



Yuan (緣)

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What is it?

Yuan began as Buddhist concept: for a cause to produce an effect, conditioning factors or secondary causes—*yuan*—must facilitate their occurrence. In the world of dependent origination, no phenomenon will be able to manifest without *yuan*. *Yuan* then transformed into a Chinese folk concept through a set of elaborate linguistic expressions describing how associations are formed, as well as their quality and content, such as *youyuan* (having *yuan* [有緣]), *wuyuan* (having no *yuan* [無緣]), *touyuan* (match *yuan* [投緣]); and *xiyuan* (cherish *yuan* [惜緣]). Every instance of interconnectedness among all beings is seen as facilitated through myriad conditioning factors and must be conceived as a manifestation of *yuan*. *Yuan* instills in Chinese the belief that relationships do not come easily and that any phenomenon can only be transitory, thus adding an extra layer of passion to cherish union and the sense of helplessness when an encounter dissipates.

Who uses the concept?

Yuan has rarely appeared in academic literature as yet, but holds a place in the hearts of many Chinese, both as a convenient validation for encountering one another and an attitude toward life. The popularity of using *yuan* to describe relationships can be observed in modern-day websites devoted to matchmaking in various Chinese societies. As a concept originating in India, similar terms appear in other East Asian countries.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

Yuan can be said to be the foundation upon which people connect, and hence has a perfect fit with intercultural dialogue. Although *yuan*'s elaborated

linguistic expressions are in Chinese (and other Eastern Asian) languages, similar sentiments, that human encounters are precious and miraculous in a way that goes beyond the power of words to describe, remain intuitive and universal, transcending cultural or linguistic boundaries. *Yuan* can also provide an alternative account in facilitating intercultural dialogue beyond a primary focus on differences.

What work remains?

Compared to other popular Chinese folk concepts such as *guanxi* [關係] and *mianzi* [面子], *yuan* remains less studied, especially in English literature. Current analysis tends to endorse Western cultural value judgments, treating *yuan* as a fatalistic construct in need of transformation, as *yuan* is used to describe conditioning factors beyond immediate human comprehension. *Yuan* remains to be studied as an indigenous concept with its meanings continuing to be contested and performed by individuals, and we must remain open to the possible contours *yuan* may take to exert its impact.

Resources

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