

A COMPARISON OF THE APPROACHES TO CONSTRUCTING THE "MORAL SUBJECT" IN ZHANG TAIYAN AND LIANG SHUMING

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Abstract: In the process of Chinese philosophy's modernization, both Zhang Taiyan and Liang Shuming were pioneering figures who reconstructed the theoretical framework of the "moral subject" in Chinese philosophy by drawing on different theoretical resources. Zhang Taiyan employed Yogācāra (Consciousness-Only) Buddhism to deconstruct traditional Confucian ritual ethics. He put forward the moral proposition of "relying on oneself rather than on others," critiqued the externality of moral authority through the concept of "provisional designation" (*prajñapti*), and emphasized that individual consciousness and self-awareness constitute the true source of moral practice. Liang Shuming, by contrast, took traditional Chinese Confucianism as his foundation and integrated Bergson's philosophy of life with the Yogācāra doctrine of the "three valid means of knowledge" (*pramāṇa*) to reconstruct an epistemology of "intuition and benevolence" (*ren*). In doing so, he grounded Confucian ethics in the philosophical intuition of life itself. Although both thinkers stressed the self-awareness of the moral subject, Zhang Taiyan's approach is distinguished by its critical and transcendent character, while Liang Shuming's emphasizes practicality and ethical commitment, advocating the reconstruction of social order. This dynamic of Buddhist deconstruction and Confucian reconstruction reveals how, in the modernization of Chinese philosophy, scholars constructed different conceptions of the "moral subject" through their divergent philosophical commitments.

Keywords: Liang Shuming; Zhang Taiyan; Moral subject; Ethics

1 INTRODUCTION

As leading philosophers of modern China, Zhang Taiyan and Liang Shuming both confronted the crisis of national identity under the impact of modern Western culture, as well as the need to reconstruct traditional Chinese philosophical systems. In their efforts at reconstruction, they drew on different theoretical resources and followed distinct lines of reasoning. Faced with the task of building a moral system amid radical social change, each developed a philosophical framework based on his own academic orientation. Zhang Taiyan began with a critical engagement with Buddhist philosophy, integrating the Tathāgatagarbha tradition with Yogācāra thought and uniting the nature school and the phenomenal school. Using the theoretical structure of "one mind opening two gates" from the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*, he constructed a moral subject centered on "relying on the self rather than on others." Liang Shuming, by contrast, drew on the Yogācāra theory of valid cognition, combined it with Henri Bergson's philosophy, and grounded his approach in traditional Confucianism, taking "intuition and benevolence (*ren*)" as the axiological foundation of the moral subject.

2 ZHANG TAIYAN: MORAL SELF-AWARENESS IN "RELYING ON THE SELF RATHER THAN ON OTHERS"

Zhang Taiyan employs the theoretical core of "one mind opening two gates" from the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna* to synthesize Yogācāra thought [1]. Through the framework of the Tathāgatagarbha, he posits a single true and unmoving ontological ground, which serves as the fundamental source enabling the moral subject to engage in moral practice. In addition, he reworks the Huayan school's concept of the Dharma realm so that it does not lose its subjective dynamism when applied to concrete affairs. By integrating the Huayan notion of the dependent origination of the Dharma realm with the Yogācāra theory of seeds and perfuming, he unifies the ālaya-vijñāna with the dependent origination of the Dharma realm. Endless dependent origination is thus grasped as a creative and dynamic process, while the dependent origination of the Dharma realm provides a static spatial structure. Within temporality and inner consciousness, the individual undertakes moral self-cultivation.

Accordingly, the moral subject is both a historical substance situated within history and a subject that constitutes itself through history. Amid historical change, the moral subject is in itself empty in nature; yet through the formation of history and the constitution of culture, history endows the subject with a mission. Thus, although the moral subject is finite, it also possesses a dimension that transcends history. This requires us to engage in active practice so that the moral subject has the opportunity to manifest itself and to carry out the mission of historical reform, thereby avoiding a lapse into the nihilism of emptiness.

3 LIANG SHUMING: "INTUITIVE BENEVOLENCE" AS THE SOURCE OF MORALITY

Liang Shuming draws on Yogācāra epistemology to divide the foundations of human knowledge into three forms of cognition: sensation (direct perception, *xianliang*), intellect (inference, *biliang*), and intuition (non-conceptual awareness, *feiliang*). He places the Confucian concept of benevolence (*ren*) within the scope of intuition, regarding intuition as the basic capacity and value source through which the moral subject performs moral actions [2].

Following the Yogācāra method, Liang Shuming distinguishes three types of knowledge: direct perception, inference, and non-conceptual awareness. For Liang, direct perception refers to sensation—for example, the sweetness tasted when drinking sugar water, the whiteness seen when looking at a white stone, or the hardness felt when touching the stone. Sweetness, whiteness, and hardness all belong to the category of sensation. However, these qualities—sweetness, whiteness, and hardness—are not things that sensation itself can know. Sweetness, whiteness, and hardness are sensations obtained through taste, sight, and touch, but sensation in itself contains no meaning of sweetness, whiteness, or hardness. The meanings arise from another function; sensation is merely pure sensation.

Sensation can only operate within the realm of phenomena and essence. Liang's notion of the "inherent realm" (*xingjing*) can be understood as referring to phenomena and essence. The constitution of the "inherent realm" requires two conditions. The first is that "there is image (the immediate perceived aspect) and there is substance (the essence)," which we may understand as the coexistence of essence and phenomena. The second is that "the image must correspond to its substance," which we may understand as phenomena being the manifestation of essence. For example, the "whiteness" of the white stone we see is the essence, while the whiteness that appears to me is the phenomenon. I regard the white stone as white because my optic nerve responds to external stimulation; the white stone itself is what we call the essence. Whether the white stone is truly white, however, is something we cannot know, because everyone's perception of the whiteness of a white stone is a transformation of our visual capacity, not a direct cognition of its essence.

Liang Shuming holds that our sensory perceptions are all instruments through which we explore and perceive the external world. Every sensation is an outward inquiry, and what is sensed is the answer or report to that inquiry. Therefore, whiteness is purely created by the subject; it is not an inherent property of the white stone. Nevertheless, only when a white stone exists can there be a sensation of whiteness. Thus Liang says that "there is image and there is substance" is the first condition. From this we can also understand that, although we cannot know whether the stone is truly white, the stone must possess a certain "capacity" that causes us to produce the cognition of whiteness.

In addition, Liang Shuming holds that there is also a "special direct perception," that is, a special kind of "sensation"—for example, when one perceives a white stone through sensation but does not produce the sensation of whiteness.

Our knowledge is to a large extent derived from sensation. For example, all our knowledge of tea begins with the color and taste of tea that we have previously sensed, and on this basis the concept of tea is formed. Although other mental functions also play a role when the knowledge of tea takes shape, the role of sensation is indispensable. Take, for instance, the formation of our knowledge of tea: we have seen and drunk tea many times, and we distinguish tea from all things that are not tea, such as water, soup, oil, and wine, while extracting the common properties shared by various kinds of tea, such as black tea, green tea, strong tea, and weak tea. The function that forms the concept of tea can be divided into two kinds: discrimination and synthesis. When we form the concept of tea, we connect different kinds of tea and identify what they share in common; this is synthesis. When we first distinguish tea from other things and differentiate the various colors and kinds of tea; this is discrimination. Synthesis and discrimination do not occur in a fixed order but operate simultaneously.

The first step in forming knowledge is sensation, but what sensation yields is a mass of disordered phenomena without any clear order. We need to rely on the intellect to synthesize and discriminate these sensations, to extract what is common and what is different, and thereby to form clear and distinct concepts. Therefore, the formation of knowledge relies mainly on sensation and intellect. "This function of discrimination and synthesis is what is called the wisdom of inference (*biliang zhi*)."

What Liang Shuming calls intellect is precisely inference (*biliang*). But what is the object of intellectual cognition? Liang holds that it is what we call meaning, that is, concepts, or what we term "universals" (*gongxiang*). "Its realm is what is called the realm of mere images (*duying jing*)."

In modern terms, this means that the domain in which the intellect operates is subjective and corresponds directly to phenomena. For example, when we think of tea, the thought itself is also a phenomenon, but this phenomenon is not produced through an essence; rather, it is created by our consciousness itself. Just as our concept of tea is shared by many instances of tea, it is called a "universal," and this universal belongs to the domain of the intellect. But each time we look at a white stone, we can only say that what we see is similar to what we saw before; we cannot say it is identical, because each act of cognition involves a different phenomenon. Therefore, we call this a "particular" (*zixiang*), and this particular belongs to the domain of sensation.

Liang Shuming holds that the domain of sensation involves no differentiation and yields nothing. Beyond phenomena, sensation gives nothing else; within sensation, no meaning exists. Yet if one gains nothing upon seeing whiteness for the first time, then logically one would gain nothing no matter how many times one sees it. In that case, the intellect would have no material for discrimination and synthesis. Therefore, Liang argues that in the process of knowledge formation, besides sensation and intellect, there is another function. He holds that the mental factors of feeling (*vedanā*) and perception (*saṃjñā*) obtain, in the course of cognition, a vague and inexpressible "sense." For example, when one first obtains the "sense" of whiteness, and after many accumulations the intellect synthesizes and connects these senses, while also discriminating them clearly from the senses of other colors, only then can the intellect perform its functions of discrimination and synthesis, and only then can abstract meaning arise. The cognition of this "sense" by the mental factors of feeling and perception is what Liang calls intuition. Thus, from pure sensation to abstract concepts of the intellect, there is an intermediate stage of intuition. Knowledge does not come into being solely through sensation and intellect.

Through the theoretical framework of Yogācāra epistemology, Liang Shuming constructs a Confucian theory of knowledge. By criticizing the tendency in Western philosophy to over-rely on reason and thereby fragment the wholeness of life, he provides an epistemological foundation for Confucian thought. He takes intuition as the inner dynamic by which the moral subject practices humaneness, enabling the moral subject to realize benevolence (*ren*) in the concrete experience of life, and allowing each individual as a moral subject to identify his or her own life with the great life of the universe [3].

4 ZHANG TAIYAN'S CONSTRUCTION OF THE MORAL SUBJECT THROUGH THE THEORY OF "PROVISIONAL DESIGNATION"

Zhang Taiyan's theory of "provisional designation" (*jiaming anli*) is grounded in a theoretical system that integrates Tathāgatagarbha thought, Lao-Zhuang philosophy, and revolutionary theory, thereby forming the theoretical framework of his practical philosophy of the moral subject. Yogācāra philosophy maintains that all names and concepts are merely "provisional designations" with no independent entities behind them. Drawing on his distinctive theory of "provisional designation," Zhang Taiyan criticizes traditional moral authority, pointing out that the core categories of Confucianism are symbols specific to particular historical contexts, and that the construction of modern philosophy requires breaking free from attachment to these traditional symbols.

Zhang Taiyan further distinguishes two forms of provisional designation: the provisional designation without substance that follows emotional attachment (the ordinary person's clinging to illusory realms) and the provisional designation with substance established for expedient purposes (the skillful means set up by sages for teaching). He emphasizes that moral practice must transcend the one-sidedness of the surface level of symbols and realize the true reality (*zhenru*) through subjective introspection. For example, what Confucians call "heavenly principle" (*tianli*) is not an objective fixed law but the natural flow of life intuition; it must be realized through the subject's awakening rather than dogmatic adherence.

Zhang Taiyan integrates modern natural science with Yogācāra thought to systematically deconstruct the transcendental foundation of morality. Using concepts such as "atom" (*atun*) and "ether" to explain the self-generation of all things, he denies that "heaven" is a volitional entity and maintains that "nature itself is the Way," thereby stripping morality of its traditional dependence on theology. In his later period, Zhang Taiyan uses the principle of "all phenomena as consciousness-only" to deconstruct the concept of "nature" itself, revealing that even "nature" is a provisional designation manifested by mind-consciousness. If moral norms are regarded as objectively necessary, one actually falls into the deluded attachment of "universal imagining" (*bianji suozhi*) and must return to the active construction of the subject's mind-consciousness.

Facing the moral vacuum of the late Qing period and the need for national salvation, Zhang Taiyan exposes the hierarchical nature of the three bonds and five constant virtues as contaminated by feudal consciousness, while affirming the intuitive awareness of the original mind expressed in benevolence (*ren*), such as Confucius's notion of "ease and unease" as moral knowing. He advocates stripping away the outer shell of ritual doctrine while preserving the ethical core. He transforms "provisional designations" into practical tools, using virtues such as "knowing shame" and "certain trustworthiness" to cultivate revolutionaries. Although such categories are expedient establishments, they acquire legitimacy because they correspond to the historical need for national survival, thereby embodying the practical wisdom of "provisional designation with substance."

Zhang Taiyan's theory of "provisional designation" comprises four aspects. First, the Yogācāra theory of dependent origination provides a deconstructive methodology and scientific rationality. Second, atomic theory and evolutionary theory complete the disenchantment of the cosmos and Confucian learning of the mind. Third, the tradition of innate moral knowing preserves moral subjectivity. Fourth, revolutionary practice endows ethical categories with historical dynamism.

Ultimately, the theory of "provisional designation" crystallizes into the revolutionary subject philosophy of "relying on the self rather than on others." Moral authority originates neither from divine revelation nor from canonical texts; rather, it is realized through the intuitive awareness and active construction of awakened individuals in historical practice, thereby achieving an ethical progression from the self-awareness of mind-consciousness to social revolution [4].

5 LIANG SHUMING'S CONSTRUCTION OF THE MORAL SUBJECT THROUGH THE THEORY OF "INTUITIVE EXPANSION"

Liang Shuming uses Mencius's notion of the expansion of benevolence (*ren*) to explain how "intuition" operates as the practical model of the moral subject. He holds that Mencius's idea of "knowing without deliberation" and "ability without learning"—the innate moral knowing and capacity—concerns the origin of moral intuition. He argues that this natural instinct and intuition toward goodness is an innate endowment present within every person. This is why Mencius says that "all people have a mind that cannot bear to see the suffering of others": just as anyone who sees a child about to fall into a well will reach out to help without deliberation, the intuition for goodness and beauty, and the natural inclination toward virtue (love of goodness), share the same source as the natural preference for beautiful things (love of beauty). This source is precisely what Confucianism calls "benevolence" (*ren*). This intuitive benevolence is an inherent and keen inner light within human beings.

However, the innate moral knowing of the moral subject is often obscured and defiled by bad habits, causing its original keenness to be lost. Confucius's discussion of "ease and unease" is precisely the direct manifestation of whether this inner

moral knowing is keen or not. In facing moral issues in the world, Confucianism emphasizes that the subject must follow the guidance of this intuition. Therefore, maintaining the keenness of intuition is of crucial importance, and falling into numbness is the greatest hidden danger.

Confucius teaches people to "seek benevolence," and its core is precisely to require each individual life to expand its inner moral knowing. For example, when faced with the decision of whether to observe mourning for one's parents, Confucius sees this essentially as a process in which the subject's mind seeks the balance between "ease and unease"—a demand for inner harmony. The keener and stronger the intuition, the stronger the subject's desire to attain inner ease, and the deeper the pursuit of moral balance and harmony. The appropriate action that arises from this is "benevolence," and the one who practices it is a "benevolent person." Such actions are regarded as virtues, but their source is nothing other than the subject's conformity to the natural flow of life. As the saying goes, "The alternation of yin and yang is called the Way; what continues it is goodness; what completes it is human nature." The true meaning of the Way lies in dynamic harmony and the pursuit of the mean (the state of balance). One who can keenly recognize this principle and follow it accordingly performs good actions and becomes a good person. The focus of innate moral knowing (*liangzhi*) and the moral awareness (*zhi*) it manifests lies precisely here. Ordinary people live within this process but may not truly perceive the natural flow of this moral law. This inner principle that is not fully grasped in daily life is what is called "heavenly principle" (*tianli*). If a moral subject can fully heed the call of intuition and allow life to unfold through the natural arising and flowing of the original mind's moral knowing without losing its proper measure, this is the state of conforming to the Way of Heaven. If one goes beyond this range and forcibly seeks things through self-will, one falls into "selfishness" and "selfish desire." Liang Shuming particularly emphasizes that "heavenly principle" is by no means a scientific formula or an objective law of nature. Human emotions such as familial affection and love are all inner principles within the natural flow and transformation of the subject's life. Selfish thoughts and human desires do not necessarily refer only to external greed for fame and profit. If an individual relies solely on the intellect to make mathematically precise plans and deliberate arrangements for life, this very act will damage the natural intuition of life and cause it to degenerate. Therefore, in Liang Shuming's view, Confucianism does not reject the normal desires of human life.

Desires such as the need for food and drink and the affection between men and women all arise from the natural flow of life itself; they are part of the operation of the great transformation and are beyond reproach. As long as one follows the heavenly principle (the inner law of moral knowing) and attains the mean (balance and harmony), allowing life to renew itself ceaselessly and remain full of vitality, one will naturally reach the state of joyful acceptance of one's lot and peaceful acceptance of destiny. What Liang Shuming criticizes is the use of the intellect to artificially construct an external "target" and then calculate and measure against it. Such "intellectualized" operations inevitably lead to the degeneration of the subject's moral intuition, the numbing of the mind, and ultimately falling into "non-benevolence." This is the same as Zhu Xi's use of "no selfish mind" as corresponding to "heavenly principle" in explaining "benevolence." Both emphasize that stripping away the natural intuition of life in search of benevolence, or using the intellect to forcibly impose "selflessness," will only damage the moral subject's foundation of innate knowing and, through numbness, destroy the possibility of its expansion [5].

6 THE PRACTICAL AIM OF ZHANG TAIYAN'S CONSTRUCTION OF THE MORAL SUBJECT: BREAKING THROUGH TRADITIONAL RITUAL DOCTRINE

Through a modernizing interpretation of Yogācāra philosophy and Zhuangzi's thought, Zhang Taiyan deconstructs the metaphysical foundation of traditional Confucian ritual doctrine and constructs a moral subject grounded in the freedom of the individual's mind-nature. He does not simply take Western theories as the standard; instead, he seeks critical tools from traditional Chinese intellectual resources, such as Buddhism and Zhuangzi, forming a distinctive theoretical path of using tradition against tradition. He employs the Yogācāra principle of "all phenomena as consciousness-only" to dissolve the metaphysical basis of ritual doctrine. For example, Zhu Xi maintains that heavenly principle is an objectively existing moral substance and that the order of ritual and law is the manifestation of heavenly principle. Zhang Taiyan, by contrast, argues that the heavenly principle and the constant virtues upheld by ritual doctrine are merely names and forms manifested by mind-consciousness, and in essence are empty and without self-nature. Therefore, in the moral practice of the individual, moral value must be realized through the individual's own self-verification rather than through dependence on external authoritative norms [6].

At the same time, Zhang Taiyan draws on Zhuangzi's doctrine of the equality of things to reveal that all distinctions between noble and base are subjective, and that such distinctions are in reality equal within the nature of true suchness. He points out that the hierarchical system of ritual doctrine is an attachment to symbolic concepts and violates the nature of true suchness. Zhang Taiyan uses the principle of "relying on the self rather than on others" to overturn the authority of ritual doctrine, emphasizing that morality is not externally established but inherently present in one's own mind. He opposes both blind obedience to Confucian sages and the new authority of so-called rational enlightenment from the West. The moral subject achieves the freedom of its own nature by breaking through names and forms, refusing submission to traditional ritual doctrine and shifting moral authority entirely from the external realm to the inner mind of the moral individual [7].

Zhang Taiyan further proposes that true morality should be practiced as the bodhisattva path, that is, the altruistic spirit of Mahayana Buddhism, premised on the concept of no-self and transforming formalized morality into unconditional care for life. However, precisely because this theory is highly radicalized, it is difficult to implement in social practice. Liang Shuming's subsequent reconstruction of Confucian ethics can be seen as a complement to this theory [8].

7 THE PRACTICAL AIM OF LIANG SHUMING'S CONSTRUCTION OF THE MORAL SUBJECT: AFFIRMING CONFUCIAN ETHICAL VALUES

Liang Shuming was influenced by Bergson's intuitionism but adapted it to a Chinese context, holding that intuition is the bridge connecting the benevolent mind (*renxin*) with the moral subject's ethical practice. He argues that the essence of Confucian benevolence (*ren*) is not logical reasoning but the direct realization of life's original nature through intuition. This intuitive capacity enables people to perceive directly the natural reasonableness of ethical relations such as the affection between father and son and the righteousness between ruler and minister. This is continuous with Mencius's doctrine of knowing without deliberation.

In Liang Shuming's view, modern civilization is chiefly built upon the power of natural science and is therefore a civilization grounded in intellect. Precisely because we today exalt mathematics-based natural science or empirical science and neglect intuitive cognition, we habitually calculate in our dealings with external things and always demand a fundamental reason. In fact, we are using the intellect to do the work that intuition should do, replacing intuition with intellect and constructing an objectified self outside of things. As a result, the ceaselessly creative intuition within us, that is, the benevolent mind, degenerates. This is why Confucius says that "by nature people are close to one another, but through practice they grow far apart." We are all similar at birth; we all possess an innate goodness, which is the intuition of "innate moral knowing and innate moral capacity." Acquired habits separate us from it and cause us to lose our true selves.

We tend to believe that an institution or a law can preserve humanity and represent human civilization. In reality, true morality and true virtue must arise spontaneously from intuition within the human mind. Calculation that remains bound to external things and concerned only with gain and loss fundamentally destroys morality. Liang Shuming on the one hand emphasizes the a priori character of intuition (approaching idealism), while on the other hand in his rural reconstruction work he stresses experiential adjustment (approaching pragmatism). This tension gives his affirmation of Confucian values both metaphysical height and a resistance to complete detachment from reality, though it has also been criticized by Guy Alitto as "romantic traditionalism." In an era dominated by positivism, Liang defended through his theory of intuition the value of Confucian ethics for the moral subject's ethical practice.

8 CONCLUSION

In general, Zhang Taiyan's construction of the moral subject relies on the critical theoretical path represented by his engagement with Buddhist philosophy. By deconstructing traditional morality, he seeks the freedom and moral obligations of the moral subject, opposing traditional systems and traditional dogma in a manner closer to a postmodernist style. Liang Shuming, by contrast, represents a reconstruction of traditional Confucianism. By endowing the traditional moral subject with a new philosophical foundation, that is, a new ontological basis, he seeks to adapt it to the demands of modern society, a position closer to a conservative theory of modernization.

The two thinkers share common ground in that both oppose instrumental rationality and both elevate the self-awareness of the moral subject. However, Zhang Taiyan's moral subject is empty in nature and critical, with its ultimate orientation toward transcendental freedom. Liang Shuming's moral subject, on the other hand, is substantive and practical, with its ultimate orientation toward the concrete implementation of social ethics [9]. This difference represents two distinct solutions offered by modern Chinese philosophy in response to the problem of modernization. At its root, it can be seen as reflecting a fundamental difference between Buddhist philosophy and Confucian philosophy.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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