

Reflections on Confucianism in Four Women Characters in *The Sword and The Brocade*

Anfrida Cathlyn

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University,
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA
Email: a11180044@john.petra.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Chinese dramas, in recent years, have gained popularity in the international market. To be precise, historical dramas have a market that has increased year by year since 2017. This thesis is about Confucian virtues found in four women characters in a historical Chinese drama titled *The Sword and The Brocade*. This television drama intrigues the writer to analyze four women characters Luo Shi Yi Niang, Qiao Lian Fang, Madam Xu, and Xiang Yi Zhen in the story because *The Sword and The Brocade* shows the dynamic relationship between the women characters and the plot is wrapped in historical settings but with modern perspective. This thesis aims to find out how the female characters' actions reflect Confucian virtues and what the impacts of the reflected actions are for them. The analysis is based on Confucianism, focusing on five Confucian virtues: loyalty, filial piety, wisdom, benevolence, and harmony. Moreover, the analysis begins with the women's way to express the Confucian virtues within their actions and then moves to how the actions from reflecting the virtues impacted their life. From expressing loyalty to harmony, Luo Shi Yi Niang, Qiao Lian Fang, Madam Xu, and Xiang Yi Zhen get positive changes in their lives like getting a new status, achieving their goals, making their family proud, and getting positive aftermath from their past actions. The finding is these women prove that women can gain benefits from Confucianism that is known to be patriarchal and these women are the example of how ancient belief can be modernized to suit nowadays' modern issues and the story is suitable for everyone and in every era.

Keywords: Confucianism; confucian virtue; chinese drama; chinese historical drama

INTRODUCTION

Television drama is a part of entertainment that has been roaming around people for years. In Indonesia, television dramas aired on television come from a number of countries, especially Asian countries. Countries like China, Japan, and Korea have a place in people's hearts when it comes to dramas. And, historical Chinese dramas also take part in it. Chinese historical dramas are mostly adapted from Chinese historical fiction. Historical fiction is defined as a story with fictional characters and events in historical settings (Stocker, 2017). Because of their historical setting, historical Chinese dramas play a massive part in addressing and introducing Chinese culture to people outside China. Historical subject-matter includes kungfu (*wuda pian*), reworked legends (*chuanqi*), bio-pics of great leaders, statesmen, and patriots, and tales of power and passion from the dynastical past – usually called Royal Court 'costume' dramas (*guzhuang*) (Keane, 2005,). The other genres occupied the Chinese historical dramas industry are legendary tales, martial arts, historical events, law and justice, and gods and ghosts (Zhu, Y., Keane, M., & Bai, R., 2008).

The popularity of Chinese historical drama is at its peak in the last five years. The starter is during the release of now-most-watched historical *xianxia* drama *Three Lives, Three Worlds: Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms (Eternal Love)* that is aired in 2017 and also historical fiction drama *Princess Agents* which is also released in the same year. After the success of *Eternal Love* and *Princess Agents*, many overseas fans take an interest in historical drama. The next historical drama that managed to hit its peak is *Ashes of Love*, also a historical *xianxia*

drama which was released in the following year. After the successful releases of these two particular dramas, historical dramas gain a place in international fans' hearts. It shows the increasing number of viewers on various online streaming platforms. On YouTube, the official channel of Youku Indonesia gathered around 252 million viewers for various dramas since the channel's launching in 2021. The market of Chinese television dramas has increased in recent years. China has been trying to reach the international market with their drama and the most successful genre is their historical television dramas. Production houses like Tencent Pictures puts out at least five historical drama releases in one year. In 2021, for example, Tencent released thirteen historical dramas in total. The number of releases of historical dramas in one year is the key reason for its demand in the general public. IQIYI, the competitor of Tencent Pictures, has its original series which also include at least one historical drama in the list.

One Chinese historical drama that attracts my attention is *The Sword and The Brocade*, a historical romance drama produced by Tencent Pictures, a subsidiary of Tencent Holdings Ltd. *The Sword and The Brocade* is adapted from a web novel titled *The Concubine-born Daughter's Strategies* by Zhi Zhi. The Director of this drama, Wen De Guang, has directed the popular drama *The Story of Yanxi Palace*, which aired in 2018. He teamed up with Cheng Ting Yu, the screenwriter who wrote popular historical drama scripts like *Princess Silver*, *The Princess Weiyong*, and *The Promise of Chang An* (MyDramaList, 2021). Due to the excellent result of the production, *The Sword and The Brocade* won such outstanding awards as Best Drama of The Year (on the first half of the year), Top 12 Most Popular Dramas by Audiences of the Year on Tencent Golden Goose Awards 2021. These awards are given enough validation that the drama did well in general. The rating accumulated at IMDb at 8.4/10 on IMDb and at 8.2/10 on My Drama List.

The plot is set in the Ming Dynasty around the year 1560-1567 when Emperor Jiajing and then Emperor Longqing reigned. The dynamics shared by the female characters here is what makes me interested to pursue a discussion on them. Each female character has her own impactful ways and goals which for me is quite fascinating to see in a Chinese historical drama. The female characters involved in this study are Luo Shi Yi Niang, Qiao Lian Fang, Madame Xu, and Xiang Yi Zhen. The first character is Luo Shi Yi Niang. With her connection and intelligence, she could open a workshop to support less fortunate women in the capital while also managing household affairs as the matron of the Xu family. The second character is Qiao Lian Fang. She is a strong-willed woman. Her ambition is what makes her stronger. The third character is Madame Xu. She is the dowager of the Xu family. She is the Great Madam of the Xu family and the one who controls the *harem* (a relationship which is between one man and many women) in the family. The last character is Xiang Yi Zhen; she is the second madam of the family. She came from a respectful family, resulting in her being well-educated and well-mannered. Due to her being the Second Madame, her opinion matters to the family. Another factor that intrigues me to analyze *The Sword and the Brocade* is that there is a dynamic in the relationship between each character. This drama not only embodies historical aspects during the Ming dynasty but also gives a glimpse of how people use Confucianism in their daily life, as well applying Confucian virtues through their life. *The Sword and The Brocade* gives a different perspective that women can also take part in public and internal matters.

The story that revolves around issues in a family and the relationship of each character intrigues me more. Therefore, in this study, I want to find out how the female characters' actions reflect Confucian virtues and what the impacts of the reflected actions are for them. The purpose of this study is to show the way the main female characters' actions reflect the Confucian virtues in their lives and the impacts of the actions on themselves from their reflections on the virtues.

To analyze the actions, I use Confucianism as the base by applying the Confucian virtues in the women characters. Confucian values principles and some of the principles that are still relevant until now are loyalty, filial piety, wisdom, benevolence, and harmony. The first value, loyalty, values sacrifices. This value intends to give consideration to a person or group, by preventing harm to them (Gert, 2013). By having loyalty, people have a willingness to go beyond their own capability and to suffer more than the person or group to whom they give their loyalty. The second value, filial piety, refers to a way to offer love and respect within families. It can be from daughters to parents, sons to parents, or the family members to elders in the family (Mack, 2020). Filial Piety is often shown between children and parents, or showing respect to ancestors. The third Confucian value is wisdom. In Confucianism, wisdom refers to the ability to see the good and bad in a situation, to embrace intelligence. The fourth one, harmony, indicates mutual responses. It refers to the existence between different things that form a relationship later (Li, 2006). Moreover, it can be said harmony highlights how different people can coexist because differences gather each other in one situation or simply indicates togetherness is the key. The last Confucian virtue is benevolence. It is the highest value in Confucianism. Confucius said that benevolence has its three main aspects that are loving others, having kind feelings to people, and has the maximum capability to make people feel at ease (Guo et al., 2012). Benevolence can be interpreted as a sense of respecting the dignity of humans towards others as well. By having benevolence, a person can express their kindness to others.

I am going to apply the said Confucian virtues in each of the characters in the analysis, to see how they reflect each virtues in their actions in the drama; and to convince that Confucian virtues can play a role in getting the women some impact on themselves as the result of their expressions on the virtues.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Main Female Characters Reflect Confucian Virtues Through Actions

In *The Sword and The Brocade*, the dynamic between the characters is shown in the storyline. From the relationship in a family, the dynamic between concubines, and friendship. Then, the female characters dominate the drama in their own way. Their way of showing concern, voicing out their worries, and earning a good life are part of the women's issue. *The Sword and The Brocade* also cannot be separated from Confucianism. In the characters, some Confucian virtues are shown. They act according to some of the virtues. The first act is sacrificing themselves for others. This act is showing when the characters are willing to do anything in order to provide a good result for anyone. The second act is having devotion to the family. This is showing the characters' caring nature toward their family and that family is the top priority in their life. The third act is helping the family solve problems from internal and external matters. This act is going to cover the female characters' intelligence to help the family by having a position in the family as a problem solver. The fourth act highlights the kindness that they spread to people around them. Then, the fifth act is going to show the way they maintain a good relationship with people around them.

The first reflection is through expressing their loyalty. First, Shi Yi Niang shows her loyalty toward her long-time teacher, Teacher Jian. Teacher Jian is the owner of Xianling Pavilion, a shop that sells embroidery stuff. In episode 01 from minute 20:04 to minute 20:58, Luo Shi Yi Niang shows her loyalty when Teacher Jian asks her to help manage the pavilion by teaching refugees. By acknowledging the fact that her helping Teacher Jian could harm her in the future if her mother-in-law knows it, she shows that it is okay to give a helping hand. She is willing to give her time and energy to teach embroidery to the refugees at Xianling Pavilion although that means her workload and responsibility will be doubled. She insists on helping and she does not seem to be bothered that her action will harm her because she is helping others.

Luo Shi Yi Niang does not seem afraid nor bothered by the fact that her action might harm her in the future. Her loyalty is shown through her bravery in doing a thing that benefits her teacher but has the possibility to harm Luo Shi Yi Niang's status in her family. The second character that shows a gesture of loyalty is Qiao Lian Fang. It is shown in episode 03, from minute 09:25 to minute 10:28. She is willing to give up her high-ranking status as the legitimate daughter of the influential Qiao family to be Xu Ling Yi's concubine because she loves the Marquis deeply. She actually could get a better position other than a concubine by marrying another man, but all she wants is Xu Ling Yi and she does not mind being his concubine. She is willing to dedicate her entire life to Xu Ling Yi and the Xu family, she is willing to serve the family until the end of her life. Another character that shows a deep loyalty is Xiang Yi Zhen. She shows her loyalty by praying for her husband's soul to have a peaceful rest in heaven. She also makes a bamboo ink painting every time she commemorates her husband's death anniversary because the painting reminds her of her late husband. On his death anniversary, she only wants to pay him some respect by giving what she thinks is valuable on behalf of their shared memories in the past. She is aware that her painting skill is not that good, but her love and commitment to her deceased husband are what make her put some effort into the painting which shows that her loyalty to her husband is so big. Loyalty is a thing that holds an important value in the Ancient Chinese era. Whether it is for family, friends, loved ones, or someone that holds a higher position in society, showing that a person is loyal makes that person has a thing that can be appreciated

The second reflection is through expressing their filial piety. Filial Piety is a virtue that shows one person's respect for their parents. Respect can be implied by taking care of them, showing support, or giving love. Filial piety can also be said as a component to emphasize the intimacy between parents and children (Hwang, 1999, p. 179). The characters that reflect this virtue are Luo Shi Yi Niang and Madam Xu. Luo Shi Yi Niang shows that she is a filial daughter and has a very close relationship with her birth mother by how determined she is to find the truth behind the murder of Concubine Lu. She has a very deep love for her birth mother like the way a daughter loves and respects a mother. The last thing that she can do to her mother is to prove the truth behind the murder. She is so keen on bringing her mom's name to get the right treatment in the murder case as she wants her mom to rest in peace. Luo Shi Yi Niang thinks that her way to prove who the murderer is can ease her mom's soul. The other character is Madam Xu. She leads the family in praying for their ancestors and deceased family members on the death anniversary of the late Marquis and her eldest son Xu Ling An. As the matriarch, she gets the utmost respect in the family and she also has the right to lead an important ceremony such as commemorating the death anniversary of deceased members. The way Madam Xu keeps on reminding the Xu family members to never forget their ancestors indicate that she is dutiful and filial to her elders. As a result, Luo Shi Yi Niang convinces me that the mother and daughter relationship cannot be forgotten and no matter what happens, mother and daughter have a connection that no one can break. Then, Madam Xu is a reminder that no matter what year, paying respect to ancestors is a thing that cannot be forgotten. She embraces her roots as a Chinese and shows how filial she is to the ancestors by leading the ceremony with the entire household members.

The third reflection is through expressing their wisdom. Wisdom is a gesture that shows a human's intelligence. It shows how humans solve problems and are prepared for anything. According to Confucian virtues, wisdom is a virtue that shows how to differentiate good and bad and embrace intelligence in daily life. First, Luo Shi Yi Niang portrays her wisdom in the way she behaves and it is also shown in her characteristic. She uses the knowledge that she got from Teacher Jian to improve her embroidery works and make a living of it. In episode 01 from minute 21:00 to minute 21:20, Luo Shi Yi Niang is shown trying to sell her embroidery through Teacher Jian and the profit will be used by Luo Shi Yi Niang as a savings later. Luo Shi Yi Niang also thinks ahead of time and she does not make the decision impulsively. Next, Qiao Lian Fang shows her wisdom in managing the household affairs. She expresses her opinion

firmly and she is also familiar with the situation in the Xu family. Qiao Lian Fang sets an example to be decisive and clear while giving rewards or punishments, a thing that a matron of a family should have in episode 08 from minute 11:25 to minute 12:05. The other character that shows her wisdom in the drama is Madam Xu. She shows her wisdom in episode 8 when she observes the way Luo Shi Yi Niang, the new legal wife of the Xu family, and Qiao Lian Fang handle a problem regarding a maid who had stolen embroidery fabric given by the Emperor to the family. Madam Xu is also showing her wisdom in the child adoption matter, she raises an opinion to let the child spend more time with the mother candidates to see the bond between them. Not only does she care for the child, but she also thinks about its long-term effect. This shows that she has wisdom in her, to see the best way to a problem and that the way is not placed in between a good or bad side. Another one is Xiang Yi Zhen. She speaks her own opinion with long-term value and also observed one problem's situation very well. She puts what is best for the family. In episode 08, from minute 12:21 to minute 12:29, she shows her wisdom by giving punishments to people who make mistakes. She has fair treatment and has great judgment to overcome a problem. She thinks for the sake of the Xu family, to not let others think bad of the family if the news spreads out. In result, these women use their wisdom in different circumstances: to gain savings, to gain trust from another person, to lead a better solution for an urgent matter, and to be a fair judge in giving punishments.

The fourth reflection is through expressing their benevolence. Benevolence is an act of kindness, to do things based on kindness. According to Hwang (1999), benevolence is a virtue that is related from one person to another person. The first key is by showing affection to those close to us. The first character that shows her benevolence is Luo Shi Yi Niang. She shows that she has benevolence through the way she controls the household of the Xu family. When handling a problem, Luo Shi Yi Niang sees it from a different perspective and she thinks about what is fair enough. She does not go that far to punish someone that creates a mistake and has sympathy and empathy for everyone. The second character is Xiang Yi Zhen. She shows her kindness to children. Xiang Yi Zhen has been longing for a child and she shows her patience and pure love to the kid brought back by his brother-in-law, she shows the pure nature of a mother in front of the child. Her mature state as the Second Madam of the Xu family is also shaping her to be who she is, a woman with patience and high tolerance. Luo Shi Yi Niang and Xiang Yi Zhen prove that having kindness is a great trait and it should not be taken away from one's self.

The fifth reflection is through expressing the virtue of harmony. Harmony refers to how difference can be the key to uniting people, and how it can make the characters have tolerance and understanding toward each other. Luo Shi Yi Niang expresses the importance of having virtue by maintaining harmony through her relationship with her close maids, Dong Qing and Hu Po. In episode 17 from minute 10:43 to minute 10:50, she expresses her way to blend in with her maids by saying things that only three of them understand, like an inside joke between best friends. That shows that Luo Shi Yi Niang cherishes her maids and treats them like friends, the dynamic is not like a boss and her subordinates. Another character that embodies harmony is Madam Xu. She wants a peaceful environment in the family and believes a good family is the one that is together through thick and thin and up and down. She shows that unity can make the whole household support each other and does not try to break apart. Harmony shows how having a 'harmonious' surrounding is important as it brings people's relationships to a deeper level and makes life be more bearable by having people who pull a positive environment in life.

The Aftereffects of the Women's Actions

The first aftereffect is that women can stand on a higher status. The women that get affected are Luo Shi Yi Niang, Qiao Lian Fang, and Xiang Yi Zhen. By expressing wisdom, in episode 45 Luo Shi Yi Niang gains respect due to her great contribution in managing Xianling

Pavilion. Her existence in Xianling Pavilion helps the pavilion a lot. Her loyalty to Teacher Jian and Xianling Pavilion makes her get respected that her choice to stick in embroidery is not a vain decision. Luo Shi Yi Niang's loyalty gets her a spot to make her stand proud of what she has been doing since the start. By expressing benevolence, Xiang Yi Zhen gains a new status as a mother in episode 20. Being a mother seems to be Xiang Yi Zhen's biggest dream since her own child died young, and to finally have one makes her look happy and confident in herself. By adopting a child, she has a pride in herself. Next, in episode 10, by expressing loyalty, Qiao Lian Fang manages to have the right to manage the Xu family's household affairs. In managing the household affairs, her intelligence gets recognized and it boosts up her status in the family as well. Qiao Lian Fang gets respected and appreciated by the maids in the household from managing the affairs. She gets praised and her status also levels up due to her wisdom. She makes herself known from her way in using her wisdom and that is a good thing for her reputation.

The second aftereffect is that women can achieve their goals. By expressing filial piety and wisdom, Luo Shi Yi Niang manages to find out who is the murderer of her mother. Luo Shi Yi Niang shows how strong-willed she is like a daughter to give justice to her dead mother. She fights for it in all the ways that she can think of, and she is willing to go through a dangerous situation to prove it. This trait of her shows how deep her love for her mother is and how hardworking she is as a human. She proves that she is very filial to her birth mother, she loves her mother more than anyone else's and does her best to make her mother rest in peace.

The third aftereffect is that women bring pride to the family. By expressing benevolence and wisdom, Luo Shi Yi Niang gets the reward of making her family proud. She left a good impact as a part of a noble family on her contribution at Xianling Pavilion. Her benevolence affects her to not be so hard on people and to be patient in handling things, and that makes her known for her good deeds. Her wisdom shows how eager she is to stay working at Xianling Pavilion and is proof that she thinks Xianling Pavilion can be successful in the future. Luo Shi Yi Niang is an example that a woman can also give their family a chance to be proud of. She not only makes her family proud, but also gives herself a chance to prove that she is capable of doing things that are beyond women in her era.

The fourth aftereffect is that women get positive results from past actions. By expressing harmony and benevolence, Luo Shi Yi Niang gets a beautiful friendship with her maids. She does not see others from their status, she treats others with fair behavior. She treats her maids like her own sisters. In episode 42, Luo Shi Yi Niang shows a gesture that proves that she treasures her maids a lot. She hugs her maid Hu Po and the hug is tight and strong; not a sight that is common to be seen between a boss and subordinate. The friendship formed by Luo Shi Yi Niang and her maids show that Luo Shi Yi Niang gains a new family despite her status. Next, by expressing harmony, Madam Xu gets what she wants the most and that is the unification and togetherness in the Xu family. She reaches her goal to see her family is away from danger and be there for each other through thick and thin. The principle from Madam Xu is spread in the family and as a result, the other members also set it in mind that family is one of the most important treasures in life. The virtue of harmony shows how important it is in keeping a good relationship with people. The good surroundings can affect life experience and it is good to have a great bond with different kinds of people. It also teaches that having a good bond in a family also matters, because family is an important aspect in life.

The women in *The Sword and The Brocade* show that women can reflect the Confucian virtues in their actions and get positive impacts from the virtues. The virtues make the women get impacts that benefit themselves in the story. From expressing loyalty to harmony, these women get positive changes like having a new status, achieving their goals, making their family proud, and getting positive aftermath from their past actions. *The Sword and The Brocade* wraps

the story and the characters according to Confucianism and majorly mixes the plot with women's perspective that highlights their place in the drama.

CONCLUSION

The Sword and The Brocade plays a huge part in portraying modern issues with ancient settings. In the entertainment industry nowadays, Chinese dramas tend to create stories with a plot that involves women and their contributions. The belief in ancient Chinese limited women to have passion and create positive movement for their own good but in this drama, I see that each character makes a move that still follows Confucian belief to reach their dreams and make impacts. Luo Shi Yi Niang, Qiao Lian Fang, Madam Xu, and Xiang Yi Zhen are examples of how ancient belief can be modernized to something that is suitable for everyone and in every era. They get positive impacts in their lives by applying Confucian virtue, that is, the value of loyalty, filial piety, wisdom, harmony, and benevolence. These values are reflected in their actions and behaviors. Luo Shi Yi Niang gains a new status, gets to find the murderer of her mother, makes her family proud, and gets a family-like bond with her maids. Qiao Lian Fang gets a new status in the family and gets the authority to manage the household affairs. Madam Xu gets the family atmosphere that she has been longing for. Xiang Yi Zhen gets to be a mother that makes her reputation leveled up. They get different impacts and they prove that women can gain benefits from Confucianism that is known to be patriarchal.

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