

A Comparative Study of Interpersonal Relationship in Confucian and Hebrew Classics

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Both Confucian and Hebrew classics remain an everlasting heritage for their nations and the world. Wisdom from both classics stresses the importance of interpersonal relationships in constructing the social order. This paper, through a comparative study, analyzes similar teachings and rituals concerning two prominent interpersonal relationships—marital bond and parent-child relation. It is found that in these two interpersonal relationships, both wisdom highlight the significance of these bonds, define clear boundaries and roles, and provide ethical warnings in these relations. This study contributes to the cross-cultural investigation of ancient Chinese and Hebrew wisdom in that human nature is embedded with similar hope for order, quality, and glory, so mutual understanding and acceptance is essential in promoting a globalized dialogue and critical view of cultures. Suggestions are provided for further research.

Keywords: comparative study, interpersonal relationship, Confucian classics, Hebrew classics

Introduction

Confucianism sets up the ideological foundation for China starting from the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States periods in history with a long lasting influence till present day. One of the key ideas in Confucianism is Ren (仁), translated as benevolence, humanity, love, or kindness in different contexts, but for ancient Chinese, the meaning of Ren goes beyond this scope. In the first Chinese dictionary of characters *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, the word Ren means a loving relation. As observed from the Chinese character, it consists of human (人) and two (二), suggesting a moral standard in handling interpersonal relationships (Zhao, 2019, p. 26). In the chapter of *Yanhui, Analects*, when Fanchi asked what Ren is, Confucius replied, “loving people” (Zhao, 2019, p. 163). Living in an era of wars and turmoil, Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, emphasized the reconstruction of the social order by following the rituals of the previous dynasty Zhou. That is, when everyone fulfills his roles, a social order would be built. It is written that “There is government, when the prince is prince, and the minister is minister, when the father is father, and the son is son” (Zhao, 2019, p. 157). It's seen that human relationship is one of the focal themes in Confucius' ideas, because a harmonious human relationship contributes to the reconstruction of social order. In Hebrew classics, interpersonal relationship was also

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emphasized as essential in building up the social order. In the early Hebrew book of *Exodus*, there is description concerning the ideological foundation of the nation Israel in the form of laws, which is called the law of Moses. In the law, there are 10 generalized commandments and more than 600 detailed rules. For the 10 commandments, the first four rules are about one's relationship with God and the other six are on interpersonal relationships. That is, the law of Moses, as one establishing the national identity of Israel, focuses on human relationship as well. Confucian and Hebrew classics were compiled in different cultural and historical periods, the former compiled between 5 and 3 century B.C., the latter in about 1400 B.C., and both compiling processes lasted for centuries. Despite of the differences, they bear similarities, and one of them is that, as mentioned above, both emphasized the role of interpersonal relationship in reconstructing social order or establish national identity.

The author of this paper is inspired by this similarity from the two ancient civilizations, believing that an exploration of their understanding of interpersonal relationships would help us ponder more profoundly into our nature and existence as human beings that breathe and live on our mother planet earth, and bring us closer and work together in times of conflict, desperation, and darkness. Furthermore, as a Chinese, the author is eager to know the study of this area within the research context of China, expecting that a comparative study could help Chinese to develop a critical view of both cultures.

The author thus retrieved on CNKI, a popular indexing database in China, put in key words related with Confucian, Hebrew, and Interpersonal Relationship, and selected the most relevant articles based on a comparative analysis from journals of CSSCI (Chinese Social Science Citation Index, an authoritative high level index citation) published from 2010-2021. By reading these literature recursively, the author found that these comparative studies focus on a variety of aspects of the two cultures, such as rituals and laws (Jin, 2017a), collectivism and individualism (Jin, 2017b), morality and ethics (Wu, 2016), etc., but limited attention has been paid to the theme of interpersonal relationship except for several studies on filial duty (e.g., Wang, 2020; Fu & Wang, 2016). In addition, much comparison is set in a wide social or religious scope such as between Confucianism and Christianity (e.g., Jin, 2017c) or Confucianism and Judaism (Sun, 2018), while the present work intends to focus on the study of interpersonal relationship within the related textual scope of early Confucian and Hebrew classics. For Confucian classics, the book of *Analects* will be focused as it is the main representative of Confucius' ideas and basis of early Confucian classics, and other early Confucian classics such as *Zhong Yong*, *Li Ji*, *Mencius*, and *San Zi Jing* will be mentioned. For Hebrew classics, the book of *Exodus* will be focused since the law of Moses, as the foundation of Israel's national identity and Hebrew wisdom, is introduced for the first time in this book, and other Hebrew classics like *Genesis*, *Deuteronomy*, *Proverbs*, *Jeremiah*, and *Malachi* from *The Old Testament* and books like *Matthew*, *Ephesians*, and *1 Peter* from *The New Testament* will be included as well. Besides, among various interpersonal relations described in these classics, two kinds of relations are targeted in this paper, that is, marital bond and parent-child relation, because both relations are elaborated in detail in these classics, and both are of vital significance to the family and society, and a poor handlings of these relations have brought severe problems at present time.

On Interpersonal Relations in Confucian and Hebrew Classics

Though Confucian and Hebrew classics were compiled in different times, places, and cultures, both classics from ancient human civilizations bear common features. As mentioned above, both endeavor to establish or reestablish a social order from a national chaos of wars or ignorance by emphasizing inter-personal

relationships. In modern psychologist Abraham Harold Maslow's (1908-1970) *Theory of Hierarchy of Needs*, he defines and ranges human needs from the lowest to the highest level, arguing that human beings and civilization evolve on their needs. Among these needs, besides the essential ones like physiological and safety needs, human beings crave for care and respect in human relationships (Maslow, 1987, pp. 40-50). Looking back into history and the immediate world, lack of social bonds is likely to put both individuals and nations into conflicts and miseries. So in both Confucian and Hebrew classics, the ancient sages were enlightened to see this secret of human nature and necessary rules in constructing a civilized society.

Take the focal books of *Analects* and *Exodus* for example. The book of *Analects*, believed to be compiled by Confucius' disciples as a collection of Confucius ideas containing fragments of dialogues between Confucius and his disciples in about 3-2 B.C., has been one of the key literatures to study the ideological legacy of Confucius and Confucianism. Going through its table of contents, one could find that Confucius' philosophy of Ren goes beyond regular understanding of ethics and virtues, and focuses more on the bonds and interaction among human beings instead of mere individual ethics in achieving social orders (An & Luo, 2013). In the patriarchal societies of ancient China, there are five kinds of essential human relationships including those between king and minister, father and son, husband and wife, and also those among brothers and friends. In *Analects* and other Confucian classics, these human relations are illustrated many times (Li, 2009; Li, 2015). The word *Exodus* in Hebrew means the way out, referring to the events happened most commonly considered by historians around 1250 B.C. (Ehrman, 2014, p. 61) when the Israelite fled away from Egypt where they had lived for about 400 years as slaves, heading back for Canaan, a promised land from God to their ancestor Abraham. The author of the book *Exodus* was usually believed to be the national leader Moses who led them out of Egypt. This book describes about Israel's sufferings in Egypt and how God led them out of Egypt through Moses and gave them laws in Mount Sinai. Within the 40 chapters of *Exodus*, starting from Chapter 19 through Chapter 40, the 10 commandments and the extended rules and details are given. Six out of 10 commandments are describing about inter-personal relationships concerning honoring one's parents, no murdering, no commit adultery, no stealing, no false testimony, and no coveting. And the extended details of these commandments try to elaborate on how one behaves and contacts with others.

Before setting out to illustrate the marital and parent-child relations, one point needs to mention is that in both classics, the prerequisite of a good interpersonal relation is faith. According to the explanation in Chinese *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, faith means one sticks to his promise and acts on what he says. In the chapter on *Governing* in *Analects*, Confucius said that a person would accomplish nothing with no credit, just like a cart had no crossbar and a dray had no reins (Zhao, 2019, p. 47). In the chapter of *Yanhui*, *Analects*, when his disciple Tsukung inquired about politics, Confucius said that good supplies of food, good equipment of arms, and the faith of people were essential, and faith was of first importance because people could not do without faith (Zhao, 2019, p. 155). In *Exodus*, there is a strong emphasis on faith as well. If we say that the 10 commandments deal with two kinds of relations, one between God and the Israelite, the other among the Israelite, then the book of *Exodus* focuses on two kinds of faith, that is, one's faith in God and trust in other people. For instance, when God called Moses to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt, facing so many barriers, Moses had to start his journey by putting trust in God (Exodus 3)¹. When the Israelite were thirsty and hungry in wilderness, they

¹ All Biblical scriptures in this paper are cited from books of the *Holy Bible* (New International Version) published in 2007 by Chinese Christian Association. All in-text citation of the books from the Holy Bible follow the international convention. For example, *Exodus 1:3* refers to Chapter 1, Verse 3; *Genesis 2:24-25* refers to Chapter 2, Verse 24-25.

needed faith in God (Exodus 15-17) to be provided with food of quail and manna in the desert of Sin (Exodus 16:13-15), water in the desert of Shur (Exodus 15:22-25) as well as water produced through Moses' striking the rock at Horeb (Exodus 17:6), though these people failed many times. Furthermore, the Israelite needed faith and trust in each other. They should have trusted Moses when he stayed on the mountain with God for the tablets of 10 commandments. Instead, their lack of faith led to their producing an idol cast of a calf as well as other consequences (Exodus 32:2-4). Much detailed regulations concerning their trust in each other were also described (Exodus 21-23).

Marital Relations

When modern technology changes our economic structure, it changes our ideas on marriage. Some people in modern times, after witnessing many unhappy marriages, claim that marriage is the tomb of love, so they choose not to enter this tomb, or once they enter, they are used to the state of being unhappy, instead of being ready to fix or change this situation. The author holds that a happy marriage is one of the essential human rights; everyone needs to fight for it. And it is unfair to be raped off this right by any misconception. A renewing mind about marriage has a great transforming power in this fight. Exploring wisdom in ancient classics could help us to dig deeper into the secret of a happy marriage. Anyway, no one likes to live miserably without the blessing of marriage. Similar teachings and wisdom are found in Confucian and Hebrew classics on marriage. The author would like to draw the readers' attention on the three points below, namely, the primary position of marriage, different roles of husband and wife, and ethical warnings on marriage.

Many Confucian classics emphasize that marriage is of primary importance among various interpersonal relations. In *Zhou Yi (The Book of Changes)*, it says that after heaven and earth are formed, there is men and women, and there comes marriage, then followed by other relations between father and son, king and minister, the senior and the inferior, etc., then social rituals are established, so it's seen that marital bond is taken as an enduring relation lasting for life among many interpersonal relationships (Gao, 1998, p. 483, cited from Liu, 2006, p. 174). In Chapter 12, the book of *Zhong Yong (The Golden Mean)*, it says that the Tao of being a gentleman starts from marriage, and if one could develop a close bond with one's spouse, then he would understand the Tao of heaven and earth (Lian, 2018, p. 9). In the chapter on marriage from the book *Bai Hu Tong Yi* written by Ban Gu from East Han Dynasty, it says that it is the bond between husband and wife that initiates other kinds of relations in human society. In compiling *Shi Jing (The Book of Songs)*, Confucius compiled and preserved many poems praising the love and harmony between husband and wife. For example, it says that when husband and wife love each other, it is like playing a harmonious music (Zhang, 2006, p. 57). In ancient Hebrew culture, marriage is also of primary role in human relations. When God created heaven and earth, on the sixth day, he created a man and a woman, Adam and Eve. They are both naked but felt no shame, because they are one flesh. Hebrew people believed that husband needs to leave his parents and unite with his wife and become one (Genesis 2:24-25). This description in Genesis sets the tone for marriage. Adam and Eve are believed to be the first and most intimate human relation created by God. This bond should not be separated by human misbehavior, because God is the witness between husband and wife, this relation is permanent and for life, and his wife is his marriage covenant, so a man could not abandon his wife married at youth (Malachi 2:14). Though in the law of Moses, it says that a man could divorce his wife by writing her a certificate (Deuteronomy 24:1-2), Jesus said that Moses permitted divorce because people's hearts were hard, not because

it was right, and this was not the case in the beginning (Matthew 19:8). So it's seen that in Hebrew culture, marriage is a testimony of love, eternal bond, and of primary importance in human relations.

Many Confucian classics stress the equality between husband and wife, claiming that husband and wife take a different role in marriage. Confucian scholars Dong Zhongshu and Ban Gu in Han Dynasty tried to analyze marital relations from the perspective of *Yin* and *Yang*, saying that the two sides are equal, cooperative, and go hand in hand, but still take different roles and positions in the social hierarchy (Zhong, 2019, p. 62). Confucian philosophy claims, on one hand, the equality between husband and wife, and that husband should not mistreat their wives as inferior. A man could take concubines who are inferior to him, but his wife enjoys equal position with the husband in the family, and one who unreasonably divorces his wife would bear severe legal consequences (Zhong, 2019, p. 64). On the other, husband and wife are considered to fulfill different roles in the family. In *Li Ji (The Book of Rites)*, it says that the bridegroom walks ahead of his bride on the wedding, because husband leads his wife and wife submits to her husband in the marriage, which is as natural as that the king leads his ministers and also heaven is created before earth (Zhong, 2019, p. 65). In Hebrew classics, husband and wife also takes a different role in marriage, mostly husband takes care of his wife and wife submits to her husband, and the rights of wives are especially protected in a patriarchal society. In the 7th commandment of the Hebrew law, it says that the Israelite shall not commit adultery and in the 10th commandment, it says that they shall not covet their neighbor's wife (Exodus 20:14-17). Then the law of Moses details the illegal sexual relationships out of marriage and regulations intended to protect marriage (e.g., Deuteronomy 22:13-30, 24:1-5, 25:5-12). In a patriarchal society when women were considered inferior to men, most of these regulations try to protect women's rights in the marriage. Husband needs to fulfill his role in marriage to lead, love, protect, and care for his wife. For example, if a man has recently married, he should stay at home to bring happiness to his wife instead of being sent to the battlefield (Deuteronomy 24:5). Similarly, wife needs to fulfill her role to submit to her husband; if she is found with illegal relation out of marriage, she has to bear severe consequences such as being toned to death (Deuteronomy 22:20-21). Based on the law, later Hebrew saints elaborated the roles of husband and wife by confirming the husband's leading role of love and care for his wife and wife's submitting role in trusting and respecting her husband (Ephesians 5:22-33; 1 Peter 3:1-3; Jeremiah 2:2; Proverbs 31:10-12).

Besides similar elaboration of marriage being a primary and enduring interpersonal relation as well as the different roles of husband and wife, both Confucian classics and Hebrew laws warn that men should pay more attention to women's character and inner beauty instead of their looks and trappings, probably because men in nature are likely to be attracted and seduced by the latter which usually brings damage or disaster to a marriage. In the chapter of Lord Spirit, *Analects*, Confucius exclaimed that he had never seen a man who loved virtues more than he did a beauty (Zhao, 2019, p. 199). In the chapter of *The Chi's, Analects*, Confucius warned gentlemen to abstain themselves from three things, and one of them is seduction at a young age (Zhao, 2019, p. 213). Despite of warning men to keep themselves away from seduction, some researchers claim that another way to keep men away from the seduction is to degrade women and keep them in an inferior social position (Yao & Chen, 2013, p. 166). For example, in chapter *Yanghuo, Analects*, Confucius said that women and flunkies are hard to sustain; when you are near, they are contemptuous, when you are afar, they complain a lot (Zhao, 2019, p. 230). In ancient Hebrew culture, there are similar teachings like men should not lust for women's beauty and let her captivate with her eyes (Proverb 6:25), a seductive women's house is a highway to

the grave leading down to death (Proverb 7:27), and women's charm is deceptive and her beauty is fleeting (Proverbs 31:30). In Hebrew laws, as mentioned previously, on marriage bond, much emphasis is put on warnings against adultery which is one of the most dangerous consequences of being seduced by women's looks, and the adulterers will be judged by God (Hebrews 13:4).

Parent-Child Relations

Parent-child relation is also one of the core relations in a family. A good parent-child relation would build up a loving, healthy, and harmonious atmosphere, and help pass on the best qualities of the family to the next generation. In present China, many children are left behind in the countryside alone or with their grandparents because their parents, called farmer workers, flow into the fast speed urbanization of China. Many sociologists say that these children, brought up with an absence of parents, would be a big social concern in the next decades. So it's time to rethink about building up a healthy parent-child bond. As to similar teachings on parent-child relation from both Confucian and Hebrew classics, the author would like to focus on the following three aspects: the role of father, the role of child, and ethical warnings in parent-child relations.

Firstly, as to the role of being a father, both classics proclaim that a father should take the responsibility to teach and discipline their children. In Confucian tradition, rules and wisdom and social convention are passed on from generation to generation basically through teachings of parents. So parents or mostly fathers in ancient patriarchal societies are responsible in disciplining their children. Chinese are familiar with what it says in *San Zi Jing (The Three Character Classic)* that if a son is not well behaved, it is the fault of his father, because it is his father who does not teach him. In the chapter of *Isn't It, Analects*, Confucius said people usually look at one's wills if his father is alive, look at what he does when his father passed away (Zhao, 2019, p. 36). In ancient Hebrew culture, a father also takes the main responsibility in teaching and disciplining his son. In Hebrew wisdom, people believe that if a father loves his son, he would discipline him, and if the father spares the rod, it is not love at all (Proverb 13:24). It says that a father is responsible to train his child in the way he should go, and he also needs to help him stick to his commitment (Proverb 22:6). Also, fathers should not exasperate their children; instead, they should bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4), that is, the law of Moses.

As to the role of being a child, the wisdom from both classics believe that children need to submit to their parents and follow their teachings and disciplines. In Confucian tradition, the child's submission to their parents is elaborated through filial piety. In *Xiao Jing (The Book of Filial Piety)*, one of the first among the 13 Confucian classics, it says that parents are the ones who brought their children to this world, fed them, and brought them up, so children need to listen to and keep filial to their parents (Yao, 2013, p. 158). The son needs to follow his father's teachings even after his father passed away, and he should not change his father's way at least for three years (Zhao, 2019, p. 36). In chapter of *Yanghuo, Analects*, when Chaiwo said three years of mourning is too long, Confucius replied that a baby stayed three years with his mother before getting off his mother's arms, so mourning of one's parents was a natural and universal rule because one's love for his parents was more worthy than three years (Zhao, 2019, p. 227). In ancient Hebrew wisdom, children should obey their parents because it is a right thing (Ephesians 6:1). A son should keep his father's commands and mother's teachings, fasten them around his neck so as to help him bind these words in the heart. When he walks, these commands and teachings would guide him, when he sleeps, they will watch over him, and they are a lamp in

his life, leading them away from traps and dangers in his life (Proverb 6:20-24). So the child should listen to his father and mother instead of despising them (Proverb 23:22).

As to the ethical warnings concerning parent-child bond, both Confucian and Hebrew wisdom seem to emphasize on children's responsibility and fidelity to their parents. The reason might be that parents, especially when they are at an old age, need care and protection from their children, while children, at their prime years of life, are likely to show partiality to their wives, children, and other worldly concerns but ignore their parents. In Confucian tradition, there are rigid rules about fidelity, because fidelity is the first quality of a good man and one needs to try his best to treat their parents well. For example, Mencius listed five kinds of disobedient behavior of children to their parents, mostly referring to one's ignorance of or not caring for their parents because of their partiality to their wives or indulgence in alcohol, wealth, competition, fight, or other worldly cares (Yao, 2013, p. 160). In the first half chapter of *Lilou, Mencius*, it says that if a man is not filial and submits to his parents, he is not a good man and a good son (Yang, 2000, p. 43). In the chapter of *Isn't It, Analects*, Confucius' disciple Tsuhsia said one should serve his parents at his best (Zhao, 2019, p. 33). In the chapter of *Governing, Analects*, one of Confucius disciples Tsuyu asked about filial piety; Confucius replied that people usually regard piety as taking care of their parents, but people could also take care of their dogs and horses, so if without veneration, there would be no difference between men and animals (Zhao, 2019, p. 41). In *Xiao Jing (The Book of Filial Piety)*, it says that if a man loves others instead of first loving his parents, it is against moral ethics, and if a man respects others instead of first respecting his parents, it is against social rituals (Yang, 2000, p. 42). In Hebrew culture, one's submission to his parents is also highly valued. In the law of Moses, the 5th commandment, prior to all interpersonal relations, claims that if one honors his parents, he would enjoy long life in the land (Exodus 20:12). In the new Testament, it also emphasizes that this commandment is the first one with a promise, that is, if one could really do this, the promise of a long life would be fulfilled (Ephesians 6:2-3). For ancient Hebrews, glorifying God is the prerequisite of their life, while one's behavior of honoring and glorifying their parents equals that of glorifying God (Yao, 2013, p. 160).

Conclusion

This paper compares similar teachings from Confucian and Hebrew classics concerning two kinds of interpersonal relationships: marital bond and parent-child relation. It is found that in marital bond, both classics teach that marriage enjoys a primary position among all human relations, husband and wife take a different role in this relation and each needs to find and fulfill his or her role, and there are similar ethical warnings to husband not to be seduced by outward trappings and looks of women so as to protect the marriage bond. Furthermore, in parent-child relation, both classics teach that fathers should teach and discipline their children to walk on the right way, children need to follow the disciplines of their parents, and both classics give ethical warnings on children's fidelity and submission to their parents. The elaboration of similarities in interpersonal relations from the two wisdom contributes to the cross-cultural studies, helping to develop a critical view of both cultures in the context of globalization. While this paper focuses only on the similarities concerning human relations, differences still exist in this cross-cultural study, because explorations of similarities and differences are both needed not only to peek into our common human nature and living circumstances, but also to find out the gap so as to complement each other. So prospective research could be conducted on the differences as well. In addition, on similarities of the two cultures, a more profound elaboration could be considered such as the explanation and evaluation of the similarities so as to promote a better mutual understanding and acceptance.

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