

# ***Cheng* and Teaching: The Ontology of the Way of Teachers in Zhou Dunyi's Philosophy and Its Moral Education Implications for Contemporary College Students**

Hongjuan Wang<sup>1</sup>, Jun Yu<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Marxism, Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages, Shaoxing 312000, Zhejiang, China

<sup>2</sup>School of Tourism, Huangshan University, Huangshan 245041, Anhui, China

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**Abstract:** As the founder of Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties, Zhou Dunyi's thought on *Cheng* inherits from *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *the Commentaries on the Yi*, and inspires Cheng, Zhu, Lu, and Wang, achieving a coherence from "cosmology" to "moral theory." He elevated *Cheng* to the philosophical height of unifying the cosmic noumenon and the source of morality, establishing the metaphysical foundation of the Confucian learning of inner sagehood and marking the starting point of the ontological construction of Neo-Confucianism. Taking *Cheng* as the cosmic noumenon and moral source, he further grounded "teaching" on *Cheng*, thereby providing ontological support for the way of teachers. Teachers are not transporters of knowledge but witnesses and transmitters of *Cheng*. The essence of education lies not in instilling norms but in awakening the *Cheng* inherent in students. This thought of "establishing teaching on *Cheng*" has important theoretical reference and practical implications for solving the problems of disconnection between knowledge and action and nihilism of belief commonly existing in the moral education of contemporary college students.

**Keywords:** Ontology of the way of teachers; Moral education; *Cheng*; Teaching

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## **1. Introduction**

Moral education for contemporary college students is facing a triple dilemma. The first is the lack of belief: some students lack identification with lofty values. The second is utilitarianism: moral choices are often based on gains and losses. The third is the disconnection between knowledge and action: there is an obvious gap between moral cognition and actual behavior. The root of these problems lies in the fact that moral education often remains at the level of external behavioral norms and fails to touch the moral source within students' hearts.

Zhou Dunyi is the founder of Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties, and the core of his thought is *Cheng*<sup>[1]</sup>. He elevated *Cheng* to the unity of cosmic noumenon and moral source, and simultaneously constructed an ontology of the way of teachers based on *Cheng*, providing a solid foundation for moral education.

This paper explores the ontological connotation of Zhou Dunyi's *Cheng*, analyzes how "teaching" takes *Cheng* as its noumenon, and finally discusses its implications for the moral education of contemporary college students, providing a feasible theoretical path for exploring the moral education dilemma in today's society.

## 2. Zhou Dunyi's *Cheng* is the unity of cosmic noumenon and moral source

Zhou Dunyi is the founder of Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties, and his core category is *Cheng*. In the *Tongshu*, with unprecedented theoretical height, he elevated *Cheng* from a moral concept in pre-Qin Confucianism to a philosophical thought with the dual connotations of cosmic noumenon and moral source. This laid a solid theoretical foundation for Confucian moral philosophy and became the central thought running through his entire ideological system.

### 2.1. *Cheng* as cosmic noumenon

Zhou Dunyi's exposition of *Cheng* starts from cosmology. In the *Tongshu*, "*Cheng* is the foundation of the sage. 'Great indeed is Qian Yuan, the beginning of all things'—this is the source of *Cheng*<sup>[2]</sup>." Quoting the description of "Qian Yuan" in the *Tuan Commentary* of the *Zhouyi*, he linked *Cheng* with the creative power of the universe. "Qian Yuan" is the foundation of heaven, earth, and all things, the root of all existence, and *Cheng* is precisely the source of this creative power. Therefore, *Cheng* is not a moral quality formed after birth, but a fundamental attribute inherent in the cosmic origin itself.

Quoting "The way of Qian changes and transforms, so that each thing is correct in its nature and destiny," he pointed out that "*Cheng* is thereby established<sup>[3]</sup>." *Cheng* is not only the creative source of the universe, but also the basis for all things to each possess their own nature and attain their correctness. In Zhou Dunyi's view, the operation of the universe is not a chaotic mechanical movement but has its internal order and laws, and the root of this order and law is *Cheng*. Thus, *Cheng* acquired the status of cosmic noumenon, being both the origin of all things and the basis for their existence.

In *Taiji Tushuo* (An Explanation of the Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate), Zhou Dunyi described the cosmological process from "the Ultimateless and yet the Supreme Ultimate" to "the transformation and generation of all things": "The Ultimateless and yet the Supreme Ultimate. The Supreme Ultimate, in its activity, generates yang; when activity reaches its extreme, it becomes stillness; in stillness, it generates yin. The two qi interact and transform, giving rise to all things; all things are generated and regenerated, and their transformations are endless<sup>[4]</sup>." This process indicates that the generation of the universe is orderly and conforms to law, rather than being blind and accidental. The source of this orderliness, as recorded in *Tongshu*, is "*Cheng*"<sup>[5]</sup>. "*Cheng*" is the "Principle" of the Supreme Ultimate and the inherent law governing the operation of the universe. It can be said that *Taiji Tushuo* describes the "process" of the generation of the universe, while *Tongshu* reveals the "essence" of this process, and this essence is "*Cheng*."

The first core meaning of Zhou Dunyi's *Cheng* is the highest principle of the universe and the ontological basis for the existence of all things. As later scholars have said, Zhou Dunyi "replaced Heaven

with *Cheng*,” transforming the mysterious “Heaven” in pre-Qin Confucianism into *Cheng* with philosophical connotations, thereby completing the preliminary construction of Confucian ontology.

## 2.2. *Cheng* as moral source

The preliminary construction of Confucian ontology is that *Cheng*, as a cosmic noumenon, answers the question “what is the world,” while, as a moral source, it answers the question “how should humans live.” In the *Tongshu*, Zhou Dunyi explicitly established *Cheng* as the foundation of all morality: “*Cheng* is the foundation of the five constant virtues, and the source of all conduct <sup>[6]</sup>.”

The so-called “five constant virtues” are benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity, which are the core virtues of Confucian ethics. Zhou Dunyi believed that these five basic moral qualities are not social norms external to humans but are rooted in *Cheng*, the cosmic noumenon. In other words, the reason humans can possess a heart of benevolence, conduct of righteousness, measure of propriety, clarity of wisdom, and truthfulness of fidelity is ultimately that humans share the same noumenon of *Cheng* with the universe. Human nature is originally good precisely because it is endowed with *Cheng*.

Zhou Dunyi further pointed out that the original state of human nature is *Cheng*. “Sagehood is nothing but *Cheng*.” The reason a sage is a sage is not that they possess some special knowledge or skill, but because they fully embody the realm of *Cheng*. The sage is the personified embodiment of *Cheng*. In this sense, *Cheng* is not only the law of cosmic operation but also the ultimate standard of human morality. If a person can return to their original nature of *Cheng*, they can naturally practice the five constant virtues and accomplish all conduct.

## 2.3. The unity of *Cheng*: From heavenly way to human way

The profundity of Zhou Dunyi’s thought lies in bridging the gap between the Heavenly Way and the human Way. In the *Tongshu*, *Cheng* is both the cosmic creative source of “Great indeed is Qian Yuan” and the foundation of moral practice of “the foundation of the five constant virtues” <sup>[7]</sup>. This means that human moral life is not opposed to the cosmic nature but is the concrete manifestation of cosmic law in humans. By cultivating their own *Cheng*, humans participate in and respond to the virtue of ceaseless generation of the universe.

This thought of the “unity of Heaven and man” provides a solid metaphysical foundation for Confucian moral philosophy. Morality is not a rule set by humans but an inherent endowment given to humans by the universe itself. Moral cultivation is not passive obedience to external norms but an active return to one’s own original state. It also lays the theoretical foundation for Zhou Dunyi’s further construction of his ontology of the way of teachers.

Teaching acquires a profound significance beyond knowledge transmission. It is not the external instillation of moral norms, but rather the removal by humans of the obscuration of temperamental bias and the return to their inherent *Cheng*. As one who has awakened first, the teacher’s mission is to awaken the student’s *Cheng* with their own *Cheng*, so that the Heavenly Way may be clearly manifested in the human heart.

## 3. From *Cheng* to teaching: The ontological construction of the way of teachers

Zhou Dunyi’s philosophy does not stop at the theoretical exposition of *Cheng* but is further implemented as the practice of teaching. Since *Cheng* is the ontology of the universe and the source of morality, the

fundamental mission of education is not to transmit knowledge but to help people return to the original state of sincerity, thereby constructing a unique ontology of the way of teachers that grounds the status of teachers and the purpose of education in sincerity.

### **3.1. The necessity of teaching: From ignorance to awakening**

Although Zhou Dunyi maintained that human nature is originally good, he did not believe that everyone can naturally preserve this goodness. He pointed out that people, influenced by the bias of temperament, often deviate from the original state of *Cheng*. Human beings are born in a state of ignorance, and without the guidance of teachers and friends during their growth, they will fall into benightedness. Ignorance here is not intellectual inferiority but moral confusion—a loss of awareness of one’s inner sincerity, obscured by selfish desires and external things.

The existence of education is necessary, and its function lies in helping people remove obscurity and regain awareness of and return to their original true nature. Such education is not the external instillation of a set of moral norms but the awakening of people’s inner sincerity through the guidance of teachers and friends and the edification of the environment. “If there were no sages, all people under heaven would be ignorant.” The role of the sage is to illuminate the light in others’ hearts.

### **3.2. The ontological ground of the way of teachers: The teacher as the embodiment of *Cheng***

Zhou Dunyi’s understanding of teachers transcends the traditional functional definition of transmitting the Way, imparting knowledge, and resolving doubts. Han Yu, in his Discourse on Teachers, emphasized the teacher’s role in knowledge transmission and problem resolution. Zhou Dunyi went further, holding that the most fundamental reason a teacher can teach students is that the teacher himself is first sincere.

A teacher is not a conveyor of knowledge, nor a preacher of moral norms, but a witness and transmitter of *Cheng*. The teacher’s authority does not derive from position or learning but from his own embodied realization and practice of *Cheng*. Only when the teacher himself becomes the embodiment of *Cheng* can he subtly influence and awaken students through his own words and deeds.

The way of teachers takes *Cheng* as its ontology. The value of a teacher lies not in what he teaches but in what he is. The teacher’s very existence is the most powerful proof of *Cheng*. The teacher is the concrete manifestation of *Cheng* in the human world, a bridge connecting the Way of Heaven and the Way of Humanity.

### **3.3. Methods of teaching: Leading by example, inspiring self-awareness, and edification through ritual and music**

The method of teaching begins with leading by example; exemplary conduct carries more weight than verbal instruction. Since the teacher is the embodiment of *Cheng*, the educational approach is not verbal preaching but personal practice. Every gesture and every word of the teacher should embody the quality of *Cheng*. Through observation and imitation of the teacher, students are naturally influenced and edified.

Education is about inspiring self-awareness and valuing the role of thought. Zhou Dunyi stated in the Tongshu: “Thinking is the foundation of the sage’s achievement”<sup>[8]</sup>. True moral growth must come from the individual’s inner self-awareness, not from external compulsion. The teacher’s task is not to think on behalf of students but to stimulate students to think—to reflect on their own behavior, realize their own nature, and

ultimately achieve self-awakening to *Cheng*. This heuristic education resonates with the modern educational concept of “student-centered” approaches.

Edification through ritual and music creates a favorable environmental atmosphere. Zhou Dunyi inherited the Confucian tradition of ritual and music, holding that “ritual is principle; music is harmony”<sup>[9]</sup>. Ritual is the manifestation of order, and music is the symbol of harmony. Through the edification of ritual and music, people’s behavior can be imperceptibly regulated, and their emotions harmonized, gradually leading them toward the realm of *Cheng*. This idea of educating through environment reminds us that moral education cannot rely solely on classroom teaching but also requires the creation of a cultural atmosphere filled with uprightness and harmony.

## **4. Implications for contemporary moral education of university students**

Zhou Dunyi’s thought of “establishing teaching through *Cheng*,” though originating in the Song Dynasty nearly a thousand years ago, still carries important implications for the moral education of contemporary university students<sup>[10]</sup>. In the face of various problems in current moral education, wisdom can be drawn from it.

### **4.1. *Cheng* as the ontological foundation of moral education: From external norms to inner self-awareness**

A fundamental dilemma of contemporary moral education for university students is that it often remains at the level of behavioral norms. Various rules, codes of conduct, and reward-punishment measures are certainly necessary, but if moral education remains merely at the level of external prescriptions such as “you should do this” and “you should not do that,” it will be difficult to truly reach students’ inner world. Once external constraints disappear, moral behavior may collapse accordingly.

Zhou Dunyi’s “sincerity” provides an entirely new ontological perspective. Its purpose is not to make students comply with external norms but to help them discover and return to their inner “*Cheng*.” If students can recognize that morality is not a burden imposed upon them but a natural expression of their own nature, moral behavior becomes not a forced choice but a conscious pursuit. Therefore, moral education in contemporary society should return to core values such as “integrity” and “*Cheng*,” avoiding formalism and utilitarian tendencies. Moral education courses are not merely the transmission of knowledge but the awakening of the soul.

### **4.2. The return of the way of teachers: Teachers as spiritual guides**

In today’s university education, the role of teachers has been simplistically reduced to that of knowledge transmitters. Particularly in general education and ideological-political courses, teachers play the role of relayers of knowledge, merely relaying textbook content to students while paying little attention to the growth of students’ spiritual world. Most teachers are more accustomed to reading from the textbook, mechanically lecturing on textbook content, and rarely attending to the growth of students’ spiritual world and personality. This phenomenon leads to estrangement in teacher–student relationships and renders moral education ineffective. Students perceive only cold score evaluations and tedious moral preaching, rather than the teacher’s vitality and personhood.

## 5. Conclusion

With his profound philosophical speculation, Zhou Dunyi elevated *Cheng* to the supreme status of unifying the ontology of the universe with the source of morality, and on this foundation constructed a unique ontology of the way of teachers. Sincerity is the creative source of all things in heaven and earth and the ultimate ground of human ethics. The essence of teaching is not the simple transmission of knowledge but the awakening of the sincerity inherent in each person. The teacher is the one who is awakened to, and bears witness to, sincerity, whose mission is to ignite the fire in students' hearts with his own sincerity. His system of thought laid a solid theoretical foundation for Confucian moral philosophy and provided profound spiritual guidance for educational practice in later ages.

It profoundly reveals that the fundamental predicament of moral education lies not in the lack of methods but in the destabilization of its foundation. When moral education degenerates into purely external norms and utilitarian calculations, it inevitably falls into the mire of disconnection between knowledge and action and the void of belief. Zhou Dunyi's thought of "establishing teaching through *Cheng*" precisely provides a path of returning to the root and opening the new for contemporary moral education—returning to the ontological foundation of "*Cheng*," shifting moral education from external discipline to inner awakening; restoring the sacred dignity of the "way of teachers," enabling teachers to return from being "relayers" of knowledge to being "guides" of the spirit; and constructing a three-in-one educational model of "exemplary conduct, inspiration, and environment," allowing moral education to truly permeate every corner of students' learning and life.

No classical thought can be directly transplanted into the present. Zhou Dunyi's philosophy was born in a specific historical context, and its system of thought inevitably carries the limitations of its era. Its exposition of "*Cheng*" remains more at the level of metaphysical speculation, lacking detailed analysis of concrete moral situations. The "edification through ritual and music" it advocates also needs to be transformed into more modern expressions in contemporary society. These limitations do not diminish the core value of his thought. The eternal significance of "*Cheng*" as the foundation of morality, as revealed by Zhou Dunyi, and the spiritual core of the "way of teachers" grounded in "sincerity" hold irreplaceable implications for cultivating a new generation of university students with faith, responsibility, and the unity of knowledge and action.

In the contemporary context of comprehensively advancing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, higher education bears the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education. Zhou Dunyi's ontology of the way of teachers reminds us that the foundation of moral education lies not in the quantity of institutional designs but in the sincerity of the human heart. The success of education lies not in the depth of knowledge but in the spiritual stature of the teacher. Only by rebuilding the metaphysical foundation of moral education on the basis of "*Cheng*" can morality cease to be a suspended ideal and become the solid ground beneath the feet of young students. Only by enabling teachers to truly become the embodiment and transmitter of "*Cheng*" can education cease to be merely a profession and become a great undertaking that illuminates life and transmits civilization.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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