

**THE ROLE OF CONFUCIANISM IN RELIGIOUS-PHILOSOPHICAL RELATIONS
BETWEEN CHINA AND CENTRAL ASIAN PEOPLES**

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Abstract: This research is dedicated to studying the role and significance of Confucianism in religious-philosophical relations between China and Central Asian peoples from a historical-philosophical perspective. The study provides an in-depth analysis of the origins of Confucianism, its fundamental principles (ren, li, junzi, zhongyong), and its religious-philosophical essence. The mechanisms of the spread of Confucian ideas to Central Asia through the Great Silk Road and the role of cultural centers such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Termiz are examined. Particularly, traces of Confucian and Eastern philosophical influence are identified in the works of Central Asian thinkers—al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Yusuf Khass Hajib's "Kutadgu Bilig." The research demonstrates the interaction of Confucianism with Buddhism and Islam, as well as common and distinct features with Sufism. The significance of Confucian heritage in contemporary China-Central Asia relations is evaluated.

Keywords: Confucianism, Central Asia, Great Silk Road, religious-philosophical relations, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Kutadgu Bilig, Yusuf Khass Hajib, Buddhism, Islam, Sufism, junzi, ren, cultural exchange, Eastern philosophy, China-Central Asia relations, Neo-Confucianism, state governance, ethics, dialogue of civilizations.

The history of world civilizations demonstrates that cultural-philosophical relations among various peoples have held particular significance in the development of human society. Intellectual, religious, and philosophical interactions among diverse peoples of the East and West across Eurasian expanses have made substantial contributions to the formation of the modern world. Specifically, religious-philosophical relations that occurred over millennia between China and Central Asian peoples occupy a unique place in this process. One of the central elements of these relations is undoubtedly the study of the role and influence of Confucian teachings in Central Asia.

Confucianism, which emerged in Ancient China in the 6th-5th centuries BCE, is not merely a national philosophy of the Chinese but a teaching that has become the cultural-spiritual code of all of East Asia. This doctrine, created by Confucius (551-479 BCE), focused on state governance, social relations, ethics, and education, and formed the foundation of Chinese civilization for millennia [1]. Confucianism is distinguished by such principles as the concept of the "noble person" (junzi), family values, respect for parents (xiao), and the importance of rituals and order (li).

Through the Great Silk Road, alongside economic relations between China and Central Asia, a process of philosophical-religious exchange of ideas also took place. Beginning in the 2nd century BCE, as a result of the journey of Chinese envoy and traveler Zhang Qian to Central Asia, direct contacts were established between the two regions. Indeed, when the diplomat and traveler Zhang Qian came to Central Asia in 138 BCE, a bridge of cultural-scientific relations

was created between the countries, uniting Central Asian thinkers with Confucian and Buddhist views.

The ancient Chinese, along with Buddhism, also spread Confucian teachings and Daoist philosophy among the ancient Turanians, while simultaneously becoming acquainted with the ideas of thinkers from Samarkand, Tashkent, and Termiz. As a result of this process, long-lasting cultural-spiritual relations emerged between the Chinese and Central Asian peoples. Notably, the famous scholar, thinker, translator, and monk from Samarkand, Kang Seng-Hui (280s CE), earned great respect from the Chinese, engaged in problems of social philosophy, and endeavored to eliminate existing philosophical contradictions and direct toward human perfection by synthesizing Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism [3].

However, to properly assess the place of Confucianism in Central Asia, it must be emphasized that this teaching exerted considerably less influence compared to other religious-philosophical currents, particularly Buddhism and later Islam. Buddhism's greatest success was associated with its spread to China, where it revitalized existing philosophy, culture, and literature, and also reached Korea and Japan, where its interaction with Daoism and Confucianism helped it take deep root among East Asian peoples.

The spread and acceptance of Confucianism in Central Asia was a complex and multifaceted process. While this teaching mainly arrived through Chinese merchants, travelers, diplomats, and some scholars, it could not exert as broad an influence as Buddhism and local beliefs. The inevitable passage of culture along the Great Silk Road shaped the contemporary beliefs of many well-known religions such as Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Islam, and Judaism. However, Confucianism remained primarily as state ideology in East Asian countries such as China, Korea, and Japan.

With the wide spread of Islam in Central Asia beginning in the 7th century, the religious-philosophical landscape of this region fundamentally changed. Philosophical-ethical teachings like Confucianism occupied a secondary position under conditions of Islam's strong dominance. Central Asia's religious landscape is distinguished by its mosaic nature and diversity, with each Central Asian country possessing its own cultural and historical characteristics rooted in ancient traditions. Nevertheless, even after Islamic culture arrived in Central Asia, cultural and scientific contacts with China did not cease, as the Prophet Muhammad had not prohibited seeking education in China.

The relevance of this research stems precisely from the need to comprehensively study the place and influence of Confucianism in Central Asia. While the role of Buddhism and Islam in analyzing religious-philosophical relations between Chinese and Central Asian peoples has been widely studied, the relatively lesser attention paid to Confucianism makes it a special research topic. This research is directed toward analyzing the position of Confucian teaching in Central Asia within the context of cultural exchanges that occurred through the Great Silk Road, its influence on local philosophical traditions, and possibilities for utilizing this historical heritage within the framework of contemporary China-Central Asia cooperation.

The aim of the research is to scientifically reveal the role and significance of Confucianism in religious-philosophical relations between China and Central Asian peoples from a historical-philosophical perspective. To achieve this goal, the following objectives have been set: to analyze the origins and fundamental principles of Confucianism; to study the mechanisms and pathways of the spread of Confucian ideas to Central Asia through the Great Silk Road; to investigate the interaction and synthesis between Central Asian philosophical traditions and Confucianism; to identify relations between Islamic culture and Confucianism; to assess the significance of Confucian heritage in China-Central Asia cultural cooperation under contemporary conditions.

Confucianism is one of the most ancient and influential philosophical-ethical systems of East Asian culture, and determining its religious and philosophical essence has continued to generate scholarly debates to this day. The Chinese name for Confucianism is "ru jia" (儒家) or "ruxue" (儒學), meaning "school of learned people," and does not refer to the personality of the teaching's founder [4]. This characteristic corresponds to Confucius's own principle of "not creating but transmitting, believing in and loving antiquity."

Confucianism, which emerged in China in the 6th-5th centuries BCE, developed not as based solely on the legacy of one thinker, but as a complex of teachings and doctrines formed on the basis of ancient mythology and ideological evolution. Confucius (551-479 BCE) linked his teaching to the legacy of the semi-legendary ancient "sacred wisdom holders" (sheng) rulers, relying on the most ancient and authoritative works such as "Shu Jing" and "Shi Jing" [5]. This initial orientation toward historical precedent-based normativity and literary style conforming to canons became fundamental characteristics of all Confucianism.

The central principles of Confucianism are key to understanding its religious-philosophical essence. One of the central concepts for Confucianism is "ren" (仁), which can be translated as "humaneness," "humanity," "love of people." This principle can be expressed as follows: "Do not do to others what you would not want done to yourself, and help them achieve what you wish to achieve." Confucius explained this concept to one of his disciples thus: Humaneness is "respect, courtesy, righteousness, wisdom, and kindness."

During Japan's Tokugawa (Edo) period, Confucianism's concept of the "five constants" (wu chang) was consolidated: humaneness (ren, 仁), righteousness (yi, 義), ritual propriety (li, 禮), wisdom (zhi, 智), and trustworthiness (xin, 信). Beyond these concepts, Confucianism also contained other important categories: Dao (道) - the way, truth, method, morality and spirituality; De (德) - the power of virtue, moral justice, humanity, honesty, spiritual strength and dignity; Xiao (孝) - the principle of respecting parents, continuously fulfilling ancestral will [6].

A religious characteristic in Confucian behavior was veneration of the past; for them, the foundations of world order were associated with past prosperous dynasties, particularly the rule of Emperor Shun. Veneration of the past was manifested in respect for ancestors, wherein the question of the afterlife did not particularly concern Confucians. In every Chinese home, tablets inscribed with ancestors' names existed, and on holidays or special ceremonies, paper money was burned before these tablets.

Confucianism is indebted to "Confucius of the Han Dynasty"—Dong Zhongshu, who, utilizing corresponding concepts from Daoism and the Yin-Yang school, elaborated in detail the ontological-cosmological doctrine of Confucianism and gave it certain religious functions necessary for a centralized empire (teachings on "spirit" and "will of Heaven") [8]. Overall, during the Han period (late 3rd century BCE - early 3rd century CE), "Han Confucianism" was created, whose main achievement was systematizing ideas generated by the "golden age" of Chinese philosophy (5th-3rd centuries BCE).

In the first half of the 20th century, particularly in the opposition between the teachings of Feng Youlan and Xiong Shili, a new, fourth form of Confucianism emerged—post-Neo-Confucianism (after early, Han, and Neo-Confucianism)—which combined Neo-Confucian and partially Buddhist categories with European and Indian philosophy. Contemporary Confucians (Mou Zongsan, Tang Junyi, Tu Weiming, and others) see in Confucianism's moral universalism, the moral interpretation of any layer of existence, and Neo-Confucianism's creation of "moral metaphysics" an ideal unity of philosophical and religious thought [9].

Confucianism does not lose its relevance in contemporary society because it preaches universal human values, rejects any manifestation of evil and corruption, cultivates a sense of high social

responsibility in people, and develops high self-demands. Confucianism has an anthropocentric character, and it is precisely this aspect that strongly distinguishes it from the Western value system based on individualism and materialism.

While Western ideology emphasizes the individual and freedom, Confucianism supports the unity of person, family, state, and the entire world, and only through such a path can a person establish their values in society. However, promoting collective spirit does not mean denying a person's right to their personal inner world and spiritual freedom. A person should not become a dishonorable being who merely mechanically fulfills service obligations. The ideal state is achieving balance in the ratio between individual and collective, freedom and cooperation.

Overall, Confucianism's core concepts of humaneness and love of people, loyalty and goodness, and harmony exert great influence on both ancient Chinese society and the social life of contemporary China. They make Chinese culture capacious and assimilative, and serve as a powerful ideological foundation for implementing the "One Country, Two Systems" policy. In contemporary China, Confucianism plays an important role in many aspects of social life.

In 138-126 BCE, Chinese diplomat and traveler Zhang Qian reached Bactria during his journey and saw magnificent horses in the Fergana Valley, an event that laid the foundation for the beginning of regular contacts between China and the West [2]. Based on Zhang Qian's recommendation to the emperor, China monopolized silk production and began exporting it abroad in exchange for magnificent horses, sweet fruits, wine, and other products. This trade exchange subsequently opened the way for large-scale cultural-religious dialogue.

The cultural exchange that occurred along the Great Silk Road was primarily religious in character and was more complex and multi-directional than the Europe-China route. Buddhism spread from India to China through Central Asia, while Christianity and Islam exerted broad influence in the West-to-East direction. The significance of the Great Silk Road lies in the fact that for nearly two thousand years, it became a meeting point for cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and scientific-technical achievements between Eastern and Western civilizations.

Central Asia played a central role in this process. Located with China and India to the east, the European world to the west, the Volga and Siberia to the north, and Persia and Arabia to the south, Central Asia stood at the crossroads of great trade routes and world civilizations and cultures for nearly two millennia. Cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva, Tashkent, Termiz, and Fergana became international trade centers where not only goods but also cultures were exchanged.

Buddhism's greatest success was associated with its spread to China, where it revitalized existing philosophy, culture, and literature, and also reached Korea and Japan. Buddhism's encounter with Daoism and Confucianism helped it take deep root among East Asian peoples. During the Kushan Empire period (1st-3rd centuries CE), Buddhism spread widely in Central Asia, and rulers built monasteries and temples along the Great Silk Road, which were intended for use by representatives of various religions [10]. Information exists about the presence of a monastery in the famous city of Bukhara, which later became a major Central Asian cultural center of Islam.

The Great Silk Road served as a bridge through which political contacts and cultural exchange between East and West were carried out. In China, Western art—music, dance, painting, sculpture, architecture, new scientific knowledge in the fields of astronomy, calendars and medicine, as well as religions such as Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Nestorianism, and Islam—spread. In turn, Europe received textile manufacturing, paper, gunpowder, navigation instruments, porcelain, book printing technologies, as well as Chinese visual arts and the teachings of Confucianism and Daoism through the Great Silk Road.

Merchants, monks, ascetics, and travelers played an important role in the spread of religious ideas. Arabs traveled to India and China, Chinese went to Central Asia, India, and Iran,

Buddhism spread from India through Central Asia to Tibet, China, and Japan. Islamic Sufism spread from Western Asia to Iran, Central Asia, China, and India through teachers and armies. The first wave of Christianity was associated with Nestorian activity, and in the 13th century, a new wave of Christian teaching began with the activity of Catholic missions.

Although the spread of Confucianism through the Great Silk Road exerted relatively less influence, it reached Central Asia as an integral part of Chinese culture. Even after Islamic culture arrived in Central Asia, cultural and scientific contacts with China did not cease, as the Prophet Muhammad had not prohibited seeking education in China. Central Asian thinkers did not forget achievements accumulated over centuries but created new teachings, and Chinese scholars continued to utilize Central Asian achievements. Confucianism and Central Asian Sufism intermingled, becoming a source of new knowledge.

The Great Silk Road, serving as a bridge for political contacts and cultural exchange, ensured organic connections among various European and Asian states. In the Middle Ages, this route helped achieve great accomplishments in the fields of mathematics, physics, astronomy, chemistry, and medicine. Great scholars such as al-Biruni and Ibn Sina lived and created during these empire periods, and Ibn Sina's "Canon of Medicine" became the standard for European medical education until the 17th century [11].

The religious-philosophical significance of the Great Silk Road lies in the fact that it demonstrated a model of peaceful coexistence and mutual enrichment among various religions and philosophical schools. The religious history along the Silk Road presents a remarkable example reflecting a pattern of large-scale synthesis rather than clashes of beliefs and civilizations. Various religious communities interacted, lived together, competed, and influenced one another over a long period. As a result of this process, many new religious-philosophical syntheses emerged, including examples of interfaith harmony such as Chan Buddhism (Zen in Japan).

The spread of Confucian ideas to Central Asia occurred through several pathways. First, Chinese merchants, diplomats, and monks traveling along the Great Silk Road brought with them not only goods but also ideas and knowledge. The contacts established as a result of Zhang Qian's journey in 138-126 BCE opened the way not only for economic but also cultural-philosophical exchange.

Second, some cities in Central Asia, particularly Samarkand, Bukhara, and Termiz, as centers with long-term contacts with Chinese culture, played an important role in the spread of Confucian ideas. In these cities lived scholars and thinkers who studied various religious-philosophical teachings and, along with Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and later Islam, also possessed knowledge about Confucianism.

Third, Confucian ideas also spread indirectly through Buddhist texts translated in China. When Buddhism spread from India to China through Central Asia, it formed unique characteristics in the process of encountering Confucianism and Daoism existing in China. When this transformed Buddhism later returned to Central Asia, traces of Confucian ideas were also present in it.

One of the brightest examples of the reflection of Confucian ideas in Central Asian literature and philosophy is the work "Kutadgu Bilig" ("Knowledge That Brings Happiness"), written in the 11th century. The author of this work, Yusuf Khas Hajib of Balasagun, lived and created in Chinese Turkestan (present-day Xinjiang), and therefore was directly familiar with Chinese culture and philosophy.

Although German researcher Otto Albrecht expressed the view about Ibn Sina's influence on Yusuf Khas Hajib, this view is unfounded for several reasons. First, Ibn Sina has no works directly dedicated to state governance [12]. Second, Ibn Sina died in 1037, and the likelihood

that his works spread in Chinese Turkestan in 1030-1040 is very small. Furthermore, books were very scarce in that period, and there were no rapid means to deliver them to various territories. For this reason, in "Kutadgu Bilig," the influence of al-Farabi and Confucius, not Ibn Sina, is observed on Yusuf Khas Hajib's philosophical views. Al-Farabi's teaching about the "Virtuous City" (al-Madinatu-l-fadila) and Confucius's ideas about state governance, ethics, and social order correspond to the main themes of "Kutadgu Bilig" [13]. Whether Yusuf Khas Hajib knew Chinese is not precisely known, but Confucian ideas had long been spread in territories closely connected with China, and many Chinese works had been translated into Uyghur.

In "Kutadgu Bilig," state governance, the ruler's virtues, officials' obligations, and citizens' duties and responsibilities are extensively covered. Confucius put forward an ideal state structure in which real power belonged to learned people ("ru") who combined characteristics of philosophy, literature, and state service. The same idea is found in "Kutadgu Bilig," where knowledge, wisdom, and justice are emphasized as the ruler's fundamental virtues.

Ibn Sina's works such as "Kitab ash-Shifa" ("The Book of Healing") and "Kitab an-Najat" ("The Book of Salvation") are dedicated to philosophy, logic, physics, mathematics, and metaphysics. Although his ethical and socio-political views are primarily based on Islamic philosophy and Greek philosophy, his ideas on human perfection, knowledge and wisdom, and justice and order in society partially harmonize with Confucian ideas.

Beginning in the 7th century with the wide spread of Islam in Central Asia, the region's religious-philosophical landscape fundamentally changed. Islamic philosophy gained a dominant position, and under these conditions, philosophical-ethical teachings like Confucianism occupied a secondary position. However, this does not mean that Islamic thinkers were completely separated from Confucian ideas.

Several common features exist between Islamic philosophy and Confucianism. Both emphasize ethical perfection, justice and order in society, the importance of knowledge and education, and family values. Likewise, both support a hierarchical social structure and consider the idea of a ruler's just governance important.

Central Asian thinkers, including al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, demonstrated mastery in synthesizing Islamic philosophy with Aristotelian philosophy and other ancient ideas. In this same process, they may have assimilated some elements from Eastern philosophy, including Confucianism and Buddhism, although this influence was not direct and explicit.

For example, al-Farabi's concept of the "virtuous city" and Ibn Sina's views on ideal society were influenced not only by Greek philosophy and Islam but also by the Eastern worldview. Confucianism's idea of achieving order and tranquility in society through knowledge and enlightenment harmonizes with Islamic thinkers' concepts of "hikmat" (wisdom) and "adl" (justice).

Sufism, as the mystical direction of Islam, spread widely in Central Asia and played an important role in this region's spiritual life. Sufis placed great emphasis on inner spiritual perfection, approaching God, and self-cultivation. This approach partially resembles Confucianism's principles of self-cultivation and continuous improvement.

Central Asian Sufis, including Ahmad Yasawi, Baha-ud-Din Naqshband, and others, combined Islam, local traditions, and elements of Eastern philosophy in their teachings. Their ethical teachings, views on human perfection, and ideas of order and justice in society partially harmonize with Confucianism, although we cannot say this harmony occurred directly and consciously.

Traces of Confucian ideas can also be found in Central Asian literature and art, although this influence has often manifested in indirect and complex forms. Beyond "Kutadgu Bilig," issues of

state governance, ethics, justice, and human perfection are also extensively covered in the works of Central Asian writers and poets such as Alisher Navoi, Jami, Lutfi, and others.

In Central Asian architecture and visual arts, a synthesis of Eastern and Western influences is also observed. As a result of cultural exchange carried out along the Great Silk Road, a unique cultural landscape emerged in Central Asia, where various philosophical and religious currents influenced one another and created new syntheses.

In conclusion, the reflection of Confucian ideas in the thinking of Central Asian thinkers was a complex and multifaceted process. This influence occurred not in direct and explicit form but as a result of cultural exchange through the Great Silk Road, synthesis of various philosophical currents, and interaction with local traditions. While traces of Confucianism and al-Farabi's philosophy are clearly observed in works such as "Kutadgu Bilig," the indirect influence of Eastern philosophy, including Confucian elements, is also felt in the works of great thinkers such as al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. Common features between Islamic philosophy and Sufism with Confucianism also deserve attention, although these currents primarily possess their own distinct goals and methods.

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