby enhancing their sense of identity and belonging to the country.

In addition, the education system during the Western Han Dynasty also provided a practical platform for Dong Zhongshu's moral education ideas. At that time, with the rise of private schools and the improvement of official schools, education gradually spread to all levels of society. Dong Zhongshu made full use of this favorable condition and actively promoted his moral education ideas, which were widely spread and deeply rooted in people's hearts through lectures, writing books, and other methods.

2. The main content of Dong Zhongshu's moral education thought

2.1 The goal of moral education

Dong Zhongshu's moral education thought is profound and extensive, and his moral education goals constitute an important cornerstone of his ideological system. In Dong Zhongshu's view, the goal of moral education is not only related to the growth and development of individuals, but also closely linked to the maintenance of social order.

2.1.1 *At the individual level*

From an individual perspective, Dong Zhongshu believes that the core goal of moral education is to make the possibility of goodness in human nature a reality. He emphasized that human nature is like an unpolished jade, requiring moral education to remove impurities and showcase its inner radiance. Dong Zhongshu vividly illustrates the key role of moral education in the process of human perfection by using the metaphor of "nature is like a cocoon or egg, the egg waiting to be covered becomes a chick, the cocoon waiting to be coiled becomes silk, and nature waiting to be taught becomes good". He believes that through moral education, people can be guided towards good and evil, gradually bringing the nature of the common people closer to that of the sage. This pursuit and realization of goodness is not only an improvement in personal cultivation, but also a compliance with the Tao of Heaven and human nature.

Dong Zhongshu also pointed out that human nature is a combination of good and evil. Goodness is like rice, and nature is like grass. Although grass produces rice, it cannot be called rice in full. This means that although human nature has the potential to produce goodness, it is not inherently good and requires guidance and shaping through moral education to unleash its potential for goodness. Therefore, the individual goal of moral education is

to help people recognize and explore their own goodness, and achieve the perfect transformation of human nature.

2.1.2 At the societal level

From the perspective of the overall society, Dong Zhongshu believes that the ultimate goal of moral education is to maintain social order and consolidate political rule. He advocated that through moral education, people should accept and practice the moral principles of feudal society, such as the “Three Obediences and Five Constants”, in order to cultivate obedient masses, which is conducive to the stability and development of feudal rule. This moral education goal reflects Dong Zhongshu’s profound insight into the relationship between politics and morality. He believes that morality is the foundation of politics, and good moral education can provide solid guarantees for social stability.

In addition, Dong Zhongshu emphasized the important role of moral education in cultivating social atmosphere. He believes that through moral education, it is possible to “transform the people into nature” and “transform the people into customs”, forming a good social trend. This trend not only helps to improve the overall moral level of society, but also promotes social harmony and progress.

The goal of Dong Zhongshu’s moral education philosophy is to focus on both individual moral cultivation and improvement, as well as the maintenance and stability of social order, reflecting the profoundness and comprehensiveness of his ideas.

2.2 Methods of Moral Education

Dong Zhongshu, as an important representative of the Confucian school in the Han Dynasty, not only deeply influenced the social atmosphere at that time, but also provided valuable theoretical resources for future educational practices. Dong Zhongshu put forward a series of unique and systematic insights on the methods of moral education.

Firstly, Dong Zhongshu emphasized the importance of “treating people with benevolence and righteousness”. He believes that in moral education, educators should first lead by example, use a compassionate heart to appease people, and at the same time correct their words and deeds with the path of justice. This method emphasizes the two-way nature of moral education, requiring both educators to possess noble character and learners to constantly reflect on themselves and achieve self-improvement while receiving education.

Secondly, Dong Zhongshu advocated the educational policy of “benevolence and wisdom”. He proposed that moral education should not only be limited to the level of

benevolence, but should also be combined with wisdom education to cultivate talents who possess both benevolence and wisdom. This educational method avoids the one-sidedness of moral education and emphasizes the importance of balancing morality and intelligence. Through the cultivation of wisdom, people can have a deeper understanding of the connotation of morality and better practice it in practice.

Furthermore, Dong Zhongshu emphasized the educational process of “understanding the Tao” and “valuing aspirations”. He proposed the principle of ‘upholding righteousness without seeking personal gain, and disregarding merit in understanding the way’, emphasizing that the purpose of moral education is to pursue the path of justice rather than personal gain. In connection with this, he emphasizes the cultivation and cultivation of moral will, believing that only a firm moral will can support people to adhere to the moral bottom line when facing temptations and difficulties.

3. The Characteristics of Dong Zhongshu’s Moral Education Thought

3.1 Theoretical characteristics

Dong Zhongshu’s moral education philosophy, as an important component of ancient Chinese Confucianism, exhibits unique and profound theoretical characteristics. These characteristics not only had a profound impact at the time, but also provided valuable theoretical resources for moral education in later generations.

3.1.1 Moral education as the foundation, punishment as a supplement

Dong Zhongshu explicitly stated that “moral education is the foundation of governance” and emphasized the core position of moral education in national governance. He believes that moral education is a key means to achieve benevolent governance, while punishment is only an auxiliary means. This viewpoint reflects Dong Zhongshu’s firm belief in the goodness of human nature and his profound understanding of the role of education in guiding human nature towards goodness. He advocates guiding the public to pursue morality through education, rather than relying solely on punishment to curb criminal behavior.

3.1.2 The Three Obediences and Five Constants are the core content

Dong Zhongshu’s moral education philosophy revolves around the core content of the “Three Obediences and Five Constants”. Among them, the “Three Principles” refer to “the ruler as the ruler, the father as the son, and

the husband as the wife,” while the “Five Constants” are benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness. These moral norms not only constitute the ethical foundation of feudal society, but also have a profound impact on moral education in later generations. Dong Zhongshu’s systematic argumentation and exposition on the “Three Obediences and Five Constants” have enabled it to be widely disseminated and applied in educational practice.

3.1.3 Emphasize righteousness over profit, and give equal importance to benevolence and righteousness

In terms of principles and methods of moral education, Dong Zhongshu advocates “valuing righteousness over profit”, which means that the pursuit of morality should be higher than personal interests. He believes that the pursuit of the principle of reflecting national interests should be higher than the pursuit of personal interests, so that life can ultimately achieve satisfaction. At the same time, he also emphasized the importance of “both benevolence and righteousness”, believing that moral education must achieve the unity of “benevolence” and “righteousness”, not only filling others with a heart of benevolence, but also adhering to the path of justice. This viewpoint reflects Dong Zhongshu’s concern for the balance between emotions and rationality in moral education.

3.1.4 Emphasize honesty and sincerity, and aspire to lofty goals

Dong Zhongshu believes that the motivation of individual behavior has more moral value than the effect of behavior. Therefore, he demanded that people be upright and sincere in their moral cultivation, and aspire to be a person suitable for the requirements of feudal countries. This viewpoint emphasizes the important role of moral education in shaping personal character and ideal beliefs, and also reflects Dong Zhongshu’s profound thinking on the goals of moral education.

3.2 Practical characteristics

Dong Zhongshu’s moral education philosophy not only has a profound theoretical foundation, but also exhibits distinct characteristics in practice. These practical characteristics not only had a significant impact at the time, but also provided valuable references for moral education in later generations.

Dong Zhongshu emphasized the all-round infiltration of moral education. He believes that moral education should not be limited to schools, but should be integrated into people’s daily lives. Therefore, he advocates integrating moral education into people’s words and actions through

various means such as school education, family education, and social education. This comprehensive educational approach enables moral education to deeply penetrate people’s hearts and become a code of conduct that people consciously abide by.

Dong Zhongshu emphasizes the practicality of moral education. He deeply understands that moral education should not be limited to theoretical level, but should be reflected through practical actions. Therefore, he advocates that people practice moral principles in their daily lives and cultivate and enhance their moral qualities through practical actions. This practical educational approach enables moral education to take root and become a behavioral norm that people consciously practice.

4. The Influence of Dong Zhongshu’s Moral Education Thought

4.1 The impact on the society at that time

Dong Zhongshu’s moral education thought had a profound impact on the Han Dynasty and even the entire feudal society. It not only shaped the moral concepts of the society at that time, but also deeply influenced multiple fields such as politics, economy, and culture.

In the political field, Dong Zhongshu’s ideas of “great unity” and “divine right of kings” provided theoretical support for Emperor Wu of Han to strengthen centralization. He emphasized that as the highest ruler of the country, the monarch’s power comes from heaven, which to some extent strengthens the monarch’s authority and helps maintain the unity and stability of the country. At the same time, Dong Zhongshu’s advocacy of the “Three Obediences and Five Constants” became the moral norm of feudal society, emphasizing the ethical relationships between monarchs and ministers, fathers and sons, and spouses, further consolidating the feudal hierarchical system.

In the field of cultural education, Dong Zhongshu’s policy of “exclusively respecting Confucianism” had a profound impact on the cultural education of feudal society in China. He advocates Confucianism as the only orthodox ideology, with Confucian classics becoming the textbooks prescribed by the state, and Confucian moral values becoming the basis for moral education. This not only promoted the widespread dissemination of Confucian culture, but also cultivated a large number of talents with Confucian moral concepts. These talents play important roles in their respective fields, further strengthening the influence of Confucian culture.

However, Dong Zhongshu’s moral education philosophy also has certain limitations. Confucianism has long held a dominant position, undoubtedly suppressing

various non Confucian academic ideas and hindering the overall development of cultural education. This singular cultural atmosphere may lead to ideological rigidity, lack of innovation and diversity.

4.2 The impact on future generations

Dong Zhongshu's moral education ideas, with their profound connotations and forward-looking perspectives, have had a profound impact on future generations. This influence is not only reflected in the political and educational systems of feudal society, but also profoundly shaped the spiritual outlook and value orientation of the Chinese nation.

In the political field, Dong Zhongshu emphasized that rulers should possess noble moral qualities and lead by example, which became an important principle for the governance of feudal dynasties in later generations. Rulers gradually realize that morality is not only a reflection of personal cultivation, but also a key factor in maintaining national stability and consolidating political power. Therefore, many emperors regarded moral education as the foundation of governing the country, selecting officials with excellent moral character to maintain social stability and prosperity. The influence of this ideology made the political system of feudal society pay more attention to moral factors, laying the foundation for the development of political civilization in later generations.

In the field of education, Dong Zhongshu's moral education ideas have become an important part of later education. The Five Constants of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness proposed by him have become the most important moral norms in feudal society and have been widely spread and practiced. This idea not only affects the curriculum and teaching content of school education, but also profoundly influences family education and social education. Through moral education, people gradually form correct values, cultivate good moral qualities and behavioral habits. The inheritance of this educational philosophy has made ancient Chinese education pay more attention to the cultivation of talents with both morality and talent, providing valuable experience for the development of education in later generations.

5. Conclusion

Dong Zhongshu's moral education philosophy, with the "Three Obediences and Five Constants" as its core, established the dominant position of Confucian ethics in feudal society, emphasizing the importance of governing

the country with virtue and personal cultivation. This ideology not only profoundly influenced the education system of the Han Dynasty and later generations, promoted the widespread dissemination of Confucian culture, but also strengthened social moral norms and maintained the stability of feudal rule. However, its hierarchical beliefs and conservative tendencies also limit the development of intellectual diversity. In contemporary times, Dong Zhongshu's moral education philosophy reminds us to value personal moral cultivation and provide traditional wisdom for solving modern social problems. However, we should critically examine its limitations, creatively integrate tradition and modernity, and construct a moral education system that meets the needs of the times, contributing to the construction of a harmonious society and the promotion of human civilization progress.

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