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Only Propriety Guarantees Success

The traditional Chinese character li (禮), meaning propriety, is an associative compound character in which two parts with certain meanings are combined to create a new meaning. The left side means express, and the right side represents the utensils that people used to offer sacrifices to the gods or the spirits of ancestors. Originally, propriety in Chinese basically meant holding ceremonies to offer sacrifices to the gods for blessings or to express reverence and awe for them.

Since ancient times the Chinese people have assigned a special value to the role of the propriety in interpersonal relations. Confucius once told his son, Kong Li, that “a man does not have the proper words to speak if he does not learn The Book of Songs, and a man does not know how to behave if he does not learn propriety.” When a person learns propriety, he will have specific and clear knowledge about conduct and morals. Thus, he will have a firm understanding of virtue, and will be able to behave properly. Confucius' teachings, such as “Practice self-discipline to restore propriety,” refer specifically to the rules of conduct of the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046-771 BC). In modern times, propriety refers more to the rules and standards of a society, involving a series of codes about the hierarchical relationships related to age, rank, etc.

A person should follow propriety when treating both juniors and seniors, and show his care for others, as well as respect and love for his family members and friends.

At the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220), Kong Rong, a courteous boy only four years old, was about to share a plate of pears with his elder brothers. The pears were of different sizes and qualities. The two biggest ones were an attractive yellow color: juicy, crisp and sweet. Three were of medium size, greenish-yellow in color and some-what sour. The remaining one was green and small. Dried up and unattractive, it seemed to have no juice left. How should they divide the pears among them? Kong Rong took the smallest one, and gave the other pears to his elder brothers. Kong Rong said, “I am the youngest, so the smallest pear is enough for me.” The story about Kong Rong dividing the pears soon spread across the country, and people took him as a model when it came to educating their children. Later, this story was even included in the Three Character Classic, a leading children's primer in ancient China.

People also follow propriety to show their respect for the learned and the talented when they interact with people of higher learning and accomplishments. In the Song Dynasty (960-1279), there was a student named Yang Shi. When he was studying under Master Cheng Yi he would go to his master's house every time he had a question. One day, it snowed heavily and the weather was freezing cold. When Yang Shi and his classmate You Zuo, came to the master's house, they saw him sleeping in a chair. The two students didn't want to rouse him from his nap, so they stood

quietly outside the door. When the master finally woke up, he found two “snowmen,” Yang Shi and You Zuo, standing in snow almost one-foot deep and covered all over with snow. The master was deeply touched, and asked them to come inside. This story was later captured in a Chinese phrase known as “Standing Respectfully in the Snow to Wait Upon Master Cheng.”

A person should show care and respect for his teacher, and he should also follow propriety when communicating with wise people, even those inferior to him in social status. During the period of the Three Kingdoms (220-280) the King of Shu, Liu Bei, learned that a very talented man named Zhuge Liang lived on Sleeping Dragon Hill. He thought that if he could invite Zhuge Liang to join him, he could win the fight for the throne of

the whole empire. Liu Bei prepared some presents and went to the hill with two of his most trusted warriors, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei. But the servant boy in Zhuge Liang's house said, “The master has gone out. I do not know where he has gone or when he will be back.” Liu Bei and his companions had to leave, disappointed.

Later, Liu Bei heard that Zhuge Liang was back home, so he wanted to visit him a second time. Zhang Fei tried to dissuade him, saying, “The man is nothing but a peasant living in seclusion in the mountain woods. Your highness is a mighty warlord. You do not have to visit him personally. Just tell someone to bring him here.” Liu Bei told Zhang Fei: “Mencius said, If you want to meet a sage but you do not follow his ways, it is like wanting to let him in but closing your door.” Zhuge Liang is a genius of this age. He is certainly not someone whom you can send for.”

So, Liu Bei went to the hill on a windy and snowy day for the second time, only to miss Zhuge Liang again. Zhang Fei was furious, and protested: “This is outrageous! The man was said to have gone out twice when we went to visit him. We do not know whether this was true or just an excuse. The wind is getting stronger and the snow thicker. Let us go back quickly.” But Liu Bei insisted, “We came to visit without proper notice both times. It is reasonable that the master was not at home. We should not violate the principle of propriety today.” So, he asked for a writing brush and ink, and wrote a long letter to Zhuge Liang to express his appreciation and respect as well as his hope that the master could assist him to fulfil his ambition. Liu Bei gave the letter to Zhuge Jun, the younger brother of Zhuge Liang, and then mounted his horse and left.

Liu Bei called on Zhuge Liang a third time one fine spring day. He finally met Zhuge Liang, who had gone to live as a hermit when the empire fell into turmoil. In a later memorial to Liu Bei he explained, “I only tried to keep my life in a chaotic world and never sought to become known to the princes.” He said he did not want to get involved in worldly matters. Moved by Liu Bei's respectful visits and sincere invitation, Zhuge Liang proposed the Long Zhong Plan to him, in which he suggested they should ally with the Wu Kingdom to resist the Wei Kingdom. The mutual respect and sincerity between the warlord and his future prime minister became a well-known story. Later, Zhuge Liang devoted his life to helping Liu Bei to restore the Han Dynasty.

Observing propriety does not mean going through complex but unnecessary formalities or behaving in an affected way; instead, it means appreciating the perspective of the other party. It embraces morality, accomplishment, civilization, etiquette and cultural attainments, which reflect

an excellent element of China's cultural and ethnic inheritance, and deeply influence the ways of thinking and behavior of each Chinese citizen.

The Moral of This Story

Propriety in the story “Kong Rong Dividing the Pears” highlights the love among family members. Propriety in the stories “Standing in the Snow Respectfully to Wait Upon Master Cheng” and “Liu Bei Visiting Zhuge Liang's Hermitage Thrice” express respect for learning, and the understanding and valuing of virtuous and talented people. As pointed out in The Analects of Confucius, “The practice of propriety lies in taking harmony as the most valuable thing.” This is because propriety functions as the guarantee of social harmony in China.

Practice

1. 什么是禮? What is traditional Chinese character li? (10 分)

Answer:

The traditional Chinese character "li" (禮) embodies the concept of propriety. As an associative compound, its left part signifies expression, while the right part represents utensils used for sacrificial offerings. Originally focused on ceremonial acts to seek blessings and show reverence to higher entities, "li" evolved to encompass societal standards and rules in modern times. Confucius emphasized its crucial role in education, instilling specific knowledge about conduct and morals. Propriety, as depicted in anecdotes and historical stories, continues to underscore respect for others, adherence to hierarchical relationships, and the importance of maintaining social harmony in Chinese culture.

2. 孔融让梨讲了什么故事? What is the story of Kong Rong Dividing the Pears? (10 分)

Answer:

In the story of "Kong Rong Dividing the Pears," courteous four-year-old Kong Rong, sharing a plate of pears with his elder brothers, chooses the smallest one for himself. The larger, juicier pears he generously gives to his siblings, stating, "I am the youngest, so the smallest pear is enough for me." This selfless act of propriety and consideration for others made Kong Rong a model for educating children and is featured in the Three Character Classic, a prominent ancient Chinese primer.

3. 程门立雪讲了什么故事? What is the story of Standing in the Snow Respectfully to Wait Upon Master Cheng? (10 分)

Answer:

In the story of "Standing in the Snow Respectfully to Wait Upon Master Cheng," during a snowy day, students Yang Shi and You Zuo, studying under Master Cheng Yi in the Song Dynasty, find him napping in a chair. Rather than disturbing him, they stand quietly outside in the deep snow until he wakes. Touched by their respectful gesture, Master Cheng invites them inside. This tale illustrates the students' adherence to propriety and deep respect for their teacher's wisdom, emphasizing the importance of etiquette and sincerity in learning.

4. 判断对错 (30 分)

(True) 自古以来, 中国人特别看重“礼”在人际交往中的作用。Since ancient times, Chinese people have attached great importance to the role of "rituals" in interpersonal communication.

(True) 不论对待比自己年长的人还是年幼的人, 都要讲礼。礼代表你为他人着想, 礼是你对亲人表现出的尊重和爱。

A person should follow propriety when treating both juniors and seniors, and show his care for others, as well as respect and love for his family members and friends.

(False) 礼是繁文缛节、装腔作势。

Observing propriety does mean going through complex but unnecessary formalities or behaving in an affected way.

5. 请解释下列词语, 并标注拼音。Please translate these words and mark Pinyin.

(40 分)

孔融让梨 (Kǒng Róng ràng lí) - Kong Rong Gives Way to Others

程门立雪 (Chéng mén lì xuě) - Cheng Men Stands in the Snow

三顾茅庐 (Sān gù máo lú) - Three Visits to the Thatched Hut

礼 (Lǐ) - Rituals or Courtesy