

On Confucian Thoughts on Mortality Anxiety Management

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Abstracts

Because human beings can be aware of their own mortality, they have mortality anxiety by the effect of the instinct for seeking life and avoiding death. In order to alleviate and even eliminate the pain caused by mortality anxiety, various cultures in the world have constructed the mechanism of mortality anxiety management. Among them, the Confucian mortality anxiety management is a unique and effective thought with Chinese cultural characteristics, which psychological mechanism is mainly sublimation. It can sublimate mortality anxiety or terror into the internal motivation of actively striving and continuous self-improvement. The ways of sublimation are bloodline heritage, Li-de(立德, achieving and strengthening virtue), Li-gong(立功, rendering meritorious service) and Li-yan(立言, writing and propounding ideas), which has great stimulation or incentive function on people's making great contributions and accomplishing great tasks, creating and inventing, and enhancing their own spiritual realm improvement. Therefore, it is to say that the Confucian thought of mortality anxiety management has positive value for education, especially life education value.

Key words—Mortality anxiety management(MAM),

Confucianism, Mortality, Bloodline heritage, Li-de(立德, achieving and strengthening virtue), Li-gong(立功, rendering meritorious service), Li-yan(立言, writing and propounding ideas)

I. Introduction

In the process of human formation and development, a very important symbol to distinguish human from animals is the emergence of

consciousness and self-consciousness. Consciousness and self-consciousness are the unique mental activity of human beings, which enable people to recognize, plan, evaluate, reflect and adjust their own behaviors and examine themselves. It also includes the cognition or consciousness of the mortality. With the emergence of consciousness and self-consciousness, human ancestors found that they were just passers-by in the long river of time. One day, their time would run out and their life would end with time. To realize the inevitability of death would result in various psychological contradictions or conflicts. Among them, the most prominent is the contradiction between life and death, and between the realization of human potential and the short life[1][2]. Among them, the contradiction between life and death is the basic contradiction of human existence, and the other contradictions are only a reflection of the contradiction between life and death.

When human ancestors began to realize that it is inevitable for them to die in the future, and could do nothing about it, their terror or anxiety for death would arise. In addition, with the emergence of consciousness and self-consciousness, human ancestors found that their future is full of uncertainty, which would result in their sense of insecurity, then their terror or anxiety for the future. When they recognize that they and the people around them had been suffering from diseases, injuries and inexplicable injuries, and that they and animals killed the same kind of animals and other animals, they would reflect on themselves and identify with the objects killed on consciousness and self-consciousness. As the results, they thought that they would likely encounter such unfortunate things, thus deepening their fear or anxiety for death. This

kind of anxiety is mortality anxiety, which is a kind of existential anxiety, which is the result of people's cognition of the finiteness of their own existence, that is, death[1]. It is for this reason that human beings always try to solve the contradiction between life and death in order to alleviate and even eliminate mortality anxiety in the process of human development from barbarism to civilization and its subsequent development, which is mortality anxiety management(MAM). Mortality anxiety would play a positive role in human evolution and development by this way. This dynamic function is mainly realized by solving the five pairs of eternal contradictions contained in human deep psyche ——the contradictions between the entry into the world and the out of the world (or the realistic and ideal), the emotional and rational, the individual and the class, the sane and the intuitive, the historical and the ethical. However, in the process of evolution, formation and development of different nations in the world, due to the differences in living environment, facing and solving the existing problems, etc, there are differences in the concepts, ways or methods of solving these five pairs of eternal contradictions. The concepts, ways or methods of solving these five pairs of eternal contradictions constitute the basic life attitude, emotional mode, thinking mode, thinking way and value scale of each nation. As the “primitive ancient accumulation layer” of the deep structure of national cultural psychology, they have become the national characteristics on which the social ideologies of different nationalities used distinguish each other[3][4]. It not only forms the knowledge structure and methodology system of each nation with its own cultural characteristics, but also creates their own belief system and ideology, which includes the idea, way and method of solving the contradiction between life and death and the problem of mortality anxiety. This is the case with Chinese Confucian culture.

II. Confucian ways of mortality anxiety management

Confucian mortality anxiety manage is realized by bloodline heritage and three immortality[5] that is

Li-de(立德, achieving and strengthening virtue), Li-gong(立功, rendering meritorious service) and Li-yan(立言, expounding one's ideas in writing).

A. Bloodline heritage

Bloodline heritage is a symbolic immortality. Symbolic immortality is the extended or derivative meaning of immortality, which is not literal immortality that individual life, no matter that his body or soul, is the long-term survival, but the long-term continuation of some symbolic things, characteristics or attributes, etc. Symbolic immortality includes bloodline heritage, which is that life genes continue constantly by living and multiplying.

Since a single life cannot last forever, the procreation and reproduction of life is regarded as the continuation of life, and the reproduction of life from generation to generation is symbolically regarded as eternal immortality. Under the guidance of this ideology, people pursue to reproduce or multiply life constantly, which essence is to extend life in a symbolic way by the identification of a longer existence or entity, such as the continuation of life. The thought of Confucianism that is “no offspring is the severest one of three kinds of unfilial piety” (Mencius·Lilou chapter) is the clear expression of this thought.

Bloodline heritage is an important issue of Confucianism. It is to come true the pursuit of life and the transcendence of death by means of generation after generation of descendants to ensure the continuity of bloodline from generation to generation. By this way, Confucianism connect the limited individual life with unlimited continuation of bloodline, and the individual life value with the inheritance and development of kinship. As a result, Chinese people pay attention to kinship, and regard Tian-lun-zhi-le(family happiness) as an important goal of life. On this basis, a patriarchal society of “secular ethics” based on kinship is established. In such a patriarchal society with consanguinity, people do not need to go beyond the sustenance of life. The social family full of tender feeling is enough to make up for personal loneliness[6], give people a sense of

immortality, comfort or appease people's anxiety or fear of death.

B. Li-de(立德, achieving and strengthening virtue)

Li-de is to set up a moral benchmark, which is that make oneself a moral model in society in order to be remembered by history and passed down by society. It embodies the Confucian values of moral supremacy, which is value immortality contained in symbolic immortality. Value immortality or influence immortality means to perpetuate oneself by making a contribution or influence or playing a role that continues to influence later generations. That is, although dead, his influence is still there, as if "alive". In this way, Confucianism put moral conduct more important than life to ease mortality anxiety or terror. Confucian ideas, such as "sacrificing one's own life for righteousness", "killing one's own body for benevolence", "starvation is a small thing, but forfeiting one's integrity is a big thing", all manage mortality anxiety or terror by putting some moral values above life and death.

Although Confucian culture is cautious about life and death, it does not make death a phrase to be avoided as taboo. Before life-death and justice, the latter is always more significant than the former. Terror management theory(TMT) believes that people's terror for death would disintegrate all kinds of social behaviors of human beings, so it needs some psychological defense[7]. However, this kind of psychological defense would not be able to eliminate mortality anxiety or terror really except for suppressing mortality anxiety or terror. By contrast, Confucianism emphasizes the ultimate transcendence of benevolence and righteousness over death, so why not give up life for the sake of benevolence and righteousness. It can be seen that Confucianism put benevolence, righteousness and morality in the first place, while life-death in a secondary position. According to Confucianism, benevolence and righteousness are the root of human life and the source power of human existence. This thought of Confucianism is essentially different from TMT(terror management theory), which assumes that

mortality anxiety and terror is a kind of root power of human beings that drives the occurrence and development of various social behaviors[8]. In addition, Confucianism believes that death is not always negative and evasive. On the contrary, in some cases, death can become a way of self-realization and one of the paths to "immortality". For example, for the sake of justice or the maintenance of social ethics and morality, some people sacrifice their own life without any consideration. It is a fundamental difference between Confucian death view and TMT(terror management theory) to realize the transcendence of death by moral value. Its essence is to replace individual death with social death. According to such Confucian value view, human death is not terrible, the key is to die valuably, especially to the society.

According to the Confucian thought, "Virtue" can be further extended to people's culture or accomplishment. Li-de is to establish and constantly improve people's self-cultivation or accomplishment so as to reach the spiritual realm of "Nei-sheng(Saint inside)" of Confucianism. "Nei-sheng-Wai-wang(Saint inside and king outside)" is the goal of individual cultivation proposed by Confucianism. "Nei(inside)" in "Nei-sheng" refers to people's inner cultivation. "Sheng(Saint)" refers to sage. "Nei-sheng" refers to people's inner cultivation reaching the level of sage, which is the ideal personality of a gentleman in Confucianism. The "sages" in Confucianism refer to those people with noble moral character, superior intelligence, outstanding capacity, open-minded and positive mentality. Such people are not afraid of death because they are in harmony with the Tao, so that they have no mortality anxiety or terror. By this way, Confucianism dispels people's mortality anxiety and terror from the perspective of social and ethical values, transcends death with moral cultivation such as benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom and faith, and constructs a higher social and cultural demand than survival. This is essentially different from TMT(mortality management theory), which implies and emphasizes that the individual's

complete dependence on the cultural world plays a necessary and sufficient role in eliminating mortality anxiety and terror. Its theoretical viewpoint is derived from biological evolutionism, the method of mortality anxiety management comes from the whole cultural society, and the way to solve problems is embodied in the symbolic psychological defense mechanism.

C. Li-gong(立功, rendering meritorious service)

Li-gong(立功, rendering meritorious service) refers to achieving feats and establishing careers. It is the expression of Confucianism's thought of "Qi-jia(wining honor and distinction for their own family), Zhi-guo(governing the country), Ping-tian-xia(bringing peace to the world)"[9]. Its essence is the embodiment of the inner psychological mechanism of group immortality and influence immortality that symbolic immortality includes. If Li-de is regarded as "Nei-sheng(Saint inside)", Li-gong would be "Wai-wang(King outside)", which is to carry out Wang-dao(王道, the king's way) and achieve Wang-ye(王业, the king's enterprise). "Wai-wang" is the ambition and aspiration of gentlemen, especially the social responsibility to be undertaken. From low to high, it is to show in the order of Qi-jia, Zhi-guo and Ping-tian-xia. If an individual can achieve such an achievement, especially Wang-ye, he would be not to spend his life in vain, die without regret. In this way, Confucianism sublimates mortality anxiety into a huge internal motivation to actively undertake social responsibility and make a great contribution. Confucianism connects individual limited individual life with unlimited social undertakings and social responsibility, limited individuals with unlimited groups, and limited individual value with group and social development, which is able to not only make the individual free from loneliness, feel spiritual enrichment, but also obtain a sense of immortality.

This practice of Confucianism can actively meet people's needs of relevance, transcendence, root seeking, sense of identity, orientation and dedication said by Fromm. It is helpful to form positive psychological qualities such as love, creativity, thick

and solid sense of survival foundation, autonomy and independence, and rationality[1], to make people have a sense of self-integration and perfection, feel that their life are worth living, meaningful, and not living in vain[1]. It is essentially different from TMT(mortality management theory), which regards death as a survival threat event from the horizon of evolutionism. According to TMT, because people are afraid of death, they always tend to pursue life and avoid death when facing death, so they adopt symbolic defense methods to deal with death and alleviate death anxiety[10]. On the contrary, Confucianism sublimates death into the intrinsic motivation of making a great contribution, giving people great internal motivation to strive for progress and overcome difficulties and obstacles.

D. Li-yan(立言, writing and propounding ideas)

Li-yan is to write and propound ideas, to construct a thought or a method, which internal mechanism of mortality anxiety management is ideological immortality and works immortality that symbolic immortality includes. Ideological immortality refers to the creation of spirit or cultural ideas that later generations can inherit and develop. For example, such as Confucianism founded by Confucius, Zen established by Hui-neng and Existentialism proposed by Kierkegaard, all of them have been inherited and developed in the long history, making them "enjoy the incense for lots of generations". Works immortality refers to the creation of works, techniques, methods, tools, etc. that can be passed on forever, so that these creators can survive with them. For example, Luban as the ancestor of Chinese craftsmen has been remembered by later ages.

Li-yan is an important way or method of mortality anxiety management emphasized by Confucianism, which essence is to make the creators' name remain in the history by establishing influential theories, methods, techniques and products, etc. The reason that thinkers, famous craftsmen, inventors and creators of methods and techniques in Chinese and foreign history can be inherited to become immortal by history is their "Li-yan". By this way, the

Confucian mortality anxiety management connects the limited life of an individual with the creation or invention of products with long-term historical influence, especially spiritual products, and the limited value of individuals with the development of unlimited ideas, methods and skills. It sublimates mortality anxiety and terror into the intrinsic motivation of human creation and invention, thus makes the creators have an immortal sense of achievement.

III. Conclusion

To sum up, the Confucian mortality anxiety management is the thought of mortality anxiety management with Chinese cultural characteristics, which is rich in realistic values and era significance. It mainly sublimates mortality anxiety and terror by bloodline heritage, Li-de, Li-gong, and Li-yan, which can make people feel immortal. Its psychological mechanism is mainly sublimation. According to the Confucian thought of mortality anxiety management, mortality anxiety or terror is positive rather than negative. It is the internal motivation of people to struggle actively and constantly improve themselves. It has a great provoking or inspiring effect for people on achieving feats and establishing careers, inventions and improvement of spiritual realm, etc. Therefore, it is to say that the Confucian thought of mortality anxiety management has positive educational value, which is of great significance to the prevention of suicide, especially the suicide of teenagers and the despising life [11]. Confucian thought of mortality management should become an important content and way of education, especially life education.

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