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The Unique Wisdom——Rendan in the Wei and Jin Dynasties

Rendan is a special social phenomenon in Wei and Jin Dynasties, which is about denouncing the feudal rites, liberating the inner self and unleashing emotions carefreely. Under rendan, there existed many interesting stories in which scholars behaved in seemingly strange and abnormal ways. Digging into this social phenomenon can bring new understanding on not only the Wei and Jin Dynasties, but also on societies afterwards.

Rendan’s origin can be traced back to centuries ago in the Spring and Autumn and Warring states period when Confucius and Mencius mentioned Kuangjuan(狂狷) thinking. Confucius firstly regarded the golden means(中庸之道)as the ultimate ideal of perfect man, yet he recognized that the golden means was too ideal to achieve, so he thought Kuangjuan was the second-best choice of being a decent person. “Kuang” refers to those who are resolved to achieve their goals even if the whole world is against them. “Juan” means a life philosophy of doing nothing and maintaining integrity in an immoral environment. Also, rendan absorbed the essence of Taoism, namely the renowned nature’s concept and doing nothing(自然无为). Under Taoism, this is the best way of living.

In the Han Dynasty, social instability fueled the advent of new thinking and behaviors. During that time, there already existed some thoughts and behaviors against the social norms. These rebellious ideas in late Han Dynasty also set path for rendan.

To understand more about the scholars’ inappropriate behaviors, and to dig the true meanings and reasons behind those behaviors, we need to study some specific examples. First, the story of Wang Ziyou sailing all the way to friend’s house but turning back without going in. We can learn from the story that Wang was totally unrestrained and what truly mattered to him was simply enjoying the course. He didn’t care whether he eventually went into that door. He had an impulse. He seized that impulse. He enjoyed the course. That was what really mattered.

The second story is about Ruan Ji eating meat and drinking wine in his mother’s funeral. Such behavior was seen inappropriate. It could be concluded that Ruan hated the rites. Many scholars in that era also hated rites, believing that it was the shackles of rites that kept people from expressing their true feelings. So, these scholars broke all the rules, freed themselves from the rigid rites and started to focus on human nature and paid attention to the value of carefree life and expressing their feelings.

Liuling is also a representative figure of rendan. His anecdotes are mostly involved with drinking wine. Liu Ling’s wife once pleaded Liu to drink less, since he was such a heavy drinker. He agreed and decided to pray to the Heaven for “abstinence”. However, it turned out that he broke his promise and drank up the wine prepared for the sacrifice. Wine was a very important figure in rendan. Many scholars resorted to wine as the way to release emotions since one would remember nothing after getting drunk.

Other than these short stories, there are many other anecdotes about rendan recorded in history. Although these stories differ from each other, they revealed the scholars’ same attitude, which is to get rid of the rigid social norms and live a carefree and unrestrained life.

Why would scholars hold such an attitude? First, social unrest and regime change was the major theme of that time. Northern people flooded into south, squeezing the living environment of Han people in central China. And the unstable political situation in the Jin dynasty plunged the common people into fleeting life. The outcome was the value disruption. Taking a post in the government for the cause of good was no longer accessible. The morality standards called for by the government were only the tools to suppress people. Thus, some scholars lost confidence in social norms which lay the foundation for rendan thoughts.

Second, scholars in that era were disappointed by the regime, so they tried to find ways to escape reality, fight against decayed morality and express emotions. These embodied their fight against darkness and perseverance towards human nature. Even escaping reflected people’s respect for their own willingness rather than blind obedience to the authority. It should be noted that behind rendan behaviors and careless attitudes was the agony in reality and struggle of inner hearts.

The third reason of rendan is related with thoughts. During the Wei and Jin Dynasties, Confucianism was declining while Taosim was rising. The decline of Confucianism could be found in the fact that the Sima Family usurped the imperial power, which violated Confucius thoughts whose core principle includes respect on emperor. At that time, the value of Taosim--let everything go naturally got rooted into people’s hearts. That could partly explain why rendan became popular in these periods.

The fourth reason of rendan is about the Cadre-Selection System. Specifically, it was the Nine-rank system, of which one important measurement was whether one was temperament, natural and had his own personalities. In order to cater to this trend, some scholars in Wei and Jin Dynasties intended to be unrestrained. That’s also a reason contributing to rendan.

With all these factors, rendan dominated the Wei and Jin Dynasties and even became the icon of the time. With such huge influence, rendan surely has deep impacts on societies and people afterwards, which can mainly be divided into three aspects.

Firstly, rendan influenced scholars afterwards. Renda behaviors, although seemed to be inappropriate and reckless, were actually centered with carefreeness. Scholars in the Wei and Jin Dynasties tried to escape the rotten social norms which limited human’s nature and valued on following people’s hearts. This directly influenced scholars afterwards who chased for their hearts’ desire to release human nature.

Also, the craze for wine in the Wei and Jin Dynasties lay the foundation of Chinese wine culture. Wine has become a good tool for people to release their emotions. Many famous scholars like Libai and Xin qiji composed excellent poets on wine. Some famous wine drinkers, like Liuling, even become the symbol of wine in modern China.

Besides these, Rendan thoughts liberated people’s minds from the rigid social norms. During that era, traditional Confucius thoughts had become a tool for rulers to control people’s thoughts, leaving then society with no activeness. While with those rendan scholars, people started to get rid of the chains on their minds and pursued a more colorful spiritual world.

Evaluations on rendan fall into two aspects. Some accused rendan scholars of the root of the collapse of the Jin Dynasty and blamed them for departing social system. However, these judgements were made from the rulers’ point of view which ignored that unequal social system then was doomed to be overturned. Most of the scholars afterwards spoke highly of rendan, admiring for their courage to break social rules and rebuild morality and praising for their respect on human nature.

The Wei and Jin Dynasties was a magical era. With the darkest political environment, there lived the most innocent scholars. Their cherish for freedom, their admiration on human nature and their carefreeness without caring about other people’s views should be cherished and preserved in our Chinese blood.