

## Article

# Discussing the Relationship between Father and Son, Ruler and Subjects in the *Xiaojing*: Based on the Dunhuang Manuscripts

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**Abstract:** It has long been accepted that the ancient Chinese ruler–subjects relationship was a metaphorical extension of the father–son relationship, where loyalty and family reverence were considered synonymous. The Confucian classic the *Xiaojing* is taken as a significant piece of evidence supporting this view. However, based on the annotated version of the *Xiaojing* discovered in Dunhuang, it is evident that during the Han Dynasty and the Six Dynasties period, Confucian scholars made clear distinctions between father–son relationships and ruler–subjects relationships. They also made a clear differentiation between the moral connotations of loyalty and family reverence. The father–son relationship is a bond of blood, while the ruler–subjects relationship is a bond of duty and appropriateness, meaning that the ethical requirements for the father–son relationship and ruler–subjects relationship are fundamentally different. Therefore, expressions such as “service to ruler with family reverence is loyalty” does not mean to unify loyalty and family reverence, but means that the governor should select people who have already cultivated the virtue of family reverence to become officials because they have learnt how to show respect in their family life.

**Keywords:** the *Xiaojing*; family reverence; loyalty

## 1. Introduction

The Confucian classic the *Xiaojing* 孝经 (usually translated as the Book of Filial Piety or the Classic of Family Reverence) is an important Confucian text written in the Han dynasty<sup>1</sup>. Believed to be the record of Confucius teaching the principle of *Xiao* 孝 (usually translated as filial piety or family reverence) to his disciple Master Zeng 曾子, it has deeply influenced and shaped the understanding of the father–son and ruler–subjects relationships, which formed the foundation of politics and social relations in ancient China.

Max Weber put forward a highly influential viewpoint regarding the father–son relationship and the ruler–subject relationship in Confucian society. He believed that there was a strong similarity between the two.<sup>2</sup> Many scholars strongly criticize the negative role played by filial piety in ancient Chinese society. For example, Walter S. Slote claims that “Confucianism was based on authoritarianism, and filial piety was the principle instrument through which it was established and maintained.” (Slote and Devos 1998, p. 46). In recent years, scholars such as Roger T. Ames have defended the Confucian concept of the family as reflected in the *Xiaojing*. However, there has not been sufficient and thorough exploration regarding the similarities and differences between the ruler–subjects and father–son relationships in the *Xiaojing*. The early annotated versions of the *Xiaojing* unearthed in Dunhuang 敦煌 provide important references for clarifying this question.

The understanding of the father–son and ruler–subjects relationships in the *Xiaojing* can be roughly divided into two periods in the history of explaining the *Xiaojing*. The first period is from the Han dynasty to the Tang dynasty, when the *Xiaojing* was considered to be a classic related to the political system. In this period, the father–son and ruler–subjects relationships were clearly distinguished, and therefore the *xiao* 孝 and *zhong* 忠 (usually translated as loyalty when used in the context of the relationship between ruler and subjects) were separate concepts with their own independent connotations. The second period began after Emperor Tang Minghuang’s 唐明皇 (The Emperor Ming of Tang Dynasty,



**Citation:** Chen, Bisheng. 2023. Discussing the Relationship between Father and Son, Ruler and Subjects in the *Xiaojing*: Based on the Dunhuang Manuscripts. *Religions* 14: 916. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070916>

Academic Editor: Zhongjiang Wang

Received: 25 June 2023

Revised: 7 July 2023

Accepted: 13 July 2023

Published: 17 July 2023



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685–762 AD) commentary of the *Xiaojing* was promulgated. In his commentary, the *Xiaojing* was transformed from a political and moral classic that regulated politics to a moral treasure trove for the emperor to cultivate people. In this period, the boundaries between father–son and ruler–subjects relationships became blurred, and as a result, loyalty and family reverence merged into one.

In the *Xiaojing*, the following three passages are the main targets of criticism for their description of the father–son and ruler–subjects relationships<sup>3</sup>:

《孝经·圣治章》：父子之道，天性也，君臣之义也。

The proper way (*dao*) between father and son is natural propensity that by extension becomes the appropriate relationship (*yi*) between ruler and subject. (Sagely Governing)

《孝经·士章》：资于事父以事母而爱同，资于事父以事君而敬同。

The lower officials drawing upon their devotion to their fathers to serve their mothers, the love they feel towards them is the same; drawing upon their devotion to their fathers to serve their ruler, the respecting (*jing*) they feel for them is the same. (The Lower Officials)

《孝经·广扬名章》：君子之事亲孝，故忠可移于君。

The Master said, “It is only because exemplary persons serve their parents with family reverence that this same feeling can be extended to their ruler as loyalty. (Elaborating upon “Raising One’s Name High for Posterity”)

During the May Fourth Movement in the twentieth century in China, the scholar Wu Yu 吴虞 (1872–1949 AD), in his essay “*The Family System as the Basis for Authoritarianism*” cited these three passages along with Emperor Tang Minghuang’s annotations and analyzed their meaning:

Upon careful examination of Confucius’ teachings, he considered *xiao* as the foundation of all virtues, so he established his own theory with *xiao* as the starting point. The character “教” (teaching) also derives its meaning from the character “孝”. When ordinary people are not in official position, they practice filial piety at home by serving their parents. When they go out to serve as an official, they practice *xiao* by serving the ruler. *Xiao* is both filial and political, making no distinction between family and state; “To find loyal subjects, one must look at the door of filial sons” indicates that there is no difference between a ruler and a father. The scope of *xiao* encompasses everything. The family system and authoritarian politics are closely intertwined, inseparable. (Wu 2013, pp. 8–9).

Wu Yu’s analysis suggests that in Confucian teachings, the concept of *xiao* serves as the foundation for both familial and political relationships. The interconnection between family and state, as well as the ruler–subjects and father–son relationships, contributes to the development of an authoritarian political system, where the family system and political structure are deeply intertwined and cannot be separated<sup>4</sup>.

The belief that the ancient Chinese ruler–subjects relationship was an imitation of the father–son relationship, and that loyalty to rulers and family reverence to fathers are similar concepts, is widely accepted.<sup>5</sup> However, whether Confucian thought truly establishes the ruler–subjects relationship on the foundation of the father–son relationship, and loyalty on the foundation of family reverence, is indeed a question worth re-examining.

## 2. Clarifying the Relations between Father and Son, Ruler and Subject

In the *Xiaojing*, the most representative statement on human relationships can be found in the in the Chapter “Sagely Governing”. The following is the classic text with Emperor Tang Minghuang’s commentary:

父子之道，天性也，君臣之义也。（注）父子之道，天性之常，加以尊严，又有君臣之义。

The proper way (*dao*) between father and son is a natural propensity that by extension becomes the appropriate relationship (*yi*) between ruler and subject.

*Commentary:* The way of the father and son is the constant of nature, and when it is honored and dignified, it also becomes the way between the ruler and subject. (Tang and Xing 2007, p. 38)

父母生之，续莫大焉。（注）父母生子，传体相续。人伦之道，莫大于斯。

There is no bond more important than the father and mother giving life to their progeny and there is no generosity more profound than the care and concern this progeny receives from their parents.

*Commentary:* It is the parents who give body and life to progeny. Therefore, there is no other relationship more essential and important than the relationship between parents and progeny.

君亲临之，厚莫重焉。（注）谓父为君，以临于己。恩义之厚，莫重于斯。

There is nothing more grateful than the ruler personally giving governing and caring to his subjects.

*Commentary:* One should treat his father as a ruler. There is no other relationship which embodies the deepest graciousness and righteousness as such.

This paragraph has long been regarded as an expression that equates the father–son relationship with the ruler–subjects relationship, thereby transforming the father–son ethic into a ruler–subjects ethic. Indeed, this is also the case when considering Emperor Tang Minghuang’s commentary. However, if we carefully examine the text, it can be observed that “the proper way (*dao*) between father and son” and “the appropriate relationship (*yi*) between ruler and subject”, “father and mother giving life to their progeny”, and “ruler personally giving governing and caring to his subjects” form a contrastive structure, which indicates that the father and ruler are different entities. But Tang Minghuang’s commentary combined the father–son and ruler–subjects relationships together in the previous sentence, therefore leaving the “ruler” with no explanation in the following sentence. As a result, he had to interpret “ruler” as “parents like a ruler”. In short, in the original text, the father–son and ruler–subjects relationships were discussed separately. Yet Tang Minghuang’s commentary combined them together, seemingly providing a coherent interpretation of the text, but in fact, it leads to misunderstandings.

Before the commentary of Tang Minghuang was published, there were two other popular versions of the *Xiaojing* in the Tang dynasty. One was the Old Text version and the other was the New Text version. The New Text version adopted commentary by Zheng Xuan 郑玄 (a prominent Confucian scholar and commentator during the Eastern Han Dynasty, 127–200 AD) and the Old Text version adopted commentary by Kong Anguo 孔安国 (a renowned Confucian scholar and commentator during the Western Han Dynasty, 156–74 BC). Emperor Tang Minghuang commented on the *Xiaojing* twice: in the tenth year of the Kaiyuan 开元 era (722 AD) and in the second year of the Tianbao 天宝 era (743 AD). He used the New Text version for the scripture and mixed annotations from various scholars for his own commentary, then promulgated it throughout the country. Since then, the interpretations of Kong and Zheng were combined into one unified version by Emperor Tang Minghuang. As a result, his Imperial Commentary has been accepted and circulated for a thousand years without any alternative interpretations.

However, in the past century, numerous manuscripts have been unearthed from the Dunhuang 敦煌 caves, enabling us to see the Tang dynasty’s version of the *Xiaojing* with Zheng Xuan’s commentary. It can be seen that Emperor Tang Minghuang made changes to the New Text of the *Xiaojing* and that his commentary had a particular political agenda. In the newly discovered Dunhuang manuscripts of the *Xiaojing*, the sentence reads as “父子之道天性君臣之义父母生之续莫大焉君亲临之厚莫重焉”. There are no two “也” characters in this version. The text and commentary by Zheng Xuan is as follows:

父子之道天性，（注）性，常也。父子相生，天之常道。

The proper way (*dao*) between father and son is a natural propensity.

*Commentary:* *xing* refers to constancy. The father giving birth to son is a constant way in nature.

君臣之义。（注）君臣非有骨肉之亲，但义合耳。三谏不从，待放而去。

The relationship between ruler and subject is bond by duty.

*Commentary:* There is no blood relationship between ruler and subjects; they are bond by duty. If after advising the ruler three times and still not being heeded, the subject can wait to be dismissed and then leave.

父母生之，续莫大焉。（注）父母生之，骨肉相连属，复何加焉。

There is no bond more important than the father and mother giving life to their progeny and there is no generosity more profound than the care and concern this progeny receives from their parents.

*Commentary:* Parents give life to their progeny, and there is a bond of flesh and blood between them. What more could be added to this connection?

君亲临之，厚莫重焉。（注）君亲择贤，显之以爵，宠之以禄，厚之至也。

There is nothing more grateful than the ruler personally giving governing and caring to his subjects. *Commentary:* The ruler personally selects the virtuous, honors them with titles, bestows them with rewards, and shows the utmost favor. (Chen 1987, pp. 138–41).

With Zheng Xuan's annotations coming to light, this may overturn a thousand years of the interpretation of Emperor Tang Minghuang. The main difference between Zheng Xuan and Emperor Tang Minghuang lies in their understanding of the father–son and ruler–subjects relationship. Emperor Tang Minghuang combined the two concepts into one, while Zheng Xuan treated them separately. Regarding the phrase “the proper way (*dao*) between father and son is a natural propensity”, Zheng Xuan's commentary means that the father–son relationship is inherently established by nature, and that there is no escape from it in the world. In terms of “the relationship between ruler and subjects,” Zheng Xuan did not believe that the ruler–subjects relationship is the same as the father–son relationship. On the contrary, he emphasized the differences between the two relationships. Therefore, his explanation particularly stressed that “the ruler and subjects are not related by blood, but are bound by duty.” The “ruler-subjects relationship bound by duty” is the core principle of the Confucian view on the relationship between ruler and subject. In his annotations, Zheng Xuan is concerned that readers may not understand the meaning of “bound by duty,” so he adds an explanation: “If after advising the ruler three times and still not being heeded, the subject can wait to be dismissed and then leave”.

When annotating classics, Zheng Xuan usually focused on explaining the meanings of individual characters and cross-referenced different classics for mutual verification, rarely adding additional text to explain the classics. However, in this case, the added text serves two purposes. First, it particularly highlights the differences between the father–son and ruler–subjects relationships. The relationship between a subject and a ruler is bound by duty, so the subject can leave if their advice is not heeded after three attempts. However, the father–son relationship is based on nature, and although there is a method of remonstrance, a son has no way to terminate the relationship with his father because they are bound by blood.

Second, it clarifies the meaning of “ruler-subjects relationship bound by duty”. In Chapter Yan Yuan 颜渊 of the *Analects*, the disciple Zi Gong 子贡 asked about friendship, and Confucius replied: “Offer loyal advice and guide them in a good way. If they do not accept it, stop and do not humiliate yourself.” Zheng Xuan's annotation states: “Friendship is a lighter bond based on duty. For all relationships based on duty, there is a way to sever the bond. Offer loyal advice, and if it is not accepted, stop.” (Wang 1991, p. 136). 朋友，义合之轻者也。凡义合者有绝道，忠言以告之，不可则止也。 The character “凡” (which is generally translated as all) is rarely used in Zheng Xuan's annotations.

When it is used, it implies a generalization that covers all situations. The relationship between friends is a lighter bond based on duty, so when offering advice to a friend, one should stop if it is not accepted. The ruler–subjects relationship, on the other hand, is a heavier bond based on duty, so a subject should advise the ruler and wait to be dismissed after three attempts if the advice is not heeded. This distinction lies in the degree of importance, not the nature of the relationships. In Zheng Xuan’s view, the ruler–subjects relationship is similar in nature to a friendship rather than a father–son relationship.

With Zheng Xuan’s separate interpretation of the father–son and ruler–subjects relationships, the interpretation of the following text becomes much clearer and more reasonable. The phrase “父母生之，续莫大焉” connects with “父子之道天性”，emphasizing that the bond between parents and children, being of blood and nature, is unparalleled. Therefore, Zheng Xuan interpreted “大” as something that cannot be surpassed. The phrase “君亲临之，厚莫重焉” connects with “君臣之义”. Zheng Xuan interpreted “君” as “ruler” and “亲” as “personally”. He argued that a person of virtue originally had no official title or reward, just being a commoner. However, due to their virtue, the ruler personally selects and promotes them to positions of power and prestige, such as officials or high-ranking subjects. This recognition of one’s talent and virtue is considered as the ultimate expression of generosity and favor given by the ruler.

Zheng Xuan’s interpretation does not merely present his own point of view, as it can be proved by other historical records during the Han dynasty. The “Biography of Mei Cheng” 枚乘传 in the “*Book of Han*” 汉书 records that during Emperor Wu’s 汉武帝 reign, Mei Cheng was a courtier of the state of Wu 吴. When the King of Wu planned a rebellion, Mei Cheng remonstrated him and began by saying: “The relationship between father and son is based on nature. A loyal subject does not avoid heavy punishment in order to remonstrate, so there will be no unfinished strategies, and their merits will last for generations.” (Ban 2010, p. 2359). Mei Cheng’s words were derived from the *Xiaojing*. After Zheng Xuan, there are historical texts also adopting his interpretation. During the Jin dynasty, Shi Pangzha 史庞札, an official of Henan province, wrote in a memorial, “I heard that the relationship between father and son is based on nature, and the affection between them is natural. Yet the bond between ruler and subject comes from a sense of duty.” (Fang 1998, p. 1400). This is apparently a direct application of Zheng Xuan’s interpretation of the *Xiaojing*.

Referring to other Confucian classics, it can be found that Zheng Xuan’s interpretation is more in line with the original meaning of the *Xiaojing*. The chapter “Sang Fu Zhuan” 丧服传 in the “*Yili*” 仪礼 (Book of Rites) can provide us with more evidence. The “Sang Fu Zhuan” chapter specifically discusses the proper attire and ceremonies for mourning and funerals. Through these regulations of the mourning ceremony system, it demonstrates the human relationships defined by Confucianism. According to it, one should mourn the death of *jun* 君 (usually translated as a ruler or monarch) for three years. This is because “*jun* is the most respected”. Zheng Xuan explained the term “*jun*” as “the emperor, the dukes, and the high-ranking officials who own land are all called ‘*jun*’.” (Zheng and Kong 2007a, p. 346).

The Chapter “Sang Fu Zhuan” describes the situation in a feudal system. The Son of Heaven 天子 (usually translated as the emperor) is the ruler of the world, whose subjects are the dukes, the emperor’s subjects, nobles, lower officials, and commoners. A lord, within his state, is also a ruler, and his subjects are the subjects, nobles, lower officials, and commoners within his country. A subject or noble is a ruler within his family, and his subjects are the lower officials and commoners within his fiefdom. Lower officials do not have land, so they cannot be called rulers. In other words, the term “ruler and subject” does not necessarily refer to the emperor and his subjects, but refers to the ruler–subjects relationship in various community organizations (such as home, country, or world) of different levels. Therefore, “the bond of ruler and subject is based on appropriateness” can only be realized in such a feudal system, because only when there are many rulers can the subjects “leave after three unsuccessful admonitions” and serve the other rulers. Yet by the time

of Emperor Tang Minghuang, the political system had changed from the feudal system to the imperial system. There was only one “ruler” under heaven; that is, the emperor. And the relationship between the ruler and the subjects became the relationship between an emperor and the subjects of the world. The subjects had no opportunities to choose their rulers. Therefore, in political life, the relationship between ruler and subject, like that of father and son, also became an inescapable relationship.

Then, why was the Emperor Tang Minghuang’s interpretation, equating the relationships of father–son and ruler–subjects, widely accepted? This can be attributed to the ambiguity in expression of the early Confucian classics. In Confucian classics, father–son and ruler–subjects, as well as family and state, are often mentioned simultaneously, such as in the Chapter “Yan Yuan” 颜渊 in *Analects*, “In the state, no complaints; in the family, no complaints.” Cases where serving the father and the ruler are mentioned together, such as in the Chapter “Xue er” 学而 in *Analects*, “Serving parents, able to exhaust their strength; serving the ruler, able to devote their life,” in the Chapter “Zi Han” 子罕, “Going out to serve officials, coming in to serve father and brothers”, and so on.

However, with a careful examination of the meanings of these expressions, we can realize that they do not suggest that the ruler–subjects relationship is the same as the father–son relationship, nor do they suggest that ruling the state is the same as managing the family. The family and the state can coexist because they are the basic units in the political system. The two parts of the family and the state make up the entire world of ancient people’s lives. People have ethical lives in their families and political lives in their states. If a society only talks about family ethics, such as father–son and husband–wife relationships, public life will be unable to be established.

Yet in some cases, in order to emphasize that a son should respect his parents, the father can be compared to a ruler, as is stated in the “Jia Ren” 家人 Chapter of the “*Zhou Yi*” 周易 (Book of Changes), which says “In a family, there is a solemn ruler, that is, the parents.” This metaphor of the ruler for the parents suggests that the parents’ words, actions, and manners should be solemn and appropriate. This is consistent with the teaching in the Chapter “Sagely Governing” 圣治章 of the *Xiaojing*, which states “In family reverence, there is nothing more important than venerating one’s father”, “Affectionate feeling for parents begins at their knees, and as children take proper care of their fathers and mothers this veneration increases with the passing of each day”. All of these emphasize the dignity of the parents. In human relationships, there is nothing more dignified than the relationship between the ruler and the subject, hence the use of this relationship to metaphorically represent the parents.

However, this is not the same as the Emperor Tang Minghuang’s interpretation of the *Xiaojing*, which directly states that “The way of the father and son is the constant of nature, and when it is honored and dignified, it also becomes the way between the ruler and subject.” Referencing the historical records of the Han dynasty, the “Biography of Zhang Zhan” 张湛传 in the “Book of Later Han” 后汉书 states that Zhang Zhan was “Dignified, serious and courteous, behaves with decorum. Usually residing in a quiet room, always maintains himself neatly groomed. Even in front of his wife and children, he remains as solemn as a ruler.” (Fan 2003, p. 928). The use of the word “as” 若 indicates that it is a metaphor used to describe Zhang Zhan’s solemn and dignified demeanor.

Meanwhile, to emphasize that a ruler should be close and kind to his subjects, the ruler can be likened to a father, as repeatedly mentioned in the *Shi Jing* 诗经 (The Book of Songs), calling the ruler “the parents of the people”. In the Chapter “Nanshan Youtai” 南山有台, it states: “The joyful and delighted nobleman is the parents of the people”. The “Jong Zhuo” 洞酌 says: “What a joyous and contented nobleman, he is the parents of the people.” The so-called “parents of the people” does not mean that the relationship between the ruler and the subjects is like that of father and son, nor does it emphasize that the ruler–subjects relationship is superior to the father–son relationship, but it emphasizes that the method of governing should be protecting and loving the people.

In the Confucian classic the *Liji* 礼记 (The Book of Rites), there are two passages which explain the meaning of “the parents of the people” in the *Shi Jing*. In the Chapter “Kongzi Xianju” 孔子闲居, one of Confucius’s disciples, Zi Xia 子夏, asked: “May I ask about the meaning of the phrase in the ‘Book of Songs’: ‘The joyful and delighted nobleman is the parents of the people.’ How can one be called the parents of the people?” Confucius explained: “The parent of the people must know the origin of rites and music, so that they can reach the ‘ultimate five virtues’, and practice the ‘three abstentions’, to influence the world. If any disaster occurred anywhere, he would surely know in advance. This is what is meant by the parents of the people.” The Chapter “Biaoji” 表記 quotes Confucius’s words: “The benevolence advocated by the *junzi* 君子 (usually translated as noble man) is probably quite difficult to achieve! The ‘Book of Songs’ says: ‘What a joyous and contented nobleman, he is the parents of the people.’ ‘Joyous’ means to educate the people with an unyielding spirit; ‘contented’ means to stabilize the people with joyful emotions. The people are joyful without neglecting their duties, they are courteous and close to each other, they are dignified and at peace, they are filial and kind and respectful. Make the people respect oneself as they respect their father, and be close to oneself as they are close to their mother. In this way, one can then become the parents of the people. If one does not have very noble virtues, who else could achieve this?”

In short, the “parents of the people” emphasizes the responsibility of the ruler, addressing that the role of a ruler is like the parents of a family. He should engage in politics with a benevolent heart and treat others as his family members. But the premise of this analogy is that the father–son and ruler–subjects relationships are different and cannot be confused.

In all the human relationships defined by Confucianism, *qinqin* 亲亲 (usually translated as “cherishing kinship”, a principle that emphasizes the importance of maintaining close relationships and fulfilling responsibilities towards one’s family members) and *zunzun* 尊尊 (usually translated as respecting hierarchy, a principle that emphasizes the importance of respecting those of higher rank or status) are two fundamental ethical principles. In the chapter “Da Zhuan” 大传 of the *Liji*, six principles are introduced that regulate mourning attire. The first principle is “*qinqin*” and the second is “*zunzun*”. Zheng Xuan explains: “*qinqin* refers to the principle in the relationship between family members, with the parent–children relationship being the head. *Zunzun* refers to the principle in the relationship between ruler and subject, with the ruler being the head of the relationship.” (Zheng and Kong 2007b, p. 619). Since “*qinqin*” emphasizes the essence of the father–son relationship, and “*zunzun*” presents the essence of the relationship between ruler and subject, the ruler–subjects relationship and the father–son relationship are clearly distinct. This was not only historical fact in the pre-Qin time, but also the idea held by Confucianism. Only by understanding this foundation can we understand the distinction between *zhong* (loyalty) and *Xiao* (family reverence).

### 3. Clarifying the Different Connotations of *Zhong* (Loyalty) and *Xiao* (Family Reverence)

The reason why *Zhong* (loyalty) and *Xiao* (family reverence) are often confused as one stems from the phrase in the *Xiaojing* that says “To serve the ruler with family reverence is loyalty”. If we isolate this sentence from its context, it indeed seems to epitomize the idea of “unifying loyalty and family reverence”. However, does it really advocate the unification of loyalty and family reverence? And under what circumstances does “to serve the ruler with family reverence is loyalty” apply? We must return to the text for further understanding. This phrase comes from the Chapter “The Lower Officials” 士章 in the *Xiaojing*. Fortunately, today we can see the original text with Zheng Xuan’s annotations in the Dunhuang manuscripts:

资于事父以事母而爱同，（注）资者，人之行也。事父与母，爱同敬不同也。

The lower officials drawing upon their devotion to their fathers to serve their mothers, the love they feel toward them is the same;

*Commentary:* Drawing upon means to draw upon the way of treating the fathers to serve their mothers. When serving fathers and mothers, the love they feel toward the fathers and mothers is the same, yet the respect is not the same.

资于事父以事君而敬同。（注）事父与君，敬同爱不同也。

Drawing upon their devotion to their fathers to serve their ruler, the respect they feel for them is the same. *Commentary:* When serving the fathers and the ruler, the respect they feel for them is the same, yet the love is not the same.

故母取其爱，（注）不取其敬。

While to their mothers love is rendered.

*Commentary:* Respect is not rendered

而君取其敬，（注）不取其爱。

And to their ruler respect is shown.

*Commentary:* Love is not shown.

兼之者父也。（注）兼，并也。爱与母同，敬与君同，并此二者，事父之道。

It is only to service to their fathers that both love and respect combine.

*Commentary:* Both means combining. The love for the fathers is the same as the love for the mothers, the respect for the fathers is the same as the respect for the ruler, combining love and respect is the way of serving the father.

故以孝事君则忠，（注）移事父孝以事于君，则为忠矣。

Hence, service to the ruler with family reverence is loyalty.

*Commentary:* to transfer the family reverence for the fathers to serve the ruler, it is loyalty.

以敬事长则顺。（注）移事兄敬以事于长，则为顺矣。

Service to elders with family reverence is compliance.

*Commentary:* To transfer the family reverence for the brothers to serve the elders, it is compliance. (Chen 1987, pp. 53–57)

Zheng Xuan simply explained “service to the ruler with family reverence is loyalty” as “to transfer the family reverence for the fathers to serve the ruler, it is loyalty”. However, father and ruler are different entities; how can the family reverence for the father be transferred to serve the ruler? And why will the family reverence for the father turn to loyalty when it is applied to the ruler? Zheng Xuan did not give an explicit explanation, but a fragment of annotations in the Six Dynasties explaining Zheng Xuan’s commentary, which also was unearthed in Dunhuang, has provided us with a crucial clue to understand Zheng Xuan’s meaning:

辨爱敬同异者，士始升朝，离亲辞爱，圣人所难，以义断恩，物情不易，故曰士始升朝也。

“The reason to distinguish the similarities and differences between love and respect is that when *shi* (usually translated as lower officials) lower officials first enter the court to engage in politics, they must bid farewell to and leave their loved ones behind. Even for a sage, this can be a difficult thing to do because to establish the bond of loyalty between ruler and subject and sever the bond of affection between father and son is not an easy task from a human perspective.” (Xu 2008, p. 1990)

It talks about the class of “*shi*”, who, when entering into politics, leave their parents and serve the ruler, changing from serving their parents to serving the ruler. Therefore, to understand the phrase “service to the ruler with family reverence is loyalty”, we need to understand in what political system the people from the “*shi*” class need to leave their families and enter into politics.

Whether the titles of “*Qing*” 卿 (generally referring to the high-ranking officials in the Zhou dynasty), “*Dafu*” 大夫 (usually referring to people with cultural cultivation and official positions), and “*Shi*” 士 are hereditary is one of the key debates of the Old/New Text school Controversy in the Han dynasty. According to the text of *Xiaojing*, its attitude to the issue can be inferred. The chapter “Governing through Family Reverence” 孝治章 says:

昔者明王之以孝治天下也，不敢遗小国之臣，而况于公侯伯子男乎？故得万国之欢心，以事其先王。治国者，不敢侮于鳏寡，而况于士民乎？故得百姓之欢心，以事其先君。治家者，不敢失于臣妾，而况于妻子乎？故得人之欢心，以事其亲。

“Of old when the enlightened (*ming*) kings used family reverence to bring proper order to the empire, they would not presume to neglect the ministers of the smallest state, how much less so the dukes, earls and other members of the high nobility. Thus all of the different vassal states participated whole heartedly in their service to these former kings. Those who bring proper order to the vassal states would not presume to ignore the most dispossessed, how much less so the lower officials and common people. Thus the various families all participated whole heartedly in their service to these former rulers. Those who would bring proper order to various families would not presume to overlook their servants and concubines, how much less so their wives and children. Thus all of the people participated whole heartedly in their service to their parents.”

In the text, the *ming* kings refers to the emperors, who need to serve their “former emperors”. The ones who bring proper order to the vassal states refers to the dukes, who need to serve their “former kings”. By referring to “former emperors” and “former kings”, it can be seen that the titles of both emperors and dukes are hereditary. Only when the father dies can the son inherit the title of nobility and become an “empire” or a “duke”. Therefore, the family reverence for them is not to serve their own living parents, but to have all the people participate wholeheartedly in their service to sacrifice their former emperors and kings.

However, in terms of the high-ranking officials (including *Qing* and *Dafu*), the text says they need to serve their “parents”, not the “former empires” or “former kings”. It can be inferred that their titles were not inherited from their fathers, but obtained through election. In other Confucian classics, there are many statements that corroborate that the title of high-ranking officials could not be hereditary. For example, the *Neize* 内则 chapter of the *Liji* says: “At the age of twenty, capping ceremony should be conducted to show one is independent and responsible. At thirty, one should have a stable family life. At forty, one should begin his career . . . At fifty, one should be appointed as an official and engage in government affairs. At seventy, one should retire.” And according to the *Wangzhi* 王制 chapter, all the princes of the kings, the sons of the high-ranking officials, and all the talented individuals selected by the state can learn in the royal academy. They were taught the classic of Rites and the classic of Music in spring and autumn, and the Book of Songs and the Book of Documents in summer and winter by official *situ* 司徒. After their study performance was assessed by official *Sima* 司马, they could be granted corresponding noble titles. Since the titles of the high-ranking officials were not hereditary, it was even less likely that the lower officials, such as “*Shi*”, would inherit their titles and positions. Therefore, it can be inferred that the *Xiaojing* presumes that all the high-ranking and lower officials were not hereditary, but were selected from the talented commoners. Therefore, the meaning of “when lower officials first enter the court to engage in politics, they must bid farewell to and leave their loved ones behind” is quite clear. Because the lower officials did not inherit their titles and salaries, but were elected from among the virtuous and capable commoners, they had to leave their parents after being granted their titles and serve in the court. In doing so, they needed to sever the father–son bond in favor of their duty to the ruler, shifting from “serving the father” to “serving the ruler”.

Before being selected as a lower official, a person at home would honor his father and respect his brothers, but would have no experience in serving the ruler or superiors.

Honoring one's father and respecting one's elder brother at home are based on natural affection and respect, cultivated from a young age. But once one leaves his family to start serving the ruler, the relationship between the ruler and subjects is no longer natural. For this reason, the Sages tried to create regulations and principles that aligned with human nature for governance. Therefore, they taught people to serve their ruler based on the manner of serving their father, and serve their superiors based on the manner of serving their brother, so that people's actions, whether in family life or in public affairs, would be in line with human nature.

Since the relationship between ruler and subjects is not naturally established, then how can a person who has never served a ruler know the correct way to serve him? According to the *Xiaojing*, "service to the ruler with family reverence is loyalty" does not regard the *jun* (including the emperor, dukes, and high officials above the lower official class) as a father, nor does it require people to treat the ruler with the family reverence towards one's father, making loyalty and family reverence indistinguishable. As pointed out above, serving a father requires both love and respect, while serving a ruler requires only respect, so there is definitely a difference between loyalty and family reverence. Therefore, "service to the ruler with family reverence is loyalty" cannot be explained as "serving the ruler with the family reverence for father is loyalty", because when a lower official begins to engage in politics, he needs to leave his own family and engages in public affairs. Therefore, the sentence should be understood as "a person who can serve his father with family reverence will naturally be loyal when it comes to serving the ruler". Because the lower official cultivates his family reverence at home, which encompasses both love and respect towards his father, when he serves the emperor, dukes, or high-ranking officials, he can apply the respect he shows to his father at home to his ruler and this naturally results in loyalty. The phrase "service to the ruler with family reverence is loyalty" originally means "to apply the respect to serve the ruler", yet it has been wrongly generalized as "to apply family reverence to serve the ruler", which leads to a deep misunderstanding. The original meaning of the text is not that family reverence can be transformed into loyalty, but rather that a lower official who serves his parents with family reverence can display loyalty when serving his ruler.

It must be pointed out that the contemporary interpretation of "service to the ruler with family reverence is loyalty" overlooks the fact that this phrase comes from the Chapter "the Lower Officials" and specifically refers to the lower official class, not a principle that everyone should follow. In fact, the classic *Xiaojing* does not discuss the principle of family reverence in a general sense, but focuses on discussing how the cultivation of family reverence should be conducted in a political system. People are divided into five classes in the *Xiaojing*: the emperor, the dukes, the high-ranking officials, the lower officials, and the common people, and each class has a typical way of expressing family reverence. The regulation of practicing family reverence for each class should be understood in its institutional background. For example, if the emperor only "is circumspect in their conduct and frugal in their use in order to take care of their parents" (this is the requirement of common people), he definitely can not be considered to practice family reverence. Additionally, "service to the ruler with family reverence is loyalty" only applies to the lower officials. The lower officials who have just begun their political careers need first to consider how to learn to "serve the ruler". As for high-ranking officials, who have been in service for a long time, they should think more about how to follow the laws of the former kings to govern the state. As for the dukes, they are all relatives of the emperor or descendants of meritorious officials, and there is absolutely no reason for them to "serve the ruler with family reverence".

What should be further explored is why Confucius established family reverence as the foundational principle of Confucian society as a whole. In the chapter "Setting the theme and Illuminating Its Meaning" 开宗明义章 of the *Xiaojing*, it states "The former kings have their consummate excellence and vital way", and Zheng Xuan's annotation says: "Yu 禹 was the first of the three kings." (Pi 2015, p. 21). This means that the governing mode

discussed in the *Xiaojing* started from the era of “Family First” 家天下 (the notion is derived from the chapter Liyun of the Chinese Classic *Liji*. It refers to the time of the three dynasties of the Xia 夏, Shang 商, and Zhou 周, when the great way had disappeared and the land under heaven belonged to the royal family rather than the common people), because Yu was the founding emperor of the Xia dynasty. In the “Family First” era, the social structure was based on family and the father–son relationship was the most fundamental human relationship within the family. Therefore, the political philosophy of Confucius begins with shaping the family. According to Confucius, the fundamental human relationship within the family is the father–son relationship, the morality within the family is the family reverence, and the emotions within the family are love and respect. The reason why family reverence can be viewed as the root of all virtues is not because of family reverence itself, but because of the feelings of love and respect that naturally arise when family reverence is implemented in family life.

The *Xiaojing* speaks of love and respect many times. For example, the chapter “The Emperor as the son of ‘Tian’” 天子章 says: “The man who loves his own parents would not presume to hate the parents of others, he who respects his own parents would not presume to be rude to parents of others”. The chapter “Sagely Governing” 圣治章 says “Affectionate feeling for parents begins at their knee, and the children take proper care of their fathers and mothers this veneration increases with the passing of each day. The sages build upon this veneration in their teachings of respect, and build upon this affection in their teachings about love”. When the family becomes the basic structure of society, people are born in families, naturally establishing the relationship between father and son. Therefore, Confucius enacted principles based on human nature and applied education according to the inherent nature of humans. The father–son relationship is naturally established as the fundamental human relationship, and family life is regarded as the first school for cultivating virtues. In family, young children naturally possess not only affection but also a sense of inherent respect towards their parents. As stated in the Jinxin 尽心 chapter in *Mencius*, it is said, “What people can do without learning is their inherent ability. What they can know without deliberate thought is their inherent knowledge. Even young children all know how to love their parents. As they grow older, they all know how to show respect to their elder brothers.” Indeed, this inherent ability to act without learning and know without deliberate thought forms the foundation and essence of virtues. On the one hand, the development of virtues is rooted in love, starting with the love for one’s own parents and extending that love to encompass the parents of others. This is known as benevolence, as stated in the Jinxin chapter of *Mencius*: “To love one’s parents is benevolence.” On the other hand, respect gives rise to ritual. As the chapter “Elaborating upon the Vital Way” 广要道章 in the *Xiaojing* says: “ritual propriety is simply a matter of respect”. The reason why family reverence holds a fundamental position within the father–son relationship lies in the fact that the it must be supported by the feeling of natural love and respect.

#### 4. Understanding the Virtue of “junzi” from the Perspective of the Talent Selection System

The chapter “Elaborating upon ‘Raising One’s Name High for Posterity’” 广扬名章 in the *Xiaojing* also discusses loyalty and family reverence. The following are the text and commentary of Emperor Tang Minghuang:

It is only because *junzi* serve their parents with family reverence that this same feeling can be extended to their ruler as loyalty.

*Commentary:* To apply the family reverence to serve the ruler is loyalty.

君子之事亲孝，故忠可移于君。（注）以孝事君则忠。

It is only because they serve their elder brothers with deference that this same feeling can be extended to all elders as compliance.

*Commentary:* To apply the respect to serve the elders is compliance.

事兄悌，故顺可移于长。（注）以敬事长则顺。

And it is only because they maintain a proper home life that this same sense of organization can be extended as proper order to the offices of government.

*Commentary:* Where the *junzi* resides, he influences and educates people around him. Therefore he can be transferred to serve in government. (Tang and Xing 2007, p. 47).

居家理，故治可移于官。（注）君子所居则化，故可移于官也。

The commentary of Xing Bing says: “The previous Confucian scholars believed that there is a character ‘故’ missing after ‘居家理’, so emperor Tang added it in his commentary.” (Tang and Xing 2007, p. 47). This is the only time that Xing Bing explicitly states that Emperor Tang Minghuang made changes to the *Xiaojing* text. He further explains, “Since a *junzi* can serve his parents with family reverence, therefore, he can draw upon the family reverence to become loyal, and transfer his devotion to father to serve his ruler.” (Tang and Xing 2007, p. 38). According to Xing Bing’s explanation, loyalty and family reverence are combined as one, and there is no difference between serving the ruler and serving the father. However, the manuscript excavated in Dunhuang enables us to see Zheng Xuan’s commentary, which is quite different from Xing Bing’s explanation:

It is only because *junzi* serve their parents with family reverence and become loyal, they can be transferred to serve their ruler.

*Commentary:* In order to seek loyal ministers, one must look among families with filial children. Therefore they can be transferred to serve the ruler.

君子之事亲孝故忠，可移于君。（注）欲求忠臣，必出孝子之门，故言可移于君。

It is only because they serve their elder brothers with deference that this same feeling can be extended to all elders as compliance.

*Commentary:* To serve the elders with family reverence is compliance, therefore they can be transferred to serve elders.

事兄悌故顺，可移于长。（注）以敬事长则顺，故可移于长。

And it is only because they maintain a proper home life that this same sense of organization can be extended as proper order to the offices of government.

*Commentary:* Where the *junzi* resides, he influences and educates people around him. Therefore he can be transferred to serve in government. (Chen 1987, pp. 187–88)

居家理治，可移于官。（注）君子所居则化，所在则理，故可移于官。

The extra character “故” in the Dunhuang manuscript makes the punctuation of the whole sentence different and brings great changes to the meaning of the text. First, the main actor, *junzi*, in this chapter is a person who needs to serve his father at home and serve his elders and ruler, which indicates that he belongs to the lower official class. Therefore, it is proper for Zheng Xuan to quote the text “to serve the elders with family reverence is compliance” in the “The Lower Officials” chapter to explain the text here. Next, “It is only because *junzi* serve their parents with family reverence that this same feeling can be extended to their ruler as loyalty” means that *junzi* can serve his father with reverence, which means that he has already has the ability to love and respect his father. Because the feeling of respect is the foundation of loyalty, the potential of loyalty has thus already been prepared inside him. Even if he has not yet served the ruler, it can still be inferred that he will be loyal to his ruler in the future. Therefore, “It is only because *junzi* serve their parents with family reverence and become loyal” does not mean they will apply family reverence to serve the ruler, but means that *junzi* have already prepared all kinds of virtues in their family life and whenever they enter politics, they will show loyalty to their ruler.

As stated in the Wei Zheng 为政 chapter in the *Analects*, someone asks Confucius, “Master, why do you not engage in government?” Confucius replied, “The Book of History says, ‘Being filial and respectful to one’s parents, being friendly to one’s brothers, and extending this to governance.’ This is also governance, so why should I engage in government?” This shows that the order within the family contains the basic nature of politics

and governance. So if a *junzi* can manage his family properly, he can also govern the nation well. A paragraph in the chapter Zengzi Lixiao 曾子立孝 of the *Dadai Liji* 大戴礼记 can help to elucidate the meaning of this text in *Xiaojing*. It says, “A person without a ruler can be inferred as a loyal minister because he is a filial son. A person without elders can be inferred as compliant because he is an obedient brother”.

It must be emphasized that the *Xiaojing* in its original form is not moral instruction for individuals, but a classic of governing wisdom. This can be inferred from the beginning words “the former kings were able to use the model of their consummate excellence and their vital way to bring the empire into accord” of the first chapter “Setting the Theme and Illuminating the Meaning” 开宗明义章.

Taking this point into consideration, the potential listeners of the chapter “Elaborating upon ‘Raising One’s Name High for Posterity’” 广扬名章 are not the lower officials but the rulers. Its aim is not to teach the lower officials how to be filial and respectful at home and then how to serve the ruler and elder when leaving home. Instead, it instructs the rulers, attempting to convey to them the political idea that a person who can excel in all aspects at home will inevitably possess the fundamental qualities necessary for engaging in political life. Therefore, such individuals should be encouraged and selected to participate in politics. In other words, this political idea should be implemented in the design of talent selection systems. Examining the historical records from the Han to Wei dynasties, it can be observed that the frequent references to phrases such as “because the lower officials serve their parents with family reverence and become loyal, they can be transferred to serve their ruler” are often associated with the selection of talent. In the “biography of Wei Biao” 韦彪传 of the *Book of Later Han* 后汉书, the official Wei Biao wrote a memorial stating: “Confucius said, ‘Devotion to parents can be transferred to loyalty to the ruler.’ Therefore, when seeking loyal ministers, one should look to the doors of filial children.” (Fan 2003, p. 918). Similarly, in the “Biography of Xiahou Xuan” 夏侯玄传 of the *Records of the Three Kingdoms* 三国志, when asked about the attitude to current political situation by the Grand Tutor Sima Yi 司马懿, Xiahou Xuan responded by saying “Filial conduct is evident within the family, so shouldn’t loyalty and integrity be present in official duties?” (Chen 2007, p. 295). Both instances highlight the connection between the political idea conveyed by *Xiaojing* and the selection of talent.

## 5. Conclusions

How should we understand and discuss Confucian moralities such as family reverence, loyalty, benevolence, and righteousness in the modern day? In the past century, Confucian moralities have mainly been discussed and studied within the framework of intellectual history or the history of philosophy. This approach is characterized by abstracting moralities from their traditional semantic context, analyzing their philosophical connotations without considering their original significance in the ancient political and educational system of China. Undeniably, this approach is of great significance for contemporary people to understand traditional moralities which are quite unfamiliar to them. However, in many cases, if we try to understand moral issues without considering their specific ideological and historical background, we may not truly understand the essence of moralities, and may even distort their meanings out of modern biases. For example, as mentioned above, if we understand the meaning of “to serve the ruler with family reverence is loyalty, and to serve the elders with respect is obedience” in the “Lower Official” chapter of the *Xiaojing* literally, it seems to suggest that serving the ruler with the same family reverence as serving one’s father is loyalty. In this case, family reverence and loyalty would be indistinguishable, and serving one’s father and serving one’s ruler would become indistinguishable as well, leading to a conflation of family affairs and state affairs, and making it impossible to differentiate between public and private relationships.

However, putting this statement back into the context of the *Xiaojing*, it can be noticed that “to serve the ruler with family reverence is loyalty” is meant to apply to the lower official class, not to all the “subjects”. Since lower officials have just begun their careers in

government and know how to serve their fathers but not their rulers, it is necessary to emphasize the common moral emotions between serving the ruler and serving the father by extrapolating from what they already know to what they have yet to learn. In fact, the common emotional foundation between serving the ruler and serving the father is respect, not family reverence.

Therefore, in contemporary moral studies, it is necessary to place Confucian moralities within the context of traditional context of political and educational system in China for a better understanding<sup>6</sup>. In other words, in addition to understand and analyze moral terms abstractly, it is also necessary to place these terms within the broad classical world and to re-evaluate and interpret them accordingly.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The authorship and exact composing time of the *Xiaojing* remains uncertain. According to Hu Pingsheng, the most likely candidate is a student of Master Zeng 曾子 named Le Zheng Zi Chun 乐正子春 (Hu 1996, p. 8). Since the *Xiaojing* is first cited in the text *Lushichunqiu* 吕氏春秋 which was composed no later than 239 BC, Roger T. Ames believes that “The *Xiaojing* was composed sometime during the height of the convulsions of the Warring States period that anticipate the birth of imperial China. (Rosemont and Ames 2009, p. 18). However, it is widely accepted by Confucian scholars in Han dynasty that Confucius is the true author of this text.
- <sup>2</sup> In the book *The Religion of China*, Weber said “Feudalism rested on honor as the cardinal virtue, patrimonialism on piety. The reliability of the vassal’s allegiance was based upon the former; the subordination of the lord’s servant and official was based upon the latter. The difference is not a contrast but a shift of accent.” See Max Weber (Weber 1968, p. 157).
- <sup>3</sup> The English translation of the *Xiaojing* in this article mainly refers to the translation of Henry Rosemont, Jr. and Roger T. Ames as a reference. See Rosemont and Ames (2009).
- <sup>4</sup> As Roger T. Ames has pointed out, “At the turn of the twentieth century the traditional Chinese family and the conservative values that it represents was one of the main targets of passionate reformers who sought to drag a humiliated and convulsing China in the modern world. The hierarchical Confucian family and its structural inequalities came to be seen as emblematic of everything that was holding China back from scientific development and democratization.” (Rosemont and Ames 2009, p. 3).
- <sup>5</sup> For example, Max Weber claimed “Piety (*hsiao*) toward the feudal lord was enumerated along with piety toward parents, superiors in the hierarchy office, and office holder generally, for the identical principle of *hisao* applied to all of them. And the basic character of allegiance was patriarchal, not feudal.” (Weber 1968, p. 157).
- <sup>6</sup> In recent years, another affirmation of the significance of *xiao* has emerged within the framework of Confucian role ethics. However, this theory still needs to further explain how the ruler–subjects relationship can be based on the father–son relationship while also having distinctions from it. See (Rosemont and Ames 2016).

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