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An Examination of Li Zehou's Theory of Two Moralities

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Abstract: Li Zehou's ethical thought is centered on the "Theory of Two Moralities". His interpretation of this theory evolved across different stages: prior to traditional society, there was no distinction between the two moralities; both are products of history, suited to their specific epochs. With the advent of modern society, modern social morality and traditional religious morality have become separated and distinct. In fact, Li's "Theory of Two Moralities" was gradually developed under the influence of John Rawls's Political Liberalism. He proposed using this theory to deconstruct the original structure of Confucianism, aiming to construct a "new way of inner sageliness and outer kingliness". Although it is often constrained and guided by traditional religious morality, we should value the guiding role of religious morality's emotional dimension. Simultaneously, it is crucial to master the art of the "proper measure", respect individual value, and promote social progress.

Keywords: Li Zehou; Theory of Two Moralities; Religious Morality; Social Morality

1. Introduction

The "Theory of Two Moralities" is a significant paradigm proposed by Li Zehou in his ethical studies. The "two moralities" refer to "religious morality" and "social morality", which are complementary and mutually supportive.

2. An Overview of the Theory of Two Moralities

In his 1994 work Philosophical Exploration Notes, Li Zehou first introduced the "Theory of Two Moralities", correlating "ethical absolutism" with "religious morality" and "ethical relativism" with "social morality". The problematic consciousness behind this continued the line of thought from his 1980s studies on Kant and the history of ancient Chinese thought. Influenced by John Rawls's Political Liberalism, his thinking entered a second stage, during which he proposed using the Theory of Two Moralities to deconstruct the original structure of Confucianism. Although Li himself did not acknowledge that the formulation of the Theory of Two Moralities was influenced by Rawls, the social morality he referred to essentially falls within the scope of concern of Rawlsian theory of justice. Furthermore, in his Reading the Analects Today, he expressed considerable agreement with the "overlapping consensus" advocated in Rawls's Political Liberalism (During this second stage, Li's interpretation of the Two Moralities also varied before and after his teaching appointment in the United States). By 2001, in Historical Ontology, Li Zehou provided a new explanation of the Theory of Two Moralities. He observed the challenges posed by modern industrial society to the Chinese tradition characterized by the integration of religious and social morality. In China's social environment, deeply imbued with the Confucian learning of "inner sageliness", the question of how to interpret individual identity constructed through complex social relations became an urgent problem. Li Zehou thus raised the question: "What path will the Confucian tradition of 'inner sageliness' take?" The following section will provide an overview of Li Zehou's interpretations of the Theory of Two Moralities across these different stages.

When Li Zehou first mentioned the "Theory of Two Moralities", he did not initially regard it as a significant theoretical construct. Rather, he used it to critique Kantian ethical absolutism—specifically, the unconditional submission to and rigorous implementation of the categorical imperative—which he characterized as a form of "religious morality" and ethical absolutism. In contrast, he noted that what truly exists in reality are ethical norms and moral principles that vary across eras, social contexts, interests, and environments. These are manifested in the form of laws, regulations, customs, and conventions, often transforming

from external impositions into internalized conscious demands through prolonged historical processes. These, he proposed, could be termed "social morality". Li also pointed out that the formulation of the Theory of Two Moralities drew inspiration from the historical experience of the "mutual infusion of Confucianism and Legalism" during the Han Dynasty, which involved integrating Confucian morality with Legalist institutions. Building on this, he suggested that in modern society, morality and institutions should be separated.[1] Thus, the core problematic behind Li Zehou's formulation of the Theory of Two Moralities concerns the relationship between "morality and institutions". Chen Lai critiques that what Li refers to as "social morality" primarily denotes institutional frameworks; however, socio-political institutions themselves are not morality. By drawing on the concept of the "mutual infusion of Confucianism and Legalism", Li Zehou, from the very outset, conflated these distinct concepts in his usage—a conflation of which he remained unaware throughout.[2] He said:

In the 1990s, a new generation of professors championed the political philosophy of liberalism, emphasizing the universal applicability of the capitalist economic political order while downplaying the unique cultural, traditional, and practical backgrounds of different nations. I observed that since the Han Dynasty, the "mutual infusion of Confucianism and Legalism"—embodying the spirit of "pragmatic rationality"—whereby the Confucian worldview, valuing human relationships and substance, was integrated into the Legalist system, which emphasizes form and rationality, yielded long-term social stability and interpersonal harmony... Consequently, in ethics, I proposed the "Theory of Two Moralities", which advocates separating right/wrong from good/evil. The first is social morality, related to political philosophy. It is founded on modern individualism and the social contract, encompassing liberty, equality, human rights, and democracy, aimed at safeguarding individual rights and regulating social life. The other is religious morality, associated with religion, faith, and cultural traditions. It involves ultimate concern and the meaning of life, representing the emotions, faith, and aspirations individuals pursue for existential value and life significance. The former constitutes public virtue and public rationality, which should be universally followed; the latter constitutes private virtue and individual consciousness, which can be freely chosen. The relationship between them is not about which takes precedence; rather, religious morality possesses a guiding function but generally should not have a constructive role. Influenced by John Rawls's Political Liberalism, Li Zehou's thinking entered a second stage, during which he proposed using the Theory of Two Moralities to deconstruct the original structure of Confucianism. According to Li, he was initially unaware of the publication of Rawls's Political Liberalism. Only later, upon encountering the concept of "overlapping consensus"—which can be decoupled from tradition—did he recognize its considerable resemblance to the "modern social morality" he had articulated within his own Theory of Two Moralities. Rawls's concept of "overlapping consensus" essentially argues that modern liberal political tenets—such as the institutions and ideas of liberty, equality, independence, and human rights—need not be justified by tracing them to a specific cultural tradition. For instance, while some trace modern liberal democracy back to the equal freemen of Ancient Greece, the republican institutions and legal spirit of Ancient Rome, or Christian notions of equality before God (and while some in China similarly seek liberal traditions in ancient thought, tracing back to Laozi, Zhuangzi, or even Confucius and Mencius), Rawls contends that it is sufficient to demonstrate these norms as an "overlapping consensus" achievable in contemporary society.[3] Li Zehou strongly agreed with Rawls's "overlapping consensus" because its decoupling thesis, in Li's own terminology, precisely facilitated the distinction between the "Two Moralities". However, a significant difference remains between Li's "Theory of Two Moralities" and Rawls's "overlapping consensus."

The first key difference lies in the fact that Rawls does not explain the foundation, feasibility, or possibility of the overlapping consensus, whereas Li Zehou's "Theory of Two Moralities" provides an explanation for this. Li posits that the overlapping consensus becomes achievable precisely because of modern industrialized mass production and the development of a commodity economy, which is increasingly globalized and integrated. Consequently, taking the individual as the basic

unit and contract as the principle has become a common trend and a source of "overlapping consensus" across various regional social structures and institutional systems. The second major difference is that after proposing the decoupling, Rawls avoids addressing the relationship between traditional religious morality and modern social morality, seemingly aiming to completely separate politics from morality—to the extent that some critics sarcastically label this as "politics without morality". In reality, the norms Rawls discusses, such as public reason, constitute what is now referred to as social morality. The crucial question, however, is what relationship exists or should exist between this new morality and traditional morality. This is an issue Rawls leaves unaddressed, but one to which the Theory of Two Moralities attaches great importance. The theory maintains that while the two can be "decoupled"—that is, distinguished—they cannot be entirely separated. Furthermore, it proposes that traditional morality can play a guiding and appropriately constructive role with respect to certain aspects of modern social morality.[4]

It is evident that when Li Zehou elucidated his concept of the two moralities in 1994, his aim was not to critique liberals like Rawls, but rather to theoretically reconcile the divergence between ethical absolutism and relativism. Subsequently, as discernible in Reading the Analects Today, he essentially employed this dual moral theory to assimilate, rather than revise, liberal thought. Regarding liberalism, Li Zehou maintained that modern social morality is intrinsically linked to it. He considered the fundamental concepts of Enlightenment rationality and liberalism—such as liberty, equality, human rights, the self, science, and progress—to possess universality in the contemporary era. Furthermore, the domain that Li Zehou referred to as "social morality" essentially corresponds to the scope of concern in Rawls's theory of justice.

In the conclusion of Reading the Analects Today, Li Zehou states: "This commentary emphasizes that in the present day, 'inner sageliness' and 'outer kingliness' should be separated. Individual cultivation (religious private morality) and political affairs (social public morality) ought to develop along distinct paths; the former can, at most, serve only a guiding role". Although Li Zehou's advocacy for distinguishing between inner sageliness and outer kingliness is not without its rationale, his primary focus lies not on inner sageliness but on outer kingliness. The core problem he sought to address was not, in essence, the issue of the two moralities themselves, nor the distinction between private and public virtue, but rather the relationship between inner sageliness and outer kingliness.

Finally, in his New Theory of Ethics, Li Zehou summarized his "Theory of Two Moralities" with three key points. First, he emphasized that the term "social morality" is prefixed with "modern", indicating that this form of morality did not exist in the past. It is a product of the modern era or, more precisely, a rational construct. Second, in traditional societies, there was no distinction between the two moralities; they were blended together. This is evident in Christian ethics, Confucian ethics, and even in the ethics of some Islamic nations today, where emotional elements carry significant weight due to religious beliefs, resulting in profound religious sentiments directed towards heaven, earth, and ancestors. Third, both types of morality are products of history and are suited to their specific epochs. Modern social morality, founded on the modern market economy, the principle of contract, and individualism, is adapted to contemporary life. It has now become separated and distinct from traditional religious morality, which is precisely why the Theory of Two Moralities was proposed. The following discussion will provide a detailed analysis focusing on the latter two of these summarized points.

3. The Undifferentiation and Separation of the Two Moralities

Li Zehou held different interpretations of the "Theory of Two Moralities" across various periods. He argued that prior to modern society, there was no distinction between the two moralities; both were products of history, suited to their specific epochs. With the advent of modern society, modern social morality became separated from and distinct from traditional religious morality.

3.1 The Fusion of the Two Moralities

After proposing the "Theory of Two Moralities" in 1994, Li Zehou published a series of articles elaborating on this concept. He argued that in traditional societies, no distinction was made

between the two moralities; they were fused into an undifferentiated whole. This is evident in ethical systems such as Christianity and Confucianism, as well as in the ethics of some Islamic nations today, where emotional elements carry significant weight. Due to the influence of religious belief—exemplified by the Confucian concept of "ritual"—there exists a profound religious sentiment towards heaven, earth, and ancestors.

In ancient societies, religious morality governed social morality, and at times even directly fulfilled its functions. According to Li Zehou's historical ontology, morality fundamentally consists of the common modes of conduct, norms, or standards required by specific human groups—defined by their era, region, ethnicity, or community, i.e., their specific spatiotemporal conditions—to maintain, protect, and perpetuate their existence and way of life. Due to the environmental and subjective-objective conditions of primitive societies, such as rudimentary, low productivity and undeveloped, ignorant intellect, this "social morality" necessarily and inevitably manifested in a form that transcended society and the human world. This pattern held true from animal worship in the totemic age to ancestor worship in patriarchal societies, from polytheism to monotheism, from sorcery to religion, and even later philosophical abstractions. In other words, moral principles, behavioral norms, and inner cultivation that were inherently of this human world had to be elevated to a position beyond it, shrouded in mystery, and endowed with sacred status—labeled as "Heavenly Principle", "conscience", "God", "Reason", or "Ideal". Only through this process could they achieve the effect of commanding universal awe and collective observance.

Thus, through a process of mystification and sanctification, social morality was elevated into religious morality. On this point, Li Zehou states in An Outline of a New Theory of Ethics: "Individual morality originates from group ethics. Ethics, which fundamentally evolves and undergoes fine-tuning to adapt to changing environments of existence, are transformed—through the behaviors and speeches of certain legendary great figures—into something transcending this world and acquiring a grave sacred character. Thereby, the empirical becomes the transcendental. Worldly institutions, demands, regulations, including long-standing customs far from being humanly designed, are all, to a greater or lesser, distant or close, direct or indirect extent, cloaked in a mystical halo, becoming sacred conventions and inviolable doctrines and dogmas. This sanctity endows them with the linguistic power of universal necessity, possessing a tremendous force, incomparable and irresistible even by individuals or human groups, thus becoming objects of obedience, belief, awe, and worship." This process is exemplified by religious founders such as Jesus, Śākyamuni, and Muhammad, as well as figures like the Duke of Zhou and Confucius in China, and certain modern leaders. Ultimately, religious morality—originally derived from a specific social morality within a given spatiotemporal context—becomes the ultimate reliance of faith and emotion after being elevated to a status of universal necessity, thereby transforming into sacred objects of reverence and worship.[5]

In ancient cultural traditions, ethics, morality, and politics generally possessed a sacred or mystical religious character, with politics and morality—as well as social morality and religious morality—often remaining undifferentiated. China's two-millennia-old traditional "Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues" claimed the supreme sanctity and "universal necessity" of "Heavenly Principle" and "innate moral consciousness". Western Christian doctrines (the Bible) and the Quran in Arab nations more directly proclaimed the absolute, universally necessary nature of ethical principles as divine commandments. In reality, this purported "transcendental" or "a priori" universal necessity was merely the empirical product of objective societal conditions within specific historical periods, yet it "granted authority to experience", transforming into primordial sanctity. For instance, in China, "filial piety" evolved through rituals and spiritualization from ancient shamanistic practices into "the principle of Heaven and the righteousness of Earth", becoming a transcendental or a priori "Heavenly Principle" and "innate moral consciousness"—an absolute commandment endowed with a sanctity transcending worldly human relations. "Unfilial conduct" was not merely a violation of interpersonal norms but an offense against celestial law, warranting divine retribution. From the Classic of Filial Piety of

the Han Dynasty declaring filial piety as cosmic law, to folklore across generations recounting tales of heavenly rewards for filial devotion and divine punishment for unfilial acts, it is evident that "filial piety" long served both as the "religious morality" and "social morality" for the Chinese people. The two moralities remained undifferentiated, manifesting only varying degrees of emphasis in different concrete behaviors.[6]

Such an ethic-centric value orientation led China to form, during the Axial Age, an ideology that integrated ethics, religion, and politics into a whole with ethics as its backbone. This ideology often manifests as a form of pan-moralism, whose influence has been profound, severely hindering the establishment and dissemination of modern life and modern moral concepts. It requires deconstruction, to be followed by reconstruction. The path for this deconstruction appears to lie precisely in distinguishing between the two moralities.

3.2 The Separation of the Two Moralities

Throughout different periods, Li Zehou employed varying bases for distinguishing the two moralities. In the early stage, he differentiated them according to the Kantian framework of ethical relativism and ethical absolutism. During the second stage, influenced by Liang Qichao's On the New Citizen, he adopted the division between private virtue and public virtue, noting that this distinction pertained to the separation of matters of "inner sageliness" from those of "outer kingliness", rather than representing a division between two distinct types of morality. Subsequently, Li's central problematic shifted primarily towards addressing "pan-moralism", leading him to advocate for the separation of the two moralities.

What is the underlying reason for the separation of the two moralities? Politically, this division can be traced to the modern principle of the separation of church and state. It was only with the advent of modern society that a clear demarcation between traditional religious morality and modern secular morality emerged. In his analysis, Li Zehou placed particular emphasis on the term "modern" and its critical significance within the framework of modern social morality. He explained that this form of morality is built on the foundations of a modern market economy, the principle of contract, and individualism, all of which are suited to contemporary life. It is the distinct nature of this modern moral system, setting it apart from traditional religious morality, that gives rise to the theoretical discourse on the "Two Moralities".

In his Philosophical Exploration Notes, Li Zehou delineates the distinction as follows: Both traditional religious morality and modern social morality, as forms of morality, share the commonality of being self-legislated—they represent reason's command and stipulation over one's own sensuous activities and existence. The difference, however, lies in this: traditional religious morality is a self-chosen ultimate concern and foundation for one's life, the highest value pursued by the individual. In contrast, modern social morality constitutes the objective requirements of a collective (be it a nation, state, group, or association) within a specific historical society, which the individual must fulfill as duties and obligations, often intertwined with laws and customs. The former appears absolute, yet not everyone can necessarily fulfill it, as it pertains to the individual's level of self-cultivation. The latter appears relative, yet demands strict compliance from every member of the collective, irrespective of individual circumstances. One may hold expectations for an individual based on traditional religious morality, but cannot enforce them; whereas an individual must be bound by the regulations of modern social morality, with no exceptions. One is a maximum program, the other a minimum requirement. Borrowing terms from Kantian epistemology, one is a regulative principle, the other a constitutive principle.[7]

The constitutive principle, in turn, can be traced back to the concepts of "private virtue" and "public virtue" proposed by Liang Qichao in his work On the New Citizen. "Private virtue" encompasses the ethical framework found in texts ranging from the Three Character Classic and the Four Books and Five Classics to various traditional canon—including the "Three Cardinal Guides", "Five Constant Relationships", "Six Codes of Conduct", loyalty, filial piety, benevolence, love, trustworthiness, righteousness, peace, and the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" for women—along with their associated customs and practices. "Public virtue", conversely, comprises values introduced from the West,

such as liberty, equality, human rights, and the rule of law, with the core being a liberal ideology emphasizing individual independence. Observing the shortcomings, harms, and disasters brought about by "public virtue"—embodied in liberty, equality, human rights, and independence—in European and American societies, Liang Qichao believed that it was preferable to return to the embrace of traditional Chinese morality. This demonstrates the significant implications of separating the two moralities. Yet, it is even more crucial to recognize that this separation represents an arduous and protracted endeavor. In his Reading the Analects Today, Li Zehou states: "Religious morality ('inner sageliness') can, through a transformative creation, evolve into an individual's pursuit of life's meaning and spiritual realms. It may find expression in religion, philosophy, poetry, or art. Social morality ('outer kingliness') can, through transformative creation, develop into a Chinese form of the modern political-legal system. By integrating distinctive features such as valuing interpersonal harmony, group relations, social ideals, the unity of reason and emotion, education through moral influence, and consultative dispute resolution into the construction of a modern democratic political-legal framework, it may forge a unique path forward."[8]

However, the distinction between the two moralities might be merely an ideal-type construct, as both their historical evolution and their modern interactions reveal a profound and intricate interconnectedness. They influence and permeate each other, appearing independent yet remaining inextricably linked. It is precisely within the tension and conflict between the two moralities that Li Zehou recognized the critical importance of distinguishing them. Consequently, he proposed a "new way of inner sageliness and outer kingliness" to guide and appropriately construct their relationship. This endeavor, however, requires a mastery of the "proper measure", for which he even advanced the category of the "ontology of proper measure".

4. The New Way of Inner Sageliness and Outer Kingliness

Li Zehou contends that the intellectual source for distinguishing between "religious morality" and "social morality" lies in the traditional Chinese concept of "inner sageliness and outer kingliness". As profoundly articulated in the "Tianxia" chapter of the Zhuangzi, the expression "the way of inner sageliness and outer kingliness" elucidates a core tenet of traditional Confucian thought: "inner sageliness" is the root, "outer kingliness" is the branch; "inner sageliness" is the substance, "outer kingliness" is the function. Accordingly, Li Zehou consistently adopts this concept as his theoretical starting point, both when tracing the history of traditional Confucian thought and when probing its essential nature. Furthermore, his proposed "Theory of the Four Stages of Confucianism" is also developed within the framework of this very concept, as he professes a commitment to constructing a "new way of inner sageliness and outer kingliness." How, then, does Li Zehou elaborate on this "new" way within his theory of the Four Stages? How does this "new" way effect the separation of religious and social morality? And in the process of societal modernization, what insights does this "new" way offer for our reflection?

In his 1994 speech outline for the "Second International Conference on Modern New Confucianism" in Hong Kong, Li Zehou launched a critique against Mou Zongsan and the modern New Confucian "Theory of the Three Stages of Confucianism", while proposing his own reclassification of Confucian history. This endeavor was not driven by antiquarian sentiment but was aimed at establishing his own "Theory of the Four Stages of Confucianism". If the critique of the "Theory of the Three Stages" constituted an act of intellectual deconstruction, then the latter represented his effort at theoretical reconstruction. In his investigation into the Chinese concept of "inner sageliness and outer kingliness", while he primarily focused on analyzing specific thinkers from various historical periods, he also delved deeply into the social roots underlying this idea, most notably through his detailed exploration of the "Shamanist-Historical Tradition". His central conclusion was that China's long-standing social structure, centered on small-scale agricultural production and kinship ties, gave rise to a theocratic system integrating politics, religion, and ethics, which formed the very social soil in which the concept of "inner sageliness and outer kingliness" took root.[9]

Li Zehou points out that the traditional

Confucian ideal of cultivating the self, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world" reflects not only an ethical pursuit that extends from the family to the state but also illustrates the evolution of political order from clan to tribal alliance, thereby embodying a dual character—both ethical and political. Furthermore, owing to China's shamanistic tradition, which was closely intertwined with its political system and ancestral worship, a unique tradition emerged during the rationalization of religion: the shaman (religious leader) was often also the monarch (political leader). Figures such as Yu, Tang, and King Wen were not only great shamans but also became sacred objects of public veneration and sacrifice after their deaths. Thus, ancestral worship became tightly integrated with the ethical order based on clan kinship. By the time the Duke of Zhou "established rites and created music", a highly rationalized and systematic trinity system integrating "religion, politics, and ethics" had been completed. However, this trinity system evolved, to some extent, into a form of pan-moralism. This prevented the emergence of independent social, political, and legal systems in China, while also stifling the development of an independent psychological pursuit of religion. This situation, whose influence persists from the time of Confucius and Mencius down to the present day, has cast a thick ethical-moral hue over all aspects of Chinese life for over two millennia, including politics, making it impossible for relative social laws to be differentiated from the absolute commandments of the "universal and necessary."

Therefore, given the inherent drawbacks of this "trinity" social system that underpins the concept of "inner sageliness and outer kingliness", it becomes imperative to deconstruct it. The approach Li Zehou adopts is to differentiate between the Confucian concepts of "humaneness" and "ritual" through the lens of religious morality and social morality. Religious morality, evolving from the emphasis in Confucius and Mencius to its development in Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism that rooted "human nature" in mind-heart, attempts to integrate personal circumstances and life experiences into the moral system, forming a kind of religious experience. Social morality, in contrast, emphasizes a standard system for practical value judgment. This system incorporates not only the essence of Confucian thought but also the scholarly ideas of the various Hundred Schools of Thought, such as Daoism and the Yin-Yang School, and is solidified through the form of "outer kingliness". "Humaneness", manifested as religious morality, serves as inner mind-heart cultivation and the pursuit of life's realm, capable of nurturing and shaping human emotions and dispositions—it is a matter of individual voluntary choice. "Ritual", manifested as social morality, functions as the external socio-political system that can only regulate and govern people's conduct, possessing coercive power.[10] The former corresponds to "inner sageliness", the latter to "outer kingliness". They are both separate and entangled, much like the relationship between "religious morality" and "social morality" themselves. These two systems communicate with each other and jointly construct the Chinese ethical system. However, if they become too closely intertwined, there is a risk of imposing public virtue upon private virtue through coercive state power. Li Zehou argues that, under present circumstances, it is essential to separate "religious morality" and "social morality" from Confucianism and to deconstruct the traditional Chinese synthesis of religion, politics, and ethics. Only then can we genuinely speak of critically inheriting or creatively transforming tradition.

In his Philosophical Exploration Notes, Li Zehou adopted Zhang Zai's famous dictum—To establish the Mind for Heaven and Earth; to secure the destiny for the people; to continue the lost teachings of past sages; to open the way for peace for all generations—to encapsulate his own "new way of inner sageliness and outer kingliness". He elaborated: "To establish the Mind" means to construct the psychological ontology; "to secure the destiny" concerns the fate of humanity"; "to continue the lost teachings" entails inheriting both Chinese and foreign traditions; "to open the way for peace" is essential for the construction of human nature, for achieving inner sageliness and outer kingliness, and constitutes a necessity for the ontology of emotion. These four statements can be interpreted as using a "new inner sageliness" to open the path for a "new outer kingliness", where the so-called "new inner sageliness" refers to the "construction of human nature", and the "new outer kingliness" refers to "global peace". He pointed out: Although history has

"ended" society persists. The prevalence of drug abuse, violent brawls, murder, and suicide born of sheer boredom is evident today and will intensify tomorrow. Consequently, the question of how to construct a humanist utopia, and how to ensure the comprehensive, healthy development, and fulfillment of each individual's body, mind, and potential, must be placed on the agenda. [11]

In the context of modern society, how Confucianism can contribute to social stability is also a topic addressed by Li Zehou. In China's feudal system, the "mutual infusion of Confucianism and Legalism" served as a means to maintain monarchical rule, yet it consistently employed Legalism as the external framework while making Confucian "benevolence and tolerance" the core of governance. Li thus pondered: "Can we still draw upon the Chinese tradition's emphasis on constructing human nature to stabilize society—valuing emotion, self-cultivation, family values, and intersubjectivity—to achieve a kind of transformative creation?" Because traditional Confucianism lacks rigorous logical structure and is rooted in emotion as its substance, Li Zehou's aspiration is to preserve the socially guiding function of religious morality—its provision of ultimate concern and emotional grounding for the individual. However, he argues for a necessary distinction between the religious private virtue and social public virtue that were fused under the tradition of theocracy. This separation would allow individuals to reclaim their autonomous selves, rectify deep-seated misconceptions such as "seeking loyal ministers from the gates of filial sons", and steer society toward a direction that better respects individual worth.

In summary, on one hand, we should—guided by the materialist conception of history and proceeding from the current realities of modern economic and political structures—base our approach on the growth and development of modern society. While emphasizing the decoupling of the two moralities and upholding the priority accorded to rights, we must also, in accordance with Li Zehou's proposed "new way of inner sageliness and outer kingliness", value the emotional "guidance" offered by traditional Chinese religious morality. This is because the emotion inherent in religious belief "helps to lubricate and ameliorate the self-interest and alienation prevalent in social life, which is often a byproduct of the public rationality championed by modern liberalism".[12] Furthermore, in utilizing religious morality —which still possesses modern value—and in constructing social morality, a mastery of the "proper measure" is essential. It is crucial to recognize that the art of applying this "measure" requires judgment and choice based on concrete circumstances, avoiding both excessive radicalism and over-correction.

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