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Commentary 1 on *Di Zi Gui*:

Why Study *Di Zi Gui*? How is It Relevant Today?

By Feng Xin-ming, September 29, 2007

So why study *Di Zi Gui* (Students' Rules)? What do these old precepts from the bygone days of Imperial China have to do with us? Well, there are two main reasons: learning about the Chinese intellectual heritage, and helping us live a happy and successful life.

First, learning about the Chinese intellectual heritage: a very important part of the Chinese heritage is in the intellectual sphere; our forefathers have made remarkable contributions to the realm of thought and philosophy, including the discourse on perennial questions facing the great thinkers throughout world history. Questions such as "What is the good life?" and "What makes a good man?" have been answered with some very unique Chinese answers. *Di Zi Gui* is a succinct summary of much of that traditional thought and philosophy. Used in traditional China for raising young people into gentlemen, today *Di Zi Gui* offers a good introduction to the world of traditional Chinese thought. The text is a rich repository of Chinese philosophy, values, mores and norms. Studying *Di Zi Gui* enables us to learn about the Chinese intellectual heritage.

These days, because of the adoption of vernacular Mandarin (*bai hua wen*) as the standard form of writing and education since the early 1900's and the abandonment of classical Chinese (*wen yan wen*), fewer and fewer students are capable of reading the original works of the great Chinese thinkers because the works are written in that classical Chinese. Thus, for those seeking their Chinese roots, the Chinese intellectual heritage in the realm of thought and philosophy is often off limits, and there is little chance that those seekers can hear their forefathers' original voices expound on unique, Chinese ideas. True, one can read about the ideas second and third hand via modern books written in the vernacular Mandarin or in English, but for appreciating the spirit of the authors, nothing can replace studying the original. Therefore, to help with accessing the original, we've translated *Di Zi Gui* into plain English on this website. By studying *Di Zi Gui* we can hear our ancestors' own voices.

For those not of Chinese ethnicity, *Di Zi Gui* will be a good initial exposure to very important aspects of traditional Chinese thought.

To be considered truly educated, young people of Chinese ethnicity should know about some of the important ideas from their intellectual heritage. Would we not expect young people whose ethnicity is, say, that of a Muslim country, whether they practice the Islamic religion or not, to have been exposed to the Koran as part of having received a well-rounded education? Would we not expect young people of Caucasian, i.e. European, ethnicity, whether they practice the Christian faith or not, to have had some

exposure to the Christian Bible to be considered well educated? Of course we do. Without some exposure to the Koran it is impossible to fully comprehend and appreciate a Muslim ethnic heritage, and without some exposure to the Christian Bible it is also impossible to fully comprehend and appreciate the Western heritage. Yet, despite the importance their parents place on education and even a “well-rounded education,” very rarely are young people of Chinese ethnicity, included many considered “highly educated,” exposed to Confucian writings. Nor has the thought ever occurred to many such parents. It really is an anomaly that will be wondered at by future generations.

Studying *Di Zi Gui* can help remedy that sad situation and offer a useful glimpse into the world of traditional Chinese thought. Even if, after perusal and study, one disagrees with part or all of the traditional ideals and standards of conduct, one will still be enriched by the exposure. One will have been given the opportunity to work through the arguments and thought processes of some of the most important thinkers not just in Chinese history but also in world history. Only after having had some such exposure can a person of Chinese ethnicity be considered well educated.

The second reason for studying *Di Zi Gui* is that, as previous mentioned, doing so will help us live a happy and successful life. The precepts, values, and norms taught in *Di Zi Gui* are still suitable for us today. In fact, I believe that to live a happy and successful life today, these precepts, values, and norms are the most useful ones to follow.

Nowadays the Chinese Confucian tradition in thought and philosophy has been forgotten and abandoned by many Chinese, because that tradition has long been denigrated, since 1895 in fact, by Chinese ourselves, for being out-dated, irrelevant, the cause of Chinese backwardness, or even for being “dictatorial,” “fascist,” and “designed to keep the masses ignorant and stupid.”

It’s time to reverse that horribly wrong verdict, because the exact opposite is true. If it hadn’t been for Confucius’ teachings, if it hadn’t been those very precepts, values and norms taught in *Di Zi Gui*, Chinese backwardness would have been even more marked and the ancient Chinese civilization itself might have been long extinguished, just like the ancient civilizations of Babylon and ancient Egypt. Those teachings have never been “dictatorial” or “fascist,” and they have never opposed inquiry and independent thought—as the famous Song Dynasty Confucian scholar Han Yu has said in his essay *Jin Xue Jie*, “conduct succeeds with thinking and fails with following (*xin cheng yu si wei yu sui*).”

In fact, not only are those teachings not out of sync with modern society, but also they are most compatible with and conducive to such a society, to a society based progressively more and more on freedom and volition, and less and less on autocracy and coercion. Those teachings, in fact, constitute the answer to the failure of much of “modern” thought, values and norms to deliver to people the ability to live happy, productive and successful lives today. Following the teachings in *Di Zi Gui*, I strongly believe and my own personal experience has thus far confirmed, will be a strong guarantee of living a happy, productive, and successful life in today’s world.

Many readers will be surprised at the above statement that Confucius’ teachings are most compatible with and conducive to a modern society based on freedom and volition. How

can that be? How can precepts over two thousand years old be most suitable for living successfully in a free society? Aren't Confucian teachings all about conformity, submission, and obedience? Well, there are very good answers to those questions, and I will set forth the answers in my next commentary.