

A Comparative Study of the Concepts of "Obligation" and "Righteousness" in Chinese and Japanese Cultures

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Abstract

This paper takes Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* as the starting point and employs a comprehensive analytical framework integrating comparative cultural studies, semiotics, and ethical typology to systematically investigate the historical evolution, cultural connotations, and translational mechanisms of the concepts of "obligation" and "righteousness" in Chinese and Japanese cultures. By constructing a three - level analytical dimension of "semantic field - pragmatic domain - cultural context," this study reveals the similarities and differences between Chinese and Japanese views on "obligation" and "righteousness" and explores their transformation trends in the process of modernization, providing a new perspective and methodological paradigm for the comparative study of ethics in East Asia.

Keywords

China- Japan comparison; *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*; "Obligation" and "righteousness"; Semiotics.

1. Introduction

China and Japan, both located within the East Asian cultural sphere, share profound cultural origins and have long engaged in mutual exchanges and learning. Confucian thought has exerted a far - reaching influence on the cultures of both nations. However, in the course of historical development and social change, unique differences have emerged in various aspects of Chinese and Japanese cultures. Among these differences, the concepts of "obligation" and "righteousness" stand out as significant ethical and moral notions that play a crucial role in the social lives of both countries. As Benedict (1946) noted in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, "obligation" and "righteousness" are the nodes that bind Japanese society together. Similarly, in Chinese culture, the concepts of "obligation" and "righteousness" hold substantial ethical importance.

This paper aims to conduct an in - depth analysis of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, integrating theories of semiotics and ethical typology to fully dissect the connotations and differences of Chinese and Japanese views on "obligation" and "righteousness." It will also explore the transmission and evolution mechanisms of these concepts in cross - cultural contexts. By doing so, this study seeks to promote cultural exchange and understanding between China and Japan and to advance the comparative study of ethics in East Asia.

2. Research Background and Significance

2.1. Review of Previous Studies

Since its publication, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* has garnered extensive attention and in-depth research from academic circles in China, Japan, and the West. Western scholars have predominantly approached the work from anthropological and political science perspectives. For instance, Ramos's "political literature" theory, Geertz's "deconstruction of Western culture"

theory, and Robertson's "cultural mirror" theory all emphasize the uniqueness of the book's research methods and presentation of concepts .

Japanese scholars, on the other hand, have engaged in critical analysis and reflection on *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* at different stages. Kawashima Tetsu, for example, provided an analytical critique of the sections on "obligation" and "duty" , pointing out the limitations in Benedict's grasp of the characteristics of Japanese culture.

Chinese scholars have also conducted in-depth explorations of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* from comparative cultural and ethical perspectives. However, systematic comparative studies on the concepts of "obligation" and "righteousness" between China and Japan remain relatively scarce. This paper aims to further expand the research perspective and provide a comprehensive analysis of the connotations and differences of these concepts in Chinese and Japanese cultures, filling the gap in this area of research.

2.2. Research Significance

Theoretical Significance: By conducting a systematic comparative study of the concepts of "obligation" and "righteousness" in Chinese and Japanese cultures, this research enriches and develops the theoretical content of comparative cultural studies, semiotics, and ethical typology. It provides a new methodological paradigm for cross - cultural research.

Practical Significance: A thorough understanding of the similarities and differences in the Chinese and Japanese views on "obligation" and "righteousness" will promote cultural exchange and mutual learning between the two countries. It will enhance mutual understanding and trust between the peoples of China and Japan and contribute to the friendly development of Sino - Japanese relations. Moreover, this research offers valuable references for the coexistence and dialogue of diverse cultures in the context of globalization.

3. The Connotations and Differences of “Obligation” and “Righteousness” in Chinese and Japanese Cultures

3.1. The Meaning and Differences of “Obligation”

The Meaning of “Obligation” in Japan: For the Japanese, “obligation” (on) is a form of debt, distinct from duty and moral obligation. The Japanese categorize “obligation” into different types, each with its own set of rules. One type is infinite in quantity and duration, while the other is equal in quantity and must be repaid within a specific timeframe. The infinite form of “obligation” is referred to as “duty,” such as the duty to repay one’s parents — filial piety, and the duty to repay the emperor — “loyalty” . This concept of “obligation” is characterized by a network of duties, forming a closed - loop system of “obligation - duty - loyalty.”

The Meaning of “Obligation” in China: “Repaying kindness” is one of the traditional ethical norms in China, deeply rooted in the Chinese psyche. The concept of “obligation” in China has a broader connotation, encompassing not only the duty to repay one’s parents and rulers but also gratitude and reciprocation towards others and society. The Chinese ethical system of “obligation” has an elastic interpretative space of “benevolence - filial piety - loyalty,” with “benevolence” at the core, and filial piety and loyalty forming concentric circles around it. This system exhibits a certain degree of flexibility in different contexts.

The Differences in “Obligation” between Japan and China: The Japanese concept of “obligation” emphasizes the quantification and escalation of debts and duties, creating a vertical and horizontal network of obligations. In contrast, the Chinese concept of “obligation” focuses more on the emotional and moral aspects, highlighting the central role of “benevolence” and the flexible nature of ethical relationships.

3.2. The Meaning and Differences of “Righteousness”

The Meaning of “Righteousness” in Japan: “Righteousness” is a unique moral concept in Japan, distinct from the obligations associated with “duty.” It is divided into “righteousness towards society,” which is the duty to repay kindness, and “righteousness towards one’s reputation,” which is the responsibility to maintain one’s honor. In Japan, “righteousness” is separate from duty, which is the responsibility to fulfill familial obligations. Righteousness is based on contractual relationships, and repaying “righteousness” often brings inner discomfort, driven more by social pressure than personal willingness.

The Meaning of “Righteousness” in China: In Chinese culture, “righteousness” is closely related to “morality” (yi), emphasizing the importance of moral principles above all else. Confucianism advocates for moral courage, considering “morality” as the highest moral standard. The Chinese approach to reciprocating kindness focuses more on the emotional investment and moral commitment, reflecting the principle of “a small favor should be returned with a great one.”

The Differences in “Righteousness” between Japan and China: The Japanese concept of “righteousness” is characterized by its contractual and quantifiable nature, with the expectation of exact repayment and the accumulation of debt over time if not repaid promptly. In contrast, the Chinese concept of “righteousness” emphasizes the sincerity of emotions and the nobility of moral character, focusing on moral integrity and responsibility rather than strict equivalence in form or quantity.

3.3. The Differences between “Obligation, “ “Righteousness, “ and Duty

The Differences in Japan: In Japan, “obligation” is a passive form of duty, arising from various sources such as the emperor’s grace, parental kindness, a lord’s favor, or a teacher’s guidance. “Righteousness” is a duty that must be repaid in full, extending indefinitely over time and involving social, lord - vassal, familial, and personal relationships as well as one’s reputation. Duty, on the other hand, is an active stance of repayment, which is also infinite in duration and includes loyalty to the emperor, filial piety towards parents, and dedication to one’s work. Loyalty to the emperor is considered the ultimate moral duty, with the emperor being “sacred and inviolable,” and subjects’ loyalty to the emperor transcending everything.

The Differences in China: In China, “obligation” and “righteousness” are also forms of moral duty, but unlike in Japan, Chinese concepts of loyalty and filial piety are not absolute. They are based on the principle of “benevolence.” Confucian thought posits that above loyalty and filial piety lies the higher moral principle of “benevolence.” If a ruler lacks benevolence, the people have the right to rebel. Thus, duties such as loyalty and filial piety in China are conditional and relative, not unconditional and absolute.

The Differences between Japan and the United States: In Japan, children are expected to repay their parents for the debts of kindness and practice filial piety, a notion deeply ingrained in the culture. In contrast, this idea is seen as an interference with personal happiness in the United States. Americans place greater emphasis on responsibilities and obligations defined by law, highlighting a sense of contractual awareness. Caring for children is considered an instinctual act for mothers and a sense of duty for fathers, rather than a requirement of filial piety.

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4. Comparative Analysis of “Benevolence” , “Filial Piety” , and “Loyalty” in Chinese and Japanese Cultures

4.1. Comparison of “Benevolence” in China and Japan

Characteristics of “Benevolence” in Japan: In Japan, the concept of “benevolence” as been marginalized within the ethical system and is incompatible with the emperor system, losing the exalted status it holds in the Chinese ethical framework. In Japanese culture, “benevolence” is often associated with actions that fall outside the scope of legal obligations, such as donating to charitable causes or showing mercy to criminals. Additionally, “benevolence” in Japan has taken on a peculiar connotation, being used as a moral standard among ruffians and gangsters. For instance, during the Edo period, gangsters hiding each other was considered an act of “benevolence.” In modern usage, the term has further degraded to a form of “thieves’ honor.”

Characteristics of “Benevolence” in China: In China, “benevolence” is a core concept of Confucian thought, holding an extremely high moral status. It encompasses virtues such as loving others, tolerance, fairness, and integrity, serving as an important criterion for measuring an individual’s moral cultivation. Confucianism posits that “benevolence” is a prerequisite for loyalty and righteousness. If a ruler lacks benevolence, the people have the right to rebel. Thus, “benevolence” occupies a supreme position in the Chinese ethical system, forming the foundation of all moral norms.

Differences in “Benevolence” between China and Japan: In Japan, “benevolence” is relegated to the periphery, often regarded as a non - mainstream moral notion and even carrying a negative connotation in certain contexts. In contrast, in China, “benevolence” is the cornerstone of the ethical system, with broad connotations and profound influence, serving as the basis for social harmony and interpersonal relationships.

4.2. Comparison of “Filial Piety” in China and Japan

Characteristics of “Filial Piety” in Japan: In Japan, “filial piety” is regarded as an unconditional obligation, demanding absolute obedience from children to their parents. Even if parents have poor character, children are still expected to adhere to filial piety. This concept of “filial piety” is particularly emphasized in the case of the eldest son, who is required to unconditionally comply with his parents’ decisions. Although the relationship between Japanese daughters - in - law and mothers - in - law has improved in modern society, the notion of “filial piety” remains deeply ingrained, especially the obedience to fathers.

Characteristics of “Filial Piety” in China: In China, while “filial piety” also stresses respect and obedience to parents, it is not absolute. Confucian thought holds that “filial piety” should be based on the principle of “benevolence.” If parents lack benevolence, children have the right to refuse. Chinese “filial piety” places greater emphasis on the sincerity of emotions and the rationality of morality, highlighting mutual care and understanding between parents and children. Moreover, Chinese “filial piety” also emphasizes reverence and worship of ancestors, valuing the continuation and inheritance of the family lineage.

Differences in “Filial Piety” between China and Japan: In Japan, “filial piety” is an absolute, unconditional obligation, emphasizing complete submission to parents. In contrast, in China, “filial piety” is a conditional emotional and moral expression based on “benevolence,” focusing more on the mutual relationship and emotional bond between parents and children.

4.3. Comparison of “Loyalty” in China and Japan

Characteristics of “Loyalty” in Japan: In Japan, “loyalty” is absolute loyalty to the emperor, regarded as the highest moral duty. The emperor is seen as a sacred and inviolable symbol, and subjects’ loyalty to him transcends everything. This concept of “loyalty” exerts a strong coercive and binding force in Japanese society, from funerals to taxation, from daily life to national affairs,

all reflecting a repayment of the emperor's grace. Japanese "loyalty" forms a dual system. On one hand, subjects directly show loyalty to the emperor. On the other hand, the emperor's will is conveyed to subjects through various intermediaries, carrying extremely high coerciveness. Characteristics of "Loyalty" in China: In Chinese Confucian thought, "loyalty" is not absolute but relative and conditional. Confucianism holds that "loyalty" should be based on the principle of "benevolence." If a ruler lacks benevolence, subjects have the right to rebel. Throughout Chinese history, with its numerous dynastic changes, subjects' loyalty to rulers was not unconditional but based on the ruler's virtue and benevolent governance. Chinese "loyalty" emphasizes loyalty to the nation and the people rather than to a single individual or family. Differences in "Loyalty" between China and Japan: In Japan, "loyalty" is absolute loyalty to the emperor, characterized by a strong sense of personal worship. In contrast, in China, "loyalty" is a relative responsibility based on "benevolence," emphasizing loyalty to the nation and the people, with stronger moral rationality and social orientation.

5. Conclusion and Future Prospects

This study has conducted an in - depth analysis of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, integrating semiotics and ethical typology theories to systematically investigate the connotations and differences of the concepts of "obligation" and "righteousness" in Chinese and Japanese cultures. The research has revealed that the Japanese concept of "obligation" is characterized by a network of duties, forming a closed - loop system of "obligation - duty - loyalty." In contrast, the Chinese ethical system of "obligation and righteousness" allows for an elastic interpretation based on the principles of "benevolence - filial piety - loyalty." During the process of cultural translation, significant differences in the interpretation and application of core Confucian concepts between China and Japan have led to semantic proliferation and functional alienation. This study has provided a new methodological paradigm for comparative research on ethics in East Asia and offered valuable insights for cross - cultural studies.

Future research could further expand into areas such as exploring the mediating role of the Korean Peninsula in the Chinese and Japanese views on "obligation and righteousness," investigating the reconstruction mechanisms of ethical symbols in the digital age, and constructing an East Asian ethics database. Through these endeavors, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the characteristics and values of East Asian cultures, thereby providing a solid theoretical foundation for promoting cultural exchange and cooperation in the region.

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