

## Article

# The Buddhist Concept of “Filial Piety” in the Context of Early Chinese Buddhist Scripture Translation

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**Abstract:** Examining the early history of the Chinese translation of Buddhist scriptures, it is revealed that translators from the Eastern Han Dynasty to the Wei and Jin Dynasties, such as An Shigao, Lokakṣema, Kang Senghui and Dharmarakṣa, already paid much attention to and began translating Buddhist scriptures related to “filial piety”. They even, during the translation process, altered the original meanings of some words to promote the sinicization of Buddhism or brought together the contents of several sutras to provide a more culturally attuned interpretation of the Buddhist idea of “filial piety and repayment of kindness”, in accordance with Chinese culture. With their efforts, the Chinese gradually realized that Buddhism also preached filial ethics. Buddhists were not against the value of filial piety when embracing monastic life; instead, they could accumulate merits and dedicate them to their parents and relatives, rescuing them from samsara. This introduced a fresh perspective for traditional Confucian filial piety, and highlighted the importance of “filial piety” beyond the framework of “family and state as one.” Confucianism and Buddhism were able to agree on the significance of filial piety, and Buddhism also affected and complemented the ethical cultivation of the Chinese medieval society.

**Keywords:** Chinese Buddhist translation; Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha; filial piety; Early Buddhism; renounce the family



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## 1. Introduction

Max Weber, in his discussion of religion in China, pointed out that in the context of the Chinese patrimonial bureaucracy, filial piety is “the absolutely primary virtue”, “the virtue from which all others issue”, and “the most important status obligation of bureaucratic system”. (Weber 1951, pp. 157–58) As the starting point of human existence and human relations, the family is regarded by Weber as the foundation and motive of civilizations, which not only constitutes the inner mechanism of Confucian filial ethics and political, economic and social order in Chinese civilization, but also plays a fundamental and long-term role in Indian society through the establishment of the caste system.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, “family” and “filial piety” undoubtedly provide an important research approach for scholars to clarify the origins and characteristics of Chinese civilization. Consequently, this has attracted a group of scholars to engage in comparative studies from the perspective of the history of civilization, using Chinese Buddhist scriptures, Pali Buddhist scriptures, Indian inscriptions, and other materials to examine the “filial piety” concepts linked by Buddhism in China and India. From the research findings, there are two different views on this issue: some, represented by John Strong (Strong 1983), Gregory Schopen (Schopen 1997), Guang Xing (Guang 2005), and Zhao Xiaohuan (Zhao 2023) believe that there was already a tradition of filial piety in Indian civilization and that the filial piety in the early Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures was not entirely a newly developed Buddhist ethical concept under the influence of the Han Chinese; and others, such as Chen Guan-sheng (Chen 1968), Michibata Ryoshu (Michibata 1968), and Ran Yunhua (Ran 1990) assert that the tradition of filial piety is one of the significant features of Chinese Buddhism, argu-

ing that the status of “filial piety” in Chinese Buddhism is much more elevated compared to its role in Indian Buddhism.

It can be observed that scholars have reached a basic conclusion that expressions related to filial piety exist in both Chinese Buddhism and Indian Buddhism. However, there is still room for further research regarding the specific connotations and evolutionary development of the concept of filial piety in the contexts of Chinese and Indian civilizations. By examining early Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures, including the four groups of Āgama sutras, and many apocryphal texts with uncertain translators and dates, it is revealed that the tradition of filial piety in Indian Buddhism gradually gained popularity around the first century CE with the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Its core ideas revolve around sentient beings, gratitude, and liberation, which are fundamental Buddhist doctrines, and differ significantly from the essential content of filial piety in Chinese Buddhism, which was reinterpreted to focus on “filial piety towards parents and relatives” “loyalty to rulers” and “monastic devotion to filial piety”.

This paper mainly applies the methods of Buddhist literature studies and philology, comparing the Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures with Sanskrit scriptures. It briefly introduces the tradition of filial piety in Indian Buddhism and then explores the basic explanations and developmental processes of the “filial piety” concept in early Chinese translations. It attempts to understand the specific efforts made by Buddhism in early translation activities, from the perspective of cross-cultural exchange and mutual influence, to adapt to Chinese culture.

## 2. Buddhism and Filial Piety: The Tradition of Filial Piety in the Āgama Sutras

According to Guang Xing’s research (Guang 2005), early Buddhist scriptures such as the Āgama sutras contain various religious expressions related to “filial piety towards parents” and “repaying parental kindness”. These texts integrate the concepts of “filial piety” and “repaying kindness”, explaining to the monastic community the theoretical basis of filial piety, methods of filial piety, and the implications for spiritual liberation (mukti). For instance, in the Chinese translation of the *Ekottara Āgama* (*Zengyi ahan jing* 增一阿含經), there are words like “The kindness of parents is great, their nurturing affection is profound 父母恩重，育養情甚” (CBETA, T02, no.125, p. 623b23-24) and “For this reason, parents have greatly benefited their children, their nurturing kindness is profound, from breast-feeding to embracing and carrying the child. One must repay this kindness; there is no excuse not to repay it 所以然者，父母生子多有所益，長養恩重，乳哺懷抱，要當報恩，不得不報恩” (CBETA, T02, no.125, p. 823a11-12). These contents clearly highlight the hardships faced by parents in raising their children and the principle that children should repay their parents’ kindness. Regarding the specific ways of filial piety, the *Śīgalovāda Sūtra*<sup>2</sup> provides a detailed account of early Buddhist family ethics from the perspective of paying homage in six directions:

What are the five things a son should do to honor his parents? The first is to make offerings so that there is no lack of them; the second is to tell parents what you are doing; the third is to be obedient to what your parents are doing; the fourth is to not disobey your parents’ orders; and the fifth is not to leave your parents’ legitimate business with no successor. Sujāta! When a person is a son, he should honor his parents with these five things, and the parents will honor their son with five things. What are the five? The first is to make the son not to hear evil; the second is to show him a good place; the third is to love him to the core; the fourth is to seek a good marriage for him; the fifth is to provide for his needs at all times. Sujāta! If you are obedient and respectful to your parents, you will be at peace with them and have no fear. 夫為人子，當以五事敬順父母，云何為五？一者供奉能使無乏；二者凡有所為，先白父母；三者父母所為，恭順不逆；四者父母正令，不敢違背；五者不斷父母所為正業。善生！夫為人子，當以此五事敬順父母，父母復以五事敬親其子。雲何

為五？一者製子不聽為惡；二者指授示其善處；三者慈愛入骨徹髓；四者為子求善婚娶；五者隨時供給所須。善生子！於父母敬順恭奉，則彼方安隱，無有憂畏。

(CBETA, T01, no. 1, p. 71c8-17)

In different Chinese translations of the *Śīgalovāda Sūtra*, the Buddha preached the similar family ethics for Sujāta (*shansheng* 善生), and all of these preachings put forward the principle that sons should honor, provide for, and obey their parents and that parents should teach, love, and raise their sons. It can be seen that the early Buddhist concept of filial piety attached great importance to the mutual respect and support between parents and children, and required believers to put into practice the Buddhist ethical concept of filial piety and repayment of kindness in their daily practice. If children can always practice filial piety and repay their parents, they can continuously accumulate good karma and gain, otherwise they may suffer the corresponding evil consequences.

For example, as the *Madhyama Āgama* says:

If there are sentient beings born into the human realm who are not filial to their parents, do not know how to respect monks and Brahmins, do not act truthfully, do not engage in virtuous deeds, do not fear the sins of future lives, then, due to these causes and conditions, their bodies will be destroyed, and at the end of their lives, they will be reborn in the realm of Yama. 若有眾生生於人間，不孝父母，不知尊敬沙門、梵志，不行如實，不作福業，不畏後世罪，彼因緣此，身壞命終，生閻王境界。(CBETA, T01, no. 26, p. 503c22-25)

This highlights the metaphysical significance of beings practicing filial piety from the perspective of liberation and the severe consequences of not being filial to parents. It also explains why inscriptions unearthed in India frequently mention the practice of dedicating the merits of generosity to one's parents (Schopen 1997).

Around the first century CE, with the widespread dissemination of Mahāyāna Buddhism's doctrines such as *zhongsheng pingdeng* 眾生平等 (equality among all sentient beings) and *cibei lita* 慈悲利他 (compassion and benefiting others), the scope of Buddhist filial piety ethics expanded further, to include all sentient beings within the cycle of samsara. Consequently, all sentient beings became objects of reverence and offerings by Buddhist monks. In Volume 2 of the *Brahmajāla Sūtra*, we read:

If the Buddha's son, out of compassion, practices the act of saving lives, regarding all males as his fathers and all females as his mothers, being born from them life after life, then all sentient beings in the six realms are his fathers and mothers. 若佛子以慈心故，行放生業。一切男子是我父，一切女人是我母，我生生無不從之受生，故六道眾生皆是我父母。(CBETA, T24, no. 1484, p. 1006b9-11)

Under the influence of Mahāyāna teachings, where all sentient beings are considered as parents, repaying parental kindness becomes synonymous with repaying the kindness of all sentient beings. The concept of filial piety and gratitude in Buddhism thus further developed towards the goal of benefiting all beings. In this regard, the *Mahāyāna Sūtra of Previous Lives and Contemplation of the Mind-ground* (*Dasheng bensheng xindi guan jing* 大乘本生心地觀經), based on the Buddhist doctrine of karmic rebirth, explains in more detail the reasons for expanding the object of repayment from parents to sentient beings, saying that:

The grace of all sentient beings is that all sentient beings have been the parents of each other in many lifetimes since the beginning of time, through hundreds and thousands of kalpas; because they are the parents of each other, all men are the loving father and all women are the compassionate mother. There is no difference between the great kindnesses of past lives and the kindnesses of present parents. If you have not been able to repay such past kindnesses, or if you have been given the chance to be disobedient because of delusional karma, then you have become a grudge against them because of your attachment to them. What is the reason for this? Ignorance overrides the wisdom and understanding of

the past lives, so that they do not know that they were parents in previous lives, and that all the kindnesses they can repay are mutually beneficial. For this reason, all sentient beings have great kindness at all times, which is difficult to repay. 眾生恩者，即無始來，一切眾生輪轉五道，經百千劫，於多生中互為父母；以互為父母故，一切男子即是慈父，一切女人即是悲母。昔生中有大恩故，猶如現在父母之恩等無差別。如是昔恩，猶未能報，或因妄業，生諸違順，以執著故，反為其怨。何以故？無明覆障，宿住智明，不了前生，曾為父母，所可報恩，互為饒益，無饒益者，名為不孝。以是因緣，諸眾生類，於一切時，亦有大恩，實為難報。(CBETA, T03, no. 159, p. 297c8-18)

It is evident that Mahāyāna Buddhism encourages monks to universally respect all sentient beings in the world, viewing them as parents who have bestowed great kindness upon themselves. They are encouraged to continuously practice filial piety and repay this kindness, accumulating merits until they reach the highest state of liberation and enlightenment. This reflects the fact that the ultimate purpose of Buddhist teachings on repaying kindness is still the attainment of liberation. Whether it is repaying the kindness of one's parents or all sentient beings, Buddhism, as a religion that uses monasticism as a mode of practice, is ultimately aimed at seeking transcendence. Its ethical teachings of filial piety and supporting one's parents still serve the highest goal of attaining liberation. In other words, the concept of filial piety in Buddhism is just one subordinate concept within the broader framework of Buddhism, and it does not hold a special status that transcends other Buddhist doctrines. Therefore, if someone committed unwholesome deeds against the Buddhist precepts while practicing filial piety towards their parents, they would still be subject to the laws of karma and its consequences. As is said in Volume 6 of the *Madhyama Āgama*:

Therefore, Venerable Śāriputra said, "I now ask you, please answer as you see fit. Dhānañjāni! What is your opinion on this matter? If someone, for the sake of their parents, commits evil deeds and, due to those evil deeds, their body is destroyed, and upon death, they are reborn in a terrible place like hell. Once born in hell, the hell wardens seize and punish them with extreme suffering. At that moment, they say to the hell wardens, 'Wardens, please know this: do not torment me. Why is that? Because I committed evil deeds for the sake of my parents.' Tell me, Dhānañjāni! Can such a person be freed from this suffering by the hell wardens?" The answer is, "No." 於是，尊者舍梨子告曰：“陀然！我今問汝，隨所解答。梵志陀然！於意云何？若使有人為父母故而行作惡，因行惡故，身壞命終，趣至惡處，生地獄中。生地獄已，獄卒執捉，極苦治時，彼向獄卒而作是語：‘獄卒！當知，莫苦治我。所以者何？我為父母故而行作惡。’云何？陀然！彼人可得從地獄卒脫此苦耶？”答曰：“不也。”(CBETA, T01, no. 26, pp. 456c27–457a6)

This story illustrates the fact that even though Buddhism encourages people to practice filial piety towards their parents, when practicing "filial piety" one should prioritize upholding the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. In the context of Buddhism, the standards for determining whether an action is "good" (*kuśala*) or "evil" (*akuśala*) are three-fold: (1) the motivation behind the action; (2) the direct consequences of the action in terms of joy or suffering it brings about; and (3) the contribution of the action to the spiritual development towards the highest goal of Nirvana (Harvey 2012). Therefore, the actions of filial piety and repaying parental kindness by sentient beings should also inherently align with Buddhist concepts of virtue, karma, and causality. The relationship between filial piety and Buddhism can be discerned, based on these principles.

### 3. The Chinese Interpretation of the Concept of Filial Piety in Early Buddhist Translations

After the introduction of Buddhism into China<sup>3</sup>, influenced by the Confucian ethics centered on filial piety, the early translators of Buddhist scriptures intentionally translated into Chinese some of the classics that encompassed the Buddhist ethic of filial piety or ex-

cerpted the parts of the scriptures that dealt with filial piety into separate translations of the classics. By examining Buddhist scriptures translated during the Eastern Han to the Wei and Jin periods, it becomes apparent that many of these scriptures provided comprehensive explanations of Buddhist filial piety concepts. This includes both scriptures that were directly translated from Indian scriptures and those where translators altered some of the original terms to better align with Chinese ethical and moral concepts. There were even instances where various relevant content from multiple Buddhist scriptures was collected and reinterpreted in Chinese Buddhist texts.

The translation of scriptures related to filial piety in Han China began during the reign of Emperor Huan of the Eastern Han Dynasty 漢桓帝 (r. 146–167), with the arrival of the Buddhist monk An Shigao 安世高 (fl. ca. 148–180 CE). According to the *Memoirs of Eminent Monks* (*Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳)<sup>4</sup>, An Shigao translated 39 Buddhist sutras and treatises. Among all the Buddhist scriptures attributed to An Shigao, such as the *Śīgalovāda Sūtra* (*Shijialuoyue liufang li jing* 尸迦羅越六方禮經), *Sūtra on the Eightfold Correct Path* (*Ba zhengdao jing* 八正道經), *Sūtra on the Seven Points and Three Contemplations* (*Qichu sanguan jing* 七處三觀經), *Sūtra on the Difficulty in Repaying Parents' Kindness* (*Foshuo fumu en nanbao jing* 佛說父母恩難報經), *Sūtra on Ānanda's Questions About Good and Bad Fortunes* (*Foshuo anan wenshi fo jixiong jing* 佛說阿難問事佛吉凶經), and *Sūtra on Karmic Retribution, Moral Education, and Hells* (*Foshuo zuiye yingbao jiaohua diyu jing* 佛說罪業應報教化地獄經), there are discussions related to filial piety.

Among these, the *Śīgalovāda Sūtra* is a different Chinese translation of the early Buddhist scripture *Shansheng jing*, which reflects early Buddhist family ethics and filial piety traditions. It can be considered a relatively faithful transmission of the filial piety thoughts found in the Āgama scriptures. Similarly, *Sūtra on the Eightfold Correct Path* and *Sūtra on the Seven Points and Three Contemplations* should also be Buddhist scriptures translated from other languages' textual sources (Nattier 2008, pp. 175–76), and they still retain traces of early Buddhist thoughts on filial piety. For instance, *Sūtra on the Eightfold Correct Path* states, "To have faith in one's parents is to have faith in filial piety 信父母者信孝順" (CBETA, T02, no. 112, p. 505a27). In *Sūtra on the Seven Points and Three Contemplations*, the Buddha admonishes the monks, saying:

"There are four actions, bhikkhus, known to the wise, not known to fools, and known to the intelligent. What are these four? Giving, bhikkhus, is known to the wise, known to the virtuous, and can be done by the intelligent; not deceiving, bhikkhus, is known by all in the world as virtuous, as stated above; serving and being filial to one's parents, bhikkhus, is known as stated above; practicing as a monk, bhikkhus, is known as stated above; walking the path of the Dharma, bhikkhus, is known by the wise, known by the virtuous, not known by fools, and can be done by the intelligent." He concludes, "Knowing oneself to have engaged in giving, not deceiving, restraining one's mind, guarding oneself, and also serving and being filial to one's parents and maintaining virtuous conduct—by doing these things, one can see accomplishment and attain purity of aspiration in this world." "四行為點所有，為賢者所知，非愚者所知，慧者可意。何等為四？布施，比丘！點人知，賢者知，慧者可知者；不欺，比丘！一切天下所點知，如上說；孝事父母，比丘！所點知，如上說；作沙門，比丘！所點知，如上說；法行道，比丘！所點知，亦賢者知，愚人所不知，點者可。"從後說絕："自知有布施，不欺、製意、自守，亦孝父母有守行，是事一切為點者行，如是可見成就，便世間得淨願。" (CBETA, T02, no. 150a, pp. 882c27–883a7)

As one of the most important early Buddhist translators, An Shigao primarily adhered to the principle of literal translation, emphasizing the conveyance of the original meaning of Buddhist scriptures to the Chinese Buddhist community. Therefore, the ideas of filial piety shown to parents, which are found in these two Chinese Buddhist texts, closely align with the content in early Buddhist scriptures like the Āgama sutras. Both texts consider filial piety as one of the Buddhist traditions that monks must adhere to, believing that

being filial to one's parents can lead to positive karmic results and the accomplishment of spiritual merits in this worldly existence.

Indeed, in the process of spreading Buddhist scriptures in China, it was inevitable that monks in China would expand or incorporate elements with Chinese cultural characteristics. Emphasizing the Buddhist concept of filial piety was a typical approach. Apart from directly translating Buddhist scriptures related to filial piety, Chinese monks often used techniques like excerpting, expanding, or modifying to reinterpret Buddhist filial piety ethics. They sometimes even established connections between Buddhist and Confucian filial piety concepts. As a result, in some Chinese Buddhist scriptures, such as *Sūtra on the Difficulty in Repaying Parents' Kindness*, *Sūtra on Ānanda's Questions About Good and Bad Fortunes*, and *Sūtra on Karmic Retribution, Moral Education, and Hells*, which were attributed to An Shigao, but in fact were of uncertain dates and authorship, the "translator" thoroughly expounded the Buddhist teachings on filial piety.

Here are the main verses related to filial piety from the scriptures mentioned above:

(1) At that time, the Venerable One told the bhikkhus, "Parents to their children bring great increase. They nourish, rear, and provide for them at every stage, allowing the four great elements to develop." 爾時世尊告諸比丘: "父母於子, 有大增益, 乳哺長養, 隨時將育, 四大得成。" (CBETA, T16, no. 684, pp. 778c29–779a1)

(2) The Buddha said, "For a disciple of the Buddha, even if there are reasons, refrain from breaking disciplines. Be sincere, cautious, and respectful towards the Three Sages. Be filial to your parents, both internally and externally. Do not think deceitfully, and let your heart and speech correspond. Use skillful means with good timing, knowing when to advance and when to withdraw. In this way, you can engage in worldly matters without possessing worldly attachments." 佛言: "為佛弟子, 雖有因緣, 持戒勿犯, 誠信畏慎, 敬歸三尊, 孝事二親, 內外謹善, 不念誑佞, 心口相應, 善權方便, 進退知時, 可得作世間事, 不得為世間意。" (CBETA, T14, no. 492a, p. 753c11-15)

(3) The Buddha said, "You should diligently be filial to your parents, respect and serve your teachers and elders, and honor the Three Sages. Practice giving, uphold disciplines, endure patiently, be diligent, cultivate meditation, and develop wisdom. Be compassionate, joyful, and generous, treating both enemies and relatives impartially, regarding them as equal to yourself. Do not deceive or exploit the orphans and the elderly; do not belittle the humble. Protect them as if they were your own. If you can practice in this way, you will have repaid the Buddha's kindness and forever be free from various sufferings." 佛言: "當勤孝順父母, 敬事師長, 歸奉三尊; 勤行布施、持戒、忍辱、精進、禪定、智慧, 慈悲喜舍, 怨親平等, 同己無二; 不欺孤老, 不輕下賤, 護彼如己。汝等若能如是修行, 則為已得報佛之恩, 永離眾苦。" (CBETA, T17, no. 724, p. 452b13-17)

It is evident that the above-mentioned scriptures, by summarizing the inherent concept of filial piety in Buddhism, convey to the Chinese people the practical need for Buddhist monks and nuns to implement filial piety in their daily lives. This indicates that filial piety and repaying kindness are aligned, to some extent, with Confucian ethical values, harmonizing the conflict and contradictions between Buddhist monastic traditions and Chinese cultural family ethics. As a result, this alleviated some of the pressure faced by Buddhism in China concerning filial piety ethics. Furthermore, the appearance of these Chinese Buddhist scriptures reflects the initial understanding and acceptance of Buddhist teachings by the Chinese people when Buddhism was first introduced to China. In this sense, they can be seen as valuable explorations conducted by Chinese Buddhist monks and nuns to promote the sinicization of Buddhist ethics.

During the reign of Emperor Ling of the Eastern Han dynasty 漢靈帝(r. 168–189), the Buddhist monk Lokakṣema (Zhi Loujiachen 支婁迦讖, fl. ca. 168–186 CE) translated the

Mahāyāna Buddhist sutra *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (*Daoxing bore jing* 道行般若經). In this scripture, there were instances of altering the original text to specifically translate terms into Chinese words, like “*xiao*” (filial piety) and “*ci*” (compassion). This practice continued with Zhi Qian 支謙 (fl. ca. 220–257 CE) following Lokakṣema’s approach, until Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (*Jiomo luoshi*, 343–413) retranslated the *Small Section Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (*Xiaopin boreboluomi jing* 小品般若波羅蜜經), which essentially restored the original text of the scriptures. According to the Sanskrit original of this scripture, the Chinese terms “filial piety” and “compassion” in the translations by Lokakṣema and Zhi Qian had multiple parallel words in Sanskrit. Some were translated from Sanskrit terms like *gaurava* and *gauravatā*, which originally meant reverence or respect. Others came from Sanskrit terms like *priya*, *manāpa* and *kāma*, which originally meant love or pleasure. The typical translational variations in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* are now summarized in the following Table 1 (Karashima 2010, pp. 232–35):

**Table 1.** The translational variations of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*.

Sanskrit Version	Translation of Sanskrit Version	Lokakṣema’s Translation (CBETA, T08, no. 224)	Zhi Qian’s Translation (CBETA, T08, no. 225)
<b>dharma-gauraveṇa</b>	Through respecting the Buddhist teachings	諸天人適欲問法師，天神語之。用慈於法中故，其人即自了知，諸天所不解者便自解。(p. 434 c6-7)	聽經不解義者，欲問所疑，用慈於經中，即自曉了。(p. 484 c28-29)
<b>hitaiṣitayā premato vā gauravato vā</b>	Out of care, friendship, and respect	今佛現在，有慈心佛恩德，欲報佛恩，具足供養者。汝設有慈心於佛者，當受持般若波羅蜜，當恭敬作禮供養。(p. 468 c19-22)	若有慈心於佛者，當受此法，敬禮供養，為供養三世佛，報佛恩備矣。(p. 502 c20-21)
<b>yadi te ..... ahaṃ priyo manāpo ’parityaktas tathāgatas</b>	If you love and do not abandon me, the Tathagata	汝慈孝於佛，恭敬、思念於佛，不如恭敬於般若波羅蜜。(p. 468 c23-25)	若慈孝於佛，不如恭敬明度。(p. 502 c21-22)
<b>dharma-kāma</b>	The love for Buddhist teachings	是時薩陀波倫菩薩及五百女人，各自取刀處處刺身出血，持用灑地，用慈孝於經法故。(p. 474 c5-7)	時普慈及諸女各取刀，處處刺身出血灑地，用慈於法故。(p. 506a c15-16)

From Table 1, it can be seen that if the two translators, Lokakṣema and Zhi Qian, had translated the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* according to its original Sanskrit meaning, there would not have been any content related to *xiao* or *ci*. Instead, the main focus would have been on expressing reverence and affection for the Buddha and the Buddha’s teachings, which are the basic themes found in most Buddhist scriptures. Thus, the uniqueness of the Chinese translations of this sūtra lies in the fact that Lokakṣema and Zhi Qian chose not to translate these passages literally, and used Chinese terms like *xiao* and *ci*, which were commonly used in the Chinese cultural context instead, in order to convey the general concepts of Buddhism. Through this approach of translation, they brought Buddhism as a foreign civilization into the context and perspective of Chinese civilization, creatively interpreting and transforming Buddhism to form their own method of interpreting scriptures (Sheng 2021, pp. 142–43). This may be because the early translators realized the potential for communication between the Buddhist civilization and Chinese civilization, particularly in the realm of filial ethics, when they first encountered Chinese culture. Hence, they incorporated content that was more in line with the cultural characteristics of China, when translating Buddhist scriptures.

In the year 251 AD, Kang Senghui 康僧會 (fl. ca. 249–280 CE) compiled an eight-volume version of the *Scripture on the Collection of the Six Perfection* (*Liudu ji jing* 六度集經) at the Jianchu Monastery 建初寺. In this scripture, the term “*xiao*” (filial piety) appears a remarkable 54 times. As a foreign monk who was well-versed in both Buddhist Trip-

itaka and Confucian classics, Kang Senghui explained the relationship between Confucianism and Buddhism to Sun Hao 孫皓 (r. 264–280), the ruler of the Wu state 吳國, by saying “Although it is a Confucian classic, it is the same as the teachings of Buddhism 雖儒典之格言，即佛教之明訓” (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 325c24), and “What Confucius and Zhou Gong spoke of only briefly hinted, whereas in Buddhist teachings, everything is elaborated in depth 周孔所言，略示近跡，至於釋教，則備極幽微” (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 325c25-26), etc. Kang Senghui believed that because Buddhist and Confucian teachings shared similar principles under different names, he could combine Buddhist concepts such as “equality of all sentient beings” and “filial piety towards parents” with Confucian ideas like “*ren* 仁” (benevolence) and “*xiao* 孝” (filial piety). He applied Chinese terms that were easy for people to understand and accept when conveying the Buddhist concept of “filial piety” during the translation of scriptures. For example, Volume 1 of the *Scripture on the Collection of the Six Perfection* contains the passage: “Kings and ministers collectively got ordination. Sons are filial, ministers are loyal; heavenly beings honor and protect. The country prospers, the people thrive, and everyone is obedient to the virtue. None do not praise the good. 王逮臣民，相率受戒，子孝臣忠，天神榮衛，國豐民康，四境服德，靡不稱善” (CBETA, T03, no. 152, p. 4a13-15); Volume 3 contains “Filial piety towards parents, reverence and love for the nine relatives. 孝順父母，敬愛九親” (CBETA, T03, no. 152, p. 11b16); and Volume 8 contains “By using the Buddha’s teachings to illuminate the law, governing with a righteous heart, ensuring the inheritance of filial piety, and upholding high moral standards. 以佛明法，正心治國，令孝順相承，戒具行高” (CBETA, T03, no. 152, p. 49b16-17). This language style, which combines Confucian and Buddhist cultural elements and emphasizes filial piety, reflects the unique contributions made by early Buddhist translators to promoting Buddhism in China.

Subsequently, the Buddhist scriptures translated by the Buddhist monk Dharmarakṣa 竺法護 (*Zhu fahu*, fl. ca. 280–308) during the Western Jin Dynasty, such as the lost *Fo sheng daolitian wei mu shuofa jing* 佛升忉利天為母說法經, the *Ullambana Sūtra* (*Foshuo yulanpen jing* 佛說盂蘭盆經) and the *Simḥaparipṛcchā Sūtra* (*Foshuo taizi shuahu jing* 佛說太子刷護經), introduced to Chinese monks the reasons for and practices of filial piety and gratitude observed by the Buddha and his disciples. For instance, in Volume 1 of the *Ullambana Sūtra*, there is a passage saying that:

For the Buddha’s disciples who practice filial piety, they should constantly remember their parents and provide offerings to their parents and even their parents for seven generations. Every year, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, they should remember their parents with filial piety and gratitude, extending their offerings to their parents and ancestors for seven generations. This is done as an act of giving to the Buddha and the Sangha, in order to repay the kindness of parents who provided care and love. All Buddha’s disciples should faithfully uphold this practice. 是佛弟子修孝順者，應念念中常憶父母，供養乃至七世父母。年年七月十五日，常以孝順慈憶所生父母，乃至七世父母，為作盂蘭盆施佛及僧，以報父母長養、慈愛之恩。若一切佛弟子應當奉持是法。(CBETA, T16, no. 685, p. 779c15-20)

Also, there is a passage in the *Simḥaparipṛcchā Sūtra* that preaches similar teachings:

The Prince Simḥa replied to the Buddha, saying, “Why is it that Bodhisattvas, due to what causes and conditions, study the scriptures, believe in the words of the Buddha, and do not violate the teachings? Why is it that they understand the precepts, rules, and rituals, due to what causes and conditions? Why is it that they practice filial piety in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha, due to what causes and conditions?” The Buddha said to the Prince, “Bodhisattvas, in every lifetime, do not flatter or deceive others. Due to this, they study the scriptures, listen to the Buddha’s words, and remember them without forgetting. Bodhisattvas, when entering profound teachings, are not afraid or terrified. Due to this, they quickly understand the disciplines, rules, and rit-



uals. Bodhisattvas, in every lifetime, show deep reverence to the Buddha, the scriptures, their teachers, and their parents. Due to this, they attain wisdom.” 太子復白佛言：“菩薩何因緣學經、聞佛語人民皆信？何因緣知經律儀法？何因緣孝順隨佛教不犯？”佛告太子：“菩薩世世不諛諂，用是故學經、聞佛語悉知不忘；菩薩入深經不恐不怖，用是故得經律便知儀法；菩薩世世敬佛、敬經、敬師、敬父母，用是故得智慧。” (CBETA, T12, no. 343, p. 154a17-22)

It is evident that, with the efforts of early Buddhist translators in advocating the Buddhist teachings of filial piety and repaying parental kindness, Chinese monks and followers gained an understanding of the Buddhist tradition of “honoring parents” and “repaying parental kindness”. They began to use Confucian terminology and ethical concepts to explain and propagate the Buddhist ideals of filial piety and gratitude, even creating a set of apocrypha in response to the criticism from society regarding the perceived deviation from filial piety in Buddhist monasticism. These Chinese Buddhist texts often integrated Confucian ethical thoughts, like “filial piety towards parents” and “loyalty to the ruler”, reflecting the early translators’ and Buddhists’ keen interest in emphasizing the concept of Buddhist filial piety. For instance, in the *Foshuo xiaozi jing* 佛說孝子經 we read:

By upholding these clear disciplines, as a ruler, you will protect the land and the people; as a minister, you will be loyal; with kindness, you will nurture the people. This is the enlightened way of a father, and it is the filial and compassionate way of a son, as well as the trustworthiness of a wife and the fidelity of a husband. Bhikṣus and Bhikṣuṇīs, practicing in this way, will encounter the Buddha from age to age, seeing the Dharma and attaining enlightenment. 奉斯明戒，為君即保四海，為臣即忠，以仁養民，即父法明子孝慈，夫信婦貞。優婆塞、優婆夷執行如是，世世逢佛，見法得道。 (CBETA, T16, no. 687, p. 781a2-4)

Also, in the *Śyāmakajātaka Sūtra* (*Foshuo pusa shanzi jing* 佛說菩薩睽子經), it states, “Now, having attained the Buddhahood, I will save the people of the country, extend the virtue of filial piety to them 今得為佛，並度國人，皆由孝順之德” (CBETA, T03, no. 174, p. 438a27) and “You should widely proclaim to people that they all have their parents, thus filial piety is indispensable 汝廣為一切人民說之，人有父母，不可不孝” (CBETA, T03, no. 174, p. 438a28-29). And in the *Nāgasena Bhikṣu Sūtra* (*Naxian biqiu jing* 那先比丘經), there is a passage saying, “King asks the Bhikṣu Nāgasena: ‘Who are the filial ones?’ and Naxian replies, ‘All virtuous people are filial’, and it goes on to mention that there are thirty-seven volumes of scriptures, all based on filial piety.” 王復問那先：“何等為孝順者？”那先言：“諸善者皆為孝順。”……凡三十七品經，皆是孝順為本。 (CBETA, T32, no. 1670A, p. 697b22-c7), etc. These texts highlight the importance of filial piety in Buddhism and its role in guiding individuals toward virtue and enlightenment.

After examining the Chinese Buddhist texts related to the concept of Buddhist filial piety from the Eastern Han Dynasty to the Wei and Jin Dynasties, it becomes evident that the Buddhist tradition of “honoring parents and repaying parental kindness” does align with China’s inherent Confucian ethics, to some extent. From the perspective of Buddhism itself, the sinicization of Buddhism is not merely a passive adaptation, but also, to a certain extent, a process of mutual integration and enrichment with China’s native Confucian culture (Wu and Xu 2019, p. 52). In this sense, filial piety serves as a bridge for mutual communication between the two civilizations of China and India, providing possibilities for early Buddhist translators and Buddhists in China to conceptually integrate and spread Buddhism within the Chinese cultural context.

#### 4. Monastic Life and Householder Life: The Integration of Confucianism and Buddhism Based on the Concept of Filial Piety

Guang Xing summarized the ways in which Chinese Buddhist monks responded theoretically to Confucian criticisms of Buddhist monasticism, which emphasized renunciation and leaving family behind, into three main approaches: “translating relevant Buddhist scriptures and extracting sections that discuss filial piety; writing essays to counter these

criticisms, such as *Mouzi* 牟子's essay *Mouzi lihuo lun* 牟子理惑論 (*Mou-tzu on the Settling of Doubts*), *Sun Chuo* 孫綽's *Yudao lun* 喻道論 (*A metaphorical argument for the Dao*), and *Qi Song* 契嵩's *Xiao lun* 孝論 (*Treatise on Filial Piety*); reinterpreting Buddhist precepts to argue that they are aligned with Confucian filial piety" (Guang 2016, p. 20).

As mentioned earlier, through the translation and Chinese interpretation of Buddhist scriptures, the translators of the Eastern Han and the Wei and Jin dynasties demonstrated the similarity between the Buddhist concept of filial piety and the Chinese spiritual structure, thus confirming the internal factors that allowed Buddhism to adapt to the Chinese cultural context, particularly in ethical aspects. In the early stages of Buddhism's introduction to China, Buddhist scriptures did provide great help for the Chinese to understand Buddhist thought. However, as Buddhist culture became more widespread, Chinese society, with Confucianism as the orthodox ideology, struggled to understand and accept the ethical challenges posed by Buddhist monasticism. Therefore, in the early stages of interaction and integration between Confucianism and Buddhism, some Chinese intellectuals began addressing the relationship between Buddhist and Confucian notions of filial piety, as a means of resolving the fundamental contradictions between these two traditions.

As significant proponents of reconciling Confucianism and Buddhism during the Eastern Han to the Wei and Jin periods, figures like *Mouzi* (ca. second century), *Sun Chuo* (314–371), and *Huiyuan* 慧遠 (334–416) have all written relevant essays addressing external criticisms that questioned whether Buddhism contradicted the concept of filial piety. To Chinese people who had just encountered Buddhism, the practices of Buddhist monastics, including renouncing worldly life, shaving their heads, having no offsprings, leaving their wives, and renouncing material wealth, undoubtedly stood in stark contrast to the Confucian tradition of filial piety. Therefore, it seemed that the Buddhist "filial piety" ideology did not align with Chinese ethical norms, and should not gain widespread acceptance in China.

In response, *Mouzi* extensively cited examples from ancient sages to explain the transcendence of the Buddhist way, in his *Lihuo lun*:

Confucius said, "There are some with whom we can traverse on the same path, but with whom we cannot agree on future planning." This refers to doing what is best at the time. Moreover, the Classic of Filiality says, "The early kings ruled by the ultimate virtues and the essential Way." Yet, *Tai bo* sacrificed his hair and tattooed his body, thus following the customs of Wu and Yue and violating the propriety of the body, hair, and skin. Still, Confucius praised him, saying that his behavior could be considered the epitome of ultimate virtue. Confucius did not disparage him for sacrificing his hair. From this, we can see that if someone possesses great virtue, they are not confined by the trivial. Monks give away their family wealth, forsake their wives and children, and refrain from sound and sex. One can consider this as an ultimate form of renunciation. How does it contradict the words of the sages? *Yu rang* swallowed hot coals and painted his body with lacquer, *Nie zheng* slashed his own face as self-punishment, *Bo ji* walked on fire, and *Gao xing* was disfigured by herself. Men of noble character considered them courageous and dying for righteousness, not criticizing them for self-destruction. Compared with the behaviors of those four, monks just shave off their hairs and have not gone any further. 孔子曰：“可與適道，未可與權。”所謂時宜施者也。且孝經曰：“先王有至德要道。”而泰伯祝髮文身，自從吳、越之俗，違於身體髮膚之義。然孔子稱之，其可謂至德矣。仲尼不以其祝髮毀之也。由是而觀，苟有大德，不拘於小。沙門捐家財，棄妻子，不聽音視色，可謂讓之至也。何違聖語，不合孝乎？豫讓吞炭漆身，聶政刺面自刑，伯姬蹈火，高行截容，君子以為勇而死義，不聞譏其自毀沒也。沙門剔除須髮，而比之於四人，不已遠乎？ (CBETA, T52, no. 2102, pp. 2c25–3a6)

*Mouzi* believed that although Confucian ethics regarding filial piety required people to value their physical bodies and continue their family line, fundamentally, the standards of filial piety were not absolute. When *Tai bo* 泰伯 cut his hair and marked his body to pass

the throne to *Ji li* 季歷, Confucius praised his noble character. This demonstrates that those who perform great acts of virtue need not be constrained by minor details, just as those who practice filial piety should not rigidly adhere to a single method. Therefore, Buddhist practitioners who, in pursuit of loftier goals, do not strictly adhere to Confucian ethics should be respected and understood by society. They should not suffer from misunderstandings and criticisms related to the misconception that Buddhism involves abandoning family and loved ones.

On the basis of *Mouzi's* arguments, the renowned scholar *Sun chuo* of the Eastern Jin period also wrote an essay in response to the criticisms of Buddhism not adhering to filial piety by the general public. He refuted this from the perspective of Buddhist scriptures, as follows:

Buddhism has twelve sets of scriptures, and four of them are dedicated to promoting filial piety with utmost sincerity and dedication. This can be considered the epitome. Yet, laymen do not investigate their origins, nor do they explore their content. Instead, they blindly utter groundless words and baseless accusations. 佛有十二部經，其四部專以勸孝為事，慇懃之旨，可謂至矣。而俗人不詳其源流，未涉其場肆，便瞽言妄說，輒生攻難。(CBETA, T52, no. 2102, p. 17c20-22)

This indicates that Buddhist scriptures also contain extensive discussions on the concept of filial piety and repayment of kindness. Only those who are unfamiliar with the depth and breadth of Buddhist teachings would launch unfounded attacks against Buddhism. Furthermore, considering the three-dimensional perspective of Confucianism on filial piety, *Sun chuo* also affirmed the significance of Buddhist filial piety through monasticism, and stated that:

The essence of filial piety lies in the ability to establish one's character, follow the path, and perpetually honor one's parents. 孝之為貴，貴能立身行道，永光厥親。(CBETA, T52, no. 2102, p. 17b2-3)

*Sun chuo* believed that, compared to the Confucian filial piety practiced by those serving their parents within the household, the Buddhist filial piety that seeks transcendence from worldly suffering is the true epitome of filial devotion. As stated in the *Interpretation of the Book of Rites (Liji Zhengyi 禮記正義)*, "Filial piety has three levels: small filial piety involves effort; intermediate filial piety entails labor; great filial piety knows no exhaustion." 孝有三：小孝用力；中孝用勞；大孝不匱 (*Liji Zhengyi* 2009, fascicle 48, p. 3469). Therefore, if a person can renounce worldly life, accumulate merits, and free their parents from the suffering of the samsara through their spiritual practice, they can forever honor their parents. In fact, this can even more profoundly exemplify the essence of filial piety, compared to daily service to parents while remaining in their presence. In this sense, the Buddhist concept of filial piety that places the pursuit of transcendence as the ultimate goal forms a potent complement to Confucian filial piety ideology. It enriches the content of Chinese *xiao* culture and deepens society's understanding of the Buddhist perspective on filial piety, especially in the context of "*chujia daxiao* 出家大孝" (Monastic Devotion to Filial Piety).

Furthermore, in the *Shamen bujing wangzhe lun* 沙門不敬王者論 (*Treatise Arguing that Monks Should Not Bow to Worldly Authorities*), *Huiyuan* also integrated Buddhism and Confucianism, emphasizing repeatedly the core idea of filial piety to parents and loyalty to rulers within Buddhist teachings. In the context of the interaction between Confucianism and Buddhism, *Huiyuan* pointed out that, although Buddhism "internally deviates from the heaviness of worldly matters, it does not violate filial piety; externally lacks the formality of serving rulers, it does not lose its respect 內乖天屬之重，而不違其孝；外闕奉主之恭，而不失其敬。" (CBETA, T52, no. 2102, p. 30b17-19). Thus, Buddhism and Confucianism both provide virtuous methods for governing a benevolent society; that is, "while their outward manifestations may differ, their underlying influences are intertwined 發致雖殊而潛相影響，出處誠異，終期則同。" (CBETA, T52, no. 2102, p. 31a19). They both converge to maintain the ethical order and transcendental pursuits of Chinese society.

It can be seen that, for the early Han intellectuals and scholars who tried to reconcile the contradictions between Confucianism and Buddhism, the concept of “filial piety” promoted in the Buddhist scriptures formed a useful supplement to the existing Chinese filial piety ethic. To some extent, it addressed the shortcomings in the transcendent aspects of Confucian filial piety. By introducing Buddhist ideas of karma, retribution, and reincarnation, Buddhist translators and Buddhists in China tried to illustrate that “Monastic Devotion to Filial Piety” was also a form of filial piety. Moreover, it could even more brilliantly honor one’s family and rescue parents from the suffering of the cycle of rebirth compared to the Confucian advocacy of the *zaijia zhi xiao* 在家之孝 (Filial Piety within the Household).

## 5. Conclusions

Since its inception, Buddhism has held a tradition of filial piety and repaying kindness to others. However, its perspective on filial piety remains fundamentally distinct from the Confucian ethical tradition in China, where filial piety is at the core, as Buddhism’s concept of filial piety remains subordinate to the supreme spiritual goal of transcending worldly suffering and achieving spiritual liberation. Examining the early history of the Chinese translation of Buddhist scriptures, it is revealed that translators from the Eastern Han Dynasty to the Wei and Jin Dynasties, such as An Shigao, Lokakṣema, Kang Senghui, and Dharmarakṣa, already paid much attention to and began translating Buddhist scriptures related to filial piety. They even, during the translation process, altered the original meanings of some words to promote the sinicization of Buddhism or brought together the contents of several sutras to provide a more culturally attuned interpretation of the Buddhist idea of filial piety and repayment of kindness, in accordance with Chinese culture.

With the relentless efforts of those translators, the Chinese gradually realized that Buddhism, while pursuing a path of transcendence from worldly suffering, also advocated teachings related to worldly moral and ethical values, such as “repaying parents’ kindness”. However, this does not mean that Buddhism and Confucianism have achieved unity on the concept of filial piety, since there are still many contradictions that make Confucians constantly attack Buddhism for being unfilial. The defense of Buddhist translators, *Mouzi*, *Sun Chuo* and *Huiyuan*, just represents early Chinese understandings of Buddhism and its theories. These scholars who are reverent and tolerant to Buddhism believe that Buddhist practitioners who embraced monastic life did not contradict the fundamental spirit of filial piety and that they could even dedicate their merits to their parents and relatives, rescuing them from samsara. This introduced a fresh perspective to traditional Confucian filial piety and highlighted the importance of filial piety beyond the framework of *jiaguo tonggou* 家國同構 (family and state as one). As a result, Confucianism and Buddhism were able to agree on the significance of filial piety, and Buddhism also affected and complemented the ethical cultivation of Chinese medieval society.

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## Abbreviations

CBETA: Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association, based on the *Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō*. Citations for CBETA are referenced and enumerated according to the text number, volume order, page number, column, and line number, e.g., CBETA, T01, no. 1, p. 71 c8-17. T: *Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. Ed. Takakusu Junjiro and Watanabe Kaigyoku, et al. Tokyo: Taisho issaikyo kankokai, 1924–1932.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For more on the studies of family philosophy, see: Zhang (2017); Sun (2019); Xiao (2020, pp. 41–135).
- <sup>2</sup> *Śīgalovāda Sūtra* is an early Buddhist scripture that discusses household ethics. It was translated multiple times when Buddhism was first introduced to China. Existing Chinese translations include the *Shijialuoyue liufang li jing* 尸迦羅越六方禮經, *Foshuo shanshengzi jing* 佛說善生子經, *Shansheng jing* 善生經 of the *Madhyama Āgama* (Vol. 33), and *Shansheng jing* 善生經 of the *Dirgha Āgama* (Vol. 11).
- <sup>3</sup> For more on the background of Buddhism spreading and adapting in early medieval China, see Eric (2007).
- <sup>4</sup> The *Gaoseng Zhuan* records An Shigao's translation work as follows: "An Shigao translated many scriptures, adapting them from the original languages into Chinese. His works include *Anbo shouyi*, *Yin chi ru*, *Shier men* in large and small versions, and *One Hundred and Sixty Verses*. Firstly, foreign Tripitaka master *Zhong hu* compiled important scriptures into twenty-seven chapters, but An Shigao analyzed *Zhong hu*'s compilation and translated seven chapters into Chinese, that is the *Daodi jing*. In total, he translated thirty-nine scriptures throughout his career. (安世高) 宣譯眾經, 改胡為漢, 出《安般守意》《陰持入》、大小《十二門》及《百六十品》。初, 外國三藏眾護撰述經要為二十七章, 高乃剖析護所集七章, 譯為漢文, 即《道地經》是也。其先後所出經、論, 凡三十九部" (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 323b6-10).

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