

The Bridge Between Morality and Education: An Overview of Ancient Chinese Family Virtue Thought

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Abstract: This paper aims to explore the significant role of ancient Chinese family virtue thought in moral education. Through a systematic analysis of the connotation and characteristics of family virtue, its historical evolution, and the reasons for its inception, the paper reveals the crucial role of family virtue in shaping individual character, maintaining family harmony, and preserving cultural heritage. As a core part of traditional Chinese culture, family virtue has exhibited unique forms and content in different historical periods and continues to exert a significant influence in modern society. Studying family virtue thought is beneficial for a deeper understanding of the traditional Chinese moral education system, and it holds important practical significance for modern family education and social moral construction.

Keywords: Morality; Education; Ancient China; Family Virtue

1. Introduction

Family ethos, as the essence of traditional Chinese culture, has evolved over millennia, profoundly influencing societal ethical concepts, moral education, and cultural heritage. In the Western Jin Dynasty, Pan Yue's "Family Style Poem" marked the initial formation of the concept of family ethos in literature, reflecting the era's emphasis on family education and moral transmission. Yu Xin's appraisal of Pan Yue as "initiating the exposition of family ethos" further established its position in literature and social thought. Confucius's filial piety doctrine laid the foundation for family ethos in the pre-Qin period, emphasizing the role of family education in shaping personal virtues. From the Han to the Wei-Jin-Southern-Northern Dynasties, family ethos education gradually became systematic, enriched by texts such as Liu Xiang's "Admonition to Zi Xin" and Liu

Bang's "Manual for the Crown Prince." During the Sui-Tang-Song-Yuan periods, the establishment of the imperial examination system and the rise of the literati class expanded the scope of family ethos education, with Yan Zhitui's "Yan's Family Instructions" marking its maturity. In the Ming-Qing periods, the proliferation of family instruction texts, exemplified by Zhu Yuanzhang's "Ancestral Instructions" and Emperor Kangxi's "Courtroom Teachings," showcased the imperial family ethos and its broad societal impact. [1-10]

The significance of family ethos extends beyond basic moral education, fostering individual moral qualities and social responsibility through inter-family influence and education, and ensuring the continuity and stability of traditional Chinese culture as a vital cultural transmission pathway.

2. Connotations and Characteristics of Family Ethos

2.1 Connotations of Family Ethos

Family ethos, a core concept in traditional Chinese culture, encompasses rich and profound meanings, transcending mere interactions among family members to embody cross-generational cultural transmission and moral education. Its formation and development are both historical sedimentation and cultural selection, reflecting shared values, lifestyles, moral norms, and cultural styles formed through long-term family practices.

Moral norms and values: Family ethos primarily embodies moral norms, including pursuits and practices of virtues such as kindness, integrity, filial piety, and respect for the elderly and young. These values are passed down through generations, guiding family behavior.

Lifestyles and behavioral patterns: Family ethos also manifests in family members' lifestyles and behavioral patterns, such as thrift,

honesty, and courage. These habits and patterns influence personal development and societal ethos.

Cultural transmission and educational methods: Family ethos serves as a vital cultural transmission pathway. Through family education, including verbal instruction and family rituals, historical stories, cultural knowledge, and artistic cultivation are passed on to subsequent generations, forming unique family culture.

2.2 Characteristics of Family Ethos

Inheritance: the most significant characteristic of family ethos is its inheritance. It is transmitted and sustained across generations through mutual influence and education, ensuring family continuity and stability.

Implicit and explicit aspects: Family ethos combines implicit spiritual and value dimensions with explicit behavioral and habit dimensions, creating a unified norm that family members collectively recognize and follow.

Diversity: Varying historical backgrounds, geographical environments, and family professions result in rich diversity in family ethos, each with unique characteristics and styles.

Temporal adaptability: While family ethos is inherited, it is not static. It adjusts and updates with societal development and cultural changes to adapt to new environments and backgrounds. As a vital component of traditional Chinese culture, the profound connotations and unique characteristics of family ethos profoundly influence family members' growth and development and positively contribute to the Inheritance and development of societal culture.

3. Historical Evolution of Family Ethos

The rudimentary form of family ethos emerged as early as the Western Zhou period, primarily reflected in rituals and family teachings. During this era, the flourishing of ritual culture led to the establishment of family etiquette as a behavioral norm, laying the groundwork for the formation of family ethos.

The Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period marked a significant era of intellectual and cultural development in China, with the rise of various philosophical schools, particularly Confucianism, leading to

the gradual formation and promotion of family ethos. Confucius's philosophy of "self-cultivation, family harmony, state governance, and world peace" emphasized the importance of personal integrity and family unity in state management. Family ethos during this period was embodied in the moral cultivation, ritual norms, and family responsibility of its members.

After Dong Zhongshu advocated the "sole reverence for Confucianism" in the Han Dynasty, Confucian thought became the orthodox ideology of the state, and family ethos further developed during this period. Family teachings emerged as a crucial method of family education and gradually became a significant vehicle for the transmission of ethical and moral values within families. The Tang Dynasty was a period of flourishing family ethos culture, with the famous "Yan's Family Instructions" completed during this era. Yan Zhitui summarized the experiences and lessons of family education in this work, emphasizing the importance of family education for personal growth and social stability.

The rise of Neo-Confucianism in the Song Dynasty led to a greater emphasis on moral and ethical education in family ethos. Zhu Xi, a Neo-Confucian scholar, emphasized "cultivation as the foundation" in his family teachings, focusing on the moral cultivation and conduct education of family members. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, family ethos gradually integrated with law, with family teachings and clan rules becoming important bases for regulating family members' behavior. The content of family teachings during this period was rich and diverse, including education on filial piety towards elders and requirements for children to study diligently and abide by the law.

In modern society, family ethos continues to play a crucial role in Inheritance Chinese traditional culture and values. With social progress and educational advancement, modern family ethos not only inherits traditional ethical and moral education but also incorporates modern educational and legal systems, showing a trend towards diversification. Family education now focuses more on cultivating children's independent thinking and innovative spirit, while also emphasizing social responsibility and moral

norms.

4. Origins of Family Ethos

Understanding the origins of family ethos is key to comprehending why it varies. As an important aspect of Chinese culture, the "superstructure" status of family ethos in family education dictates that to eliminate its negative elements and restore its positive functions, one must start by understanding its causes. In other words, grasping the influence of economic foundations, political demands, and other cultural factors on the formation of family ethos is the primary prerequisite for understanding and restoring it.

4.1 Adaptation to the Development of Small-Scale Peasant Economy

The unique natural and geographical environment of Chinese civilization determined its traditional agricultural production methods and the culture it nurtured. Originating in the Yellow River basin, Chinese civilization, with its abundant water and fertile soil, enjoyed a natural advantage conducive to farming. Unlike nomadic tribes, the meticulous farming methods of the Chinese people fixed landowners and crops in specific regions, stabilizing family structures by reducing the mobility of family members, thereby providing basic conditions for family reproduction and the Inheritance of family ethos.

Production methods decisively influence the Connotation and functions of family ethos. In addition to food supply, families also needed daily necessities. Considering the physical differences between men and women, cooperative labor division became the basic production method of agricultural civilization. the "Discourses of the States" records: "One-man farms, a hundred eat; one-woman weaves, a hundred wear." This traditional labor method, tested by reality and practice, proved sufficient to support the basic needs of a family.

Economic changes inevitably lead to cultural shifts. With the refinement of farming techniques and the diversification of needs, the exchange of goods and currency among families became an inevitable result of the development of the small-scale peasant economy. the enrichment of exchange forms promoted the expansion of trading ranges, enabling cultural exchanges through economic circulation. To accumulate wealth, families

often imitated the production methods of those with high crop yields and good quality. In the process of learning and referencing, people discovered that wealthy families not only possessed advanced production technologies but also maintained good family ethos. When the pursuit of each family transcended the material level to the cultural level, family ethos took its first step towards externalization, and societal norms and customs began to form.

The evolution of production methods determined the formation of the holistic life view of family ethos. Early family ethos exhibited a progression from collectivism to kinship. In the early stages of primitive society, the method of communal labor gave rise to collectivist ideas. Although the concept of family did not yet exist, there was an implicit common adherence similar to family ethos: equal access to production resources, equitable distribution of labor outcomes, and cooperative sharing of interpersonal relationships. By the end of primitive society, the emergence of the male farming and female weaving production method further deepened the collective concept. Although the emergence of families divided society into independent units, the close blood ties strengthened the collective consciousness of families, giving rise to interpersonal relationships based on kinship. Compared to the "material combination" of the early primitive society, kinship had a stronger transformative and cohesive force, allowing family character traits to be Inheritance through family members. In the progression from collectivism to kinship, family ethos completed its value guidance for the holistic life view of family members.

Family ethos is not only a shared ethical norm among family members but also reflects mutual assistance and emotional exchange among them. Through the doctrine of filial piety and fraternal respect, family ethos binds individuals closely to the family, enhancing overall family harmony. the doctrine of filial piety and fraternal respect not only shapes family relationships on a moral level but also institutionalizes these ethical norms through family teachings and admonitions. Liu Zongyuan's "Liu's Family Teachings" in the Tang Dynasty emphasized parents and friendly relations among siblings, considering filial piety and fraternal respect as important family ethos for managing the household and dealing

with the world. the doctrine of filial piety and fraternal respect enables the ethical behavior of family members to be supervised and corrected, promoting the rational operation and orderly development of the family.

4.2 Fulfillment of Ethical Needs of Filial Piety and Fraternal Respect

The "Analects of Confucius" states: "Filial piety and fraternal respect are the foundation of benevolence. " "Benevolence" is the core of Confucianism, and Confucius considered filial piety and fraternal respect as the root of "benevolence, " proving their significant moral role and high cultural status. Family ethical relationships, derived from kinship, inherently possess the orientation of "filial piety" and "fraternal respect. " Family ethos aims to reveal the necessity and universality of the doctrine of filial piety and fraternal respect, thereby making it secular and constant. the "Classic of Filial Piety" states: "Filial piety is the foundation of virtue. " As the foundational culture for cultivating personality and morality, family ethos's primary function is to shape and nurture "filial piety. " Only when "filial piety" becomes a consistent tenet of family ethos can the family possibly endure. the "Collected Commentaries on the Four Books" states: "To be good to one's elder brother is to be a younger brother. " "Younger brother" refers to "fraternal respect. " "Fraternal respect" also originates within the family, focusing on peer affection, which is a basic ethical relationship in family ethos. "Filial piety" and "fraternal respect" together build the basic framework of family stability, laying the human logic for the continuation of family ethos.

The practical significance of the doctrine of filial piety and fraternal respect lies in shaping the respect, kindness, and gratitude of subordinates towards superiors in the family. Traditional filial piety and fraternal respect believe that the downward compatibility of parents and elder siblings is a natural human and biological trait. the distinction between humans and animals lies in humans' ability to cultivate, nurture, and awaken filial piety and fraternal respect in the other party through cultural cultivation, achieving mutual assistance and emotional exchange among family members. the "Analects of Confucius" states: "Be cautious in funeral rites and pursue the distant ancestors, and the people's morality

will become thick. " the doctrine of filial piety and fraternal respect can effectively connect individuals with the family, integrating personal independence into the overall harmony of the family. Through "filial piety" towards parents and "fraternal respect" towards elder siblings, one can cultivate a family tradition of cautious funeral rites and pursuit of distant ancestors, ultimately completing the recognition of the entire family culture and achieving the Inheritance and continuation of family ethos.

The doctrine of filial piety and fraternal respect, based on internal circulation as the basic ethical method, elevates family ethos from intangible cultural constraints to relatively explicit order norms. the doctrine of filial piety and fraternal respect becomes the key to the moral continuity of family ethos, and the explicit functions of "filial piety" and "fraternal respect" promote the historical Inheritance of family ethos. Compared to the oral and physical education of family ethos in ancient times, and different from the natural affection of kinship, the "filial piety" and "fraternal respect" cultivated by Chinese civilization also require certain institutional constraints to better realize and Inheritance. At this point, family teachings and admonitions came into being. Family ethos recorded in books can maintain family interpersonal relationships and order in a manner similar to rules and regulations. Throughout history, most of the family teachings and admonitions that have been passed down to this day contain rich filial piety and fraternal respect ideas. For example, Liu Fei's family teachings in the Tang Dynasty believed that "discussing family laws, one should base oneself on filial piety and fraternal respect, " considering parents and friendly relations among siblings as important family ethos for managing the household and dealing with the world. Family ethos containing the doctrine of filial piety and fraternal respect, though intangible, powerfully supervises and corrects the ethical behavior of family members, promoting the rational operation of the family. Moreover, based on "filial piety" and "fraternal respect, " family ethos such as "kindness, " "goodness, " "obedience, " and "righteousness" assigns different ethical missions to family members for different relationship subjects, achieving a virtuous cycle of mutual benefit between

superiors and subordinates.

4.3 Meeting the Political Demands of the Ruling Class

Kinship is the most fundamental and solid interpersonal relationship in a family. To maintain social stability, ancient rulers imitated family ethos ethics to create a "ruler-subject" political ethic, constructing norms suitable for national governance. As the influence of family ethos externalized, the state and family gradually merged, forming a social ethic of "ruler-subject, father-son" and "family-state isomorphism." The feudal patriarchal clan system of the Zhou Dynasty is an example, extending family ethos to the national level and establishing norms that constrain the behavior of all societal members.

The establishment of systems always revolves around political needs. the survival model of farming and reading, which both rulers and the ruled Admire, provided a specific path for family ethos to exert its political role. the key to farming and reading lies in "farming" and "reading," with the emphasis on "Inheritance." The continuation of each family is a stable guarantee for the overall social continuation, and the continuation methods of families are also adopted by society.

Rulers imitated family ethos ethics to create a "ruler-subject" political ethic, constructing norms suitable for national governance. the externalization of family ethos's influence gradually merged the state and family, forming a social ethic of "family-state isomorphism." the feudal patriarchal clan system of the Zhou Dynasty is an example, where family ethos no longer remained confined to the family sphere but became a norm that constrained the behavior of all societal members. the political demand for family-state isomorphism prompted rulers to integrate their values into family ethos, promoting the significant role of family ethos in national governance.

5. Conclusion

Family ethos not only plays a role in moral education within families but also serves to maintain order and unite people at the societal level. Rulers have used family ethos as a crucial tool for governing the nation, emphasizing family virtues such as filial piety and loyalty to strengthen the sense of responsibility and loyalty of societal members

towards their families and the nation. Rulers have incorporated these ethical norms into laws and systems, extending the influence of family ethos to all levels of society, forming a social governance system based on family ethos.

Through the promotion of family ethos, rulers not only consolidated their ruling positions but also promoted social stability and harmony. Family ethos became a vital link connecting families and the nation, individuals and society, allowing family ethics and national ethics to permeate each other, jointly constructing the moral and political order of ancient Chinese society. Rulers utilized the power of family ethos to achieve effective governance of society, making family ethos an integral part of national governance.

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