



Exploring wisdom in the Confucian tradition: Wisdom as manifested by Fan Zhongyan



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ABSTRACT

Exploring the wisdom manifested in the world's great traditions can enhance our understanding of significant human strivings to live a meaningful and satisfying life and, at the same time, to help other people live better lives. This study focuses on Confucianism, which emphasizes self-cultivation and humaneness, and explores the wisdom manifested by Fan Zhongyan (989–1052), a Confucian scholar-official in Song-dynasty China and a model for Chinese intellectuals subsequently. Wisdom is defined as a process involving cognitive integration, embodying actions, and resulting positive effects for oneself and others. The study shows that Fan generated positive effects for himself and others through multiple efforts to embody his integrated idea,—being “the first to worry about the world's troubles and the last to take pleasure in its happiness.” I also discuss a synergistic relationship between the manifestation of wisdom and the development of Confucianism, which may have implications for other great traditions as well.

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The world's great traditions are an important reservoir of human wisdom. It is thus essential that we explore the wisdom manifested in these traditions. Such explorations may help us learn important lessons from history, understand more about the world we live in, and reflect and re-examine the traditions we inherit and live by. This study explores wisdom manifested in the Confucian tradition, an East Asian ethical and philosophical system that emphasizes self-cultivation and humaneness.

1. Introduction

In 1989, National Taiwan University, Taiwan's most prestigious university, held an international conference to celebrate the one thousand year birthday of Fan Zhongyan (Fan Chung-yen, 范仲淹, 989–1052), a Confucian scholar-official in Song-dynasty China. Scholars from both East and West wrote articles in commemoration. In the opening address, the chairperson of the Taiwanese Council for Cultural Affairs stated that the conference was held because Fan “is a model for intellectuals” (Kuo, 1990, p. (5)). In 2006, educators and researchers in mainland China formed an institute to promote Fan's idea that intellectuals should be “the first to worry about the world's troubles and the last to take pleasure in

its happiness” (“中国范仲淹研究会” [China Institute of Fan Zhongyan Research], n.d.). These gestures of respect show how deeply Fan is remembered and honored.

Who was Fan Zhongyan? Why has he been remembered and honored for a thousand years? This study uses a process view of wisdom to explore the wisdom manifested in the Confucian tradition by Fan Zhongyan.

2. Wisdom

Many languages have terms for wisdom (Assmann, 1994; Ferrari, Kahn, Benayon, & Nero, 2011; Holliday & Chandler, 1986; Levitt, 1999; Takahashi, 2000; Yang, 2001); the cross-cultural ubiquity of this term demonstrates its importance. Although the meaning of wisdom varies cross-culturally, individuals across many cultures find that exhibiting wisdom often leads to success in living a life that is meaningful and satisfying, and in handling human affairs (Assmann, 1994; Ferrari et al., 2011; Holliday & Chandler, 1986; Yang, 2001).

Scholars of different disciplines have attempted to define wisdom variously, but many agree that wisdom is pertinent to human striving to live a meaningful and satisfying life and, at the same time, to help others live better lives (Ardelt, 2003; Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004; Bluck & Glück, 2004; Descartes, 1960; Edmondson, 2005; Le, 2011; Mickler & Staudinger, 2008; Plato,

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1957; Sternberg, 1998; Yang, 2008a). (For a more complete review of definitions of wisdom, please see Staudinger & Glück, 2011 and Yang, 2008a).

In this study, I use a process definition of wisdom. Wisdom is defined as a special kind of real-life progression that is displayed through one's efforts to live a meaningful and satisfying life while also helping others to live better lives (Yang, 2008a, 2013, 2014). This process definition argues that the complete development of wisdom encompasses three components: cognitive integration, embodying actions, and positive effects for one's self and others.

2.1. Integration

The wisdom process is often manifested in the interaction between an individual and the challenges he or she faces. When wisdom emerges in a real-life context, we often feel that something unusual has happened. That unusual thing may be an integration of separate goals or even conflicting ideas to form a humane vision that cannot usually be achieved by following existing rules or social norms. This is the first core component of wisdom (Yang, 2001, 2008a, 2008b, 2011). Without this kind of integration, we are merely effective in following social conventions.

2.2. Embodying actions and positive effects

Although the wisdom process begins with individuals' cognitive integration, it also consists of embodying actions—actual actions that carry out integrated ideas—and the resulting positive consequences in the life of the acting self as well as in the lives of others (Yang, 2001, 2008a, 2008b, 2011). Wisdom is rare in real life, since these three components seldom occur together.

Results of empirical studies support this definition of wisdom. Terrini (1994) showed that vignettes with consequences were rated significantly higher for wisdom than those without consequences. Bluck and Glück (2004) found that, in the majority of their “experienced wisdom” narratives, the outcome was more positive than the eliciting event. Yang (2008a) showed that, when asked to nominate individuals who they considered to be wise, study participants described cognitive integration, embodying actions, and positive effects to justify their nominations. When wisdom nominees were asked to describe wise decisions and actions in their own lives, their narratives also contained these three components (Yang, 2008b, 2011). In addition, independent evaluators gave higher wisdom scores to narratives perceived as including all three components (Yang, 2008b).

By focusing on phenomena that have emerged in real life, this process-oriented view of wisdom can be a tool for exploring the wisdom that is manifested in the world's great traditions—wisdom that certain individuals have manifested in their lifelong endeavors to generate widespread positive effects for their contemporaries and future generations (Yang, 2013). When this manifestation occurs across a lifetime or in the stretch of history, the span of this undertaking can make it difficult to study empirically. Researchers may therefore need to use archival methods or biographical research to further their understanding of this form of wisdom. In this paper, I use the process definition of wisdom to explore whether Fan Zhongyan manifested this long-term form of wisdom in the Confucian tradition.

3. Historical sources of Fan Zhongyan

The main sources of information on Fan Zhongyan used in this study are (a) the official history of the Song dynasty (宋史 *History of the Song Dynasty*); (b) the anthology of Fan Zhongyan's writings, which was compiled after his death and includes his collected

anecdotes and chronicles, and commentaries from historians and scholars in the Song (960–1279), Yuan (1271–1368), Ming (1368–1644), and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties of China (范文正公集 *Collected Writings of Fan Zhongyan*); (c) articles and books written by scholars of the modern era (1912–present); and (d) papers from the international conference commemorating his 1000th birthday. Although the exploration inevitably involves hermeneutics, I use sources that many scholars have searched for evidence and cross-cited to avoid taking historical records at face value. Many traditional Chinese texts were printed from wood blocks and have no page numbers. I cite those texts from modern texts with regular pagination and digitalized historical Chinese text from internet sources as much as possible.

4. A brief biography of Fan Zhongyan

The Song dynasty was established in 960 A.D., following the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907AD–979AD), an era considered by many historians to be the darkest and most corrupt age in Chinese history (Chou, 1990). During Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms, China was invaded and ruled by different ethnic groups. Over a seventy-year period, five dynasties succeeded one another in the north, and more than twelve independent kingdoms were established, mainly in the south. Historians have recorded that most people in this chaotic time traded their integrity for survival (Chan, 1987).

Fan Zhongyan was born at the end of this period. When Fan was only a year old, his father died. He and his mother boarded in a temple, and when the Fan clan refused to support them, his mother remarried and moved to north China (Chan, 1987). We do not know the quality of his life in his stepfamily. Historical records revealed that he was not sent to school but spent over three years studying under harsh conditions in a Buddhist temple on a mountain (Tung, 1990): “he lived on a daily subsistence diet of two small rice cakes with a few slices of vegetables” (Liu, 1957, p. 127).

Historical records state that Fan learned that he was not a true son of his stepfather by accident (*Collected Writings of Fan Zhongyan*, cited in Chan, 1987). Having rebuked his stepbrother for being a spendthrift, the stepbrother retorted that since Fan was not a true son of the father, how he spent his father's money should not concern Fan. Fan, then 22, left the family shortly thereafter.

Fan's biography in the *History of the Song Dynasty* (n.d., cited in Chan, 1987) stated that Fan then entered an academy of classical learning originally founded by Qi Tongwen, who taught the Confucian classics that emphasize self-cultivation, humaneness, and concern for the common people, and illustrated these teachings by his own exemplary conduct in his family, clan, and community. Fan arrived shortly after Qi's death, and was influenced by the school spirit that Qi had created (Tung, 1990).

Historical records do not describe how Fan was educated other than that he studied for five years in Qi's academy under austere conditions. Although the Song dynasty was later known as the golden age of Confucianism, in which Neo-Confucianism developed and became a dominant philosophy, Confucianism was not highly valued when Fan was in the academy (Liu, 1976). Nevertheless, Fan came to identify with the Confucian ideals (Chan, 1987) and mastered Confucian classics (“*History of the Song Dynasty*,” n.d.). On his death bed, Fan said this of himself: “I grew up fatherless and was not educated until coming of age, then I began to take pleasure in learning Confucian philosophy and decided that the sage's way was the way to follow” (*Collected Writings of Fan Zhongyan*, cited in Y. N. Chan, 1990b, p. 1269).

At 27, Fan passed the Imperial Examination and received a position in the civil service. He then visited the Fan clan but was not welcomed; he was received only after he indicated that he wanted

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