

# Tracing the Cultural Genes of the Great Striving Spirit of the Chinese Nation

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**Abstract:** The great striving spirit is one of the most important spiritual symbols of the Chinese nation, which has gradually formed through philosophical thinking and historical practice in the long river of history. The great striving spirit originated from Zhouyi, which states that “As Heaven is in constant motion and vibrant, virtuous men should strive continuously for self-improvement.” This indicates the respect and adherence of the ancestors to the laws of cosmic motion. Next, the “Three immortality” of “Li De”, “Li Gong”, and “Li Yan” demonstrate the ideal of striving for a civilized and developed society, with moral cultivation as the fundamental premise. Next, Wang Yangming, a representative figure of the Confucian philosophy of mind, proposed classic propositions such as “the unity of knowledge and action” and “the pursuit of conscience”, he implemented moral cognition and moral practice into daily cultivation and included human transcendence and striving spirit in every detail of life. These precious spiritual treasures have influenced countless people and gathered into a great tide of striving spirit, creating outstanding spiritual and material civilization for the Chinese nation and making tremendous contributions.

**Keywords:** The great striving spirit of the Chinese nation; Unremitting self-improvement; “Three immortality”; “Unity of knowledge and action”

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## 1. Introduction

In thousands of years of unremitting struggle, the Chinese people have formed a great striving spirit. This unique spirit of striving is one of the most important spiritual symbols of the Chinese nation. In the new era, the great striving spirit of the Chinese nation demonstrates the unique spiritual temperament of the Chinese nation. This spirit also provides spiritual strength for the important historical period of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Trees have roots and water has a source. The great striving spirit comes from the fine traditional Chinese culture. In the long course of the historical development of the Chinese nation, many cultural contents related to

the spirit of striving were produced. It contains not only the theoretical elaboration of classical works but also the vivid interpretation conducted by important figures.

This paper holds that the fighting spirit of unremitting self-improvement, the moral pursuit of “Three immortality” and the practical character of the “Unity of knowledge and action” are the most important cultural genes of the great striving spirit. Therefore, this paper tries to explain how these three aspects become the organic composition of the great striving spirit.

## 2. The fighting spirit of unremitting self-improvement

The phrase “unremitting self-improvement” can be traced back to Zhouyi. There are sixty-four hexagrams in Zhouyi, which symbolize the Chinese view of the universe. “Qian” in Zhouyi is the first hexagram, symbolizing the fundamental laws of the universe’s operation. In “Qian”, it is said that “As Heaven is in constant motion and vibrant, virtuous men should strive continuously for self-improvement”<sup>[1]</sup>. The meaning is that the movement of Heaven (the universe) exhibits robust and never-ending characteristics. Therefore, virtuous men should emulate this quality, be robust and self-reliant, and never stop. Then derived, virtuous men can connect to the exuberant and robust vitality to never stop or slack in spontaneously moving forward, keeping pace with the time, constant self-transcendence, and constantly honing their moral character and abilities.

The worldview expressed in Zhouyi is very authoritative in Chinese culture. Therefore, the impact on Chinese culture is that the natural laws of the world have the highest inevitability, and if people disobey the laws, they will encounter disasters; If a person follows the law, it is the most important virtue of a person.

Due to the lofty cultural status of Zhouyi, unremitting self-improvement has since infiltrated the spiritual world of the Chinese people in the long history, internalized in the heart and externalized in action, profoundly affected the ideological character and reality practice of the Chinese nation, and became the source of strength to overcome all difficulties and obstacles on the way forward. In this process, not only has a rich material civilization been created, but also a spiritual civilization of great striving spirit has been forged.

Firstly, from the perspective of the human inner spirit, unremitting self-improvement is reflected in the self-development. “Continuous progress” indicates that development is endless. Every step forward is development compared to the past. Development is the best manifestation of self-improvement. The purpose of “self-improvement” is not to overcome others, but to overcome oneself. It is to constantly continuously elevate the realm of life in the process of surpassing oneself, making one’s mind more mature, willpower more firm, not to hold fast to one’s established ideas or conservative, and to become strong and brave in the process of self-reform. Therefore, unremitting self-improvement has also become the endogenous driving force that motivates people to strive tirelessly.

Furthermore, when countless people with lofty ideals of self-reliance and self-improvement in perseverance for personality cultivation, their unremitting self-improvement constitutes the practice source of the great striving spirit, creating countless true brilliant deeds. For example, during the spring and autumn periods, Confucius traveled to various countries in the hope of promoting the way of Duke Zhou to save the world and ensure the safety of the people. Faced with various poverty and hardship, he said “I do not complain against heaven, nor do I blame man”<sup>[2]</sup>. He did not change his original aspiration, thus practicing the virtuous character of “The gentleman devotes his mind to attaining the way and not to securing food”<sup>[2]</sup>.

The spirit of unremitting self-improvement is not only reflected in individuals but also in the public affairs of

governing the country. Outstanding political leaders still give full play to this spirit, leading the countrymen people to fight hard and carry out vigorous reform efforts again and again, leaving behind numerous glorious deeds. It is said that in the ancient period, when floods were rampant, Dayu led the vassal and the people to dig blockages, dredge large rivers, and divert water into the sea. After unremitting hard work day and night, the natural disaster was finally overcome<sup>[3]</sup>. Only in this way can people's lives be stable and all nations be governed<sup>[4]</sup>.

All these histories fully prove that the Chinese people's spirit of unremitting self-improvement has guided the great practice of unremitting striving, and has also become the practical source of the great striving spirit of the Chinese nation.

### 3. The moral pursuit of "Three immortality"

Since ancient times, Chinese people have attached great importance to perceptual experience and intuition, and they are good at introspection. For instance, beginning from the era documented in Shang Shu, which dates back to the Western Zhou Dynasty, leaders like Duke Zhou advocated pursuing from within, specifically through "introspection" and "inner exploration", to exhume the worth of pursuing goals and a powerful spiritual drive within oneself, namely one's own "immortality." This embodies the cultural gene of the great striving spirit. And this pursuit contains three different parts, therefore it is called the "Three immortality", specifically, "Li De", "Li Gong" and "Li Yan"<sup>[5]</sup>. The sages hoped to leave a good reputation flowing down for long ages through these three pursuits, among which the highest part was to the establishment of virtue, the middle-level part was to render meritorious service, and the final part was to the establishment of word and make statements. Those who can achieve the "Three immortality" will be remembered by future generations for a long time. That is to say, a person transcends the brevity and limitations of their natural life due to the extension and infinite of their meaning in life. Since the spring and autumn period, the "Three immortality" have gradually become the guide of Chinese people's behavior and the driving force of life, with infinite transcendental value.

Among the "Three immortality", "Li De" is the foremost and plays a leading role. The Chinese nation has a tradition of valuing virtue since ancient times. In the Western Zhou Dynasty, rulers realized that their moral character was the reason for receiving divine favor<sup>[6]</sup>. Therefore, later Confucians who inherited this spirit believed that they would rather choose "benevolence" between "success" and "benevolence", which is to demonstrate the basic principle of "virtue." Therefore, "Li De" is the basis for "Li Gong" and "Li Yan", both of which need to obey and serve "Li De." Without the benchmark and guidance provided by "Li De", "Li Gong" would become aimless and disoriented, possibly leading to reckless actions; "Li Yan" may also become falsifying remarks and even endanger people's minds. Next, the goal established by "Li De" should be implemented through "Li Gong" and "Li Yan", otherwise, the internal "Li De" will lack external manifestations. In short, "Li Gong" and "Li Yan" originate from "Li De", demonstrate "Li De", and achieve "Li De." The "Three immortality" are connected by the axis of "Li De."

The so-called "Li Gong" refers to someone's actions that are helpful to others and contribute to the country and the people. "Gong" is the "social value" created by the subject. "Li" is the realization of "personal value" by the subject. Therefore, "Li Gong" is the foundation and carrier of "life value." In that way, the evaluation criteria for measuring whether the subject's behavior is valuable and the magnitude of the value is determined by the standards established by "De." That is to say, the key to whether a person can "Li Gong" lies in whether they can "Li De" and internalize this moral cognition into their beliefs, forming a sense of social responsibility, and then

manifesting it as a social behavior that “follows social ethics and morality”, ultimately benefiting society and achieving the goals set by “De.”

The so-called “Li Yan” is to use words to explain the value, goals, and connotations of “Li De”, record the deeds of “Li Gong”, demonstrate the stance of praising and criticizing good and evil, imparting and inheriting civilization, and explore new ideas while establishing text. “Convey ‘Dao’ through words” is a cultural tradition of the Chinese nation that has lasted for two thousand years<sup>[7]</sup>. The “Dao” here means the highest moral and philosophical thought, and is the tenet established by “De.” Therefore, “Li Yan” also serves “Li De”, even if there is ideological innovation, it cannot violate the rules of “De.” “Li Yan” is the expression of the spiritual pursuit of “Li De” through words, and like “Li Gong”, it is also the main way to carry out “Li De.”

Since ancient times, countless sages have regarded the “Three immortality” as their life goals, which has become the practical source of the great striving spirit. For example, Mencius said, “In difficult times, one should focus on self-cultivation and preserve integrity, and help others and bring prosperity to all under heaven after achieving success”<sup>[8]</sup>. Here, “focuses on self-cultivation” is the lowest level of “Li De”, while “bring prosperity to all under heaven” is a higher level of “Li De.” The “Three immortality” not only emphasizes the pursuit of a noble spiritual realm by individuals but also emphasizes the historical responsibility of seeking the well-being of the people and even imparting and inheriting civilization. Because the “Three immortality” combines individual subjective cognition with the objective laws of social development, it has been enduring for a long time.

The “Three immortality” is the interaction between subjective understanding and objective practice, which runs through the national spirit of the Chinese nation and accompanies the historical development of Chinese civilization. “Li De”, “Li Gong”, and “Li Yan” not only reflect people’s noble spiritual pursuits but also are related to the endless material creation. At the micro level, it depicts the relentless striving of individual life; it also reveals the direction of progress in the development of human civilization achievements at a macro level. Not only adhering to the pursuit of an ideal personality but also hoping “to ordain conscience for Heaven and Earth, to secure life and fortune for the populace.” It also advocates the social goal of being “people-oriented”, and hopes to “succeed the wisdom which by past sages, establish peace for all future generations”<sup>[9]</sup>.

In short, the great striving spirit that includes elements such as “Li De”, “Li Gong”, and “Li Yan” is to help people break free from the limitations of nature through their own spiritual and production practice to achieve liberation. It intends that through the continuous progress of society, people can live a life of “universal harmony under heaven”, with the ultimate goal being to achieve the free and comprehensive development of human beings. Marx said that “the whole social life is practical actually”<sup>[10]</sup>. Accordingly, the reason why “Li De”, “Li Gong”, and “Li Yan” can be called “immortality” is because they can not only explain the world, but more importantly, they can change the world. As the life ideal and social belief of the Chinese nation, the “Three immortality” plays an extremely important role in the spiritual life of the Chinese people. Like an eternal beacon, it illuminates the path of the Chinese people’s continuous struggle and plays an immeasurable positive role in the development of Chinese society.

#### **4. The practical character of the “Unity of knowledge and action”**

As an important category in traditional Chinese philosophy, different philosophers use the concepts of “knowledge” and “action” to represent different meanings. Wang Yangming of the Ming Dynasty was an important representative of Confucianism’s “the philosophy of the mind”, had a high reputation, and emphasized the “unity

of knowledge and action” in his studies. The practice character contained in his philosophy is another integral source of the great striving spirit.

Wang Yangming believed that knowledge and action are integrated and cannot be separated. If knowledge and action are separated, then it must be people’s selfish desires that block the inner “noumenon of knowledge and action”, so that knowledge and action seem like two separate things, with the order of priority. The “noumenon of knowledge and action” is an important concept in Yangming’s Neo Confucianism, equivalent to the principles of judgment and practice within human beings. Wang Yangming believes that “knowledge” and “action” are like people’s “enjoy good-looking” and “hate stink”, which are natural reactions that occur in different situations and can be completed without additional thinking. Therefore, he said, “True knowledge is what we do, and just being called knowledge without action is not true knowledge”<sup>[11]</sup>. “Knowledge” and “action” occur simultaneously, just as when experiencing pain, one knows the pain that pierces the heart, and when feeling cold, one knows the bone-chilling coldness.

True “knowledge” cannot exist separately from the actual practical experience. True “knowledge” can naturally manifest as “action”, and it cannot be said that one already has “knowledge” before making the correct practice. Regarding this, Wang Yangming gave an example and said, “Someone claim to know about filial piety and often discuss its principles, but they cannot do filial piety to their relatives. Therefore, this person has not truly understood ‘filial piety’, that is, has not gained relevant true knowledge.” Only when people can seriously and fully practice the morality of filial piety in their daily lives, and have practical and genuine filial piety behaviors, they can say that they truly understand the principles of filial piety and have truly acquired relevant true knowledge. Therefore, people need to judge whether there is true “knowledge” based on “actions”, and without “actions”, it cannot be called “knowledge.”

In Wang Yangming’s opinion, the opinions of various scholars who separate knowledge and action into two are playing with words. The real important task is to eliminate selfish desires, so that the “conscience” as a noumenon can naturally play a role, and truly practice the inherent goodness of human beings in daily ethics. It can be said that Wang Yangming aimed at the shortcomings of the Ming Dynasty scholars who only talked about the principles of heart, nature, and righteousness, and neglected to practice them. The “unity of knowledge and action” is not a study of being far away from the world and staying unaffected, but a proposition that focuses on practice. The “unity of knowledge and action” emphasizes that people should face the world with a positive attitude towards life, regard self-cultivation, manage their family well, govern the state properly, and bring peace to all under heaven as a sense of responsibility and mission that everyone should possess. As a result, it has played a particularly important role in promoting the development and maturity of the great striving spirit of the Chinese nation.

Specifically, Wang Yangming advocated the theory of “unity of knowledge and action”, to emphasize the improvement of one’s morality and the establishment of personal character. In the inquiry session with student Lu Cheng, Wang Yangming bluntly stated, “Knowledge is the beginning of action, and being able to take action means that true knowledge has been obtained: divine knowledge has only one proposition because knowledge and action cannot be divided into two things”<sup>[11]</sup>. In his view, there is only one thing that needs to be done to cultivate virtues and establish achievements, which is knowledge and action. Knowledge and action are one thing, not separable. “Knowledge” and “action” are the unity of the beginning and completion of moral cultivation, and the two constitute the whole of the complete practical process. Therefore, Wang Yangming rejected the pursuit of superficial articles, vigilant against just an increase in the amount of knowledge, and opposed “Only wasting

energy on studying books, only doing conceptual research.” This will lead to “more knowledge, but at the same time, more desires, and more talents, but the true principles of heaven are obscured.” To warn Lu Cheng, Wang Yangming used gold as a metaphor, saying that different gold products have differences in weight, but as long as the purity is high enough, they are all full gold. Although there are differences in merit between people, as long as they cultivate themselves, they can fully integrate their hearts with the principle of heaven and become sages. Therefore, the effort of knowing and action is not about seeking knowledge from the outside, blindly seeking knowledge of one’s unknowns, and perfecting one’s shortcomings. Rather, everyone exerts their strength and spirit, working hard on the pure natural principles that exist within their heart, in which everyone has it, and each one is perfect. By doing so, everyone can achieve corresponding accomplishments based on their own strength<sup>[11]</sup>.

So, why did the development process of the great striving spirit become further elevated in Wang Yangming’s “unity of knowledge and action” ideology? The reason is that it is impossible for everyone to achieve the noble cause of Yao, Shun, Yu, and Tang, that is, being able to achieve “Li Gong” and “Li Yan.” But “Li De” and constantly striving for self-improvement is what every person with lofty ideals must strive for, that is, everyone strives to fully integrate their inner self with the laws of heaven, and achieve perfection in their spiritual cultivation.

At this point, it also means to achieve “Li Gong” and “Li Yan”, because the “unity of knowledge and action” is to promote the application of people’s inner conscience to everything. Wang Yangming believed that the principle of heaven is not outside the heart, but inherent to each individual. When people further practice and achieve “Zhi Liangzhi” in their daily life, it becomes a natural extension of the “unity of knowledge and action”. That is to say, one needs to be determined to learn and always hold onto the principles of heaven; transform knowledge into virtue, and establish lasting moral beliefs. Through practical experience, one can cultivate their inner self, strengthen their moral will, and confirm their moral ideals. By reflecting on oneself and cultivating oneself, one can restrain their words and actions, and form a noble moral character. Finally, through this practice, the inner virtue is externalized into external behavior, which promotes a deeper understanding of conscience and enables the manifestation of heavenly principles. To achieve the unity of “conscience” and “unity of knowledge and action”, the unity of knowing what is good and doing what is good.

## 5. Summary

This article focuses on the cultural origins of the great striving spirit of the Chinese nation and traces the philosophical and historical origins. This study believes that the great striving spirit people possess today can be traced back to the phrase “virtuous men should strive continuously for self-improvement” in Zhouyi, which symbolizes the Chinese nation’s respect and adherence to the laws of the universe. Next, Confucianism proposed the pursuit of “Three immortality” in life: “Li De”, “Li Gong”, and “Li Yan.” Based on the fundamental premise of personal moral cultivation, it clarified the ideal of striving for a more civilized and developed society. When it came to Wang Yangming, who was the master of the Confucian philosophy of mind, he transformed from the unity of knowledge and action to the pursuit of conscience, and elevated moral cognition and practice into daily practice, internalizing one’s own transcendence and striving spirit into every detail of life. These are the ideological sources of the great striving spirit and precious spiritual wealth, which have made tremendous contributions to the development of the Chinese nation, creating outstanding spiritual and material civilization to this day.

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## Disclosure statement

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