

Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues

Sāngāng Wǔcháng 三纲五常

The Three Fundamental Bonds and the Five Constant Virtues are separate Confucian terms for the most important human relations and social virtues. In early Confucianism, one who perfectly fulfilled these relationships and manifested these virtues was the highest form of human—a sage. The neo-Confucians combined these two terms into a single cosmological principle that stood for human social order.

The expression *Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues* sums up a Confucian doctrine that was designed to guide people's behavior and aspirations in traditional China. The Three Fundamental Bonds deal with traditional society's most fundamental social relationships: father and son, lord and retainer, and husband and wife. As essential relationships, these three serve as shorthand for all human relationships. The Five Constant Virtues mean the Confucian virtues of benevolence (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 義), propriety (*li* 禮), wisdom (*zhi* 智), and trustworthiness (*xin* 信). As with the Fundamental Bonds, these five virtues are the most significant ones and thus serve as shorthand for all the Confucian virtues. In other words, the Three Fundamental Bonds designate the social relationships that are essential for structuring human social life, while the Five Constant Virtues are the values needed to live a moral life.

For late imperial neo-Confucians the Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues (*sangang*

wuchang 三纲五常), or the shorter Bonds and Constants (*gangchang*), was the heart of Confucianism. Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), the great synthesizer of Neo-Confucian thought, criticized the teachings of Buddhism and Daoism in the following manner:

[It] is unnecessary to analyze them to understand that they both abandon the Three [Fundamental Bonds] and Five Constant Virtues. Just this one [omission] earns them a reputation for committing a grave crime. It is unnecessary to say anything else about them.

In other words, if a teaching did not promote the Fundamental Bonds and constant virtues, then not only was it of no account, but, even worse, it was guilty of promoting disorder. Zhu Xi believed that humans could become sages by perfecting these three relationships and realizing these five virtues. Interestingly though, in terms of China's long history, these concepts of the Three Fundamental Bonds and the Five Constant Virtues did not have an ancient pedigree: they were creations and expressions of the unified Han empire (206 BCE–220 CE). Hence, one could cynically argue that the guides and virtues were Confucianism in the service of the state. The full four-character term *sangang wuchang* was not commonly used until the tenth century CE.

Three Fundamental Bonds

Searching the Confucian classics for a reference to the Three Fundamental Bonds, one encounters Confucius's

conditions for a well-ordered society: “Let the lord be lordly, the retainer loyal, the father fatherly, and the son sonly” (*Analects* 12.11, *Lúnyǔ* 論語). Here though, Confucius presents only two relationships: lord and retainer, and father and son. In the *Mencius* (*Mèngzǐ* 孟子) one finds five rather than three principal human relationships (*renlun* 人倫); moreover, the text stresses their reciprocal basis: “Father and son have love [for each other]; lord and retainer have obligations [to each other]; husband and wife have distinct [spheres]; senior and junior have precedence; and friends have faith [in each other]” (*Mencius* 3A.4). Although clearly a strong sense of hierarchy pervades each set of relationships, both Confucius and Mencius underscore that everyone, whether a superior or an inferior, has obligations to properly fulfill his or her role. As the Confucian scholar Hsü Dau-lin has pointed out, the first text that more overtly promotes what would become the Three Fundamental Bonds is one of the later chapters of the Legalist text written by Han Fei Zi 韓非子. The chapter, which probably dates from the beginning of the unified Han empire, states: “A retainer serves his lord; a son serves his father; a wife serves her husband. If these three principles are followed, then all-under-Heaven is well-governed; if these three principles are betrayed, then all-under-Heaven is in chaos” (Chapter 51). What is striking is that no mention is made of mutual obligations.

The first person to label these relationships was Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (197–104 BCE), the great Han dynasty Confucian philosopher and statesman. Dong called them the Three Cardinal Guides or Bonds (*sangang*). For him, these relationships are not social constructions; instead, they are natural expressions of the cosmological principles of yin and yang. He tells us in *The History of the Han* (*Han shu* 漢書):

The lord is *yang* 陽, the retainer is *yin* 陰; the father is *yang*, the son is *yin*; the husband is *yang*, the wife is *yin*. The way of *yin* cannot proceed anywhere on its own. . . . Therefore, the retainer depends on his lord to gain merit; the son depends on his father; the wife on her husband, *yin* on *yang*, and the Earth on Heaven. . . . The Three [Fundamental Bonds] of the kingly way can be sought in Heaven. (Chapter 53)

Since for Dong yang is superior to yin, lords are superior to their retainers, fathers to their sons, and the



The three-year-old Prince Bu Yi, throne name Xuantong, on the right. On the left is his father, Prince Zhun, the Regent, holding a younger brother, 1909. The Confucian influence of the Three Cardinal rules applied even to the highest levels of Chinese society. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

husband to his wife. In other words, Dong accepts Han Fei Zi's formulation of these relationships as entirely vertical and one sided. That Dong was living in a centralized empire and serving a powerful monarch undoubtedly helps explain his view.

The most extensive formulation of the concept behind the Three Fundamental Bonds is found in *Baihutong* 白虎 (“Comprehensive Discussions in the White Tiger Hall”) by Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 CE). The book devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of this notion. Interestingly though, here the Three Fundamental Bonds are not matched up with the Five Constant Virtues but rather with the Six Rules (*Liuji* 六紀), which are relations with one's paternal uncles, brothers, clansmen, maternal uncles, teachers, and friends. The Three Fundamental Bonds

and Six Rules thereby incorporate all the most important social relationships that constitute society. Without them society falls apart. This same book tells us: “In past times, the Three Fundamental Bonds and the Six Rules did not yet exist; as a result, people only knew the identity of their mother, not their father” (Chapter 2). That is to say, without these fundamental relationships, civilized social order cannot exist.

The Five Constant Virtues

Even though the Five Constant Virtues (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness) were articulated as such only in the Han dynasty, the idea of five interrelated virtues appears earlier. The fourth-century BCE Confucian text known as the *Wuxing* 五行 (“Five Types of Action”) argues that there are five types of favorable behavior: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and sagacity (*sheng* 聖). The person who harmonizes and enacts four of these actions, is good. The person who realizes all five of these actions is a sage (*shengren* 聖人), in accord with heaven. Here, four of the Five Constant Virtues are articulated, and sagacity substitutes for trustworthiness. The *Mencius* sets forth four of Five Constant Virtues, leaving out sagacity. In an argument about whether human nature is intrinsically good, Mencius notes: “Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not welded onto me from the outside. They are that which I have always had” (*Mencius* 6A.6). In other words, these four virtues are inherent in all people.

Once again, Dong Zhongshu, the Confucian statesman and philosopher, was the first person to unambiguously use the term *wuchang* to designate the Five Constant Virtues. He relates:

Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness—i.e., the Way of the Five Constant Virtues—should be that which the king cultivates. If the king cultivates the Five Constant Virtues, then he will receive blessings from Heaven and will enjoy the spiritual efficacy of the spirits; moreover, his virtue will extend across the world and will reach all creatures. (*The History of the Han* 56.2504)

Many scholars believe that Dong added the fifth virtue, trustworthiness, to Mencius’s four-virtue formulation so that it would be in accord with the Five Phase (*wuxing*) cosmological theory that was in vogue during the Han dynasty.

The *Baihutong* provides the first extensive discussion of the Five Constant Virtues. It states:

What are the Five Constant Virtues? They are benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness. Benevolence means not being able to endure (seeing others suffer), loving others, and aiding all living things. Righteousness means doing what is proper. In making judgments one hits the mark. Propriety means to enact. That is, to realize the way and perfect the refined. Wisdom means knowledge. One has a special understanding and can know things before hearing about them. He is not befuddled by matters and can discern the subtle. Trustworthiness means sincerity. One cannot be deterred from his purpose. Therefore, people are born and respond to the Eight Trigrams, thereby obtaining the five energies (*qi* 氣) that are the Constant Virtues. (Chapter 30)

In other words, the five virtues are inherent in us and consist of *qi* (energy, ether, psychophysical matter). The *Baihutong* further equates the Five Constant Virtues with the Five Viscera; hence, benevolence resides in the liver, righteousness in the lungs, propriety in the heart, wisdom in the kidneys, and trustworthiness in the spleen. Similarly, because of the existence of the Five Constant Virtues, there are also the Five Musical Notes, the Five Classics, and the Five Cardinal Directions.

The Neo-Confucian Interpretation

From the Han dynasty on, scholars and politicians made frequent mention of the Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues, but usually separately, not together. However, by the Song dynasty (960–1279), these two lists were often fused. In fact, for Zhu Xi, the Three

Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues became cosmological principles:

Within the cosmos there is but one eternal principle. Heaven, by getting hold of it, becomes heaven. Earth, by getting hold of it, becomes earth. All things which live between heaven and earth, by getting hold of it, become what they are. Expanded, it becomes the “three bonds.” Elaborated, it becomes the “five constants.” All these are this principle in operation. Wherever one goes, it is there. (Hsü, 1970–71, 32)

Rather than naming humankind as the third element of the cosmos (which is the common formulation), Zhu Xi puts the Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues in that place. Hence, heaven, earth, and the Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues compose the universe. Clearly these human relationships and virtues were the most important characteristics of mankind. Chen Chun (1159–1223), Zhu Xi’s student, thought that the Five Constant Virtues were so important that he devoted a whole chapter of his book *Beixi ziyi* 北溪字義 (Neo-Confucian Terms Explained) to explaining them. He believed that all good stemmed from these virtues: “Generally speaking, in human nature there are only the four virtues of humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. All the ten thousand good deeds are produced from them. In reality, they are a summary of the ten thousand good deeds” (Chan 1986, p. 85). Goodness is born out of these virtues, so to become a sage it is essential that one practices them. Likewise, since the Three Fundamental Bonds constitute the most significant human relationships, Zhu Xi believed that perfecting them would also lead to sagacity. As Hsü Dau-lin indicates, though, in making the Three Fundamental Bonds a cosmological principle, the neo-Confucians enshrined the guides’ emphasis on the hierarchical rather than the reciprocal duties inherent in the relationships. As a consequence, Zhu Xi stressed that parents could never be wrong, while another neo-Confucian philosopher, Cheng Yi (1034–1106), emphasized that a woman could never remarry.

By late imperial times, the Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues had been transformed from being general Confucian concepts about social structure and virtues to being a specific term that designated all social relationships and values and, by extension, human social order itself. To not adhere to these Confucian norms and virtues was to threaten both social and cosmological order. Hence, particularly in the late imperial period, Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues was a concept of immense significance.

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