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The Impact of the Confucian Analects on the Concept of Filial Piety in Qutadgu Bilig through the Introduction to the Western Regions of China

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Abstract

Since ancient times, filial piety has been a traditional virtue of the Chinese people, highly regarded and praised by numerous scholars and sages. This paper intends to conduct an in-depth study of the influence of The Confucian Analects, which was introduced to the Western Regions of China during the Han Dynasty, on the concept of filial piety in Qutadgu Bilig, a work completed during the Song Dynasty, using literature review and textual analysis methods. The research findings reveal that these two works, written in different regions, by different authors, and in different eras, demonstrate significant commonalities in their views on filial piety). Specifically, both works assert that: (1) while parents are alive, one should support and show filial respect to them; after their death, one should bury and offer sacrifices to them with proper rites; (2) children should honor their parents with respect and offer sincere advice when necessary; (3) when away from home, one should show brotherly love, universal compassion, and treat others with kindness; (4) filial piety is used to promote loyalty, and the principle of filial piety is applied to govern society. Additionally, this paper explores the cultural background that explains the commonalities in filial piety found in both works, summarizing them as: Qutadgu Bilig's recognition and assimilation of Central Plains culture, the deep-rooted acceptance of the concept of filial piety in the Western Regions, and the widespread dissemination of The Confucian Analects in the region.

Keywords

Concept of Filial Piety, The Confucian Analects, Qutadgu Bilig, Chinese Culture

1. Introduction

Confucian filial piety is a treasured cultural heritage of the Chinese nation, regarded as one of the most influential ethical and familial moral concepts in Chinese history. It forms the foundation of the Chinese national spirit and traditional virtues, serving as a key element in the horizontal extension of Chinese culture into interpersonal relationships and societal structures. Filial piety acts as the core of the logical framework of Chinese culture. As Xiao Qunzhong notes, "Filial piety is the knot and core of the logical web of Chinese culture" (Xu, S., 1963, p. 173). Since the Han Dynasty, filial piety has been deeply embedded in social and political life, with ideas such as loyalty and filial piety promoting loyalty to the state, and the governance of the country through the practice of filial duty, becoming central to people's moral consciousness. The Analects of Confucius (Lunyu), as the cornerstone of Confucian thought, promotes key principles such as harmony in diversity, benevolent governance, filial piety, and brotherly love, as well as the doctrine of the mean. These teachings have profoundly shaped the ethical and moral values of the Chinese people for over two millennia. The Analects provides succinct yet profound interpretations of filial piety, an idea central to Confucian culture.

Qutadgu Bilig (The Wisdom of Royal Glory), composed in the 11th century by the Chinese Uyghur scholar Yusuf Khass Hajib, conveys a wide range of philosophical, ethical, and practical knowledge through dialogues between its characters. These dialogues cover topics as diverse as politics, law, linguistics, religious studies, history, education, and more. As Niu Ruj ìpoints out, Qutadgu Bilig spans an extensive breadth of intellectual domains, contributing significantly to the cultural and philosophical heritage of the Western Regions of China (Yang, B. J. (Trans. and annotated), 2006).

The Analects of Confucius predates Qutadgu Bilig by nearly 1,500 years, originating during the early Warring States period. Since the Han Dynasty, the teachings of the Analects began spreading westward into the regions of Central Asia, influencing the cultures of the Western Regions through the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties, and continuing through the Tang and Song Dynasties. The philosophical and cultural ideas from the Analects were warmly received and widely praised by the local populations. Consequently, it is not surprising that the ethical and philosophical tenets of the Analects left an imprint on Qutadgu Bilig.

In the mid-9th century, following the fall of the Uyghur Khaganate in the Mongolian Plateau, the Uyghurs migrated to the Western Regions. There, they lived under the rule of the Central Plains dynasties and integrated with the local Han Chinese population, who had a profound influence on Uyghur culture. Historically, the Uyghurs assisted the Tang Dynasty in quelling the An Lushan Rebellion, which helped restore lost territories to the country. As a result, the Tang court honored the Uyghurs with diplomatic ties, including sending a princess to marry into the Uyghur royal family. This practice of mutual respect and acknowledgment continued into the Song Dynasty. As the History of the Song Dynasty records, the Uyghurs referred to the Central Plains dynasty as their maternal uncle, while the Tang and Song courts regarded the Uyghurs as their nephews (Yusuf, H. H., 2014). During the

Tang period, eleven local Uyghur rulers were conferred official titles by the Central Plains dynasties, reflecting Confucian values such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, loyalty, and filial piety. The Uyghur rulers' adoption of these Confucian ideals underscores the significant influence of Confucian culture on the region. In the Song Dynasty, the Uyghurs of Xizhou actively maintained ties with the Song court through the tributary system, further solidifying their connection with Chinese culture. This cultural exchange, particularly in the realms of ethics and governance, contributed to the shaping of Qutadgu Bilig as a work that reflects both local Uyghur traditions and the broader Confucian ethos.

Qutadgu Bilig stands as a unique and valuable cultural artifact of the Western Regions and an important treasure of China's cultural history. The concept of filial piety in Qutadgu Bilig reflects the distinctive ethnic identity of the Uyghurs, while also sharing commonalities with the traditional cultural values of the Han Chinese. The interaction and mutual influence of ethical ideas across regions have shaped the development of philosophical thought, illustrating the interconnectedness of cultures throughout history. This paper seeks to explore the impact of the Analects of Confucius on the concept of filial piety in Qutadgu Bilig, examining the ways in which Confucian values were incorporated into Uyghur cultural and philosophical thought.

2. The Concept of Filial Piety in the Analects and the Wisdom of Felicity

According to Xu Shen's Explanation of Script and Elucidations of Characters (Volume 8), the philological interpretation of the character for filial pietyis as follows: "It refers to those who serve their parents well. The character is composed of the radical for 'elder' (老) and the radical for 'child' (子), symbolizing the child succeeding the elder" (Yusuf, H. H., 2014). The structure of the character itself reflects this relationship, with "子" (child) at the bottom and "老" (elder) at the top, signifying the child's role in succeeding and supporting the elder. In The Confucian Analects (Lunyu), Confucius offers a comprehensive understanding of filial piety from two perspectives, providing a clear and profound interpretation. On one hand, filial piety entails children's dutifulness in providing for, respecting, and obeying their parents. In The Confucian Analects (Xue Er), Zi Xia remarks, "When serving one's parents, one should exert all one's strength", emphasizing that filial duties should be performed with the utmost effort. In The Confucian Analects (Li Ren), Confucius states, "The years of one's parents should be remembered with joy and fear: with joy for their longevity, and with fear for their advancing age and declining health". Here, Confucius acknowledges both the emotional and practical aspects of filial piety—caring for one's parents, while also cherishing their well-being. Additionally, in The Confucian Analects (Wei Zheng), Confucius observes, "It is hard to maintain a pleasant demeanor. When there is work, let the younger ones do it; when there is wine and food, let the elders partake of it. Is this what we call filial piety?" This passage underscores that filial piety involves not only material support but also the emotional and respectful conduct one should exhibit toward

parents. It highlights the importance of children taking on the laborious tasks and ensuring their parents enjoy the comforts of life, all while maintaining an attitude of respect.

Moreover, Confucius broadens the concept of filial piety beyond the family unit to include one's conduct in society. Filial piety is not merely confined to the respect shown toward one's parents but extends to the kindness and loyalty one should exhibit toward friends, rulers, and the broader society. In The Confucian Analects (Xue Er), Confucius instructs: "At home, be filial to your parents; outside, be respectful to your elders. Be cautious and trustworthy, love the people, and draw close to those who are virtuous. If you have energy to spare, study literature". This statement highlights the social dimensions of filial piety, urging individuals to demonstrate filial conduct within the family while extending respect and integrity to others in society. Additionally, in the same chapter, Zi Xia echoes Confucius' teaching, saying, "Esteem the worthy and be kind to others. In serving your parents, exhaust your efforts; in serving your ruler, devote yourself; in dealing with friends, be trustworthy in your words". Zi Xia emphasizes that the ability to serve one's parents with devotion is directly linked to one's capacity for loyalty to rulers and sincerity in friendships. Thus, Confucius' conception of filial piety evolves from a familial virtue to a broader social ethic, illustrating its central role in shaping both individual character and social harmony in Confucian thought.

In Qutadgu Bilig, the concept of filial piety shares many similarities with the teachings of The Confucian Analects, though it is framed within the cultural and philosophical context of the Uyghur world. In Qutadgu Bilig, filial piety is conveyed through dialogues between the characters, where it is interwoven with other themes such as the formation of virtuous friendships, loyalty to rulers, and the importance of both domestic and civic responsibility. These discussions, which unfold through the interactions of the four characters—Sunrise, Full Moon, Wisdom, and Awakening—explore the notion of filial piety in a way that resonates with Confucian values while reflecting the unique cultural and social conditions of the Western Regions. The text elaborates on the importance of filial devotion to one's parents and the broader social obligations of loyalty and integrity in both personal and political spheres. In the sections that follow, a deeper exploration of these themes will further highlight the shared moral and ethical underpinnings that link Qutadgu Bilig with Confucian thought.

3. The Specific Manifestations of the Influence of the Confucian Analects Introduction to the Western Regions on the Concept of Filial Piety in Qutadgu Bilig

3.1 Supporting and Honoring Parents While They Are Alive; Performing Funeral Rites and Ancestral Worship after Their Passing

In The Confucian Analects, the concept of filial piety is elaborated in various passages. In the Xue Er chapter, it is said, "Serve your parents with all your strength". This emphasizes that while parents are alive, children should devote themselves entirely to serving and supporting their parents. In the Ba Yi chapter, Confucius states, "If I am not present at the sacrifice, it is as if I did not sacrifice". This

highlights the importance of personally participating in funeral rites and honoring parents in their final moments. In the Wei Zheng chapter, the statement “When there is wine and food, let the elders be served first” underlines the importance of providing for parents before oneself. Children are expected to ensure their parents are well-fed and well-clothed, fulfilling their filial duties. Confucius also mentions, “Nowadays, filial piety means simply to provide for one’s parents. But even dogs and horses can be provided for. Without respect, what is the difference?” This underscores that true filial piety is not merely about providing material support but also about showing deep respect and reverence for one's parents.

Similarly, in Qutadgu Bilig, similar ideas are expressed. It states, “Remember well your father’s instructions, and you will be blessed with fortune and success. If you serve your parents and bring them joy, the reward will be endless blessings”. Here, “serving” refers to the filial responsibility of honoring one’s parents both in life and after their death, with the goal of bringing them happiness. In one passage, when the character “Enlightened” watches his ailing father suffer, he says, “Oh, Father, I suffer for you, as if my body is being burned by fire. If you were to die, how could I continue to live, how could I bear to see you in such pain?” This illustrates his deep filial devotion, as he is willing to sacrifice himself to alleviate his father’s suffering. The idea of respect is further reflected in the teaching, “Greet elders and younger people with a smiling face”, where a character advises his son to maintain an attitude of respect and positivity toward his parents. After his father’s death, Enlightened honors his father by performing sacrifices and giving alms to the poor, thereby fulfilling his filial duty. He continues to follow his father’s teachings, which brings him increasing fortune and blessings. This mirrors the Confucian view that respect and proper rituals for parents in both life and death are essential elements of filial piety.

3.2 Respectfully Supporting Parents and Honestly Admonishing Them

When examining the shared aspects of filial piety, both The Confucian Analects and Qutadgu Bilig reflect a consistent belief in caring for and respecting one’s parents during their lifetime, and properly burying and honoring them after death. This represents a commonality in their views on filial duty. Additionally, both texts emphasize that children should also offer gentle admonition when their parents make mistakes or show imperfections in their thoughts or actions during their lifetime. In the Li Ren chapter of The Confucian Analects, Confucius states, “When serving your parents, offer gentle remonstration. If your advice is not accepted, remain respectful and do not contradict them, laboring without complaint”. This means that if parents make mistakes, children should offer tactful advice, and even if that advice is not heeded, they must continue to show respect and not offend their parents. Though they may feel troubled, they should not resent their parents for it.

Similarly, in Qutadgu Bilig, the character “Enlightened” offers gentle counsel to his father, who is suffering from illness. He says, “Why are you sorrowful, why are you weeping? If you cry over the wealth you cannot take with you, don’t cry, for it is useless. If you weep for the heavenly blessings you

cannot carry with you, don't cry, for it is not worth lamenting. Many people before you have enjoyed these blessings, left their wealth behind, and said farewell to life". As a son, Enlightened advises his father in his time of sorrow, encouraging him to open his heart, accept the reality of death, and release the burden of sadness. His words provide comfort and relieve his father's distress. In both texts, the act of respectfully supporting parents and offering sincere, gentle counsel demonstrates a deep commitment to filial piety, highlighting the importance of both material and emotional care for one's parents.

3.3 Cultivating Brotherhood, Loving All, and Treating Others with Benevolence

At home, children should serve their parents well, and when venturing out, they should foster brotherly love. In the Xue Er chapter of The Confucian Analects, Confucius states, "A disciple should be filial at home and respectful to elders outside, cautious in speech, broadly loving to the public, and close to virtuous people". This underscores the importance of filial piety, respect for teachers, integrity in communication, and the practice of kindness to others. In the Zi Lu chapter, Confucius mentions, "Friends should be close and cheerful, brothers should live in harmony". This emphasizes the need for joyful interactions among friends and harmonious relationships among siblings. Moreover, in the Yan Yuan chapter, he remarks, "All under heaven are brothers. What does a gentleman have to fear if he has no brothers?" This perspective highlights the idea of universal brotherhood.

Similarly, Qutadgu Bilig expresses a comparable notion of filial piety. When Yueyuan leaves home to travel to the capital, the author writes, "One should have friends in all directions; with good friends, everything will go smoothly". This implies that while out in the world, it is essential to cultivate friendships with people of good character. The text advises, "Be close to relatives and friends, and greet both the elders and the young with a smile". The author further states, "Everyone should have brothers to support them; if one has no brothers, one should make friends. Those with brothers gain respect, while those with friends will have their names spread far and wide. If you have no brothers, then go make friends. If your friends are virtuous, they are like brothers". Engaging with friends brings great benefits and joy, and it is important to connect with family and return to one's friends. The author emphasizes, "Form friendships with sincerity and trust; good friends will repay your kindness". It is evident that every person should take pride in their family and siblings, fostering loving relationships. If one does not have brothers, they should seek out kind-hearted and loyal friends.

3.4 Promoting Loyalty through Filial Piety: Governing the World with Filiality

Both The Confucian Analects and Qutadgu Bilig reflect the intertwined concepts of "filial piety and brotherly love" and "loyalty to the ruler", effectively combining the two to better govern the world through filial piety. In the Wei zheng chapter of The Confucian Analects, it states, "To approach with solemnity brings respect; to be filial and compassionate is to be loyal". Additionally, in the Xue Er chapter, it is mentioned: "A disciple should be filial at home and respectful to elders outside". The same chapter also emphasizes, "In serving the ruler, one must dedicate oneself". Furthermore, the Zi

Han chapter states, “In public service, one should serve the nobles; at home, one should serve one’s parents and brothers”. In the Wei zheng chapter, it is mentioned, “Filial piety is solely about being filial, being friendly to brothers, and applying these behaviors to governance. This is also governance; why should it be considered anything else?” Filial piety entails honoring parents and fostering brotherly love, while also extending these virtues to influence political affairs. This implies that participation in governance does not necessitate holding an official position. Thus, these texts elucidate the close connection between “serving one’s parents” and “loyalty to the ruler”. Similarly, in Qutadgu Bilig, there is a resonant theme. The author notes, “Have your parents not told you not to oppose the king?” This suggests that, within the context of family education, subjects must be loyal to their rulers and cannot act in contradiction to this principle. When the protagonist, oğğurmış, first meets King küntoğdı, the king inquires, “How has life treated you since your father passed? Has he brought you joy or sorrow?” “He (oğğurmış) has become a faithful shield for the king, managing the treasury in an orderly manner”. From this dialogue, it is evident that the notion of filial piety was deeply ingrained in society at the time, resonating among both nobility and common people. Xian ming expresses, “Happy monarch, I (oğğurmış) wish to be your loyal servant”. A loyal servant seeks the king’s benefit, and such individuals genuinely love their monarch. “Regardless of external problems, I am a faithful servant”. “The hearts of the people belong to the monarch; the body of the servant belongs to the servant; wherever the monarch goes, the servants will follow”. These excerpts illustrate that the character of Xian ming, a high minister in Qutadgu Bilig, is depicted as a devoted son who, following his father’s passing, continues to serve King küntoğdı faithfully, fulfilling his father’s wishes and remaining loyal to the king.

4. Common Cultural Background of Filial Piety in the Confucian Analects and Qutadgu Bilig

4.1 The Recognition and Assimilation of Central Plains Culture in Qutadgu Bilig

Qutadgu Bilig is nurtured and produced in the soil of Chinese culture. In the preface of the work, the author Yusup Has-Hajip clearly states: “This book is extremely precious. It is adorned with the maxims of philosophers from the Qin region and the verses of scholars from the Maqin” (Yusuf, H. H., 2014). The term “Qin” refers to China, and “Qin people” indicates the Han ethnic group. This suggests that the maxims and poetry of Qin philosophers fundamentally support the establishment of the core ideas of Qutadgu Bilig. Undoubtedly, the author read and cited the thoughts, works, or poetry of Central Plains Han philosophers and scholars before writing Qutadgu Bilig, assimilating them into his own work in a compatible and inclusive manner. Indeed, the widespread dissemination of Central Plains culture influences and nurtures the social life, historical culture, and ideological concepts of ethnic minorities in the western regions. Historically, the exchanges between the motherland and the western regions have never ceased, and the author is keenly aware of this, as reflected in the text: “The brown earth is draped in green silk, and the Khitan merchant caravans lay out peach blossom brocade”. He

poses the question, "If the Khitan caravans' paths were to be blocked, where would countless pieces of silk come from?"(Wang, Q. T., 2017, p. 4). Furthermore, the author's profound and sharp insights and expressions about the issues of his time illustrate the mutual interactions, exchanges, and infiltration between various ethnic groups in China, reflecting the projection of Chinese historical culture. The ideas promoted in Qutadgu Bilig, such as the emphasis on goodness as the foundation, serving in government, loyalty to the ruler, benefiting the people, and governing according to law, can be traced back to Confucian culture, which centers on benevolence, self-cultivation, family harmony, governance, and world peace. It is evident that the development of a nation's culture is a process of continuously absorbing outstanding cultural achievements, innovating within inheritance, and transmitting through innovation.

4.2 The Deep-rooted Concept of Filial Piety in the Western Regions

Filial piety occupies a central position in traditional Chinese ethical thought. The dissemination of the concept of filial piety from Confucian culture into the Western Regions can be traced back to the sixth century AD, according to archaeological literature. Currently, nine pieces of texts or commentaries of The Classic of Filial Piety have been unearthed in Turpan. In addition, there are a considerable number of manuscripts that explain The Classic of Filial Piety (Wei, S., 1974, p. 2245).

Due to its concise length, elegant content, and clear and profound meanings, The Classic of Filial Piety has been greatly revered in the cultural atmosphere that promotes filial piety as a governing principle. Within the framework of Confucian culture advocating self-cultivation, family harmony, governance, and world peace, The Classic of Filial Piety has been endowed with special significance, and this applies to the Western Regions as well. By the sixth century, The Classic of Filial Piety had reached Gao chang. In the first year of the Zheng guang era of Northern Wei (520 AD), Qu Jia requested the Northern Wei Emperor to "borrow the Five Classics and various histories and asked the National University's assistant teacher Liu Xie to serve as a doctor, to which Emperor Xuan agreed" (Linghu Defen et al., n.d., p. 620). There were classes on the Book of Songs, The Confucian Analects, and The Classic of Filial Piety, with academic officials and students teaching one another (Wang, S., 2002, p. 204). Moreover, during the Tang Dynasty's western prefecture period, the local residents of Turpan not only habitually read The Classic of Filial Piety during their lifetime but also revered the filial piety ideas of the Central Plains. After their deaths, they would choose to be buried with copies of The Classic of Filial Piety. According to research organized by Mr. Wang Su, the unearthed manuscripts of The Classic of Filial Piety in Turpan can be categorized into five types (Herodotus (Ancient Greece), 1997, p. 32), specifically including the plain text of The Classic of Filial Piety, Zheng's annotations on The Classic of Filial Piety, the Explanations of The Classic of Filial Piety, the Imperial Annotations on The Classic of Filial Piety, and the Commentaries on The Classic of Filial Piety. The excavation of these documents once again proves that the people in the Turpan region have inherited and preserved the customs of burying clothes and articles with the deceased, a tradition common in the Central Plains.

The discovery of various versions of The Classic of Filial Piety further illustrates the local populace's importance and adherence to the filial piety concepts of the Central Plains.

4.3 The Extensive Dissemination of the Confucian Analects in the Western Regions

It is well known that geographical environment plays a crucial role in historical research. As the ancient Greek historian Herodotus pointed out in his work Histories, "All history must be studied from the geographical perspective... Geography provides the natural background and stage for history and culture. Historical facts only have meaning when connected to it" (Wang, Q. T., 2017, p. 4). Thus, the geographical environment is an indispensable factor in historical studies.

The dissemination of The Confucian Analects in the Western Regions has a long history and coincides with the geographical context of Qutadgu Bilig. Throughout history, the former has had a profound influence on the latter. Currently, at least 31 manuscripts of The Confucian Analects or its commentaries have been unearthed in Turpan (Compiled by the Archaeological Research Institute of Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences, 1983). After the liberation, The Confucian Analects comprised the largest number among the ancient texts excavated in Turpan (Wang, S., 2002, p. 204). Archaeologists have discovered fragments of The Confucian Analects in Han-dynasty wooden slips found in Loulan. This site served as a beacon tower during the Han Dynasty, located at the end of the Peacock River and on the northern bank of the Lop Nur, functioning as an important storage site and postal station on the Silk Road, thus holding a pivotal position in transportation, along with a substantial Han-dynasty agricultural garrison. The fragment contains the following content: "also wishes not to impose on others; the Master said: 'Zhi, no'". This likely corresponds to a section in The Confucian Analects (Chapter 14: Gongye Chang): "Zigong said: 'I do not wish for others to impose on me; I also wish not to impose on others'. The Master said: 'Zhi, it is not something you can reach'" (Chen, H. F., 1990, p. 109). This indicates that from the Han Dynasty onwards, there were already immigrants stationed by the Han Dynasty in this region, implementing administrative management systems similar to those of the central dynasty. Furthermore, it illustrates that in these new immigrant settlements, families engaged in agriculture and border defense while considering Confucian classics like The Confucian Analects as essential for cultural and educational purposes.

Additionally, the commentaries of The Confucian Analects found in the Western Regions are predominantly from Zheng Xuan, far surpassing the number of He Yan's Collective Exegesis of The Confucian Analects, aligning with the characteristics of Confucian scholarly dissemination in northern China during the medieval period. In his work Dunhuang and Turpan Literature, Mr. Wang Su points out that The Confucian Analects unearthed in Turpan primarily include the plain text of The Confucian Analects, Zheng's Commentary on The Confucian Analects, and He Yan's Collective Exegesis of The Confucian Analects (Herodotus (Ancient Greece), 1997, p. 32). Thus, it is evident that The Confucian Analects and its commentaries were widely disseminated in the Western Regions, profoundly influencing the ideological and cultural landscape of the local inhabitants.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the concept of filial piety shared between Qutadgu Bilig and The Confucian Analects highlights a deep connection between the traditional cultures of the Western Regions and the historical culture of the Chinese heartland. The development and refinement of filial piety in Qutadgu Bilig were inevitably shaped by the unique characteristics of its own society, including its modes of production, lifestyle, family education, natural instincts, and belief systems. At the same time, it is important to recognize that this work also absorbed and inherited the ideals of filial piety from Central Plains culture, ultimately becoming an integral part of Chinese cultural heritage.

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Note

Note 1. ***Qutadgu Bilig:*** The Kutadgu Biligor Qutadğu Bilig is an 11th-century work written by Yūsuf Balasaguni for the prince of Kashgar. The text reflects the author's and his society's beliefs, feelings and practices with regard to quite a few topics and depicts interesting facets of various aspects of life in the Kara-Khanid Khanate.