

The Ideological Connotation and Contemporary Implications of the Pre-Qin Confucian Concept of *Yi* and *Li*

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Abstract:

The relationship between *yi* (righteousness) and *li* (profit) is a fundamental and significant issue in traditional Chinese thought. The profound changes in the social structure during the pre-Qin period made the issue of interests increasingly prominent, prompting the pre-Qin thinkers to systematically reflect on the relationship between *yi* and *li*. As a crucial ideological resource, pre-Qin Confucianism did not simply negate the pursuit of *li*; rather, it sought to guide and constrain profit-seeking behaviors by establishing the normative status of *yi*. Set against the historical backdrop of the social transition during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, this paper systematically reviews the representative discourses of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi on the relationship between *yi* and *li*, analyzing their similarities and differences in ethical standpoints, political orientations, and institutional conceptualizations. The study suggests that the views of Confucius and Mencius are centered on the ethical priority of *yi*, focusing on regulating profit-oriented behaviors through moral edification. In contrast, Xunzi, while acknowledging human desires and social complexities, proposed that “*yi* is the harmonization of *li*,” emphasizing the integration and regulation of interest relations through the system of rites and righteousness, thereby propelling the critical transition of the Confucian concept of *yi* and *li* from virtue ethics to institutional ethics. The characteristics of normative priority, limited recognition of interests, and order-orientation embodied in the pre-Qin Confucian concept of *yi* and *li* still provide significant ideological implications for modern society to reflect on the relationship between value rationality and instrumental rationality, and to improve mechanisms for coordinating interests.

Keywords:

Pre-Qin Confucianism, Concept of *Yi* and *Li*, Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi, Social Order

1. The Formulation of the *Yi-Li* Issue and Its Ideological Background

1.1. The Social Transition in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods and the Prominence of the *Li* Issue

The systematic reflection of pre-Qin Confucians on the issue of *yi* and *li* was not the product of abstract ethical discussions, but was deeply rooted in the drastic social transformations of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. As the community order based on patriarchal kinship that had existed since the Western Zhou Dynasty began to weaken and transform, the original social order centered on blood ties and hierarchy continuously loosened, and the binding force of traditional ritual systems on social relations significantly declined [1]. Frequent wars for hegemony and annexation increased social mobility, making individual survival and development increasingly dependent on the acquisition of practical interests. Consequently, *li*-seeking behaviors gradually shifted from implicit to explicit, and conflicts of interest became a pervasive phenomenon in social life.

Against this backdrop, *li* was no longer merely a matter of satisfying material needs; it directly correlated with the acquisition of political power, the establishment of social status, and the restructuring of interpersonal relationships. Rulers governed for *li*, scholars advanced for *li*, and commoners made a living for *li*, with the logic of *li*-seeking continuously eroding the original ethical order. It was exactly in this practical predicament that how to view and handle the relationship between *yi* and *li* became an epochal issue commonly faced by the various schools of thought. Unlike the Legalists, who rely on reward and punishment to regulate interests, and the Mohists, who judge behavior based on public utility, Confucians place greater emphasis on using benevolence, *yi*, and rituals to restrain the logic of *li*-seeking. Mencius particularly pointed out that if both rulers and subjects act solely in pursuit of *li*, social relations will become ones of mutual competition for gain, thereby threatening political and social order [2]. Therefore, the issue of *yi* and *li* gradually ascended to become one of the core topics within the Confucian ideological system.

1.2. The Basic Ideological Connotations of *yi* and *li*

Judging from the usage in pre-Qin literature, *yi* and *li* are not isolated abstract concepts, but rather categories of value judgment formed in specific social practices [2,3,4]. In the Confucian context, *yi* primarily points to the standard of behavioral legitimacy, embodied in the value orientation of conforming to ritual systems, adhering to role norms, and maintaining social order [3]. It not only possesses moral evaluative significance but also contains explicit social normative functions, serving as a vital yardstick to measure the rationality of individual behavior.

In contrast, *li* mainly points to the acquisition of interests in real life, including material benefits, political advantages, and the resulting social status and security guarantees. Confucianism did not deny the objective existence of *li* in social life, nor did it simply equate it with moral depravity [4]. However, precisely because *li* is directly associated with human desires and survival needs, a lack of normative constraints makes it highly susceptible to triggering disorderly competition and social conflicts, thereby destroying the overall order.

Thus, it is evident that the relationship between *yi* and *li* is not a simple opposition, but rather possesses an inherent tension. On the one hand, social operations cannot be separated from the rational pursuit of interests; on the other hand, if *li* is regarded as the sole or highest standard of value, it will inevitably shake the moral foundation and normative system of society. It is precisely within this structural tension that pre-Qin Confucians elaborated their discourses on *yi* and *li*, attempting to provide stable and lasting value support for social order.

1.3. The Basic Stance of the Pre-Qin Confucian Concept of yi and li

Overall, the basic stance of pre-Qin Confucians on the issue of *yi* and *li* was not “valuing *yi* and despising *li*,” let alone denying practical interests. Instead, it emphasized using *yi* as a value principle to regulate and guide “*li*.” What Confucianism opposed was the behavioral pattern of “harming *yi* for *li*”—namely, crossing ethical bottom lines and destroying human relations driven by interests. Conversely, what it advocated was “regulating *li* with *yi*,” constraining and guiding *li*-seeking behaviors through moral norms and social systems.

This stance epitomizes the social concern orientation of Confucian thought. Confucianism was not satisfied with mere requirements for personal morality; it sought to embed individual *li*-seeking pursuits into a stable social structure by establishing universally effective value standards [5]. Because of this, the issue of *yi* and *li* in Confucian thought was always closely linked to social order, political legitimacy, and human relations, rather than remaining solely at the level of personal cultivation.

Within pre-Qin Confucianism, although Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi differed in specific discursive methods and theoretical emphases, they were highly consistent in their basic judgment on the relationship between *yi* and *li*: acknowledging the practical rationality of pursuing interests while emphasizing that *yi* must serve as its normative principle[2,6]. Based on this shared stance, the Confucian concept of *yi* and *li* gradually formed a theoretical trajectory deepening from moral ethics to institutional norms. The following chapters will focus on the different responses of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi to the issue of *yi* and *li*, specifically analyzing the ideological connotations and theoretical development of the pre-Qin Confucian concept of *yi* and *li*.

2. The Concept of Yi and Li in Confucius and Mencius: the Ethical Priority of Yi

The systematic reflection of pre-Qin Confucians on the issue of *yi* and *li* was initially manifested in the related discourses of Confucius and Mencius. As the founder and a significant developer of Confucian thought, Confucius and Mencius highly valued the normative role of *yi* over *li* at the levels of social ethics and political ideals, emphasizing the priority of *yi* in the hierarchy of values. Although the two differed in theoretical focus and modes of expression, their concepts of *yi* and *li* both shared the fundamental goal of establishing a stable order of human relations and social norms.

2.1. Confucius’s Concept of yi and Profit: yi as the Yardstick for Behavioral Legitimacy

In The Analects, Confucius repeatedly expressed his value judgment stance by juxtaposing *yi* and *li*. Among these, the assertion that “the gentleman understands what is *yi*; the petty man understands what is *li*” is particularly quintessential [7]. This expression was not intended to segregate the identities of social members but to highlight the potential social consequences of different life pursuits through the differences in value orientations. The *yi* esteemed by Confucius is not an abstract moral principle, but a behavioral norm closely linked to specific social roles and human relations.

In Confucius's view, *yi* is primarily reflected in whether an action conforms to ritual systems and role expectations. Individuals assume different identities in society, and their behaviors should align with corresponding ethical responsibilities. In comparison, *li* points more toward personal gains and practical benefits. Confucius did not deny the existence of *li* in real life, but he warned that once *li*-seeking behaviors deviate from ethical constraints, it could lead to the instrumentalization of interpersonal relationships, thereby undermining the foundational trust of society. Therefore, Confucius emphasized taking *yi* as the primary standard for judging whether an action is legitimate, thereby guiding members of society to maintain moral consciousness when facing the temptation of *li*.

From the perspective of social function, Confucius's concept of *yi* and *li* possessed obvious intentions of moral edification. By establishing the value paradigm of "the gentleman putting *yi* first," Confucius attempted to shape a morality-oriented social ethos, enabling individuals to consciously accept the constraints of ethical norms while pursuing their own interests. This concept of *yi* and *li*, centered on personality cultivation, laid an essential foundation for the subsequent development of Confucian thought.

2.2. Mencius's Concept of yi and li: The Politicization and Moral Idealistic Expression of yi

Compared to Confucius, who primarily discussed the relationship between *yi* and *li* from the levels of personal cultivation and social edification, Mencius elevated the issue to the realm of political philosophy. Against the backdrop of the prevalent utilitarian politics during the Warring States period, Mencius directly responded to the rulers' practical tendency to base governance on interests with his famous assertion, "Why must you speak of *li*?" In his view, once *li* is established as the starting point and source of legitimacy for political behavior, fundamental human relations—such as those between sovereign and minister, father and son, and elder and younger brothers—would be eroded by utilitarian logic, making it difficult to sustain social order [2,8].

Mencius did not deny the common people's reasonable demands for improving their material lives; rather, he opposed rulers using the pursuit of *li* as the value principle for governing the state. He emphasized that truly legitimate politics should be founded on "benevolence and *yi*" (*ren yi*), winning the hearts of the people by implementing benevolent governance, thereby achieving long-term social stability. In this sense, *yi* is not only a manifestation of personal virtue but also the fundamental basis for political legitimacy. The intrinsic connection between *yi* and the popular will constitutes a crucial part of Mencius's political thought of the Kingly Way (*Wangdao*).

However, Mencius's high emphasis on *yi* also endowed his concept of *yi* and *li* with distinct characteristics of moral idealism. He placed more hope in the moral consciousness and value choices of rulers, while writing little about specific methods for coordinating conflicts of interest in a complex society. This stance possesses strong inspirational power at the value level, yet there remains a certain tension at the level of practical operation.

2.3. Theoretical Characteristics of the Concept of yi and li in Confucius and Mencius

Overall, the concept of *yi* and *li* in Confucius and Mencius exhibits a distinct characteristic of ethical priority. Both scholars insisted on the primary position of *yi* in the hierarchy of values, emphasizing that personal behaviors and political practices must be subordinate to moral norms. This stance is conducive to maintaining the basic ethical order of society and preventing *li*-seeking behaviors from damaging human relations.

Simultaneously, their concept also showed a high reliance on moral edification, rarely involving institutional mechanisms for coordinating interests. It is in this sense that the concept formulated by Confucius and Mencius is manifested more as a form of moral idealism. As social structures became further complicated, this concept, centered on virtue consciousness, gradually revealed its theoretical limitations, providing ideological space for Xunzi to reconstruct the relationship between *yi* and *li* from the perspectives of realistic human nature and institutional norms.

3. Xunzi's Concept of *Yi* and *Li*: the Realistic Turn to Regulating *Li* with *Yi*

In the developmental trajectory of pre-Qin Confucian thought, Xunzi's discourse on the relationship between *yi* and *li* bears the important significance of inheriting the past and ushering in the future. Compared to the concept of Confucius and Mencius centered on moral consciousness, Xunzi confronted the complexities of social reality and human nature more directly. He re-examined the relationship from the perspectives of human desire and institutions, proposing the critical proposition that “*yi* is the harmonization of *li*.” It is precisely within this theoretical framework that the pre-Qin Confucian concept of *yi* and *li* completed an important shift from ethical idealism to realistic normativity.

3.1. The Legitimacy of Seeking *li* from the Perspective of the Theory of Human Nature as Evil

Understanding Xunzi's concept of *yi* and *li* requires placing it within the theoretical context of his theory that human nature is evil. Xunzi explicitly stated, “Human nature is evil; its goodness is the result of conscious activity,” arguing that humanity's natural disposition is not morally good but dominated by desires. Desires for food, comfort, and fame all stem from natural human instincts and possess undeniable objectivity[9]. In this sense, seeking *li* is not a result of moral degradation but a realistic prerequisite for the maintenance of human social life.

Unlike Mencius, who emphasized the inherent consciousness of *yi* stemming from an originally good nature, Xunzi did not expect humans to spontaneously restrain *li* with *yi*. He lucidly recognized that if human desires were allowed to expand unconditionally, society would inevitably descend into contention and chaos. Therefore, Xunzi was not defending *li*-seeking behaviors; instead, he attempted to find reasonable ways to regulate them on the basis of acknowledging their legitimacy. It is precisely this direct acknowledgment of realistic human nature that grants Xunzi's concept of *yi* and *li* stronger explanatory power and practical relevance.

In Xunzi's view, the crux of the problem does not lie in whether interests are pursued, but in whether the pursuit of interests is subject to reasonable constraints. Denying the legitimacy of seeking *li* neither accords with human nature nor resolves the conflicts of interest in real society; conversely, only by acknowledging the inevitability of seeking *li* and subsequently guiding it through systems and norms can

a stable social order be achieved. This understanding constitutes the theoretical starting point for Xunzi to reconstruct the relationship between *yi* and *li*.

3.2. The Ideological Connotation of “*yi* is the Harmonization of *li*”

“*yi* is the harmonization of *li*” is the most representative proposition in Xunzi’s concept of *yi* and *li*. This articulation explicitly indicates that Xunzi did not view *yi* and *li* as mutually exclusive opposites; rather, he emphasized the normative role of *yi* in coordinating and integrating interest relations. The “harmonization” (he) here is not a simple compromise or concession, but a process of enabling the interest demands of different subjects to achieve relative balance within the overall order through rational distribution and normative arrangements.

In Xunzi’s perspective, disorderly *li*-seeking behaviors are the root cause of social conflicts, and *yi* is precisely the value principle that prevents conflicts of interest from spiraling out of control. *yi* is not a moral sermon detached from reality, but a normative yardstick with clear social orientations, used to judge which interest demands are reasonable and which behavioral modes are legitimate. Guided by *yi*, individual *li*-seeking behaviors are incorporated into a socially acceptable scope, thereby avoiding social disorder caused by the scramble for interests[10].

This understanding significantly distinguishes Xunzi's concept from the moral idealism of Confucius and Mencius. While Confucius and Mencius placed greater emphasis on the value suppression of *li* by *yi*, Xunzi underscored the normative integration function of *yi* over *li*. For Xunzi, *yi* was no longer merely a standard for moral evaluation but became a realistic principle for handling complex social interest relations. This theoretical shift from “denying *li*-seeking” to “regulating *li*-seeking” marked a deepening of the pre-Qin Confucian concept of *yi* and *li*.

3.3. The Normative Function of the System of Rites and *yi* on Interest Relations

In Xunzi’s ideological system, *yi* does not remain at the abstract value level; instead, it is materialized into operable social norms through the system of rites and *yi*. Xunzi repeatedly emphasized that “ritual is the great divide of law, the guiding thread of categories,” asserting that the system of rites and *yi* is the fundamental mechanism for regulating human desires, standardizing behaviors, and maintaining order. It is precisely within the framework of ritual that *yi* is translated into institutional arrangements in real life[11].

Xunzi elucidated the regulatory function of the system of rites and *yi* over interest relations through the logic of “division” (*fen*) and “harmony” (*he*). He pointed out that the formation of social order relies on clear divisions of labor and hierarchical arrangements, defining the rights and obligations of different groups and individuals through “division” to reduce disorderly competition. Achieving “harmony” on the basis of “division” enables the interests of all parties to be satisfied within a relatively stable structure, ultimately achieving the overall coordination and unity of society.

This institutionalized approach imbues Xunzi's concept of *yi* and *li* with distinctive realistic characteristics. Unlike Confucius and Mencius, who primarily relied on moral edification, Xunzi emphasized the importance of external norms, believing that only through the institutionalized arrangements of rites and *yi* could human impulses for *li* be effectively restrained, preventing society from sliding into chaos. This was not merely a supplement to the concept of Confucius and Mencius but a substantive advancement of their theoretical deficiencies.

3.4. The Theoretical Significance of Xunzi's Concept of *yi* and *li*

From the perspective of intellectual history, Xunzi's concept of *yi* and *li* marks a major theoretical upgrade for pre-Qin Confucianism in addressing social complexity. Under the premise of acknowledging human desires and the legitimacy of seeking *li*, he emphasized achieving interest coordination through the institutionalized arrangements of *yi* and rites, thereby providing Confucian thought with a more practically operable social ethical paradigm.

It is in this sense that Xunzi accomplished the critical transition of the pre-Qin Confucian concept of *yi* and *li* from virtue ethics to institutional ethics, establishing “regulating *li* with *yi*” as an important ideological resource for Confucianism to address the issue of interests. This turn not only deepened the Confucian understanding of social order but also provided vital intellectual inspiration for later generations contemplating the relationship between ethical norms and social systems.

4. The Ideological Characteristics and Contemporary Implications of the Pre-Qin Confucian Concept of *Yi* and *Li*

A systematic examination of the concepts of *yi* and *li* in Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi reveals that the pre-Qin Confucian reflections on the relationship between *yi* and *li* were not scattered ethical judgments, but systematic ideological achievements gradually formed in the process of responding to issues of social order. Their concepts display several stable and distinct characteristics in theoretical morphology and value orientation, from which ideological implications of universal significance are derived.

4.1. The Normative Priority Characteristic with *yi* as the Value Yardstick

The most prominent ideological characteristic of the pre-Qin Confucian concept of *yi* and *li* lies in its unwavering adherence to *yi* as the primary value yardstick for judging behaviors and regulating social relations. Whether it is Confucius emphasizing that “the gentleman understands what is righteous,” Mencius opposing “governing by *li*,” or Xunzi proposing that “*yi* is the harmonization of *li*,” their common stance lies in denying that interests can exist independently of value norms as the ultimate basis for behavior.

This characteristic of normative priority reflects the profound Confucian understanding of the fragility of social order. Confucianism does not deny the realistic status of interests in social life, but it remains constantly vigilant that once *li*-seeking behaviors lack the constraints of *yi*, they will erode human relations and destroy social trust. Therefore, in the Confucian concept, *yi* holds not only moral significance but also bears the crucial function of maintaining social stability.

4.2. The Ethical Limitation Characteristic of Acknowledging the Reality of Interests

Contrary to the perspective that simplistically interprets the Confucian concept of *yi* and *li* as “anti-*li*ism,” pre-Qin Confucianism as a whole did not deny the realistic rationality of the pursuit of interests. Instead, it presented an ideological characteristic where the limited acknowledgment of *li* coexists with strict limitations. Although Confucius and Mencius remained alert to *li*-seeking behaviors, the focus of their criticism was “harming *yi* for *li*”; Xunzi, even more explicitly, acknowledged the naturalness of human desires and the pursuit of *li*, regarding interests as necessary conditions for the operation of society.

This characteristic of ethical limitation allowed the Confucian concept of *yi* and *li* to avoid both the neglect of realistic human nature and the unlimited indulgence of *li*-seeking behaviors. By placing interests within the normative framework of *yi*, Confucianism endeavored to establish a stable equilibrium between realistic needs and ethical order, thereby realizing the continuous operation of society.

4.3. The Evolutionary Characteristic from Virtue Constraint to Institutional Norms

From the thread of ideological development, the pre-Qin Confucian concept of *yi* and *li* exhibits clear theoretical evolutionary characteristics, moving from virtue constraints focusing on individual moral cultivation toward emphasizing the institutional regulation of external norms. Confucius and Mencius primarily relied on individual moral consciousness to guide interest-related behaviors, and their concepts largely reflected forms of virtue ethics. Conversely, based on confronting human nature and social complexity, Xunzi implemented *yi* as the system of rites and *yi*, standardizing *li*-seeking behaviors through institutional arrangements.

This evolution was not a negation of earlier Confucian thought, but a response and supplement to its theoretical inadequacies amidst an increasingly complex social structure. By introducing institutional norms, Xunzi endowed the Confucian concept of *yi* and *li* with stronger practical relevance and operational feasibility, while also propelling the deepening of Confucian ethical thought towards the level of social norms.

4.4. The Order-Caring Characteristic Guided by Social Integration

The pre-Qin Confucian concept of *yi* and *li* consistently served the fundamental goal of social integration. Whether through moral demands on individual behaviors or the emphasis on institutional norms, its ultimate orientation was to prevent society from falling into disorder due to conflicts of interest. The role that *yi* assumes in the Confucian concept is precisely the integrative function of incorporating decentralized interest demands into a unified order.

This order-caring characteristic imbued the Confucian concept of *yi* and *li* with a distinct orientation toward publicness. Confucianism did not view the issue of *yi* and *li* merely as a matter of private individual choice; rather, it examined the issue within the framework of the overall operation of society, thereby emphasizing that individual interests must achieve their legitimacy within public norms.

5. Contemporary Implications of the Pre-Qin Confucian Concept of *Yi* and *Li*

In the context of modern society, the relationship between *yi* and *li* remains a core, unavoidable issue in ethical reflection and social governance. Although the pre-Qin Confucian concept was formed under different historical conditions, its systematic reflections centering on value norms, interest regulation, and social order still offer crucial ideological implications for contemporary society.

First, contemporary society needs to re-establish the guiding position of normative values over instrumental rationality concerning interests. The operation of modern society relies largely on rational calculation and principles of efficiency, with interest rationality serving as a vital logical foundation for individual behaviors and institutional designs. However, when the pursuit of interests breaks away from the constraints of normative values, it easily leads to a tendency to instrumentalize social

relationships, weakening public trust and ethical consensus. The pre-Qin Confucian persistence in the value stance of “putting *yi* first” serves as a reminder that *li* is not a self-sufficient standard of judgment, but must be guided by normative values. The *yi* emphasized by Confucianism is not abstract moralizing, but a value yardstick with public attributes, used to determine the legitimacy of actions. Placing *yi* above *li* essentially underscores the constraining function of value rationality on instrumental rationality [12]. This thought holds significant enlightening meaning for modern society's reflection on single-minded utilitarianism and the reconstruction of public ethical foundations.

Second, handling complex interest relations cannot rely solely on moral consciousness but must emphasize the regulatory functions of norms and institutions. During its developmental process, the pre-Qin Confucian concept transitioned from moral constraints focusing on individual virtue to emphasizing the normative regulation of the system of rites and *yi*, reflecting a continuous response to social complexity. In particular, Xunzi's ideological attempt to implement *yi* as institutional norms indicates that individual moral consciousness alone is insufficient to effectively coordinate increasingly intricate interest relations. This insight suggests that in modern society, *yi* should not remain at the level of value declarations but should exert actual constraining and guiding roles through institutionalized forms. Normative institutional arrangements can both set boundaries for the pursuit of *li* and provide stable coordination mechanisms amidst multifaceted conflicts of interest, thereby preventing social operations from spiraling into disorder.

Third, the legitimacy of individual interests needs to be affirmed within the framework of public order. The pre-Qin Confucian concept of *yi* and *li* consistently examined individual behavior within the totality of society. Its focus was not on suppressing individual interests, but on preventing individual *li*-seeking behaviors from undermining public order. The *yi* emphasized by Confucianism serves exactly as a critical medium for incorporating decentralized individual demands into public norms. This thought has essential implications for contemporary society's understanding of the relationship between individual interests and public responsibilities. In a highly differentiated modern society, completely viewing interest issues as private individual choices can easily lead to the weakening of public norms and a decline in social integration capabilities. The Confucian concept reminds people that individual interests can only secure continuous and stable developmental space when their legitimacy is realized within public order.

Fourth, contemporary ethical reflection needs to transcend the simplistic “*yi* vs. *Li*” dichotomy. Pre-Qin Confucians did not merely place *yi* and *li* in absolute opposition but attempted to establish a normative tension between the two. Especially Xunzi's proposition that “*yi* is the harmonization of *li*” indicates that *yi* is not the negation of interests, but the rational integration of interest relations. This approach provides significant methodological inspiration for contemporary ethical reflection. Faced with complex and diverse interest demands in real society, simplistic moral negation or utilitarian defense are both ineffective. What the Confucian concept provides is not a ready-made solution, but a cognitive pathway seeking balance between value norms and practical interests.

Fifth, the pre-Qin Confucian concept of *yi* and *li* provides intellectual resources for contemporary reflections on social order. From a more macroscopic perspective, the ultimate concern of the pre-Qin Confucian concept lies in the stability and continuity

of social order. Whether emphasizing individual virtues or valuing institutional norms, the core objective was always to prevent society from falling into chaos due to conflicts of interest. This order-oriented value concern allows the Confucian concept to transcend pure moral preaching and possess profound social theoretical significance [13]. Against the backdrop of contemporary society, re-examining the Confucian concept helps us understand the foundational role of value norms in social integration. Its significance lies not in resurrecting pre-Qin thought itself, but in providing a historically profound ideological reference for contemporary society's reflection on the relationships between *yi* and *li*, as well as norms and order.

6. Conclusions

A systematic investigation of the pre-Qin Confucian concept of *yi* and *li* reveals that the relationship between the two is not a mere moral opposition, but an important theoretical theme progressively deepened by Confucians in response to issues of social order. Facing the practical predicament of loosened social structures and intensified conflicts of interest during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, Confucian thinkers did not evade the issue of interests; instead, on the premise of acknowledging the reality of interests, they endeavored to establish rational value boundaries and normative principles for them.

Proceeding from the levels of ethical edification and political ideals, Confucius and Mencius emphasized the priority of *yi* in the hierarchy of values, warning against the erosion of human relations and social order by utilitarian logic. Their concept of *yi* and *li* exhibited distinct moral normative orientations and idealistic hues. Xunzi, however, made a significant advancement in the Confucian concept based on confronting human desires and social complexities. By understanding *yi* as the principle for integrating and regulating interest relations, and implementing it through the system of rites and *yi*, he endowed the relationship between *yi* and *li* with a more realistic and operable normative form. This marked the pivotal transition of the pre-Qin Confucian concept of *yi* and *li* from virtue ethics to institutional ethics.

Overall, the pre-Qin Confucian concept of *yi* and *li* was consistently anchored in fundamental concerns for social integration and the maintenance of order. Its core value lay not in negating interests per se, but in preventing the pursuit of interests from deviating from norms and leading to disorder. Systematically sorting through this ideological tradition not only helps deepen our understanding of the internal logic of pre-Qin Confucian ethical thought but also provides enlightening intellectual resources for contemporary society to reflect on the relationship between value rationality and instrumental rationality, and to explore rational mechanisms for coordinating interests.

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