CONFUCIAN VIRTUES AND PERSONAL HEALTH

If we were to conduct a survey on the characteristics of the typical Confucian, few people would list “healthy” as one of these characteristics, along with moral virtues such as benevolence, following traditional rites, being filial to parents, having knowledge of ancient classics, etc. In common understanding, Confucianism has little direct connection with personal health. The virtues listed above are all considered to be about one’s mental and ethical qualities, important in social and political realms, but irrelevant to personal health. Contrary to an image of a healthy person, a Confucian is typically portrayed as weak and pale because Confucians are always busy studying, thinking, and teaching, while spending little time on physical exercises. Some facts may have contributed to this misconception. For instance, in the *Analects*, Confucius’ disciple Zi Lu was addressed by an old farmer as “you who with four limbs do not toil” (*Analects*, 18:7). The editors of a book titled *A Grand Compilation of Practical Chinese Health Preservation Theories and Prescriptions* were able to find only two passages from the entire Analects that are applicable to health care according to their understanding of “health” (Shi Qi, Lu Mingfang, 1990, p. 85) - one on eating (*Analects*, 10:8), and the other on guarding against one’s desires (*Analects*, 16:7). They would probably regret that even these two are not purely on health care - one is tainted by some descriptions of Confucius’ aristocracy, and the other with a color of moral preachment, which is normally considered extrinsic to health care.

This, however, is a gross misunderstanding of Confucianism. I shall show in this paper that to Confucians, the moral virtues they advocate are means to obtain personal health. If we take the concept of health in the positive sense, namely, not merely as an absence of disease but as a state of more complete well-being,¹ we can understand the whole of Confucianism as, though not reduced to, a system of health care. Furthermore, Confucian moral virtues can be understood as qualities that define a healthy person.
I. CULTIVATION OF THE PERSON

One of the four major Confucian classics, the *Great Learning (Da Xue)*, summarizes the whole Confucian program into the following eight interdependent steps, with each subsequent step contingent upon and as necessary consequence of its precedent: investigate things, extend knowledge, make the will sincere, rectify the heart-mind, cultivate the person, regulate the family, govern the state well, and bring peace to the world (*ge wu, zhi zhi, cheng yi, xiu shen, qi jia, zhi guo, ping tian xia*). Within this program, the step concerning the cultivation of the person (*xiu shen*) is a transitional link between what is more internal or personal and what is more external or social. Starting from a proper understanding of the term “*xiu shen***” and its related concepts, we shall be able to see how the whole Confucian project is intrinsically one of health care.

The Chinese word “*shen***,” typically translated as “person,” is close to, but not equivalent to the English word “body.” Sometimes we find Chinese expressions that put *shen*** and *xin*** (heart-mind) in contrast, as in the expressions “*shen xin jiao cui***” (both the heart-mind and the body are exhausted) and “*shen bu you ji***” (the body is out of one’s own control), though other times the word *shen*** means more than the body, as in “*yi shen shi fa***” (risk one’s own person to test the power of law). This fact indicates that the Confucian “*xiu shen***” does not at all exclude the cultivation or care of the body. As Tu Wei-Ming says, to the Confucians the body is “not a servant, a means, a transition, or a shell; it is the embodiment of the person” (Tu, 1984). As an embodiment, *shen*** is primarily the bodily aspect of the entire person. It can represent the entire person because it is the expression of the overall state of the person. In that sense, the mind or the mental aspect of the person is not excluded from *shen***; it is embodied in it.

On the other hand, *xin***, the rough equivalent of the English word “mind,” etymologically means “heart,” and it still serves the function of both “mind” and “heart” in the Chinese language. That means that for Confucians *xin*** is not entirely incorporeal. Unlike the Cartesian mind, which is an ontological entity distinct from the body, the Confucian *xin*** is a bodily organ that has the function of thinking and feeling. The word “*xin***” is used, when in contrast to the word “*shen***,” in the sense of the mental aspect (not a mental entity) of the person.