

THE CONCEPT OF “CONSTANT OBLIGATIONS OF MORALITY” IN THE CULTURE MINDSET OF SOUTHERN VIETNAMESE PEOPLE

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Abstract – Drawing from Southern Vietnamese folk poetry, this article analyzes and elucidates the manifestations of the concept of “constant obligations of morality”, including “three fundamental bonds”, “filial piety”, “loyalty and filial devotion”, “righteousness”, and “benevolence and righteousness”. These notions are interpreted through the lens of an “entity” characterized by attributes such as “completeness”, “roundness”, “squareness and roundness”, “heaviness”, and “immobility”-all associated with positive values. Conversely, an entity marked by “incompleteness”, “deficiency”, “lightness”, or “mobility” is linked to negative values. The concept of “constant obligations of morality” is dynamically adapted and expressed through metaphorical language, rooted in the material and cultural experiences of the Vietnamese people, particularly those in Southern Vietnam. This concept holds significant importance, not only shaping behavioral standards, ethics, and culture but also informing the actions of Southern Vietnamese specifically and Vietnamese society as a whole.

Key words – Concept; constant obligations of morality; positive value; negative value; Southern Vietnam’s folk verses

1. Introduction

“Constant Obligations of Morality” (cương thường) is a shortened expression for the “Three Fundamental Bonds” and “Five Constant Virtues” [1]. The concepts of the Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues are key aspects of Chinese thought and culture. These principles have influenced various aspects of society and philosophy. Confucianism, one of the main schools of classical Chinese philosophy, emphasizes the importance of these bonds and virtues in promoting harmony and social order [2]. The Five Constant Virtues, which include benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity, serve as moral principles that guide individuals in their interactions with others [3]. These virtues are essential for maintaining balance and harmony within society [4]. The “Three Fundamental Bonds”, which consist of the relationships between ruler and subject, father and son, and husband and wife, are foundational to social order [5]. These bonds are crucial for maintaining stability in society. The Confucian idea of hierarchy also highlights the importance of human relationships, particularly the five moral relationships and the three bonds [6]. These relationships play a significant role in shaping individual behavior and societal norms. Overall, the Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues are essential concepts in Chinese philosophy and culture. They provide a framework for understanding social relationships and promoting harmony within society.

By adhering to these principles, individuals can cultivate virtuous behavior and contribute to the well-being of their communities [7].

As observed, researchers around the world primarily examine the “Constant Obligations of Morality” from the perspectives of philosophical ideology, morality, culture, and society. Similarly, in Vietnam, studies often focus on the meaning and role of the “Constant Obligations of Morality” in shaping values, standards, and behavioral codes in society and across different cultures. The concept of the “Constant Obligations of Morality” from a metaphorical perspective has received less scholarly attention. Among the few studies that adopt a metaphorical approach, there are works and articles that mention the concept to varying degrees, such as “The Metaphorical Concept of the ‘Constant Obligations of Morality’ in Southern Folk Verses” [8]; “Non-Spatial Orientation Metaphor through Evidence of Folk Verses in Vietnam: Constant Obligations of Morality as a Positive Value / Money as a Negative Value” [9]; “Conceptual Metaphors in Southern Vietnamese Folk Verses” [10]; “Honoring Morality and Despising Wealth-A Prominent Trait of Southern Vietnamese People” [11].

Building on previous research from a different perspective, this paper identifies and analyzes in greater depth the expressions of the concept of the “Constant Obligations of Morality” based on the concept of entity, manifested in the bipolar attributes of “form”, “weight”, and “movement”. These bipolar attributes are always associated with bipolar values: positive and negative. Studying the concept of the “Constant Obligations of Morality” from the perspective of metaphor theory can help us better understand how this concept is perceived in Southern Vietnamese culture. Additionally, it opens up a new perspective to explore the richness and diversity of this concept in the thinking and culture of the Vietnamese people as a whole. This study also allows for exploring the diversity and evolution of the concept of the “Constant Obligations of Morality” across time and space, as well as in different cultural contexts.

2. Cognitive Manifestations and Attributes of the Concept of “Constant Obligations of Morality” in Southern Vietnamese Thought and Culture

In the cognitive linguistic view, metaphor is defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another

conceptual domain [12]. A convenient shorthand way of capturing this view of metaphor is the following: conceptual domain a is conceptual domain b, which is what is called a conceptual metaphor [13]. The conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions to understand another conceptual domain is called source domain, while the conceptual domain that is understood this way is the target domain [12-13]. In order to justify whether there is such presence of conceptual metaphors, it is important to look at which linguistic metaphors these refer to. Therefore, we need to rely on the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) to identify the metaphorical linguistic expressions [14].

Using the Southern Vietnamese folk poem corpus from [15-17] (total sample size = 4,793), we identified 276 poems (5.8%) that manifest the 'Constant Obligations of Morality' concept, based on Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory [12] and the Pragglejaz Group's metaphor identification procedure [14]. In the worldview of Southern Vietnamese people, the "Constant Obligations of Morality" are reflected in Confucian-inspired concepts such as the "Three Fundamental Bonds", "filial piety", "loyalty and filial piety", "righteousness", and "benevolence and righteousness". These principles are cognitively framed through the lens of an "entity" endowed with attributes like "completeness", "roundness", "squareness and roundness", "heaviness", and "immobility"-all associated with positive moral values. Conversely, an entity characterized by "incompleteness", "deficiency", "lightness", or "mobility" is linked to negative connotations. Therefore, in the following section, we analyze the manifestations and cognitive attributes of the 'moral principles' concept as reflected in the thought patterns and culture of Southern Vietnamese people, using Southern Vietnamese folk verses as textual evidence.

2.1. The manifestations of the concept of 'Constant Obligations of Morality' are interpreted through the framework of an 'entity' possessing dichotomous formal attributes and corresponding values.

a. The manifestations of the concept of "Constant Obligations of Morality" are understood through the concept of an "entity" that possesses the properties of "completeness", "roundness", "squareness and roundness", and a positive value.

Firstly, the concept of "Constant Obligations of Morality" is reflected in the "Three Fundamental Bonds" and was localized in the Southern region of Vietnam as the "three pillars" or "three moral principles".

(1) As a man, one must *uphold the three pillars for completeness*:

Filial piety to parents, loyalty to the lord, and devotion to one's wife. [15, p.49]

(2) How can one *fulfill the three moral principles*?

Even in death, one's name will remain fragrant.

[16, p.493]

Metaphorical expressions that "*uphold the three pillars for completeness*" (1) and "*fulfill the three moral principles*" (2) indicate the existence of the metaphorical

concept of three fundamental bonds as an object. These expressions do not specify the nature of this entity but merely describe it as possessing intact properties. This is attributable not only to the general cognitive function of entity metaphors but also to the influence of thought and culture.

In the Vietnamese cultural mindset, an intact object (complete, whole) often evokes a sense of satisfaction, peace, and trust. It symbolizes completeness, sustainability, and goodness and is thus regarded as having positive value. Accordingly, in Southern Vietnamese folk verses, the "Three Fundamental Bonds" is conceptualized as an intact entity-neither divided nor diminished in integrity. From this, we may infer that the concept of "Three Fundamental Bonds" in these verses carries positive value. Thus, following this logic, if the three fundamental bonds is an intact object and an intact object has positive value, then the three fundamental bonds has positive value.

Secondly, the concept of "Constant Obligations of Morality" is expressed in the term "filial piety," which is manifested in Southern Vietnamese folk verses as "filial piety", "righteousness and filial piety", and "loyalty and filial piety".

(3) With all our hearts, we repay the debt of food and clothing,

Living *fully* according to *filial piety*, dying fragrantly as a virtuous person. [16, p.486]

(4) With all our hearts, we repay the debt of food and clothing,

Living *fully* according to *righteousness*, dying fragrantly as a virtuous person. [17, p.479]

(5) Though poor we are, with mountain firewood and wild greens,

To nurture parents, our *filial duty* we *fulfill*. [16, p.465]

(6) Hungry, I'll settle for a taro porridge,

Saving my rice to feed my mother, *fulfilling* my *filial piety and loyalty*. [16, p.463]

The metaphorical expressions "fully according to filial piety" (3), "fully according to righteousness" (4), "filial duty we fulfill" (5), and "fulfilling my filial piety and loyalty" (6) suggest the underlying conceptual metaphors:

Filial piety is an intact entity

Righteousness and filial piety are an intact entity

Loyalty and filial piety are intact entities

Applying the same cognitive principle, since filial piety / righteousness and filial piety / loyalty and filial piety is an intact entity and an intact entity has positive value, it follows that filial piety / righteousness and filial piety / loyalty and filial piety has positive value.

In East Asian philosophy, particularly in Chinese and Vietnamese cultures, "filial piety" is a core value representing children's respect, devotion, and care for their parents. In the folk verses above, "filial piety", "righteousness and filial piety", and "loyalty and filial piety" are not merely rhetorical devices but embody a

worldview, a life philosophy, and a crucial moral standard for children within the family. These are manifestations of the “Constant Obligations of Morality”, reflecting the enduring strength of a key cultural value. Thus, the “perfection” and “completeness” of a child’s role toward their parents are effectively conveyed through the metaphor of an intact entity.

Thirdly, the concept of “Constant Obligations of Morality” is manifested via such terms as “righteousness” and “benevolence and righteousness”, which indicate the core value and foundation underpinning all relationships and contributing to a better society.

(7) As long as the person remains, the *righteousness also remains*,

As long as *benevolence and righteousness are square and round*, that’s all. [16, p.496]

(8) For a hundred years, *benevolence and righteousness are complete*,

Life and death are engraved in the heart on golden stone, never fading. [16, p.453]

(9) *Benevolence and righteousness are like a full bowl of water*,

When poured out and scooped back, it cannot be as full as before. [16, p.329]

The metaphorical expressions “righteousness also remains” (7), “benevolence and righteousness are square and round” (7), “benevolence and righteousness are complete” (8), and “benevolence and righteousness are like a full bowl of water” (9) suggest the conceptual metaphors:

- Benevolence and righteousness is a square and round object,

- Benevolence and righteousness is a complete object.

Following the same cognitive framework, since square, round, and complete objects carry positive connotations, it follows that “benevolence and righteousness” also hold positive value.

The concept of “benevolence and righteousness” is metaphorically grounded in both material and cultural experiences. In material terms, “square” and “round” evoke feelings of satisfaction, stability, and trust, symbolizing enduring value and functional perfection. For instance, in folk verse (9), “benevolence and righteousness” is likened to a “full bowl of water”. Here, the “full bowl” (a container) holds “water” (a substance), metaphorically representing moral virtue. In other words, human ethical conduct is the “water” filling the “bowl”. Empirical observation confirms that a “full bowl of water” cannot hold more, and once spilled, the water cannot be fully restored. Culturally, “square” and “round” signify perfection and completeness, thus carrying positive value (aligned with the Vietnamese cosmological principle: “Heaven is round, Earth is square; Mother is round, child is square”). Hence, the “full bowl of water” metaphorically represents the perfection and wholeness of “benevolence and righteousness”.

b. The manifestations of the concept of “Constant Obligations of Morality” are grounded in the concept of an

“imperfect” and “deficient” entity, which is thus perceived negatively.

Similar to the aforementioned folk songs (1) and (2), the “Constant Obligations of Morality” in the following verses are also articulated through the “Three Fundamental Bonds”. These bonds are concretely represented by the virtues of “loyalty” (dedication to one’s nation), “filial piety” (devotion to parents), and “conjugal love” (faithfulness in marriage).

(10) You *kept loyalty, kept filial piety -but could not keep love*,

How could the bond of husband and wife be forsaken so soon? [16, p.258-259]

(11) The water rises above the basin and overflows the bowl,

I worry that you *will not be fulfilling your duty as a daughter-in-law*. [16, p.447]

In these examples, “loyalty”, “filial piety”, and “love” (10) serve as the foundational principles governing the three cardinal relationships: *ruler-subject, parent-child, and husband-wife*, which individuals are morally bound to uphold. The phrase “a daughter-in-law who fails in her duties” (11) likewise signifies a breach of filial piety, denoting her inadequacy in meeting societal expectations.

In verse (10), the concepts of “loyalty”, “filial piety”, and “love” are framed within an entity-based understanding, explaining why one might uphold loyalty and filial piety yet neglect conjugal love-or, as in (11), fail in spousal obligations. These virtues epitomize the “Three Fundamental Bonds”, which are abstract, spiritual constructs often interpreted metaphorically through cultural and contextual lenses.

From a pragmatic standpoint, deficiency or incompleteness in these obligations fosters discontent, insecurity, and distrust, thereby undermining their perceived value, functionality, and sustainability. Culturally, such shortcomings symbolize imperfection, incompleteness, and misfortune, carrying inherently negative connotations.

Thus, within the mindset and cultural framework of Southern Vietnamese society, the “Constant Obligations of Morality” are embodied in ideals like the “Three Fundamental Bonds”, “filial piety”, “loyalty”, “righteousness”, and “benevolence”, all of which are conceptualized through the duality of form: “completeness”, “roundness”, and “squareness” versus “incompleteness” and “deficiency”, corresponding to the binary values of positive and negative.

2.2. The manifestations of the “Constant Obligations of Morality” are interpreted through the lens of an “entity” possessing dual attributes and weighted values.

The concept of “Constant Obligations of Morality” is embodied in the virtues of “filial piety” and “love”. It is interpreted not only through the lens of “entity” as a dualistic construct of form, as previously analyzed, but also through the framework of “entity” as a duality of weight: “heavy” and “light”.

(12) When you step out,

Mom at home has advised,
The labor of giving birth is heavy,
Love affairs are light,
 Don't be too fond of beauty and get lost in love,
 Stay away from taverns and tea houses, don't go in.

[17, p.424]

The metaphorical expression "the labor of giving birth is heavy" (12), synonymous with "filial piety", is grounded in the conceptualization of a "heavy entity". This heaviness signifies importance, grandeur, and moral elevation, thereby conveying a positive value. In contrast, the comparative phrase "love affairs are light" (12) refers to illicit romantic relationships, framed within the concept of a "light entity". Here, lightness symbolizes insignificance, triviality, and moral inferiority, resulting in a negative valuation.

A critical distinction must be drawn between the "love" depicted in folk song (12) and that in folk song (10). The "love" in (10) represents a virtuous, enduring marital bond, whereas the "love" in (12) denotes a transient, morally dubious infatuation associated with brothels and tea houses. Thus, the former warrants preservation, while the latter demands avoidance or rejection.

It is noteworthy that in Vietnamese thought and cultural discourse, "heavy" does not invariably carry a positive connotation, nor does "light" always imply negativity. For example, in expressions such as "heavy burden – light burden", "heavy work – light work", or "to shed a burden", "heavy" assumes a pejorative nuance (denoting strain or oppression), while "light" conveys relief or ease. Empirical experience confirms that "heavy" burdens impede physical and psychological well-being, whereas "light" fosters comfort and minimal exertion. Conversely, "heavy" often correlates with higher value (e.g., diamonds and gold, whose worth increases with weight), while "light" suggests diminished worth. This duality underscores the context-dependent nature of metaphorical weight.

Revisiting folk song (12), "The labor of giving birth is heavy / Love affairs are light", the phrases acquire both positive and negative connotations contingent on their interpretation across two levels: (1) the physical and (2) the moral-cultural. Fundamental cultural values align with core metaphorical constructs [12]; thus, in Vietnamese society-and humanity broadly- "the labor of giving birth is heavy" is valorized positively, while "love affairs are light" is stigmatized negatively. This value association is irreversible.

2.3. The manifestations of the "Constant Obligations of Morality" are conceptualized through the lens of a dualistic entity, which embodies opposing properties and values in motion.

Beyond being understood as an entity with dual properties of shape and weight, "Constant Obligations of Morality" can also be understood as an entity with dual properties of movement.

(13) *Money changes today and moves tomorrow,*

But *benevolence and righteousness* shall forever prevail.

[16, p.392]

(14) Don't look at the weir and abandon the other weir,
 Don't look down on me because I'm poor and be quick to abandon me.

Look, *money is there in the morning and gone in the evening,*

Humanity and friendship are as solid as gold. [16, p.423]

(15) *The constant obligations of morality* are often very difficult, my friend,

It's not like bees and butterflies that land and then fly away.

The constant obligations of morality are not easy to change,

People, whether lucky enough to weave a hammock or unlucky to be a beggar, still accept these obligations.

[16, p.435]

In folk songs (13) and (14), the correlation between "Constant Obligations of Morality" (manifested as "benevolence and righteousness") and "wealth" is explored. "Constant Obligations of Morality" is viewed as an unchanging entity with positive connotations, while "wealth", being material, is seen as changeable and associated with negative values. Folk song (15) essentially equates "Constant Obligations of Morality" with "marital duty" (characterized by "love"), which is also perceived as unchanging and possessing positive value.

The dichotomies of "change" (13) and "existence-nonexistence" (14), when contrasted with the lifelong constancy of moral obligations, highlight the divergent nature and value of "money" and "Constant Obligations of Morality". Here, "money" metaphorically represents mundane material possessions, while "Constant Obligations of Morality" symbolizes elevated spiritual values. These folk songs encapsulate profound philosophical meanings, reflecting the enduring cultural emphasis on morality and the supremacy of righteousness over material wealth.

3. Conclusion

"Constant Obligations of Morality" is an abstract concept that is challenging to conceptualize through the perception of concrete and intuitively graspable entities. This concept is transformed and expressed with flexibility and diversity through metaphorical linguistic expressions rooted in the material and cultural experiences of the Vietnamese people particularly those in the South. Consequently, the bipolar attributes of "entities" - such as "shape", "weight", and "movement"-are consistently linked to bipolar evaluative dimensions (positive and negative). As a foundational ethical framework, "Constant Obligations of Morality" plays a pivotal role, extending beyond its influence on behavioral norms, ethics, and culture to actively shape the actions of Southern Vietnamese people.

Moreover, the concept of "Constant Obligations of Morality" offers a framework for examining its manifestations and evolution across time, space, and diverse historical or cultural contexts. Expanding the analytical scope, these obligations can additionally be

interpreted through other source domains, encompassing fundamental entities like containers, substances, and physical objects. Common source domains further incorporate attributes of objects and substances, such as shape, color, size, hardness, transparency, sharpness, and weight. Conceptualizing moral obligations as grounded in physical objects and their properties reflects a fundamental cognitive principle, stemming from humanity's existence within a physical environment populated by diverse objects and substances possessing inherent properties.

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APPENDIX

- (1) Làm trai giữ trọn ba giềng,
Thảo cha, ngay chúa, vợ hiền chớ vong. [15, tr.49]
- (2) Làm sao giữ trọn đạo ba,
Sau dầu có thác cũng là thom danh. [16, tr.493]
- (3) Dốc lòng trả nợ áo cơm,
Sống cho trọn thảo, thác thom nhân hiền [16, tr.486]
- (4) Dốc lòng trả nợ áo cơm,
Sống cho trọn nghĩa, thác thom nhân hiền. [17, tr.479]
- (5) Khó nghèo cùi nùi rau non,
Nuôi cha nuôi mẹ cho tròn nghĩa con. [16, tr.465]
- (6) Đói lòng ăn bát cháo môn,
Đề cơm nuôi mẹ cho tròn hiếu trung. [16, tr.463]
- (7) Người còn thì nghĩa cũng còn,
Miễn là nhân nghĩa vuông tròn thì thôi. [16, tr.496]
- (8) Trăm năm nhơn ngãi vẹn toàn,
Tử sanh tạc đá vàng nào phai. [16, tr.453]
- (9) Ngãi nhân như bát nước đầy,
Đổ đi hốt lại sao tày như xưa. [16, tr.329]
- (10) Minh giữ chữ trung, chữ hiếu, còn thiếu chữ tình,
Đạo chồng nghĩa vợ sao đành vội vong. [16, tr.258-259]
- (11) Nước lên khỏi chậu tràn âu,
Qua lo cho bầu làm dầu không tròn. [16, tr.447]
- (12) Lúc em bước chân ra,
Má ở nhà có dạn,
Cống sanh thành là nặng,
Điều tình ái là khinh,
Đừng nên ham nhan sắc đắm tình,
Lánh xa tửu điểm trà đình, chớ vô. [17, tr.424]
- (13) Tiền tài nay đổi mai dời,
Ngời nhơn gìn giữ trọn đời với nhau. [16, tr.392]
- (14) Anh đừng thấy đáng mà phụ đó,
Đừng chê em nghèo khó mà vội phụ phàng.
Anh coi, đồng tiền sớm mờ còn chiếu mắt,
Chớ nhân nghĩa bạn vàng vững chắc thiên kim. [16, tr.423]
- (15) Đạo cang thường khó lắm ai ơi,
Chẳng như ong bướm đậu rồi lại bay.
Cang thường không dễ đổi thay,
May nên vồng giá, rùi ăn mây cũng ung. [16, tr.435].