

## Article

# Analysis of the Ideological Paradigm of Guan Yunshi

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**Abstract:** In the Yuan Dynasty, the writer Guan Yunshi had mixed ideas and was compatible with Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Guan Yunshi's interpretation of filial piety reflects his active engagement with the world and the people-oriented Confucian tradition. Buddhism was popular in the Yuan Dynasty. From Guan Yunshi's understanding of the Diamond Sutra, we can see Guan Yunshi's Buddhist outlook on life. Guan Yunshi's Taoist thought, bound by his resignation, is divided into two periods. Taoism in the early stage was abstract, but after his resignation, Taoism was deepened and applied to his life. The study of the whole Guan Yunshi thought paradigm is helpful for the integration of multi-ethnic literature and culture in the Yuan Dynasty.

**Keywords:** Guan Yunshi; Confucianism; Buddhist thought; Taoism

## 1. Introduction

Guan Yunshi, a Uyghur by ethnicity, hailed from Beiting. Deeply enamored with Han Chinese culture, he adopted the name "Guan Yunshi" (a Sinicized version of his childhood name, "Khoşim Qaya") to better engage with Han scholars and immerse himself in Han learning. Raised by his mother in Dadu (modern Beijing), a hub of Han cultural influence, he developed profound expertise in classical Chinese studies. In his youth, he inherited his father's noble title and served as Darughachi (Mongol overseer) of the Lianghuai Wanhui Office, stationed in Yongzhou, where he distinguished himself as a heroic military commander. With his exceptional personal talents and the prestige of his illustrious family, his future seemed paved with success. Yet contrary to expectations, he had no interest in chasing fame or fortune. Yearning for freedom, he relinquished his position to his younger brother [1]. During Emperor Wuzong's Zhida era (1308–1311), Guan Yunshi returned to Dadu and became a disciple of the eminent scholar Yao Sui, who held him in great esteem. With Yao's recommendation, he rose to high office as a Hanlin Academician and Imperial Advisor (Zhongfeng Dafu). However, disillusioned by the stifling of his ambitions, he resigned at the beginning of the Yuanyou era (1314) and retreated to Hangzhou. There, he wandered freely among rivers and lakes, finding solace in nature. He passed away in the first year of the Taiding era (1324) at the age of 38. Though his life was cut short, Guan Yunshi's impact on Yuan dynasty literature remains profound. The philosophical depth and cultural resonance of his works continue to merit deeper exploration.

## 2. Embodiment of Confucian Thought: Active Engagement in Society

As a literary figure from an ethnic minority, Guan Yunshi's worldview was predominantly shaped by Confucianism — a result of his upbringing and intellectual environment. His mother was the daughter of Lian Ximin, a high-ranking court official and a renowned Confucian scholar who held Han learning in high esteem. Naturally, she was deeply influenced by her father's scholarly pursuits. Similarly, Guan's uncle, Lian Xixian, was also a devoted advocate of Confucian thought. To refine his understanding of Han scholarship, Guan Yunshi studied under his mother's guidance within the Lian family,

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immersing himself in Confucian classics. The Lian estate, with its extensive library and vibrant academic atmosphere, provided an ideal setting for mastering Confucian teachings. Furthermore, Guan frequently interacted with the eminent Confucian scholar Yao Sui, receiving direct mentorship from him. This nurturing environment laid a solid foundation for Guan Yunshi's deep engagement with Confucian philosophy.

### *2.1. Presenting Memorials to Advise the Emperor*

Guan Yunshi's Confucian ideals were first manifested in his memorials to the throne. Through prolonged exposure to Central Plains culture and close interactions with Han Chinese, he became acutely aware of the differences in Mongol customs from his own cultural perspective. After Emperor Renzong ascended the throne, Guan submitted a memorial proposing six key recommendations: "First, reduce military expenditure to cultivate cultural virtue; Fifth, establish dress codes to transform customs; Sixth, promote worthy talents to restore the ultimate Way" [2]. These proposals, formulated after thorough understanding of Yuan dynasty's national conditions, came as timely assistance for the regime. Particularly noteworthy was the fifth recommendation regarding "establishing dress codes to transform customs"-the proposed standard being Han Chinese attire. This reflected the Confucian ideal of Great Harmony (Datong). This concept of universal harmony was not only Confucius' ideal but also Guan Yunshi's aspiration. The sixth recommendation to "promote worthy talents to restore the ultimate Way" carried profound significance. Confucian philosophy emphasizes that governance fundamentally relies on personnel selection. Confucius himself, through examining the successes and failures of three ancient dynasties, recognized the crucial role of human talent in politics, advocating the principle that "the success of governance depends on getting the right people". This involved both the ruler's personal virtue and the importance of selecting capable officials. Guan Yunshi's proposal perfectly aligned with this Confucian tenet, hoping to save the Yuan dynasty through employing worthy talents. Guided by Confucian beliefs, he ultimately sought the nation's prosperity and flourishing.

This Confucian ideology is also reflected in his suite of songs [Shuangdiao-Xinshuil-ing]. "New Year's Day in the Imperial Capital". The first song begins: "Lush vitality fills the realm, celebrating bountiful harvests in peaceful times" and "The Son of Heaven enjoys divine assistance" [2]. Through depicting prosperous scenes of flourishing vegetation and abundant crops, Guan Yunshi expresses both his aspirations for national prosperity and his political ideal of having virtuous ministers assist governance while keeping sycophantic courtiers at bay. The second song extols: "The land is rich, all under heaven rejoice. Loyal talents are benevolent, heroic in both letters and arms. Achievements shake the universe, the military is content, the people dwell in peace" [3]. This presents the author's vision of an ideal state: a wealthy nation enjoying universal peace without war disturbances, where valiant and loyal officials assist the emperor, and disciplined, victorious troops follow their commanders-ultimately creating a stable living environment for common people. The fourth song proclaims: "Sing of heaven-granted longevity, with mutual support among people. Majestic is virtue, as all ministers receive equal grace" [3]. This threefold ideal reflects: firstly, wishes for people's health and longevity; secondly, advocacy of mutual aid and compassion; thirdly, expectation that rulers practice benevolent governance with impartial treatment of all officials [3]. Together, these three ideals artistically embody Guan Yunshi's Confucian political philosophy.

### *2.2. Vernacular Interpretation of the Classic of Filial Piety*

The Confucian tenets of "benevolence and righteousness" (ren yi) formed the core of all classical commentaries on the "Classic of Filial Piety" (Xiaojing). However, traditional annotations were often couched in abstruse classical language, posing comprehension challenges for the Mongol ruling class and Central Asian Semu peoples with limited Chinese literacy. To bridge this gap, Guan Yunshi pioneered his "Vernacular Interpretation

of the Classic of Filial Piety" (Xiaojing Zhijie)-translating sacred texts into colloquial speech supplemented by illustrations, thus democratizing access to profound teachings.

Guan's exegetical approach systematically substituted abstract notions with mundane analogies. His annotations not only preserved original meanings but incorporated personal insights for practical guidance. For instance, Confucius' dictum in Chapter 9 ("Sage Governance"): "Among Heaven and Earth's creations, humans are most noble. No human conduct surpasses filial piety" [4]. Was rendered in Guan's vernacular as: "The Master said: 'Under Heaven, humans are most precious. Life's greatest duty is filial piety'" The emphatic "most" crystallizes the concept of human dignity. This Vernacular Interpretation adopted plebeian perspectives while addressing Yuan societal realities, representing an innovative sinological popularization. Guan didn't merely preach filial ethics but embodied them, as evidenced in his poem Longing for My Parents: "Lush grasses beyond horizons pale before maternal love, what avails my paltry salary against overwhelming grief? Ten years' tear stains on my robe Never match the thread-marks of mother's needlework" [5]. The poignant juxtaposition of "tear stains" and "thread-marks" materializes ineffable filial devotion.

### *2.3. Carrying Forward the Confucian Tradition of People-Centered Governance*

A cornerstone of pre-Qin Confucian philosophy was the doctrine of "people as the foundation of the state" (min ben), which held that the populace constituted a nation's bedrock and played a decisive role in its prosperity. During the Zhida (1308-1311) and Huangqing (1312-1313) reigns of Emperor Wuzong and Emperor Renzong respectively, the capital Dadu and its environs suffered devastating droughts that brought immense suffering to the people. In their desperation, locals often painted dragons on paper to pray for rain. Responding to this crisis, Guan Yunshi composed Ode to the Painted Dragon, envisioning the mythical creature as a deliverer from both drought and flood: "Cracking clouds spill silver river's snow, Coral chalice overflows its measure. Sucking seas to spray as east winds blow, Spring revives all lands beneath dragon's pleasure. Seven drought-scorched years tested Yao's reign, nine floods challenged Shun's agrarian art. Now transform! Bring rains to bless our plain, Enrich Yuan's mountains — quench the land's smart thirst" [5].

Through vivid imagery of mountain torrents, blizzards, and thunderstorms, Guan conjures the awe-inspiring dragon as a symbolic solution to the crisis. While this approach lacked scientific basis and couldn't immediately alleviate the people's plight, Guan's genuine concern for their welfare shines through the verse. The poem stands as a testament to his Confucian conviction that scholars should shoulder responsibility for the people's wellbeing — a tradition he upheld through literary intervention during times of civic distress.

### **3. Buddhist Philosophy Manifested: Transcending the Cycle of Life and Death**

Historical records indicate that during Emperor Renzong's Yanyou period (1314-1320 CE), the renowned Yuan dynasty poet-official Guan Yunshi relinquished his government position to wander through the Jiangnan waterways, ultimately settling as a recluse in the Qiantang region until his death in 1324 (the first year of the Taiping era). Scholars have observed that in Guan's last ten years, his philosophical orientation underwent a profound transformation-the Buddhist concepts of impermanence and Daoist principles of natural harmony progressively supplanted his earlier Confucian convictions, emerging as the dominant framework for both his literary works and personal philosophy during this period.

### 3.1. *The Influence of Social Environment*

The Yuan Dynasty placed great emphasis on Buddhism. Living in such a Buddhist-influenced society, Guan Yunshi was naturally immersed in Buddhist culture. After returning to Jiangnan, he engaged in profound philosophical discussions with the eminent Yuan Buddhist master Zhongfeng Ben, demonstrating his considerable understanding of Buddhist doctrines.

This Buddhist influence is also evident in Guan's surviving works. His poem "Message to a Friend from the Divine Land" reads: "Vast seas carry our distant voices, who does not long for home in their heart? Ten years of friendship — three lifetimes' dream, A thousand miles of world — one inch of heart. Autumn waters gleam on my sword by lamplight, Spring winds strum the zither on my wall. Lately, ashamed my hair still stays black, I'm called 'the young Hanlin' by one and all" [5]. This poem, dedicated to a close friend, expresses Guan's deep nostalgia and enduring camaraderie. Notably, it incorporates the Buddhist allusion of "three lifetimes", referencing the famous "Three-Life Stone" at Huilin Temple in Hangzhou, which symbolizes the unbreakable friendship between the Tang official Li Yuan and the monk Jianru. By invoking this legend, Guan not only conveys his wish for an equally enduring friendship but also reveals his early engagement with Buddhist thought — even during his tenure as a Hanlin academician.

### 3.2. *Understanding and Study of the Diamond Sutra*

The Yuan dynasty's intellectual atmosphere, deeply infused with Buddhist thought, led Guan Yunshi to engage profoundly with the "Diamond Sutra", a core text of Mahayana Buddhism emphasizing the illusory nature of reality. This influence permeates his later works, revealing his grasp of Buddhist concepts like "illusory bubbles" and "transcending life and death".

#### 3.2.1. *Contentment — A Zen Epiphany*

Incense burned, floor swept, half-door closed, A few idle books rolled in hand. Seeing through this body — a fleeting bubble. All thoughts of fame and rank abandoned — Never again watching fools risk their necks on high poles [5].

This lyric depicts Guan's tranquil life in Hangzhou: after his daily rituals (burning incense, sweeping), he contemplates Buddhist texts. The phrase "seeing through this body — a fleeting bubble" directly echoes the Diamond Sutra's teaching that all phenomena are "like dreams, illusions, bubbles, and shadows". His rejection of worldly strife ("fools risk their necks on high poles") mirrors the sutra's warning against attachment to transient pursuits.

#### 3.2.2. *Farewell Poem — Enlightenment at Death's Door*

"Flowers in caves, hidden grass — forty years of bonds I veiled, today, no trace of life or death remains — Just the moon over sea and sky, perfectly round" [5]. Composed on his deathbed, this poem distills Guan's Buddhist realization: "No trace of life or death" reflects the Diamond Sutra's core tenet: "All conditioned phenomena are like dreams; relinquish attachment to self." "The moon, perfectly round" symbolizes the luminous, unconditioned mind — undivided by dualities like life/death or gain/loss.

## 4. *Conclusion of the Daoist Philosophy of Unconstrained Harmony*

As the founding sage of Daoism, Laozi advocated for "natural non-action". The concept of "unconstrained harmony" first appeared in Zhuangzi's *Free and Easy Wandering*: "If you have a giant tree but lament its uselessness, why not plant it in the realm of nothingness, in the vast wilds? There, you may wander freely by its side or rest contentedly beneath its shade." Cheng Xuanying's commentary elaborates: "'Wandering' denotes unrestrained movement; 'unconstrained harmony' signifies self-fulfillment — different terms expressing the same truth. This useless tree, with its lush foliage casting cooling

shadows, becomes a sanctuary where travelers pause and repose. Similarly, Zhuangzi's teachings on effortless emptiness allow one to wander freely in harmony with nature, offering shade to all living beings". The fusion of Laozi's principle of natural non-action with Zhuangzi's ideal of unconstrained harmony epitomizes the essence of Daoist philosophy.

#### *4.1. Before Resigning from Office and Retiring to Seclusion*

Guan Yunshi's Daoist thought can be divided into two periods, with his resignation and seclusion as the boundary. His early Daoist ideas can be seen in five fan-inscription poems he wrote for friends. The first poem reads: "The red rising sun emerges like lead from the sea; the misty smoke veils the tiny Penglai". Penglai, the fabled immortal island, is the birthplace of Taoist myths and legends. The mist-shrouded wonderland of Penglai captivated the poet. The second poem states: "The east wind cuts off the heat of the mortal world, luring coolness to nourish the Daoist heart". Here, the poet suggests that all people in the world harbor a heart for cultivating the Dao — and naturally, he includes himself among them. The fourth poem writes: "Having achieved merit, there is no need to take cinnabar; I laugh and point to the clouds and mists as my eternal home. At dawn, the mountains are always home; the Daoist's spirit resembles the plum blossom". In this poem, the poet uses the plum blossom as a metaphor for the Daoist, reflecting his sincere yearning and admiration for Daoism. From these poems, we can see that the poet merely held reverence for Daoist thought, keeping it within his heart.

#### *4.2. After Resigning from Office and Retiring to Seclusion*

It was only after resigning from his official position and retreating into seclusion that Guan Yunshi truly put Daoist philosophy into practice, marking a significant evolution in his spiritual journey. As previously discussed, the essence of Daoist thought lies in care-free harmony (xiaoyao), detachment from fame and gain, and non-contention with the world — all of which are vividly reflected in Guan's later works. For instance: "Discarding petty fame, my heart is light — Laughing once, beyond the white clouds." "Chasing rank is like a cart careening downhill — Who can fathom its perils? Yesterday, a jade-hall minister; Today, ruined by calamity. Better to flee the storm, and take refuge in my nest of peace." "Seeing through this illusory bubble of a body. Severing all thoughts of glory — No more watching fools tempt fate on high poles". These verses reveal Guan's worldview: life is but a dream, and the pursuit of fame only invites disaster — momentary triumph inevitably gives way to ruin. True contentment, he believed, comes from tranquility of mind and freedom from desire. Turning his back on worldly splendor and official ambition, Guan embraced a simple life of straw robes, rustic studies, and thatched cottages. He wandered freely amid green mountains and clear waters, unburdened by attachment — a living embodiment of Daoist liberation.

From Guan Yunshi's extant works, we can discern his profound familiarity with the "Zhuangzi". Take his poem "Inscription on Taiping Temple at Mount Lu": "Mountain breeze above, worldly dust below, Green sand and shallow streams whisper of spring. Who taps the moon beyond the pines? Startling the dreamer of Nanhua awake". Or consider his lyric "Recluse's Life" from the suite "Village Drums": "Ah! See these cloud-crowned peaks — Peaks like painted scrolls, scenes truly worthy of praise. Where do the remnant hills lead? Heart free of clinging, Beneath the forest canopy, A coconut ladle hangs high. In this chill serenity, I chant 'Nanhua' — Here, the cosmos is vast!". In these works, he repeatedly references the Nanhua Jing, an alternate title for the Zhuangzi. Allusions like "Zhuangzi's butterfly dream" and "forgetting both self and things" — core concepts from the Zhuangzi — are woven seamlessly into his poetry, demonstrating his deep internalization of Daoist philosophy. This is further evidenced in the fifth, sixth, and seventh pieces of his lyric suite "Clear River Lyrics", where such ideas are fully realized. V, on a narrow cane bed, soft and slouching, with a pillow of sweet chrysanthemums, the peach-bamboo mat is wonderfully cool. White pomegranate flowers bloom fresh, red

plum branches cast their shade, at dusk, I sleep alone by the small study window. VI, why strive for such trivial fame and fortune? It's a waste of energy. A cup of clear wind and lotus leaves, A quilt of bright moon and reed catkins — In the quiet of heaven and earth, my heart is as calm as water. VII, leaning on a rush cushion, I read books of past and present, and compose new poems in response. Brewing a strong cup of phoenix-marrow tea, carefully slicing lamb's head meat — I play the master of wind and moon over lakes and rivers.

These three lyrics vividly express the poet's contentment with his reclusive life. During his seclusion, he often visited Sanyi An (Trinity Hut) to escape the summer heat — a site where the renowned Southern Song Daoist master Bai Yuchan once cultivated his practice. There, Guan composed the poem "Sanyi An": "A thatched hut, rustling amid water and stones, where I roam free, facing woods and peaks all day. Waking from dreams, I barely notice cinnabar by the steps; Finishing verses, I find myself leaning on the rails. At night, the mortar pounds mica in haste; By autumn, the stone vial gushes cold spring-water. Even fish delight in carefree joy — Why scheme with hook and line?". With a Daoist attitude of non-contention, Guan wandered mountains and forests in leisurely bliss.

To sum up, Guan Yunshi's Daoist thought in his early period remained largely as an abstract idea, without being put into practice. However, after resigning from office and returning to seclusion due to illness, this thought of his not only deepened but also guided his actions. He applied this philosophy to his daily life, truly living a life of carefree contentment.

In the early Tang Dynasty, under the reform of Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch of Buddhism, China's first Buddhist classic, the Platform Sutra, came into being. Since then, the sinicization of Buddhism was completed. Buddhist thought has also merged with the blood of the Chinese people, standing alongside Confucianism and Taoism as the three pillars, and has become part of many Chinese ideologies. After the early Tang Dynasty, the works of ancient Chinese literati more or less contained these three ideologies. Guan Yunshi, as an ethnic minority litterateur in the Yuan Dynasty, was naturally influenced by these three ideologies. This paper holds that the ideological connotations in Guan Yunshi's works mainly include the Confucian thought of actively engaging in the world, the Buddhist thought of seeing through life and death, and the Taoist thought of being free and comfortable. These three ideologies accompanied the short yet fulfilling life of this great litterateur. As an ethnic minority litterateur, Guan Yunshi's application and expression of these three ideologies, to a certain extent, reflect the frequent exchanges between the people of the Yuan Dynasty and the Han people, the degree of acceptance of Han culture by the people of the Yuan Dynasty, and the historical landscape of the integration of multi-ethnic and pluralistic cultures in Yuan Dynasty literature. It also reflects Guan Yunshi's love for Han culture. Therefore, the study of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism contained in the works of non-Han writers in the Yuan Dynasty is of profound significance and value for deepening our understanding of the integration of multi-ethnic cultures and the characteristics of the pluralistic cultural era in the Yuan Dynasty, and is worthy of in-depth exploration.

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