Early China (2020) vol 43 pp 1–27
doi:10.1017/eac.2020.2

QIAN 謙 IN EARLY CHINESE THOUGHT

Doil Kim*

Abstract

Qian xun 謙遜 in modern Chinese is usually translated as "modesty" in English. In this paper, I examine the arguably earliest version of it in early Chinese thought, *qian* 謙. I first extract its basic features from the *qian* hexagram 謙卦 in the *Yi jing* 易經 and identify very similar features in other texts, such as the *Dao de jing* 道德經, the *Xunzi* 荀子, and the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋. On the basis of this textual comparison, then, I reconstruct the idea of *qian* in a way that captures what underlies the relevant passages in all of the aforementioned texts. Finally, I understand the *qian* person to be someone who is disposed not to present himself in a better light than the other person in social interactions but to treat the other person as better by highlighting some aspect of the other person. I ultimately argue that this idea of *qian* was shared widely among early Chinese thinkers regardless of later historical divisions of different schools of thought.

1. Introduction

Qian xun 謙遜, usually translated as modesty in English, has been highly regarded in both traditional and contemporary East Asian societies. *Qian xun* is a human quality attributed to a person who is disposed to adopt the attitude, posture, or behavior of not boasting of his merits but instead elevating others by lowering himself.[1] This quality is well

---

*Doil Kim, 金渡鎰, Sungkyunkwan University; email: philosokim@gmail.com.

I am grateful to Kwong-loi Shun, Philip J. Ivanhoe, Winnie Sung, two anonymous referees, and the editor Sarah Allan for extremely helpful comments and criticisms on earlier drafts of this essay.

1. As to this definition of *qian xun* in modern Chinese, see the entry in the *Contemporary Chinese Usage Dictionary*, ed. Feng Zhichun (Chengdu: Sichuan cishu, 2010). This definition is applied to the equivalent of *qian xun* in Korean, namely *gyeom son*. For instance, see the entry in the *Korean Unabridged Dictionary*, ed. Lee Hui-seung (Seoul: Min jung Seo lim, 1982). This definition can be traced back to the neo-Confucian Zhu Xi's 朱熹 understanding: 謙者, 自卑而尊人, 又爲禮者之所當執持而不可失者也 (*Qian* is lowering oneself and elevating others, and it is what the practician of *li* 禮 should maintain and not lose). Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi quanshu* 朱子全書, vol. 2 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2002), 42. Zhu Xi seems to borrow the above sentence from the early Chinese text *Liji* 禮記 where the same sentence is used in explaining *li*: 夫禮者, 自卑而尊人 (In general, *li* is lowering oneself and elevating others).

© The Society for the Study of Early China and Cambridge University Press 2020

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

respected especially when displayed by persons of high social status or exceptional social distinction. It is also believed widely in East Asian cultures that regardless of one's position in society or one's talent, one can maintain a harmonious social life by being *qian xun*. Despite its prevalence in everyday lives of East Asians, there has not been much philosophical investigation of it. In order to address this inadequate analysis and advance a clear and more accurate understanding and appreciation of *qian xun*, in this article I examine the nature of what is arguably its earliest form: *qian* 謙 in early China.[2]

My focus is not on the linguistic expression of *qian* but on the idea that early Chinese thinkers conveyed through the use of this term. To make clear what I mean by this, I begin by explaining how this study of the idea can reasonably be conducted and introduce some important distinctions between terms, ideas, and concepts. In Section 2, I first explain the method that I adopt by focusing on the difference between terms and ideas. After having advanced my main arguments, in Section 8 I revisit the division, by focusing on the difference between ideas and concepts, namely the idea of *qian* and its different conceptualizations, in order to characterize the idea of *qian* more clearly.

Before turning to the methodological remarks in the following section, it should be noted that few details about *qian* can be found in early Chinese texts. More particularly, even though *qian* is widely regarded as belonging to the Confucian tradition, such major early Confucians as Kongzi 孔子 and Mengzi 孟子 do not seem to have had a strong interest in *qian*: there is no occurrence of the term *qian* in either the *Lunyu* 論語 or the *Mengzi* 孟子. More disappointing is that the few occurrences of the term in another major Confucian text, the *Xunzi* 荀子, do not offer sufficient information to enable us to grasp the idea of *qian* as held by the followers of Kongzi.

In contrast, the *Yi jing* 易經 offers quite a bit of information about *qian*, and, therefore, the text is the most reliable source for studying the early sense of *qian*.[3] For this reason, I first attempt to extract some features

---

2. The relationship between *qian xun* in contemporary East Asian cultures and *qian* in early China is a question that warrants careful and detailed explanation. Also, the difference between *qian xun* or *qian* on the one hand and the contemporary Western virtue modesty on the other is a subject worthy of careful inquiry. Nevertheless, the investigation of *qian* in this article will proceed in a way that does not engage or require either of these issues.

3. In this article I use the title *Yi jing* 易經 to refer to the complete canonical text that includes the original text *Zhouyi* 周易, namely the hexagram and the statements, and the Ten Wings (*Shi yi* 十翼), namely the ten commentaries on the *Zhouyi*. Even though each of the ten commentaries remains to be dated more accurately, it should be safe to regard most of them as considerably reflecting the thoughts of the Warring states

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of *qian* from the *Yi jing* and understand these as the basic elements constituting the idea of *qian*. I show then that these basic elements are also found in some other early Chinese texts. This finding implies that the idea of *qian* was in fact shared regardless of the later historical divisions among different schools of thought such as Confucianism and Daoism.

Following the above line of discussion, in Section 3, I extract three basic features of *qian* from the *qian* hexagram 謙卦 in the *Yi jing*. More particularly, I ascertain two important descriptions of the attitudes or codes of behavior that the *qian* person typically adopts.[4] These descriptions in turn enable us, in Sections 4, 5, and 6, to recognize characteristic attitudes and types of behavior that are importantly addressed in other early Chinese texts, such as the *Dao de jing* 道德經, the "Xia xian" 下賢 chapter of the *Lüshi chunqiu*, and the *Xunzi*. In these sections, I identify several other terms in these three texts that can systematically be related to the term *qian*. This means that *qian* as an umbrella term can cover a broader range of terms, and that the early Chinese texts just mentioned also provide us with information about the idea of *qian*, even though the term *qian* is not directly used. Finally, in Section 7, I explain how the *qian* person can be understood as someone who, in his social interactions, is disposed not to present himself in a better light than the other but instead treats the other person as relatively better in terms of some aspect of the other.

2. Methodological Remarks

The *qian* hexagram of the *Yi jing* provides sufficient sources for the reconstruction of the idea associated with the term *qian*, and this reconstructed idea can also be extracted from many other early Chinese texts despite the relative infrequent use of the term and regardless of the later classification of different schools of thought. To make this point, in the following sections, I first reconstruct the idea of *qian* by extracting three main features of it from the *Yi jing*, namely freedom from excessiveness, "downplaying," and the typical interpersonal

period. See Edward L. Shaughnessy, "*I Ching* [*Yi jing*] 易經," in *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide*, ed. Michael Loewe (Berkeley: The Society for the Study of Early China and the Institute of East Asian Studies, 1993), 216–28.

4. In the *Yi jing*, *qian* is once defined as a kind of *de* 德, which is usually translated as the character trait or the virtue in English. 謙, 德之柄也 (*Qian* is the handle of *de*). See Gao Heng 高亨, *Zhouyi Dazhuan Jinzhu* 周易大傳今注 (Qinan: Qilu shushe, 1979), 582. Throughout the relevant sentences in early Chinese texts that I examine later in this article, however, *qian* is more often used to describe certain kinds of attitude or behavior.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

circumstance in which *qian* is required. The first two describe attitudes or modes of behavior that the *qian* person typically adopts, while the last is concerned with the typical circumstance in which the *qian* person adopts these two kinds of attitudes or modes of behavior. I then show that these three features can also be found in the *Dao de jing*, the *Xunzi*, the *Lüshi chunqiu*, and, arguably, the *Lunyu*.

In the process described above, special attention is paid not only to the term *qian* but also to a cluster of terms used closely in relation to *qian*. More particularly, as I show in the next section, *qian* in the *Yi jing* is explained mainly in terms of two groups of terms. The first group of terms have the connotation of "excessiveness," while the second group of terms have to do with "downplaying." I analyze the idea of *qian* in the *Yi jing* by showing its relationship to these two groups of terms. Thus understood, *qian* is a kind of umbrella term that has the function of uniting these groups of terms, which are used to explain *qian* within the text.[5] On the basis of this analysis, I further show that terms that are identical or very similar to the cluster of terms in the *Yi jing* are also used in a coherent way that clearly suggests a very similar idea. Thus, I ultimately make the point that the idea of *qian* was shared by many more early Chinese thinkers than one would initially expect.

Terms are linguistic expressions used in a text. Ideas are thoughts that thinkers try to convey through certain linguistic expressions, whereas concepts are particular, refined ideas that are thickly woven into a thinker's philosophical views. With this division in mind, the study of *qian* in this paper is intended to show, first, that many early Chinese thinkers share the idea of *qian*, even though they do not necessarily use the term *qian*, and, second, that this sharing does not necessarily imply that each thinker would give the same account of *qian*, since he might hold his own particular conception of it, which is part of his larger philosophical position.[6]

This study of the idea of *qian* goes beyond the investigation of the term, such as etymology or the study of the linguistic meanings of the

5. Among many others in the aforementioned two groups of terms, *qian* can serve as the umbrella term because, first, it was used as the entry term for the *qian* hexagram of the *Yi jing* from the outset, and, second, the idea of *qian* that this article explores has traditionally been expressed in terms of its later derivatives, such as *qian xun*, *qian rang* 謙讓, and *qian xu* 謙虛, all of which includes the term *qian*.

6. Below, in Section 8, I revisit the division between ideas and concepts and explicate the sharing of the idea of *qian* and different conceptualizations by the thinkers in early China. Note, though, that this article does not delve in detail into the issue of how the idea of *qian* was differently conceptualized by different early Chinese thinkers. Rather, the focus of this article is on the reconstruction of the idea of *qian* that was shared by the different thinkers.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

term, *e.g.*, the range of the connotations of the term and its cognates. It does so partly because it attempts to approximate the life experiences that early Chinese shared in their own culture. In this paper, the *qian* person is ultimately understood as the kind of person who is disposed to adopt certain kinds of attitudes or codes of behavior in order to interact with other people in an ideal way. If this is the case, the idea of *qian* reflects a distinctive early Chinese ethical viewpoint, from which early Chinese thinkers understood ideal ways of interacting with one another. Presumably, the idea can fully be comprehended only from their perspective, which is quite different from ours in the present day. Consequently, the study of the idea amounts to an attempt to approximate a particular kind of ethical experience, which was significant for the early Chinese, in a way that finds common ground between their perspective and ours, thereby making their experiences understandable from our perspective.[7]

The linguistic study of *qian* alone is not sufficient for developing an understanding of *qian* for several reasons. First, except for the *Yi jing* and the *Xunzi*, few early Chinese texts contain substantial discussions of *qian*. Moreover, two occurrences of *qian* in the *Liji* 禮記 and in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 do not provide substantive information about the semantic aspect of *qian*, in that *qian* is used in an isolated manner, namely in a way that does not allow us to guess at any additional information about it within the context. In the "Yue lun" 樂論 chapter of the *Liji*, *qian* is used figuratively to describe an aspect of music.[8] However, it is not clear from the context exactly in what sense *qian* can figuratively describe something other than human beings. In the *Zhuangzi*, *qian* is

7. Kwong-loi Shun points out that the process of approximating ethical experiences of premodern Chinese thinkers in a way that makes the experiences understandable from our perspective without distorting their own perspective is an essential process that the researcher in Chinese philosophy consciously goes through in interpreting premodern thought. The methodology that I attempt to develop to reconstruct the idea of *qian* in this article is intended to demonstrate an example of such a process that Shun tries to articulate. See Kwong-loi Shun, Section 2, "On the Idea of 'No Self,'" *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 92 (November 2018), 78–107. See also Kwong-loi Shun, "Studying Confucian Ethics from the Inside Out," *Dao* 15.4 (December 2016), 511–32. In these studies, Shun appeals to the kind of experiences that are mutually comprehensible for premodern Chinese thinkers and us as the common ground on the basis of which the approximation of premodern thought without distortion is feasible. Martha Nussbaum also suggests a similar kind of common experience in a different context, namely in discussing the possibility of cross-cultural comparison of virtues. She labels it as "grounding experience." See Martha C. Nussbaum, "Non-relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13.1 (1987), 32–53.

8. See *Liji Zhengyi* 禮記正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue, 2000), 1337.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

presented as one of the central concepts that the early Daoist thinkers advocated.[9] However, the text does not explain what *qian* is.

Second, the use of *qian* is often mixed and interchangeable with its homophones and near-homophones, such as *qian** 嗛, *qian*** 歉, and *qian**** 慊. It was thus noted in the seventeenth-century Chinese dictionary *Zhengzitong* 正字通 that, due to this complicated interchangeability of *qian* with the other terms, there had been no decisive exegesis of *qian*.[10]

Third, the varied connotations of the homophones or near-homophones hardly help in grasping much about the semantics of *qian*, and this further hinders the effort to make the underlying idea of *qian* accessible. In the "Da xue" 大學 chapter of the *Liji*, *qian* is once used in the sense of *qian****, the main meaning of which is "being satisfied."[11] In the *Zuozhuan* 左傳, *qian* is equated with *buzu* 不足 (deficiency), which is usually represented by another homophone *qian***.[12] There may arguably be some meaningful linkage between *qian* and *qian***, since *qian* also has to do with "being seen as if one were deficient." However, this linkage is not sufficient for explaining the whole aspect of *qian*.[13]

In order to overcome the above limitations of a purely linguistic approach, I attempt to extract the idea associated essentially with *qian* by paying attention not just to the term but to a cluster of terms that are relevant to *qian* in early Chinese texts.

---

9. 關尹老聃 … 以濡弱謙下爲表 (Guan Yin and Lao Dan made weakness and *qian xia* 謙下 their mark of distinction). See Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *Zhuangzi jinzhu jinyi* 莊子今注今譯 (Beijing: Shangwu, 1989), 900. It is worth noting that it has been historically controversial whether this person called Lao Dan 老聃 is the author of the currently received text, the *Dao de jing*, namely Laozi 老子. As to the controversy surrounding the authorship, see William G. Boltz, "*Lao tzu Tao te ching* [*Laozi Dao de jing*]" 老子道德經, in *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide*, 269–71.

10. See the entry of *qian* in the *Kangxi zidian* 康熙字典 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1958).

11. See *Liji Zhengyi*, 1859–1860.

12. See Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1981), 1265.

13. In addition, an etymological investigation of the relation between *qian* and its possible cognate *lian* (廉, angular or purity) might help in expanding our knowledge of the semantic aspect of *qian*. See Axel Schuessler, *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 424. However, I do not take this possibility into account in this article. The main meanings of the two terms are quite disconnected to the extent that *lian* may refer to another human quality, as it is usually translated as "honesty" or "purity." Even though the two terms can be etymologically close, this does not necessarily mean that the use of *lian* is directly connected to the use of *qian*, especially, in relation to the idea that early Chinese thinkers tried to convey in terms of *qian*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. *Qian* in the *Yi jing*

As mentioned before, many passages related to the *qian* hexagram in the *Yi jing* contain significant information about *qian*. A careful reading of these passages enables us to identify three features of *qian* concerning the attitudes or codes of behavior the *qian* person typically adopts and the typical circumstance in which he adopts these attitudes or codes of behavior.

First, an image associated with *qian* is the opposite of being full or overflowing. In the *Tuan zhuan* 彖傳, one of the ten commentaries on the *Zhouyi*, *qian* is understood figuratively in terms of the disapproval of being *ying* 盈.[14] *Ying* has different connotations: the state of being full to the brim and the state of overflowing. If *ying* in the latter sense is used in connection with human relationships, it means "being full of oneself" and so can metaphorically be taken to imply that one is jiao 驕, which refers to conceit or arrogance, that is, thinking excessively well of oneself.[15]

Jiao is clearly disapproved of in another major Confucian text, even if there is no discussion of *qian* as such in the text. In the *Lunyu*, *junzi* 君子 (the gentleman) is contrasted with *xiaoren* 小人 (the petty person) and described as "*tai* 泰 but not *jiao*," which is roughly translated as "self-confident though not arrogant."[16] It is also worth noting that in the *Xunzi*, *jiao* together with *ying* is used to describe the kind of person who is contrasted with the *qian* person.[17] On another occasion in the *Xunzi*, *jiao* as a verb is combined with *yi* 溢, referring to the typical attitude of the petty person. The other term *yi*, like *ying*, refers to the state of overflowing or excessiveness.[18]

The above examples show that *qian* has to do with avoiding being full of oneself or excessive in estimating one's accomplishments or oneself. In this respect, it is understandable why the *qian* person is described in the *Xici* 繫辭, another traditional commentary on the *Zhouyi*, as not being

---

14. 人道惡盈而好謙 (It is the way of human beings to dislike the full and love the modest). Gao Heng 高亨, *Zhouyi Dazhuan jinzhu* 周易大傳今注 (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1979), 179.

15. See Gong Yingda's 孔穎達 commentary: 盈溢驕慢, 皆以惡之. 謙退恭巽, 悉皆好之. (Everyone dislikes the full and arrogant and likes the modest and polite). *Zhouyi Zhengyi* 周易正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue, 2000), 96.

16. Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Lunyu yizhu* 論語譯注 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1980), 143.

17. Li Disheng 李滌生, *Xunzi jishi* 荀子集釋 (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng, 1979), 118–19.

18. "The petty person … is filled with an overweening pride around other people" (*jiao yi ren* 驕溢人). *Xunzi jishi*, 41. I consulted John Knoblock's translation. See his *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, vol. 1 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 175.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

boastful (*fa* 伐) of his own accomplishments.[19] For, in being boastful, one is inclined to overestimate one's achievements and to think excessively well of oneself.

Second, *qian* is related not only to keeping oneself from overestimation, but also to "downplaying."[20] In the aforementioned passage of the *Tuan zhuan*, *qian* is ultimately related to placing oneself in a low position. More particularly, the *qian* person places himself in a low position (*bei* 卑), hence people will not pass him over.[21] This means that though he lowers (*bei*) himself, the people around him will not disregard or think less of him. The term *bei* also occurs in the *Xiang zhuan* 象傳, yet another commentary on the *Zhouyi* among the Ten Wings, where it is said that the *qian* person cultivates himself by lowering himself.[22]

In relation to this second feature of *qian*, attention should be paid to a passage in the *Xunzi* about a vessel used in the ancestral temple. This vessel tends to be upright if it is half full and to overturn if completely full. In this passage, Kongzi is the main narrator, saying that one thing to learn from such a vessel is that "wealth encompassing all within the four seas should be guarded by *qian*."[23] To keep the vessel upright, more than just preventing the overflow of its contents is needed; its contents should be reduced by half. This metaphor implies that *qian* has to do not just with freedom from excess, but also with "downplaying."

Both of the features of *qian* explained so far have to do with the kinds of attitudes that the *qian* person typically takes or the ways the *qian* person generally behaves. According to the first feature, the *qian* person is someone who typically tries to avoid the image of being full or overflowing—or arrogant—in a way that refrains from exaggeration of his accomplishments or himself, According to the second, on the other hand, the *qian* person is understood as the kind of person who even downplays his accomplishments or himself.

---

19. 勞而不伐. *Zhouyi Dazhuan jinzhu*, 521.

20. This word, "downplay," is chosen to translate a group of early Chinese terms including *bei* 卑 (lowering) and *xia* 下 (putting down). As compared to the two terms just mentioned, "downplaying" has an additional connotation, namely representing something seem less important, thereby making people think that it is less important than it really is. With this connotation in mind, I choose "downplaying" as the representative translation for the second feature of *qian*. *Qian* has to do not just with lowering oneself or putting oneself in a low position but with representing oneself or certain aspects of one's own seem less important. This can be fully explained when the second feature is understood in relation to the third feature that I explain in the below.

21. 卑而不可踰. *Zhouyi Dazhuan jinzhu*, 179.

22. 卑以自牧也. *Zhouyi Dazhuan jinzhu*, 180.

23. 富有四海, 守之以謙. *Xunzi jishi*, 639.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The third feature of *qian* can also be extracted from the *Yi jing*. *Qian* is required typically in interpersonal circumstances. That is, it is ultimately a human quality required typically for successful and sustainable interactions with other people. To explain this, attention should be paid to the relationship between *qian* and *li* 禮. In the *Xici*, *qian* is described as "the handle of *de* 德 (desirable traits)," which enables a *qian* person to grab other desirable traits.[24] This expression implies that the embodiment of *qian* serves as the foundation for the attainment of other desirable traits. This foundational function of *qian* can be explained in terms of its close relationship with one of the key concepts in early Confucian thought, *li*. *Li* refers to ritual propriety, and this reference is extended to cover the Confucian rules of conduct that are recommended not just in formal, high rituals but also in daily life.

More particularly, in the *Xici*, *li* is understood first in connection with *gong* 恭 (courtesy), and the *qian* person is described as someone who adopts *gong* to the utmost.[25] *Gong* refers to the courteous attitude, posture, or behavior that is required for interactions with other people as well as in ritual ceremonies.[26] It is also germane to *li* in many other early Confucian texts, such as the *Liji*, the *Lunyu*, and the *Mengzi*.[27] In particular, it is said in the *Liji* that the gentleman manifests *li* by being respectful and courteous (*gong*) and lowering himself.[28] The above examples clearly show that along with *gong*, *qian* is one of the human qualities that enable the owner to observe *li* properly. This understanding is also confirmed by yet another sentence in the *Xici* of the *Yi jing*, in which it is said that one can follow *li* by means of *qian*.[29]

---

24. *Zhouyi Dazhuan jinzhu*, 582. See n. 4.

25. 德言盛, 禮言恭, 謙也者, 致恭以存其位者也. ([The gentleman's] virtue is more and more flourishing, and his behavior in accordance with *li* is more and more courteous. The humble who carries out his courtesy to the utmost will preserve himself in his position). *Zhouyi Dazhuan jinzhu*, 521–22.

26. For instance, in the "Shao yi" 少儀 chapter of the *Liji*, *gong* is defined as the kind of posture required for treating guests properly. The annotator of the Han Dynasty Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 understands *gong* in the relevant sentence as having to do especially with *mao* 貌 referring literally to outer appearance. This kind of outer appearance can be understood as postures to be taken in the polite treatment of guests or honored guests. See *Liji zhengyi*, 1210.

27. *Lunyu yizhu*, 125. *Liji zhengyi*, 17. Also see Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Mengzi yizhu* 孟子譯註 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1962), 259.

28. 君子恭敬, 撙節退讓以明禮. *Liji zhengyi*, 17. In interpreting *zun** 撙 as "lowering," I do not follow the annotation of Zheng Xuan and Kong Yingda 孔穎達. As to the same interpretation of mine, also see the *Liji zhengyi*, 17n3. The term *zun** can be regarded as belonging to the group of terms related to "downplaying," the second feature of *qian*. I revisit this term used in the same sense in the *Xunzi* later in Section 6.

29. 謙以制禮. *Zhouyi Dazhuan jinzhu*, 585. As to the above translation, see Gao's commentary. He understands the connotation of *zhi* 制 as *cong* 從 (observance).

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Now, it is important to note that the observance of *li* by means of *gong*, namely behaving in accordance with the Confucian formal rules of conduct through courteous attitude, posture, or behavior, is directed toward other people in interactions. That is, it is concerned ultimately with the way one interacts with others. The claim can be made then that *qian* is also concerned ultimately with how to interact with other people. That is, *qian* is adopted in order to treat or interact with other people properly.

The above point can also be made on the basis of the *Xici*, in which the *qian* person is described as someone who *xia ren* 下人, namely lowers (*xia*) [oneself or one's achievements] to other people.[30] In relation to this description, it is understandable why the later commentator of the *Yi jing*, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, defines the *qian* person as someone who bends his bodily posture and lowers himself *to others*, and lets other people go ahead and places himself last, thereby responding *to others*.[31] According to this definition, *qian* is adopted ultimately in consideration of proper interactions with other people.

This third feature of *qian*, namely its interpersonal nature, has an important implication for our understanding of the previous two features. In connection with this third feature of *qian*, the other two should be understood as follows. In relation to the first feature, the *qian* person is not simply the kind of person who is inclined to keep himself from overestimating his own achievements or himself. Rather, he has this inclination ultimately in order to treat other people in accordance with *li*. That is, he is to be understood as the kind of person who treats other people properly—that is, in accordance with *li*—in such a way that he tries to avoid any overestimation of himself or his achievements in consideration of the other person in the interaction. By the same token, in relation to the second feature, the *qian* person is not simply the kind of person who is inclined to underestimate his achievements or lower himself. Rather, he maintains such an inclination ultimately in order to treat other people in accordance with *li*. In other words, the *qian* person is to be understood as the kind of person who treats other people properly in such a way that he represents himself or his achievements as less significant to other people or further makes other people think that he or his achievements are less important than they may think he or it is. For this reason, I label the second feature of *qian* as "downplaying"

30. 語以其功下人者也. ([This] speaks of the man with great achievements lowers himself to other people.) *Zhouyi Dazhuan Jinzhu*, 512–22. The term *xia* 下 (lowering) can also be regarded as belonging to the group of terms relevant to the second feature of *qian*. In the following section, I show that this term is intensively used in the *Dao de jing*.

31. 謙者, 屈躬下物, 先人後己, 以此待物. *Zhouyi zhengyi*, 94.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rather than either "underestimating" or "lowering" in consideration of its relation to the third feature of *qian*.

The above reinterpretation of the two features in connection with the third has an important implication for attempts to characterize *qian* in a broader cross-cultural context.[32] For instance, *qian* can be juxtaposed with modesty, which is widely used as the English translation of *qian*. Modesty has recently been a focus of vigorous discussions among many analytic philosophers. Interestingly, modesty is also understood in terms of very similar features, namely underestimation and the avoidance of overestimation.[33] This similarity speaks for the plausibility of the cross-cultural comparison between *qian* and modesty, even though each belongs to its own separate culture. However, unlike *qian*, modesty is not considered to be required typically for interactions with other people. Rather, for instance, according to one recent account, the modest person is a self-controlled person who can avoid a general, though malign, tendency to overestimate his own achievements or himself.[34] The comparison just made is too brief to reveal all of the differences and nuances between these two ideas. Even so, it suffices to show a distinctive characteristic of *qian*. Simply put, *qian* is interpersonal, whereas modesty is intrapersonal.[35]

32. To deal with this issue fully, I have been writing another independent paper on the comparison between *qian xun*, the contemporary version of *qian*, and modesty as a contemporary Western virtue.

33. Julia Driver understands modesty in terms of the tendency to underestimate one's own achievements or oneself and explains that it is based upon an epistemic defect of not knowing the accurate value of self-worth. See Julia Driver, "The Virtues of Ignorance," *Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989), 373–84; also see her *Uneasy Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chap. 2 and 4.

34. For instance, Owen Flanagan understands modesty in terms of the disposition or desire not to have any overestimated belief. See Owen Flanagan, "Virtue and Ignorance," *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990), 420–28. Similarly, Thomas Hurka understands modesty in terms of the tendency to take too much pleasure in one's own accomplishments, compared to pleasure in those of others. See Thomas Hurka, *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), chap. 1 and 4.

35. An extensive discussion would be needed in order distinguish *qian* from modesty fully. However, that goes beyond the scope of this study. It suffices to say for now that modesty in contemporary discussions is arguably the kind of virtue based primarily on self-regarding considerations, for example, that regarding an accurate assessment of one's accomplishment or oneself by avoiding any excessive and therefore wrong assessment. By contrast, *qian* does not simply aim at accuracy in one's own evaluation of something related to oneself, rather it fundamentally has to do with the proper treatment of other people in interactions. In this sense, *qian* can be differentiated from modesty in terms of its being fundamentally related to other-regarding considerations.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

To summarize, it is worth enumerating the aforementioned cluster of *qian*-related terms in the *Yi jing*, which are divided into two groups of terms: The first group of terms is related to the first feature of *qian*, the freedom from excessiveness. This group includes *ying* 盈, *yi* 溢, *fa* 伐, and *jiao* 驕. *Qian* is defined as a warning against what is meant by these terms. On the other hand, the second group of terms is related to the second feature of *qian*, namely "downplaying." This group includes *bei* 卑 and *xia* 下. These terms basically refer to lowering or underestimating. But, when both are used in relation to *qian*, their meaning is closer to downplaying one's own achievements and oneself before other people.

This establishment of the cluster of *qian*-related terms immediately enables us to pay attention to a passage in another early Chinese text. In the *Lunyu*, Kongzi draws the line between the man of *wen* 聞 (unreliable reputation) and the man of *da* 達 (real distinction) by mentioning a couple of attitudes or types of behavior that only the latter typically has. Among them is "being considerate and therefore lowering oneself toward others."[36] Here, Kongzi uses the same expression that is used in the *Yi jing*, *xia ren* 下人. For reasons that I explained above, this expression in the *Lunyu* can also be reinterpreted as downplaying oneself in consideration of other people in interactions. If this interpretation is reasonable, the claim can be made that Kongzi also approves of the idea of *qian*, at least, to a certain degree, even though he does not use the term *qian* throughout the *Lunyu*.[37]

In the following sections, I similarly look at terms that are comparable to the cluster of *qian*-related terms in the *Yi jing* and show that there are some other early Chinese texts in which the three features of *qian* are linked more coherently than in the *Lunyu*, and the linkage strongly suggests that the thinkers share the same general idea of *qian*.

4. The Idea of *Qian* in the *Dao De Jing*

In this section, I show that some attitudes or codes of behavior in the *Dao de jing* can be described in terms of the cluster of *qian*-related terms established in the *Yi jing*, even though there is no occurrence of the term *qian* in the *Dao de jing*. In addition, I explain that the *Dao de jing* provides more detailed information about the third feature of *qian*, namely in what circumstances those *qian*-like attitudes or codes of behavior are required. On the basis of this explanation, I demonstrate that the

36. 慮以下人. *Lunyu yizhu*, 130.

37. Moreover, Kongzi disapproves of *jiao*, as mentioned before. See n. 16.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

relevant information in the *Dao de jing* enables us to reconstruct the idea of *qian* in a more detailed manner.

Before this demonstration, however, it is worth briefly providing two indirect grounds for the legitimacy of elaborating *qian* by connecting the *Dao de jing* to the *Yi jing*. First, this connection was already made in the "Ming qian" 明謙 (Explication of *Qian*) chapter of the *Liuzi* 劉子, which was allegedly edited during the Northern and Southern dynasties period (420–589 CE). This chapter is arguably the earliest piece of writing fully dedicated to discussing *qian*. In it, *qian* is explicated by reference to both the *Yi jing* and the *Dao de jing*.[38] This instance shows that later scholars like the author of the "Ming qian" chapter also took notice of the similarity between the two texts under the name of *qian*.

Second, as mentioned in Section 2, part of early Daoist thought was summarized in terms of *qian* in another early Chinese text, the "Tian xia" 天下 (All Under Heaven) chapter of the *Zhuangzi*. This tells us that not only later scholars but also some early Chinese thinkers already understood the thought of the *Dao de jing* in terms of *qian*, even though there is no occurrence of the term as such.[39]

To begin with, the first feature of *qian* is applicable to some passages in the *Dao de jing*. As explained earlier, this feature concerns the warning against the figurative image of being full or overflowing. A relevant passage states, "The one who assists the ruler according to the *Dao* [道] … has attainments, but he is not boastful [*jin* 矜]. He has attainments, but he does not brag [*fa* 伐]. He has attainments, but he does not have too high an opinion of himself [*jiao* 驕]."[40] Laozi explains these attitudes or codes of behavior as reflecting a self-warning against an aspect of the *Dao*, namely the Daoist principle, which is that when things and beings have grown to their maturity, they become old.[41] That is, according to the *Dao de jing*, what has developed to its full degree inevitably begins to dwindle or grow weaker; with this pattern of the *Dao* in mind, one should avoid whatever is figuratively comparable to being full or overflowing, such as *fa* and *jiao*, in order not to lead oneself to dwindle or get weaker. Here, the first group of *qian*-related terms in the *Yi jing* are also used by Laozi.

---

38. See *Liuzi* (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1985), 44.

39. However, it is worth noting that this second indirect ground may be controversial because the authorship of the *Dao de jing* is questionable. See n. 9. With this controversy in mind, in this section, I use "Laozi" as a convenient label that refers to the person or persons to whom the authorship of the *Dao de jing* is ascribed.

40. 以道佐人主者 [, …] 果而勿矜, 果而勿伐, 果而勿驕. *Dao de jing*, chapter 30. See Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *Laozi jinzhu jinyi* 老子今注今譯 (Beijing: Shangmuyin, 2006), 192.

41. 物壯則老. *Laozi Jinzhu Jinyi*, 192.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Second, the *Dao de jing* also talks about what are equivalent to the second feature of *qian*, namely downplaying oneself. In addition to adopting the same term *xia* 下 used in the *Yi jing*, Laozi chooses another term *hou* 後 to express more or less the same thing. These two terms are used for expressions such as placing oneself below (*xia*) and placing oneself last (*hou*) in order not to be at the front of others. More particularly, Laozi says in chapter 7 that the sage puts himself last (*hou*), and yet he finds himself in the foremost place.[42] Laozi understands this attitude or behavior as following or imitating another aspect of the *Dao*, which is that Heaven and Earth are able to endure forever because they do not live for the sake of themselves.[43] At this point, it is worth noting that there is a traditional exegesis that understands this sentence in chapter 7 in terms of *qian rang* 謙讓, which is arguably one of the later derivative words of *qian* along with the aforementioned *qian xun* 謙遜.[44] In addition to chapter 7, Laozi mentions in chapter 68 that someone who makes the best use of other people abases (*xia*) himself before them.[45]

The attitudes or codes of behavior in the above examples are well described in terms of the first two features of *qian*, namely the freedom from excessiveness and "downplaying." The claim can be made then that Laozi also has the idea of *qian*, even though the idea is not expressed by the use of the umbrella term *qian*.

In addition, the *Dao de jing* provides more detailed information that helps in reconstructing the idea of *qian*, especially, in terms of the third feature of *qian*. This information has to do with the specific kinds of interactions that require one to adopt *qian*-related attitudes or codes of behavior in the *Dao de jing*. First, *qian* should be adopted in interactions between superiors and inferiors in the sociopolitical rank. More specifically, *qian* is recommended not only to the ruler but also to "the one who assists the ruler," namely his subordinates.[46]

However, Laozi is more inclined to treat *qian* as the ideal attitude or code of behavior that a ruler should take toward his subordinates and the people at large. In the aforementioned chapter 7, *hou* is considered to be characteristically adopted by leaders such as the sage kings.[47] In

42. 是以聖人後其身而身先. *Dao de jing*, chapter 7. See *Laozi jinzhu jinyi*, 100.

43. 天地所以能長且久者, 以其不自生, 故能長生. *Laozi jinzhu jinyi*, 100.

44. *Laozi jinzhu jinyi*, 100.

45. 善用人者, 爲之下. Laozi calls this the *de* (virtue) of not contending (*bu zheng zhi de* 不爭之德). *Dao de jing*, chapter 68. See *Laozi jinzhu jinyi*, 313.

46. Quite similar a reading can apply to chapter 61 wherein Laozi says that both a major state and a minor state should abase themselves (*xia*) before each other, then they each can get what they want from each other.

47. According to a traditional commentary, *hou* is the leader's attitudes or behavior. See *Laozi jinzhu jinyi*, 74.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

chapter 68, it is recommended as a political technique for employing men.[48] In addition, Laozi says in chapter 66, "If you want to stand over the people, you should by your words put yourself below them. If you want to go before the people, you should place yourself behind them."[49] Laozi here suggests that the ruler should abase (*xia*) himself to the people and follow after (*hou*) them in order to achieve his own political goal to hold real power over them.[50]

The same inclination is also found in the *Lüshi chunqiu*, which I examine in the following section. That is, according to the relevant chapter in this text, *qian*-like attitudes or codes of behavior should be taken by rulers toward their potential subordinates. In contrast, as I show later in Section 6, Xunzi presents *qian*-related attitudes or codes of behavior as those adopted by a subordinate toward his ruler.

5. The Idea of *Qian* in the *Lüshi chunqiu*

As mentioned briefly in the previous section, there is another early Chinese text from which insights about the idea of *qian* can be extracted: the "Xia xian" 下賢 chapter of the *Lüshi chunqiu*. The title, *xia xian*, means putting oneself below the wise, and this already speaks for the relevance that the main theme of the chapter has to *qian*.

The chapter begins with a critique of the prevailing sociopolitical atmosphere of the Warring States period in early China, in which rulers and "the scholars who possess the *Dao*" tend to treat the other

48. See n 45.

49. 是以聖人欲上民, 必以言下之. 欲先民, 必以身後之. See *Laozi jinzhu jinyi*, 308.

50. As a matter of fact, according to a traditional interpretation of the text, it is full of suggestions about how the ruler can resort to political trickery to take over the reins of the government and the people. For instance, Zhang Shunhui 張舜徽 claims that the *Dao* in the *Dao de jing* is not a metaphysical principle on the basis of which all things and beings in the universe operate, but the political way by which the ruler should abide. See his *Zhou Qin daolun fawei* 周秦道論發微 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1982), 67. In this line of thought, Fu Sinian 傅斯年 takes a further step to claim that the text is full of political trickery to retain political power and understands such an attitude or code of behavior as abasing oneself as an example of such trickery. See his *Zhanguo shijia xulun* 戰國史家敍論 in *Fu Mengzhen xiansheng ji* 傅孟眞先生集 (Taipei: Taiwan National University Press, 1952). In addition, the contemporary Korean scholar Lee Seung-ryul also makes the claim that the attitude or code of behavior in question should be understood as a political tactic rather than as a moral virtue. See his "A Study of the Thought of *qian xun* in *Tang yu zhi dao* 唐虞之道 of the *Guodian Bamboo Slips*," *Dongyang cheolhak yeongu* 東洋哲學研究 28 (2002), 235–63. To focus on the main topic of this article, I shall sidestep the question of whether the interpretation of the *Dao de jing* merely as a textbook on political trickery is reasonable.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

side arrogantly (*jiao*).[51] Here, "the scholars who possess the *Dao*" refers to wise individuals who can potentially be employed by a ruler as political advisors on the basis of their ability to assist the ruler in achieving political success. Such scholars can even enjoy some freedom in choosing their employer, if the employer hopes to secure his political advice and carry out his vision of the *Dao*. Due to the competence and freedom they possess, such scholars are likely to be seen as arrogant from the perspective of the rulers who compete with one another for the best political assistants. In relation to such a political circumstance, the chapter is written to offer advice on what kind of attitude a ruler should take toward a very competent, though perhaps arrogant, scholar, thereby making such a man his political advisor and his subordinate.

The advice can be summarized as follows. First, a ruler should treat potential political advisors in accordance with *li* 禮, even though they seem arrogant.[52] Second, a ruler should rid himself of "the complexion of the sovereign" (*diwang zhi se* 帝王之色) in his interacting with potential political advisors.[53] That is, a ruler should not look down on his potential subordinates by appealing to his higher political rank as a sovereign ruler. This is nothing other than a warning against *jiao*.[54] Third, a ruler should even lower himself (*xia* 下) in his interactions with his political advisors.[55] In these ways, the author of the chapter argues, the former sage kings could successfully employ the very best political advisors and make the best ones eventually serve them.

---

51. 有道之士固驕人主, 人主之不肖者亦驕有道之士, 日以相驕, 奚時相得. (Scholar-knights who possess the Way are consistently rude to rulers. Unworthy rulers respond in kind by being rude to such scholar-knights. Each day they are rude to one another; when will they cooperate?) See Chen Qiyou 陳奇猷, *Lüshi chunqiu xin jiaoshi* 呂氏春秋新校釋 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2002), 886. The translation is Knoblock and Riegal's. John Knoblock and Jeffrey K. Riegel, *The Annals of Lü Buwei: A Complete Translation and Study* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 347.

52. 賢主則不然, 士雖驕之, 而己愈禮之, 士安得不歸之. 士所歸, 天下從之. (Worthy rulers are not like this. Even when scholar-knights are rude to them, such rulers are even more polite to the scholar-knights; Why, then, would the scholar-knights not turn to them. Those to whom scholar-knights turn, the world follows.) *Lüshi chunqiu xin jiaoshi*, 886; *The Annals of Lü Buwei: A Complete Translation and Study*, 347.

53. 士有若此者, 五帝弗得而友, 三王弗得而師, 去其帝王之色, 則近可得之矣. (Such scholar-knights could not be obtained as friends even by the Five Sovereigns or as teachers by the Three Kings. Rid yourselves of the attitude of a Sovereign or King. Then perhaps you can obtain them.) *Lüshi chunqiu xin jiaoshi*, 886; *The Annals of Lü Buwei: A Complete Translation and Study*, 349.

54. As to the understanding of the second piece of advice, see Chen Qiyou's comment on the relevant sentence. *Lüshi chunqiu Xin Jiaoshi*, 894.

55. 不唯以身下士邪. ([Did King Cheng] not put himself below scholar-knights?) *Lüshi chunqiu xin jiaoshi*, 887.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This advice reflects all three features of *qian*. Thus, the claim can be made that the idea of *qian* can be extracted from the "Xia xian" chapter. The idea in this text is similar to that in the *Yi jing* in that *qian* is supposed to accord with *li*. On the other hand, it is similar to that in the *Dao de jing* in that the *qian*-like attitudes or codes of behavior are to be taken especially by the ruler toward his subordinates.

6. *Qian* in the *Xunzi*

As mentioned in Section 3, the *Xunzi* contains some relevant information about *qian*.[56] On the surface, however, Xunzi does not seem to present *qian* as a primary Confucian attitude or code of conduct, and no part of the *Xunzi* is devoted to discussing it. Nevertheless, I show in this section that close scrutiny of the text, especially, the passages in the "Zhongni" 仲尼 chapter regarding three tactics (*shu* 術) offers evidence against the first impression.

The first tactic is a piece of advice about how a minister can keep his position as the king's favorite and maintain his political status while avoiding the enmity of others.[57] To achieve these goals, the tactic recommends taking diverse kinds of attitudes and actions. Among those are the following: If the ruler bestows high rank on you and exalts you, be respectful and courteous (*gong jing* 恭敬) to him and restrain (*zun* 僔) yourself; if the ruler trusts and treats you closely, be careful and circumspect (*jin shen* 謹愼) and let your demeanor make it seem as if you are wanting in ability (*qian** 嗛); even if the ruler treats you with distance, strive for complete oneness with him but do not betray him. Also, when you are in a high position, do not boast (*bu wei kua* 不爲夸); when trusted, exercise *qian* 謙; when entrusted with heavy responsibilities, do not presume to keep them all for yourself; and, when you are offered riches and benefits, accept them only after politely refusing (*ci rang* 辭讓) them first, as if your good accomplishments do not deserve (*bu ji* 不及) such rewards.[58]

The above advice includes what can arguably be considered core Confucian attitudes or codes of conducts, such as *gong jing* (reverence and respectfulness), *jin shen* (attentiveness and carefulness), and *ci rang* (deferential refusal). In parallel with these, there are also a number of unique attitudes or codes of behavior that are recommended in the

56. See nn 17, 18, and 23.

57. 持寵處位終身不厭之術. *Xunzi jishi*, 246.

58. *Xunzi jishi*, 246. As to the above translation, I partly consult John Knoblock's. See his *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, vol. 2 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 59.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

above, namely *qian*, *zun*, *qian**, *bu wei kua*, and *bu ji*. These terms were translated as: *Zun* as self-restraint; *qian** as presenting oneself as if one is wanting in ability, quality, and the like; *bu wei kua* as not bragging about oneself; and *bu ji* as presenting oneself as if one does not really deserve to be rewarded. Thus understood, these notions can be connected closely under the umbrella term *qian*. My claim at this point is that *qian* holds a key post in the first tactic. However, the above interpretations of the notions require further explanations, since many annotators have not been unanimous in interpreting the terms.

First of all, *zun* can connote restraining or controlling, when it is interpreted as equivalent to another term *zun** 撙.[59] If this connotation of *zun* is used in the reflexive usage, it can in turn be extended to another connotation of lowering and withdrawing oneself (*bei tui* 卑退).[60] As a result of this extension, *zun* can be interpreted as in line with *qian*.[61]

*Qian**, one of the homophones of *qian*, basically means deficiency.[62] However, some annotators consider the term in the particular context mentioned above to be equivalent to *qian*.[63] Still, there is a line of exegesis that understands that no matter which annotation, either deficiency or the equivalence of *qian*, is right, the term produces the same meaning in that context, for the attitude or behavior of presenting oneself as if one is deficient in ability, quality, and the like is closely related to *qian*.[64] By the same token, *bu ji*, understood as presenting oneself as if one does not really deserve to be rewarded, can also be related to *qian*.

---

59. This interpretation was presented for the first time by Yang Liang 楊倞, the first annotator of the *Xunzi*. See Wang Xianqian 王先謙, *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1988), 109. Also see *Xunzi jishi*, 118. Thus understood, the sentence "be respectful and courteous to him and restrain yourself" (恭敬而僔), is almost equivalent to the aforementioned sentence in the *Liji*, in which it is said that the gentleman manifests *li* 禮 by means of *gong* and *zun** understood as a *qian*-related term. See n. 28.

60. This is also Yang Liang's interpretation. See *Xunzi jijie*, 109. It is worth noting that Kim Hak-ju's translation of *bei tui* in Korean is something like the demeanor of lowering oneself. See his *Soonja* (Seoul: Eulyu Munhwasa, 2001), 166.

61. Eric L. Hutton translates *zun* simply as modest, which is the usual translation of *qian* in English. See his *Xunzi The Complete Text* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 49.

62. This is Yang Liang's interpretation. See *Xunzi jijie*, 109. Yang reads *qian** 嗛 as *qian*** 歉 and takes a further step to interpret it as not being imprudently conceited (*zi man* 自滿). See the part of Section 2 concerning the homonyms of *qian*.

63. *Xunzi jijie*, 109; Zhang Jue 張覺, *Xunzi yizhu* 荀子譯註 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2015), 68.

64. *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, vol. 2, 278n21. In this regard, Knoblock translates the term as "humble" in English. Ibid., 59.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In the case of *kua* 夸 in the expression *bu wei kua*, some annotators understand it as extravagance.[65] In this case, the entire relevant sentence, *gui er bu wei kua* 貴而不爲夸, means "Even though serving in a high position, do not be extravagant." However, it makes better sense to say: when you serve in a high position, do not have too high an opinion of yourself and boast of the high position. In fact, it is not at all unreasonable to interpret *kua* as "to speak too proudly about what you have done or yourself."[66] If this is the case, the expression *bu wei kua* means "not boasting," and, consequently, it can be related to *qian*.

Lastly, many annotators have suggested that the *qian* in the first tactic should be read as another similar Chinese character *xian* 嫌, which basically means "suspicion."[67] According to this annotation, the relevant sentence, *xin er bu wang chu qian* 信而不忘處謙, means that when trusted, be sure not to be the target of suspicion. However, one wonders if it is really necessary to read the *qian* as *xian* in this context, where in fact, *qian* understood in its basic connotation makes perfect sense. For there is no difficulty in understanding the sentence as stating that when trusted [by the ruler], do not forget to be *qian* (that is, do not have too high an opinion of yourself; downplay yourself in the presence of the ruler).[68]

On the basis of the above explanations of how each of the terms is related closely to *qian*, the conclusion can be drawn that important parts of the first tactic converge into the idea of *qian*. Although the term *qian* as such appears only once in the tactic, *zun*, *qian**, *bu wei kua*, and *bu ji* are used to refer to the kind of attitudes or codes of behavior that are captured by the first and second features of *qian* in the *Yi jing*. More particularly, the first feature of *qian* explains *bu wei kua*, while the second feature explains the others. Thus, these can reasonably be included in an extended cluster of *qian*-related terms.

The same analysis can be applied to the second and third tactics in the "Zhongni" chapter.[69] The second tactic is entitled "the method of excelling when holding a position of great importance and handling important matters appropriately, of gaining the favor of the ruler over a

---

65. This is Yang Liang's annotation. See *Xunzi jijie*, 110. See also *Xunzi yizhu*, 68.

66. In this respect, Knoblock translates *kua* 夸 as "boast." See *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, vol. 2, p. 59. Hutton's English translation is also the same. See *Xunzi The Complete Text*, p. 49. Also see Wang Tianhai 王天海, *Xunzi jiaoshi* 荀子校釋 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2005), 248.

67. For instance, see *Xunzi Jijie*, 110.

68. For such annotations, see *Xunzi jiaoshi*, 248.

69. I deal with the second and third tactics in less detail than the first one, for I focus specifically on the parts associated potentially with the idea of *qian*. The analysis in the above is only intended to show that the tactics reflect the idea in question to a more considerable extent than one may initially expect.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

state of ten thousand chariots, and of surely getting rid of the source of possible troubles for yourself."[70]

The descriptions of the second tactic include the following statement: "In the conduct of official duties, the wise person, when he has the full amount [*man* 滿], considers himself as being deficient [*qian**]."[71] This figurative expression may be understood in different ways. According to one English translation, it means that the wise person considers situations in which he might be inadequate (*qian**), when he is adequate (*man*).[72] However, there is no reason to reject reading the term literally in this context. So, the figurative expression should be understood as meaning that when the wise person fulfills his duties (*man*), on the contrary, he seems to be deficient (*qian**) in ability, quality, and the like. Thus understood, the *qian** here is connected with *qian*, as discussed above.[73]

Moreover, *qian* is obviously one of the suggestions made in the second tactic and is presented in a way that incorporates a quotation of Kongzi's teachings, "If a person is wise and still devoted to *qian*, he must be a worthy."[74] In addition, the descriptions of the second tactic include the criticism that an unwise person is *jiao ying* 驕盈.[75] As explained in Section 3, *jiao* and *ying* are the opposites of *qian*.

The third tactic is called "the tactic that can work for every occasion over all the world."[76] By drawing upon this third tactic, Xunzi explains, "You will have a mastery of serving the ruler and become a sage in developing your personhood."[77] This tactic includes a warning

70. 求善處大重, 理任大事, 擅寵於萬乘之國, 必無後患之術. *Xunzi jishi*, 119.

71. 故知者之舉事也, 滿則慮嗛. *Xunzi jishi*, 119. Kim Hak-ju translates this sentence literally just as I translate it. See *Sunja*, 167. Zhang Jue interprets it as meaning that the wise person considers being deficient, when he is perfect (*yuan man* 圓滿). See *Xunzi yizhu*, 106. The issue of inconsistency in his interpretation of the same term *qian** can arise: He understands the *qian** in the first tactic by changing it to *qian*, whereas he understands the same term in the second tactic literally, that is, as being deficient. See Footnote n. 65. Instead, if it is possible to interpret the *qian** of both tactics equally as having the connotation of *qian*, it helps with maintaining consistency in interpreting the same term that appears twice in the closely connected passages in the same chapter. Thus, I suggest that the *qian** in the first and second tactics should be understood equally in relation to *qian*.

72. *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, vol. 2, 60.

73. As to annotations that interpret the *qian** in the above context simply as *qian*, see *Xunzi jiaoshi*, 253; *Xunzi The Complete Text*, 110.

74. 知而好謙, 必賢. *Xunzi jishi*, 119–120.

75. *Xunzi jishi*, 120.

76. 天下之行術. See *Xunzi jishi*, 121.

77. 以事君則必通, 以爲仁則必聖. In interpreting this sentence, I follow Zhang Jue's Chinese translation. See *Xunzi yizhu*, 107. As to a similar interpretation, see Xiong Gongzhe, 110. In contrast, Knoblock's interpretation of the sentence is somewhat different. See *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, vol. 2, 61.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

against the opposite of *qian*: Xunzi mentions that although your accomplishments are exceedingly great, you should not brag (*fa* 伐) as if they have been achieved through your efforts alone.[78]

To summarize, all three tactics include what can be classified under the umbrella term *qian*: *zun*, *qian**, *bu wei kua*, *bu ji*, the opposition of *jiao ying*, as well as *qian*. This classification, however, is not immediately evident on the face of the relevant passages because those are not explained directly in relation to *qian* in the passages. For this reason, most of the existing exegeses have failed to systematically connect those attitudes or codes of behavior with the idea of *qian*.

Another important point to be noted is this: among the three tactics, *qian* is one of the attitudes or codes of behavior that should be adopted by a subordinate in the presence of his ruler. This contrasts with the cases of the *Dao de jing* and the *Lüshi chunqiu* in the previous sections. In other words, *qian* in the "Zhongni" chapter of the *Xunzi* is recommended primarily to the inferior person in a social hierarchy.

7. Reconstruction of the Underlying Idea

Two important observations can be made on the basis of the discussions throughout Sections 4, 5, and 6 above. First, the first two features of *qian* in the *Yi jing*, namely the freedom from excessiveness and "downplaying," can also explain very similar attitudes or codes of behavior in the *Dao de jing*, the *Lüshi chunqiu* and the *Xunzi*. This similarity shows that an extended cluster of *qian*-related terms can be established. The cluster of terms is used in a coherent way that enables us to capture the underlying idea, the idea of *qian*. The claim can thus be made that *qian* was valued widely by early Chinese thinkers regardless of whether they have been classified by later scholars as Confucians or Daoists.

Second, the third feature of *qian*, namely its interpersonal nature, can be elaborated in a more detailed manner. More particularly, in the *Dao de jing* and the *Lüshi chunqiu*, the *qian*-related attitudes or codes of behavior are recommended largely to the ruler with respect to how he should treat his subordinates or people. On the other hand, in the "Zhongni" chapter of the *Xunzi*, *qian* is the kind of attitude that a ruler's subordinate, such as a minister, should take toward his ruler. It can be said then that *qian* is required for interactions between superiors and inferiors in sociopolitical rank, and that its relevant attitudes or codes of behavior should be taken *mutually* between them. This elaboration of the interpersonal nature of *qian* enables us to reconstruct the idea of *qian* in a more detailed manner as follows.

78. 功雖甚大, 無伐德之色. See *Xunzi jishi*, 121.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The *qian* person downplays himself relative to the other person in a social interaction by preventing his merits or higher position from being highlighted, despite the fact that he indeed has the merits or occupies the higher position. For instance, even though a *qian* person is appointed to a very high office in the government, such as a minister, by acquiring the trust of a feudal lord and, accordingly, amasses a huge fortune that he has never even dreamed of before, he should always reconfirm his lower political position relative to the ruler. Such a *qian* minister will avoid having his great contributions to the country, such as saving an incompetent ruler from a predicament, draw excessive attention, in a way that makes him look more prominent than the sovereign. In this way, he reaffirms that he is still in a lower political position, despite the fact that he should be assessed higher on a merit-based scale; accordingly, he can downplay himself in his interaction with the ruler. This is the most reasonable interpretation of the aforementioned advice by Xunzi.

On the other hand, the ruler can also be *qian* in interacting with his subordinates and even the common people, by downplaying or even not at all emphasizing his political position, despite the fact that it is the highest in the country. By avoiding any overwhelming attitude, grandeur or awe, for instance, the ruler is more capable of paying attention to the merits of his subordinates and encouraging each of them to show his or her real abilities and talents in ways that better contribute to the country. Moreover, the ruler can thereby more properly recognize and fairly value accomplishments or contributions by his subordinates in a way that avoids always presenting himself as the person in a higher post. Under this political atmosphere, his subordinates will truly revere the ruler as the kind of person who respects them. The irony of this is that it allows the ruler to better maintain his supreme status. This is the most reasonable interpretation of the aforementioned advice by the author of the *Lüshi chunqiu* as well as Laozi. That is, it is what they mean when they suggest that the ruler should downplay himself in order to hold real power over his subordinates and the people.

Interpreted in the above ways, the *qian* person typically does not cast himself in a better light than the other person and, instead, casts the other person in the most complimentary position. In all three texts, one of the two parties in a social interaction can gain a comparative advantage on the basis of one of the following two criteria: sociopolitical status or competence.[79] More particularly, to be *qian*, the incompetent

79. In relation to these two criteria, it is worth paying attention to a particular part of the *Mengzi*, in which Mengzi explains very similar criteria, rank (*jue* 爵) and virtue (*de* 德), along with the third one, age (*chi* 齒). He says, "There are three things which are

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ruler should not cast himself in a better light than the competent minister in such a way that his higher social status unnecessarily affects their interaction; instead, he should cast the minster in the best possible light on the basis of his competence. On the other hand, to be *qian*, the competent minster should still interact with the ruler in a manner that allows the ruler to gain a comparative advantage on the basis of his higher status, no matter how competent the minister himself is. In this way, the minster can avoid being arrogant in the presence of his ruler.

To conclude, I understand the *qian* person to be someone who is disposed not to present himself in a better light than the other person in social interactions but to treat the other person as better by highlighting some aspect of the other person. At this point, it is important to note that this interpretation of *qian* is very compatible with the two features of *qian*, namely, first, keeping oneself from any excessiveness in evaluating one's accomplishment or oneself and, second, downplaying oneself. Moreover, this interpretation enables us to explain systematically why the *qian* person is typically depicted by early Chinese thinkers in terms of these two seemingly incompatible descriptions, simultaneously. The ultimate reason is that one can cast the other person in a better light both by attempting not to overestimate oneself and by downplaying oneself. In other words, both not overestimating oneself and downplaying oneself can serve as effective ways of treating the other person as the better person in one's interactions.

8. The idea of *qian* and its different conceptualizations

Since the texts that serve as the foci of this study span the traditional division between Confucianism and Daoism, one might wonder if the early Confucians and early Daoists shared exactly the same idea.[80]

---

acknowledged by the world to be exalted: rank, age and virtue." Moreover, he points out different sociopolitical domains in which each of the three is viewed more importantly than the other two: "At court, rank is supreme; in the village, age; but for giving help to the world and ruling over the people it is virtue." According to these statements, rank is the criterion for judging who should be more respected in the hierarchical status system where people have power because of their inherited wealth or social position, whereas age is the criterion in the domain of ordinary life where one interacts with relatives, friends, and acquaintances. In addition, Mencius presents the third criterion adopted in the domain of "giving help to the world and ruling over the people." This independent domain is related to the meritocratic social system where people can have power because of their abilities. See *Mengzi yizhu*, 89. The above translation is D. C. Lau's. See his *Mencius* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2003), 83.

80. In the case of the *Lüshi chunqiu*, it has widely been regarded as a repository of thought derived from early Confucians, Mohists, and Daoists. See *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide*, 324.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I answer this question by revisiting the division among terms, ideas, and concepts. In explaining the methodology of this paper in Section 2, I introduced this division with a focus on the difference between terms and ideas. The main point was that in order to approximate the underlying thought that early Chinese thinkers tried to convey in terms of *qian*, our attention should be paid not merely to the term *qian* alone but to a cluster of terms used closely in relation to *qian* throughout different early Chinese texts. As discussed throughout the foregoing sections, this method enables us to capture the idea of *qian* shared among many early Chinese thinkers. It is important to note that this sharing of the idea does not prevent each thinker from developing the same idea further and differently. In other words, the idea of *qian* can be more refined and further conceptualized in line with each thinker's distinctive system of thought. With this possibility in mind, I now focus on the difference between ideas and concepts.

For instance, the Confucians and Daoists further conceptualize the idea of *qian* differently in regard to the justification of *qian*, namely the question of why one should be *qian*. In the *Xunzi* as well as in the *Yi jing*, the reason one should be *qian*—for example, why one should not brag about one's own accomplishments—is that by being so, one can act or live in compliance with the core Confucian values and principles described by *li* 禮. This Confucian justification of *qian* would not be accepted by Laozi. For him, one should adopt and cultivate *qian*-like attitudes or norms of behavior for different reasons. This divergence can be shown immediately by reference to the different understanding of *de* 德 by Laozi. For Laozi, one can attain *de* only when one ceases to follow Confucian values or principles such as *ren* 仁, *yi* 義, and *li*.[81] For this reason, Laozi would not say that one should not brag in order not to violate *li*. Instead, he would say that one should not do so precisely in order to follow the patterns of the Daoist *Dao* 道 (see Section 4), which manifests itself only through the nullification of the Confucian values or principles. Thus, even if the Confucians and Laozi share the idea of *qian*, they still have different concepts of *qian* as a result of offering different justifications of it.

The difference between ideas and concepts can also be understood in parallel with the distinction between "thin" and "thick" descriptions of what someone is doing, which has widely been adopted by

81. For instance, see *Dao de jing*, chapter 38: 故失道而後德, 失德而後仁, 失仁而後義, 失義而後禮 (Thus, after the *Dao* had been lost, *de* appeared; after *de* had been lost, *ren* appeared; after *ren* had been lost, *yi* appeared; after *yi* had been lost, *li* appeared). *Laozi jinzhu jinyi*, 215.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

contemporary philosophers and anthropologists.[82] For instance, suppose that to give malicious amusement to his cronies, a boy parodies another boy who twitched, blinking his right eye. We can give a "thin description" of this boy in terms of rapidly contracting and opening his right eyelid. This description is "thin" in the sense that it can be used equally to describe these two boys, who in fact did different things, namely parodying someone else and twitching. Moreover, it can also be used to describe a third boy who winks in order to give a conspiratorial signal to another friend. In other words, the thin description can be used to depict the eye movements of all three boys who are parodying someone else, twitching, or winking. On the other hand, the very first description of the first boy, namely "parodying another boy twitched, blinking his right eye, in order to give malicious amusement to his cronies," is "thick" or "thicker" than the thin one in that this description contains a detailed account or interpretation of the context in which rapidly contracting and opening the eyelid of one's right eye has a certain implication.[83]

With the above division between "thin" and "thick" in mind, it can be said that the three features of *qian*, *e.g.*, downplaying one's accomplishments or oneself, are adopted to describe *qian* as thinly as possible to the effect that the description can be shared by many early Chinese thinkers, regardless of whether they are Confucian or Daoist, who eventually conceptualized the same idea further and differently in line with their own systems of thought.[84] In other words, the Confucians

---

82. This distinction is first introduced by Gilbert Ryle. See his "Thinking and Reflecting" and "The Thinking of Thoughts: What Is 'Le Penseur' Doing?" in *Collected Papers*, vol. 2 (London: Hutchinson and Company, 1971). Also, this distinction is used by Nussbaum in the context of the cross-cultural comparison of virtues. See n. 7. Recently, Bryan Van Norden pays attention to this distinction in order to explain the legitimacy of his adopting the Western theoretical framework, such as virtue ethics and consequentialism, to analyze early Chinese philosophy. See his *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 15–23.

83. This example of the three boys is Clifford Geertz's. He also borrows this example from Ryle. See Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

84. In this article, I do not explore different conceptualizations of the idea of *qian* in detail. In the above, I only explain one possible theoretical element that makes difference in conceptualization, namely the justification of *qian*. Instead, here, though briefly, I provide another example that can show different concepts based on the same idea. Among such examples is the early Chinese idea of *de* 德, which is widely translated as virtue in English. *De* is understood basically as the inner power that enables one to attract other people. This idea was shared among many early Chinese thinkers, such as Kongzi and Laozi. However, they conceptualize it differently. For Kongzi, *de* is "moral charisma that allows [virtuous political leaders] to attract and

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and Daoists give different thick descriptions of the *qian* or *qian*-like person, for example, in terms of why the person should adopt *qian* in interacting with other people.[85]

9. Concluding Remarks: The Early Chinese Idea of *Qian*

As shown in Sections 3 to 7, the three features of *qian*, which are initially extracted from the passages concerning the *qian* hexagram in the *Yi jing*, can also be found in other early Chinese texts, such as the *Dao de jing*, the *Xunzi*, the *Lüshi chunqiu*, and arguably the *Lunyu*. More particularly, the authors of these early Chinese texts approve of very similar attitudes or codes of behavior, which can be characterized, first, as keeping oneself from any excessiveness in evaluating one's own achievement or oneself, and, second, as downplaying the value of one's own achievement or oneself. This shared approval can be appreciated by approximating the underlying idea, which can be reconstructed on the basis of what I have called a cluster of *qian*-related terms. Moreover, these thinkers similarly believed that the two kinds of attitudes or behavior should be adopted in one's interactions with other people. More specifically, those attitudes or codes of behavior are not just intrapersonal ones, *e.g.*, ones which aim at a proper modest judgment of one's achievement or oneself, but more essentially interpersonal ones that are required

retain the support of others." On the other hand, for Laozi, *de* is the inner power that affects other people in a way that "helps them at ease and enables them to become aware of their inauthentic behavior and attitudes." If this understanding of Kongzi and Laozi is acceptable, it clearly shows different concepts based on the same idea. I borrow the above understanding of the difference between Kongzi and Laozi from Philip J. Ivanhoe's discussion of it. See his "The concept of *de* ('virtue') in the Laozi," in *Religious and Philosophical Aspects of the Laozi*, ed. Mark Csikszentmihalyi and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

85. In addition, it is worth explaining how the study of *qian* in this article differs from Edward Slingerland's study of *wu-wei* 無爲 in his *Effortless Action: Wu-wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Slingerland similarly pays attention to a cluster of terms related to *wu-wei* in order to grasp this early Chinese concept, which he translates as "effortless action." However, the cluster of terms he discusses covers a broad range of ideas, such as *ziran* 自然, *xu* 虛, and *jing* 靜, which I understand as conceptualized differently by different early Chinese thinkers. In this respect, it can be said that Slingerland ultimately seeks to subsume various early Chinese ideas and even concepts under the unifying concept *wu-wei*. In other words, for him, *wu-wei* is a higher-level of concept that unifies various other ideas and concepts under the same spiritual ideal, what he calls effortless action. If this understanding of Slingerland is correct, his study differs from the study of *qian* in this article, in that the latter is less ambitious and focuses on a single idea by paying attention to its relevant linguistic expressions that do not measure up to ideas or concepts.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

for effective and harmonious sociopolitical interactions, such as that between those between superiors and inferiors, more particularly, between an incompetent ruler and his wiser political advisors. On the basis of the above findings, I argue that the idea of *qian* was approved of by many early Chinese thinkers, regardless of whether they conveyed their thought straightforwardly under the name of *qian*.

In this paper, I ultimately define the *qian* person as the kind of person who is disposed not to cast himself in a better light in his social interactions, on the basis of some advantage he enjoys, for example higher sociopolitical rank, but instead casts the other person in a better light by highlighting some aspect of the other, such as his political competence. This definition is supposed to be "thin" to the extent that it can explain how the idea of *qian* was shared by different thinkers who could still conceptualize the same idea distinctively, in line with their different systems of thought.

中國古代思想中的"謙"

金渡鎰

提要

中文裡遜或謙虛在英語中經常譯為"modesty",本文將探討其原型。亦即，本文討論的是中國古代的"謙"。首先會從《易經》中提取其基本特徵，類似的特徵在《道德經》、《荀子》以及《呂氏春秋》等眾多古代文獻中也有所發現。通過文獻比較，本文將重構古代中國"謙"背後的基本想法。藉此，本文視一個"謙"的人具有在各種社會交流中都能使對方以更好面貌得到展現的傾向。本文主張，中國古代思想家普遍擁有如此對於「謙」的理解。

Keywords: *qian*, modesty, *qian xun*, *qian xu*, Early Chinese thought
謙, 謙遜, 謙虛, 中國古代思想

https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press