Strictness and kindness in the 'Way of the Father': Reappraising Confucian fatherhood through family education guides and *zhongyong*/*yinyang* dialectics

Abstract

Historical Confucian parenting, framed through the lens of an authoritarian father and a caring mother, gave rise to the popular trope of the 'strict father and kind mother' (*yanfu-cimu* 严父慈母) (Li, 2020). Yet, numerous Confucian texts held that the father should manifest kindness to his children (Li & Lamb, 2012, 42–44). While there has been a growth in contemporary scholarship on caring Chinese fathers (e.g. Huang, 2025; Li, 2020; Wang & Keizer, 2024; Xu et al., 2025; Xu & O'Brien, 2014), less attention has been paid to the caring expectations placed on fathers in the Confucian tradition. An examination of Confucian texts in premodern China, including 'family instructions' (*jiaxun* 家训), family education guides written by fathers themselves, shows a more nuanced picture than popular discourses allow. Kindness (*ci*) and strictness (*yan*) were expected to be in dynamic equilibrium, as per the principle of *zhongyong* 中庸 and its operating mechanism of *yinyang* 阴阳 dialectics, a relational process through which kindness and strictness work together to produce a harmony. Employing *ci-yan* as a heuristic through which to better understand Confucian fathers and Confucian masculinities rebalances the representation of historical Chinese fathers in public debate, grounds *zhongyong* as a key principle for understanding Confucian fathers and masculinities, and provides a starting point for reevaluation of historical Chinese fatherhood and family education.

Keywords

Confucianism, fatherhood, family education, *zhongyong*

Disclosure Statement

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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Introduction

Historical Confucian parenting, framed through the lens of an authoritarian father and a caring mother, gave rise to the popular trope of the 'strict father and kind mother' (*yanfu-cimu* 严父慈母) (Li, 2020). Yet, numerous Confucian texts held that the father should manifest kindness to his children, emphasising the reciprocity inherent in the "kindness-filiality" dyad (*ci-xiao* 慈孝), where the father's kindness spurred the child's filiality (Li & Lamb, 2012, 42–44). While there has been a growth in contemporary scholarship on caring Chinese fathers (e.g. Huang, 2025; Li, 2020; Wang & Keizer, 2024; Xu et al., 2025; Xu & O'Brien, 2014), less attention has been paid to the caring expectations placed on fathers in the Confucian tradition. An examination of Confucian texts in premodern China, including 'family instructions' (*jiaxun* 家训), family education guides written by fathers themselves, shows a more nuanced picture than popular discourses allow. While Confucian fathers were

undoubtedly expected to be strict, they were also expected to be kind, by nurturing their sons with ‘a heart of loving kindness and intimate intention’ (Kong, 2021, 104). Kindness and strictness were expected to be in dynamic equilibrium, as per the principle of *zhongyong* 中庸: ‘Traditional early childhood education was inherently dualistic: it valued affectionate love, but prioritized disciplined love’ (Feng, 2021, 97). Strictness was to be tempered by kindness; kindness was to be tempered by strictness. Thus, Confucian fathers had an ethical obligation to raise their children in a balanced manner that did not go to extremes. This responsibility has been called ‘the way of the father’ (*fu dao* 父道 or *wei fu zhi dao* 为父之道) (Kong, 2021; Ruan, 2025, 180).

Ci-yan has been relatively overlooked as a heuristic in studies of Confucianism, possibly because it does not feature prominently in some of the classic Confucian texts. Nevertheless, it is a core element in the ‘Confucian Way of the Father’ (*rujia fudao* 儒家父道):

> ‘Father’ is a symbol of extreme tension, both the ‘legislator’ of family order as shaped by ritual and law and the ‘soul-shaper’ of children's character as internalized through love. This construction of the ‘father’ figure is by no means a mechanical combination of ‘strictness’ (*yan*) and ‘kindness’ (*ci*) but rather an integration of the two into a dynamically balanced ethical wisdom through the way of *zhongyong*. This balance is neither eclectic nor expedient; rather, it is rooted in Confucianism's deep insight into human nature: only through the interplay of ‘authority’ and ‘kindness,’ ‘reason’ and ‘emotion,’ can the dual goals of family education and character development be realised (Ruan, 2025, 180–181).

Ci-yan follows the 'middle way' (*zhongdao* 中道) of a dynamic *zhongyong* dialectics approach to raising children, which 'neither indulges desires nor suppresses nature' (Ruan, 2025, 181). In pre-modern China, Confucian fathers were expected to emphasise kindness over strictness in a child's early years, balance strictness and kindness while the child was growing up and studying, and finally enact 'strictness in form and kindness in essence' as the child entered adulthood (Ruan, 2025, 181). Overdone severity bears the hallmark of oppressive Legalist cruelty, whereas unchecked kindness leads to unhealthy Daoist-style non-interventionist indulgence (Ruan, 2025, 181). The negative consequences of a father failing to achieve a balanced approach to parenting are mentioned repeatedly in historical works.

With the advent of the figure of the 'caring father' globally, a new phrase has arisen in China, 'kind father and strict mother' (*cifu-yanmu* 慈父严母), displaying a 180-degree turn in the discursive framing of Chinese fathers (Fok & Shek, 2011; Li, 2020). Concurrently, there are growing fears in China and elsewhere that excessive parental coddling of children, particularly those without siblings, is leading to a deterioration in young people's mental health (Fan, 2016; Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018). While both *yanfu-cimu* and *cifu-yanmu* phrases purport to describe gendered differences in parenting styles, they do not do justice to the historical balancing of kindness and strictness advocated by historical texts, encapsulated in the phrases 'balancing strictness and kindness' (*yanci-xiangji* 严慈相济) and 'balancing kindness and strictness' (*ciyan-xiangji* 慈严相济). Confucian texts were explicit that the father should deploy a judicious blend of both kindness and strictness in his child-raising methods. Employing *ci-yan* as a heuristic through which to better understand Confucian fathers and Confucian masculinities rebalances the representation of historical Chinese fathers in public debate; grounds *zhongyong* as a key principle for understanding Confucian

fathers and masculinities;[1] provides a starting point for reevaluation of historical Chinese fatherhood and family education; unsettles the misleading binary of traditional vs. modern Chinese fatherhood and masculinities; highlights the usefulness of Confucianism as a resource for conceptualising fatherhood and masculinities; contributes a new perspective to existing global debates about caring masculinities and family education; shows possible future developmental directions for caring masculinities; and offers inspiration for parents and educators concerned about the detrimental impact of overindulging children.

This article draws on Confucian feminism, feminist care ethics, literature on caring masculinities, and contemporary research on discipline and affection in parenting to help open up discursive space for reinterpretations of historical Chinese masculinities. It establishes *zhongyong* and *yinyang* 阴阳 dialectics as the foundational conceptual basis for its analysis of the fatherhood techniques advocated in historical 'family instructions.' The *ci-yan* kindness-strictness dyad is a key instantiation of *zhongyong yinyang* dialectics, which the article principally explores through a paradigmatic sixth-century guide to regulating the family, the *Yan Family Instructions* (*Yan shi jiaxun* 颜氏家训).

Confucian feminism, care ethics, masculinities, and parenting concepts

Confucian feminism offers a progressive conceptualisation of Confucian caring practices, putting care and care ethics at the centre of its attempts to reposition Confucianism's reputation for strong conservatism on gender issues. Confucian feminist theorists have generally noted compatibility between the Confucian concepts of *ren* 仁, often translated as 'humaneness' or 'benevolence' (Ames (2011) translates as 'consummate personal conduct')

[1] Research on historical Chinese masculinities has tended to focus on *wen-wu* 文武 'cultural attainment-martial valour' (Louie, 2002) as a key formative dyad. Understanding *zhongyong* as the foundational dyad repositions *wen-wu* as an instantiation of *zhongyong*, alongside other instantiations, including *ci-yan*, *gang-rou* 刚柔 (hardness-softness), and others.

and *xiao* 孝, commonly translated as 'filial piety' (Ames (2011) translates as 'family reverence') and feminist care ethics theorists' belief that caring for others is the highest moral good (Li, 1994, 74–75; Rosenlee, 2016; Wang, 2016; Yuan, 2019). The hybrid model of Rosenlee (2016; 2024) seeks to infuse Western care ethics with the foundational familial and societal morality of *ren*.

From a different angle, Mengzi asserted that a feeling of compassion and pity for the suffering of others (*ceyin zhi xin* 恻隐之心) is a natural quality within everybody, famously evidenced in his account of the distress caused to any bystander when witnessing a child falling into a well (Birdwhistell, 2007, 112). Innate empathetic feeling, according to Mengzi, is the 'sprout' (*duan* 端) of *ren*. In Birdwhistell's feminist textual analysis, Mencius created a new model of masculinity by appropriating existing maternal practices into men's everyday behaviour, such as 'compassion, caring, and putting the concerns of others before one's own' (2007, 93). The work of Confucian feminist theorists in conjunction with feminist textual scholarship such as Birdwhistell's highlights the potential to reinterpret Confucian masculinities as compassionate and caring to others.

Also inspired by feminist care ethics, 'caring masculinities' has become one of the three main conceptual frameworks for studying masculinities, besides hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 1995) and inclusive masculinities (Anderson 2009) (Wojnicka & de Boise, 2025, 2). Caring masculinity is often seen as a 'character type' and/or an individual practice, rather than reflecting wider questions of power structures, relationality and social change (Wojnicka & de Boise, 2025, 2). In this narrow context, caring masculinities are in some circumstances coded as 'protection' of the family from harm and breadwinning 'production' for the family, thereby reinforcing the feminine associations of practical interpersonal caregiving (Hanlon, 2012; Jordan, 2020; Tronto, 2013). To address an

individualised understanding of caring masculinities, Karla Elliott forefronts the role of caring masculinities in challenging power relations, defining caring masculinities as 'masculine identities that reject domination and its associated traits and embrace values of care such as positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality' (2016, 240).

Social science research on affection and discipline in parenting suggests that warm parental support combined with reasoned discipline increases children's prosocial behaviour (Knafo & Plomin, 2006, 148). Diana Baumrind's (1966) categorisation of authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parents continues to shape understandings of parenting: Baumrind showed that parents who are both highly responsive and highly demanding, whom she called 'authoritative' parents, consistently raise better adjusted children than disciplinarian authoritarians or permissive parents (Carroll, 2022; Gunnoe, 2013). Studies from diverse global locations have demonstrated that authoritative fathering shapes children's behaviour more positively than authoritarian, permissive and disengaged fathering (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2006; Hong et al., 2012; Nazifi et al., 2023). The American Academy of Pediatrics affirms that successful child-raising requires '(1) a positive, supportive, loving relationship between the parent(s) and child; (2) use of positive reinforcement strategies to increase desired behaviors; and (3) removing reinforcement or applying punishment to reduce or eliminate undesired behaviors' (Flaskerud, 2011, 82).

Historical Confucian and Legalist contexts

Studying historical texts' instructions for fathers helps illuminate how Confucianism saw the family and the state as inherently connected (Wu & Wei, 2023). The 'benevolence' or humaneness inherent in the father-son relationship paralleled the 'righteousness' or moral duty inherent in the ruler-subject relationship (Hwang & Meyer, 2018, 942). In Chapter 10 of

his *Commentary on the Great Learning* (*Daxue zhangju* 大学章句), Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), the highly influential 12th-century Southern Song neo-Confucianist, wrote:

> If the self is cultivated, the family can be taught. Filiality, fraternal respect, and parental kindness are the means through which one cultivates the self and teaches the family. Yet the ways the state serves the ruler, respects elders, and leads the people do not go beyond these. Thus, the family is ordered from above and moral transformation is accomplished from below. (My translation)

Following the classical Confucian idea of resonance between actions and responses (*ganying* 感应), Zhu Xi and other Confucian scholars held that compassion from parents towards their children evokes a response of filial love (Kong, 2021, 107); furthermore, if family relations were well ordered, then society would be harmonious and the country would be at peace. Yet, in Chapter 9 of his *Commentary on the Great Learning*, Zhu Xi warned of the dangers of spoiling children and tending to extremes: 'Overindulgence of children blinds judgment, and greed is never satisfied. Such imbalance causes harm and leads to a household's disharmony' (my translation). The advocacy of balancing kindness and strictness has characterised both parent-child and ruler-subject (the ruler as parent to the people) relations throughout Chinese history, and remains a principle promoted in contemporary Chinese political writing (Du, 2022; Shan, 2025, 12). Even today, China's President Xi Jinping's policy statements on the family link the prospects of families, nation and state (Chen, 2024; Tian & Yang, 2023).

While Zhu Xi urged measured kindness from both parents, popular discourses have exaggerated a historically gendered division of parental labour that position the father as strict and the mother as kind (Shan, 2025, 12). The trope of the authoritarian father draws on Legalist ideas about power and control as seen in the influential work *The Book of Lord*

Shang (*Shang Jun Shu* 商君书) by the early Legalist thinker Shang Yang 商鞅 (c. 390–338 BCE), who denied the usefulness of love and kindness whether from the sovereign or a father: 'A well-ruling sovereign has no loyal ministers, a kind father has no filial sons' (Pines, 2017, 210). Further demonstrating his belief in the ineffectiveness of kindness as an approach, Shang Yang wrote:

> Hence, it is said: 'The benevolent can behave benevolently toward others but cannot cause them to behave benevolently; the righteous can love others but cannot cause others to be loving.' From this I know that benevolence and righteousness are insufficient to rule All-under-Heaven. (Pines, 2017, 211)

Following Legalism's major role in the Qin Emperor's establishment of a unified China in 221 BCE, Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179-104 BCE), a scholar close to Emperor Wu of the Western Han Dynasty, which followed the Qin Dynasty, developed a mode of governance that cloaked Legalist political practices in the ethical rhetoric of Confucianism (*wairu-neifa* 外儒内法) (Zhao, 2015). Dong incorporated the key pre-Qin Legalist thinker Han Feizi's (c. 280–233 BCE) concept of the 'Three Bonds' (*Sangang* 三纲) into his syncretic governance theory. The Three Bonds prescribed the relationships between husband and wife, father and son, and ruler and minister as relations of authority in which the second-named role was subordinate to the first-named, whereas Confucius and Mencius had embraced a reciprocity at the heart of these and other roles. (Pang-White, 2018, 34–35; Wang, 2005, 217). Dong Zhongshu's reconceptualisation of the Three Bonds emphasised 'one-way obligations by stressing the subordinate's duties of loyalty, filial piety, and subservience,' minimising the earlier sense of mutual interaction (Wang, 2005, 217). Dong's move melded harsh Legalist practices into a hierarchical social order (Wang, 2005). The

historian Qin Hui pointedly remarks that 'The biggest issue in China is the dichotomy of "Confucian values on the surface but Legalist practices underneath," (*rubiao-fali* 儒表法理) which manifests in preaching benevolence and morality while engaging in corrupt and hypocritical actions' (Qin, 2010). Paradoxically, during and after the New Culture Movement (*xin wenhua yundong* 新文化运动) of the early Republican era, it was Confucianism that was attacked and accused of patriarchal authoritarianism, not the underlying Legalist policies and practices that Dong had helped establish two millennia previously (Qin, 1999a, 1999b). Contemporary scholarship similarly often asserts that Confucian masculinity perpetuates patriarchal power, without identifying the Legalist technique that lies behind and may even distort Confucian discourse. It is time for a reconsideration of conceptions of the Confucian father, for example as previously happened with reappraisals of the stereotyping of Victorian fathers as 'unsmiling domestic tyrants' (Tosh, 1996).

Zhongyong and yinyang dialectics

The *ci-yan* and *ci-xiao* dyads both reflect the core theoretical principle of Confucianism, *zhongyong*, which first appears in the *Analects* 6.29: 'The Master said, "Supreme indeed is the Mean as a moral virtue. It has been rare among the common people for quite a long time"' (Lau, 1979, 85). In the midst of the conflict and suffering that took place during Confucius' lifetime, as the older sociopolitical order gave way to intense competition between states, Confucius yearned for a return to the more harmonious environment that marked the early years of the Zhou Dynasty. *Zhongyong*, the balancing of contradictory forces in non-conflictual equilibrium, was his solution to mitigating the raw power of the political leaders around him (Wang, 2017, 80). The Confucian book that bears the name *Zhongyong* (historically attributed to Zisi 子思, grandson of Confucius) was elevated by Zhu Xi to be one of the Four Books that defined the essence of Confucianism in China's late

imperial era. *Zhongyong* is often translated into English as simply ‘the mean,’ following James Legge (1815–1897), the influential Scottish missionary and scholar, who also translated it as ‘the state of equilibrium and harmony.’ It has also been rendered in more creative terms as ‘the unwobbling pivot’ (Pound, 1969), and, as a gerund phrase, ‘focusing the familiar’ (Ames, 2011). Wang Yuechuan 王岳川 (2009, 135–6) interprets *zhongyong* as ‘the middle way and the constant way’ (*zhongdao he changdao* 中道和常道), through the following reasoning:

> It [*zhongyong*] counsels people not to pursue excessive external material possessions, not to over-indulge in desires and greed, and not to heap upon themselves too much fame, status, or wealth, as that leads to burden, pain, trouble, and anxiety. A genuine life should grasp the right ‘measure,’ a kind of ‘subtraction’ that brings one back to one’s authentic self. One’s actions should be even-handed, avoiding the supernatural, following instead the normal, everyday rhythm of life. *Zhongyong* teaches people to guard against greed, impatience, desire, and arrogance. Only after letting go of these can one become a true person (*zhenren* 真人), and from thereon develop the integrity, moderation, and constancy of an exemplary person (*junzi* 君子).

Zhongyong is the state of doing and being that the *junzi* (exemplary person) is expected to achieve; the *junzi* represents the Confucian understanding of ideal moral character that all should seek to emulate (Lee, 2020). As stated in the *Zhongyong*: ‘The *junzi* embodies the *zhongyong*; the small man acts contrary to the *zhongyong*.’ In his *Commentary on the Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸章句 *Zhongyong zhangju*), Zhu Xi interpreted *zhongyong* as the state of equilibrium that exists before strong emotions arise (Chapter 1). Mengzi 4B7.1

emphasises the educational responsibility that fathers and elder brothers had to live according to the Mean: 'Mengzi said, "Those who achieve the mean care for those who do not achieve the mean. Those who have talent nurture those who do not have talent. Hence, people will delight in having worthy fathers and elder brothers"' (Van Norden, 2009, 120). *Zhongyong* dialectics operate differently from Hegelian dialectics, which derive from Aristotelian logic and underlie modern Western politics and political philosophy. As the political scientist Qin Yaqing 秦亚青 points out, Hegelian dialectics play out through a process of conflict between two separate and opposing forces; *zhongyong* dialectics, however, consist of *yin* and *yang* in dynamic relationship as part of one another within a larger whole (Qin 2018, 171–3). In other words, in *zhongyong* dialectics *yin* and *yang* complement each other relationally, unlike the opposing sides in Hegelian dialectics, which contradict each other. The harmonisation of *yin* and *yang* in *zhongyong* seeks to achieve an 'ideal state' (Meng & Liu, 2022, 471).

An example of complementarity thinking in the *Zhongyong* is found in Chapter 10, which holds firmness and gentleness harmoniously together in the character of the exemplary person:

> To teach with tolerance and gentleness and to show forbearance towards unprincipled conduct is the strength of the South and the exemplary person (*junzi*). To live under arms and meet death without hesitation is the strength of the North and the mighty (*qiangzhe* 强者). Ultimately, the exemplary person seeks harmony yet is unyielding: how firm he is! He stands in the middle without inclining to either side. (My translation)

In the above passage, forbearance and gentleness complement courage and strength, foreshadowing the complementarity of *ci* kindness and *yan* strictness in the ideal Confucian father as set out in historical texts.

Kindness and strictness in historical texts

The Great Learning (*Daxue* 大学), historically attributed to Confucius, cites in Chapter 7 the *Book of Odes*' (*Shijing* 诗经) praise for King Wen of Zhou (周文王 Zhou Wen Wang), posthumously honoured as founder of the Zhou Dynasty, including his kindness as a father: 'As a sovereign, he rested in benevolence; as a minister, he rested in reverence; as a son, he settled in filial piety; as a father, he rested in kindness; in communication with his subjects, he rested in good faith' (Legge, 1971, 362). The *Zuo Zhuan* 左转, a chronicle of the Spring and Autumn Period (*Chunqiu shidai* 春秋时代) (c. 770 – c. 481 BCE), historically considered a Confucian text, in 'Lord Yin 3' emphasises the need for a balance of kindness and discipline in three of the 'Five Relationships' (*wulun* 五伦) of Confucianism, spanning governance of the state to regulation of the family:

> For rulers to be dutiful, for subjects to fulfill their tasks, for fathers to be kind, for sons to be filial, for older brothers to show love, and for younger brothers to be respectful, these are called the six compliances. To reject the compliances and follow the violations is the way to hasten disaster. One who rules over men should devote himself to forestalling disaster; is it not then unacceptable that he should instead hasten it? (Plaks et al., 2016, 27)

According to 'Lord Zhao 26' in the *Zuo Zhuan*, the rules of propriety governing relationships, including the kindness required of the father, emerged from the cosmological order:

> The usefulness of ritual propriety to governing a domain is old, as old as heaven and earth. When the ruler commands well, the subject follows. When the father is kind, the son is filial. When the elder brother is loving, the younger brother is respectful. When the husband is mild, the wife is compliant. When the mother-in-law is kind, the daughter-in-law is obedient. That is in accordance with ritual propriety. (Plaks et al., 2016, 1671)

Those who did not fulfil their roles appropriately, including unkind fathers, were subject to sanction (Lord Xi 33):

> The Kang Proclamation says, 'A father may not be kind, a son may not be reverential, an older brother may not be amiable, and a younger brother may not be respectful, but this does not implicate others.' (Plaks et al., 2016, 453)

Confucian ideas from ancient texts inform the ethics of care that is found in historical family instructions (*jiaxun* 家训), detailed guides that developed from the scholar-official practical education tradition from father to sons. Family instructions utilised the *zhongyong* principle to advocate a balance of strictness with kindness in childraising (Yang, 2006). The earliest systematic family instructions and one of the most influential is the *Yan Family Instructions*, written by the sixth-century scholar-official Yan Zhitui 颜之推 (531-591 CE). This work of 20 chapters, written by a father and addressed to his sons, has been reprinted many times. It is still widely read today for the advice it dispenses on regulating family

behaviour, household management, spiritual belief, calligraphy, and music, among other topics (Tian, 2021). Despite its eclectic subject matter, it is strongly Confucian in its standpoint (Yan & Wu, 2023).

While the *Yan Family Instructions* is sometimes mischaracterised as a stereotypical example of a 'strict father' treatise, a close reading of the text shows a strong commitment to balancing strictness with kindness. In II.2, in the chapter on 'Educating Children' (Jiao Zi 教子), Yan writes: 'If the parents are strict yet kind, then their son or daughter will naturally hold them in awe and act with caution, and a sense of filial piety will be born' (Tian, 2021, 9). Yan uses a medical metaphor in II.4 to convince parents to find a middle way between the extremes of overindulgence and excessive harshness:

> If parents are unable to educate their son or daughter, it is not that they want to lead their children into bad behavior or misdeeds; it is simply that they cannot bear to upset their children with angry rebukes or bring pain to their body through corporal punishment. Such parents should think of the treatment of illness as a metaphor: how can one not save one's sick child with medicine and needles? They should also understand that those parents who diligently supervise and coach their children truly have no desire to abuse their own flesh and blood, but only do it because there is no other way. (Tian, 2021, 11)

In II.7, Yan provides advice specifically on the father-son relationship, which at first glance may appear to lean towards the 'strict father' paradigm:

> The solemn [*yan*] relation between father and son should not be damaged by familiarity; the love of flesh and blood should not be sullied by casualness. When too

> casual, parental love [*ci*] and filial piety fail to meet each other; when too familiar, a sense of disrespect is born. (Tian, 2021, 13)

Yet this passage too continues a model of parent-child relations premised on combining kindness and propriety in family relations: the guidance is for the 'love of flesh and blood' that permeates a father's treatment of his son to be tempered, not replaced, by a degree of strictness.

To maintain propriety between father and son, Yan advises against over-familiarity: for example, in II.7 and II.8, he advises that fathers should not educate their sons in person (Tian, 2021, 15) and should stay in a different chamber if the father has an official appointment (Tian, 2021, 13). In the 'Encouraging study' (勉学) chapter, at VIII.29, he suggests that by not making selfish demands upon a son, but remaining humble and focused on the son's proper instruction, fathers will achieve contentment:

> If I make you give up study and pursue profit to enrich my food and clothes, how can the food taste good to me or the clothes feel warm to me? If, however, you can engage in the way of the former kings and continue our family's legacy, then pigweed stew and a coarse wadded robe are what I desire. (Tian, 2021, 157)

Such measures exemplify a father's calibrated kindness with the son's best interests at heart: avoiding over-indulgence but not overly oppressive. While Yan provides no rigidly prescriptive formula for kindly behaviour, his exhortations suggest that a father's skilful navigation of a middle path between indulgence and oppression manifests in a child's good character and behaviour.

II.10 warns of the danger of lacking compassion for children who are less bright and cooperative than others, while indulging one's favourites:

> Parental love is rarely distributed equally among all of one's children, and this has led to many disasters from the ancient times till today. One naturally admires and loves the worthy and talented sons, but should also have compassion for the senseless and stupid ones. If a parent is partial to one son, then the desire to favor him will turn out to harm him instead. (Tian, 2021, 17)

In this passage, the emphasis again is on balance and not falling into uneven favouritism. It delivers the message that all of one's children should be subject to similar levels of both kindness and strictness, as doting on one child and depriving others of kindness leads to counterproductive results.

In a chapter on 'Household Management' (Zhi Jia 治家), Yan writes in V.1 about the obligation of senior family members to show kindness and love to those junior to them:

> The civilizing influence is applied from above to below, from the earlier generation to the later generation. Therefore, if the father is not benevolent [*ci*], then the son is not filial; if an elder brother is not affectionate, then the younger brother is not respectful; if a husband is not just, then the wife is not obedient. If a father is benevolent [*ci*] but the son is rebellious, or an elder brother is affectionate but the younger brother is arrogant, or a husband is just but the wife is defiant, then they are truly the wicked people of the world. They can only be brought into submission by punishment, but will not be moved by teaching and guidance. (Tian, 2021, 37)

Re-emphasising the equilibrium between kindness and strictness, Yan affirms his caution that when family members do not respond to kindness with respect, tough measures are the only solution.

Importantly, as the above excerpt makes clear, kindness as a moral obligation is bound into the authoritative position of the father (and other seniors in the family), flowing down to the child. A child's unfilial behaviour should not cause the father to not be kind (and vice versa), as each person has the moral responsibility to hold to the obligations inherent in their role (Nuyen, 2009). Performing fatherly kindness is therefore an important stabiliser of familial and social hierarchy, not its subversion. Moreover, the Confucian father's role-based moral obligation to perform kindness differed from notions of kindness as a universal disposition, feeling or attitude (Knafo & Israel, 2012). While the extent to which the Confucian tradition of *ci* included affective as well as cognitive dimensions is a matter of debate (Brys, 2023), it is clear that the Confucian father was obligated to be kind to his children in a measured way. Thus, he ensured the stability of the family, and, in turn, the stability of the social and political order. As Yan Zhitui counsels, excessive intimacy undermines authority, whereas excessive harshness destroys affection. Kindness for the Confucian father therefore included a strong element of ethical calibration, as well as emotional warmth.

V.5 and V.6 provide examples of the dangers of excessive strictness or kindness:

> At the time of Liang Emperor Xiaoyuan, there was a Secretarial Drafter who mismanaged his household by being too harsh. As a result, his wife and concubine conspired to hire an assassin, who murdered him when he was intoxicated. But [it is equally harmful when] the eminent gentlemen of the world are only bent on leniency. When they offer food and drink to people, their servants secretly reduce the amount;

> when they make a promise to give alms, their wife and children control the quantity. The servants and family members thus insult the guests and raid the neighbors, proving to be the vermin in a household. (Tian, 2021, 39)

Chapter Five of the *Yan Family Instructions* clearly aims to teach the benefits of the middle way between extremes when managing the household. Without a moderate, balanced approach, patriarchal authority either overreaches itself with potentially violent consequences, even the loss of life, or it slides into lax indulgence, heralding the collapse of respect and loss of control of the household.

Indeed, in Chapter Two, Yan already emphasises the dangers of fatherly indulgence, which is suggestive that fatherly pampering of children was more widespread at the time than excessive disciplining. In II.3, Tan writes that fathers are often overly forgiving due to their love for their children, as he has seen many parents who 'indulge their children and let them eat, drink, and act as they please, praising them when they should be admonished, and smiling at them when they should be reprimanded (Tian, 2021, 11).' He is concerned that: 'If parents only try to control a child after the habits of arrogance and insouciance have already been formed, then by that time they will have no authority (Tian, 2021, 11).' In II.6, Yan writes about a talented son 'doted on by his father, who neglected to educate him properly. If he said one thing right, his father would tell the whole world about it, praising him all year long. If he did one thing wrong, his father would try to cover it up or make light of it, hoping that he would reform on his own (Tian, 2021, 13).' The son became so arrogant, Yan reveals, that he was eventually disembowelled by a military officer. Thus, kindness does not equate to indulgence, but to raising children properly from young: 'educate your son when he is still an infant' (Tian, 2021, 11).

Further examples of the influence of *zhongyong ci-yan* dialectics are found in the writings of Sima Guang 司马光 (1019–1086), one of the great scholar-statesmen of the Northern Song dynasty. Drawing inspiration from the *Yan Family Instructions*, Sima Guang advocated a child education method that brought together kindness (*ci'ai* 慈爱) and discipline (*yanjiao* 严教) in several of his works (Yang, 2006, 215). In Chapter Three of his *Family Precepts* (*Jiafan* 家范), titled 'Parents, Father, Mother' (Fumu, fu, mu 父母，父，母), Sima Guang approvingly quotes the line from the *Yan Family Instructions* that warns against the love of one's children becoming over familiar and casual. In his late cosmological work, *The Latent Void* (*Qian Xu* 潜虚), Sima Guang epitomised the father's role as the embodiment of both kindness and discipline:

> Consider the father: he is revered as lord, yet the peril lies in lack of closeness.
> The mother is intimate, yet the danger lies in lack of respect.
> Who can fully combine both qualities? Is it not only the father?
> Kindness without instruction undermines the duty of respect;
> Instruction without kindness harms the principle of kinship.
> Only when kindness and instruction are both fully present are respect and closeness complete. (My translation)

With growing concern in China and elsewhere about the dangers of parents overindulging their children and the deterioration of young people's mental health, the *Yan Family Instructions*, Sima Guang's *Family Instructions* and other historical works that offer balanced parenting guidance provide an antidote to 'permissive parenting' theories that reject the need for a degree of discipline (Yang, 2016, 96). Historical parenting manuals provide

alternative perspectives on contemporary parenting trends, and an opportunity to recast pervasive images of Chinese fathering and masculinities and reevaluate their historical treatment. As with the political cloaking of authoritarian Legalism with Confucian ethics, which led to Confucianism being blamed for the ills of Legalism, the Chinese father throughout history has often been tarred as a cold disciplinarian; the reality is more complex. In particular, the integration of *ci-yan* (kindness-strictness) and *ci-xiao* (kindness-filiality) warrants further discussion.

For the *ci-xiao* dyad to operate effectively, the *ci-yan* dyad must produce effective and responsive fatherly instruction. *Ci* and *xiao* appear as the first two virtues in the *Shiyi* 十义, the ten moral relations promoted in the 'Liyun' 礼运 ('The Conveyance of Rites' section of the *Liji* 礼记, the *Book of Rites*) (Chen & Wang, 2022, 36). *Ci-xiao* anchors the father-son relationship, which sits at the heart of the family and social order through the framework of the Three Bonds and the Five Relationships (Wesolowski, 2022, 318-319). Both dyads operate as *yin-yang* processes (Li & Rong, 2007, 25). The father cultivates and manifests a balanced kindness, which induces an appropriately filial response from his son. As Yan Zhitui and Sima Guang both state, the father should balance *ci* and *yan* in his own behaviour, which then achieves the dynamic balance between *ci* and *xiao* that the *Zuo Zhuan* describes. In the Confucian way of the father, *ci* is therefore always relational: it cannot be separated from *yan* or *xiao*.

This relational aspect of kindness in the Confucian tradition contrasts with the emphasis in the *Laozi* on kindness as a universal value to be directed towards all, not simply blood relations, stemming from the natural principles binding *tian* 天 (the "heavens"), *di* 地 (the earth), *ren* 人 (people) and *dao* 道 (the way) (Xu, 2007, 42-44). Mohism, by contrast, combines the relational aspect of father-son kindness/filiality with a universal impulse, as it

does not distinguish by family bloodlines, urging that the kindness and filiality cultivated in the family relationship be equally applied to all in the world (Xu, 2011, 83).

As the fundament of regulating the father-son relationship, *ci* was the mirror of governing the nation through *ren*. It was central to Confucianism's role-specific virtue framework through which relationships were organised analogically, including the sovereign's *ren* for his minister and the elder brother's *ai* (爱 love) for his younger brother. Due to the 'state as family' (*jia tianxia* 家天下) governance model, kindness became an administrative ethic: the ruler and officials were the social parallels of a 'big parent' and a 'small parent' (Chai, 2007, 158). Kindness became an important part of governance, due to its perceived role in pacifying the country (*anguo* 安国) (Chai, 2007, 158-9). In similar vein to Yan Zhitui's warnings about fathers going to extremes of kindness or strictness, cautionary tales exist about the dangers of a ruler being either too kind or too harsh. Sima Guang noted that Emperor Wu of Liang in the Southern Dynasties was excessively lenient in his application of the law, leading to increased killing, stealing and the guilty going unpunished: 'The emperor was deeply aware of these abuses, yet he was immersed in compassionate affection and unable to restrain them' (Chai, 2007, 160). At the other extreme, the Qin Dynasty collapsed rapidly due to its overwhelming oppression of the ordinary people, which led the poet and official Du Mu to caution that 'the way to govern a state is to love the people like a benevolent father, and instruct them like a strict teacher' (Chai, 2007, 160). Du Mu's view drew on 'Wei Zheng' (为政) 2.20 of the *Analects*:

> Ch'i K'ang Tzu asked, 'How can one inculcate in the common people the virtue of reverence, of doing their best and of enthusiasm?' The Master said, 'Rule over them with dignity, and they will be reverent; treat them with kindness and they will do their

> best; raise the good and instruct those who are backward and they will be imbued with enthusiasm.' (Lau, 1979, 65)

Although the *Analects* tends to emphasise filiality, with these words Confucius advises that kindness, as a morally balanced measure, will result in reciprocal behaviour from the people (Li & Rong, 2007, 27).

Conclusion

The way of the father, transmitted in Confucian works across the centuries, is more nuanced and balanced than popular conceptualisations of authoritarian Chinese fatherhood allow. The mistaken labelling of oppressive Legalist family control techniques as Confucian parallels the same pattern of misrepresenting Legalist governance of the state as Confucian. Whatever the realities of parenting practices, in theory, Confucian texts urged fathers to be kind as well as strict, lest any imbalance cause ill effects in their children's development, strikingly foreshadowing the recommended 'authoritative' approach of contemporary research on parenting. These texts also saw relationships as reciprocal, a facet lost in the Legalist reinterpretation of the Three Bonds, requiring subservience and submission. Underlying the dynamic equilibrium of *ci-yan* is the principle of *zhongyong* and its operating mechanism of *yinyang* dialectics, a relational process through which kindness and strictness work together to produce a harmony. This 'middle way' swings to neither extreme, avoiding indulging or suppressing the recipients of care.

Confucian feminism's engagement with feminist care ethics, combined with feminist textual analysis, opens up new imaginaries of caring in the Confucian tradition. Acknowledging the patriarchal structures that framed much historical thinking, a Confucian feminist care ethic approach creates social relations that reject power inequalities while fully

embracing the existence of inequalities in relationships. A key significance of the *ci-yan* dyad is its illumination of a side of Confucian fatherhood that is not often discussed; it also opens a door to better understanding of the foundational premise of historical Chinese masculinities, the *zhongyong yinyang* dialectic. This relatively neglected caring side to Chinese masculinities requires further academic attention through analysis of family instructions and other conduits of the tradition.

The c*i-yan* harmonious equilibrium has the potential to provide inspiring contributions to global debates about men's parenting; it helps articulate possible future directions for more measured and effective ways for men across the world to develop fruitful fathering and caring masculinities.

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