

The Life Wisdom of Chinese Traditional Filial Piety

HAO Haiyan

Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China

Filial piety is not only the core concept of Confucianism, but also an important category of Mohism, Legalism, Taoism and Buddhism. To analyze the essence of Chinese traditional filial piety, we should explore it from the vast classical works of hundreds of schools of thought, and also from the long-term practice of social life of all nationalities and folk culture. I think that although the content of "filial piety" is constantly changing with the times, the wisdom of life contained therein, especially the dialectical thinking of thinking and dealing with filial piety, is the essence of the most universal and lasting value.

Keywords: Life Wisdom, China, Filial Piety

The Essence of “Filial Piety” Is “Serving Parents”, Which Emphasizes “Material Support” and “Spiritual Respect”

The original meaning of “filial piety” is “taking good care of parents”. To serve parents, children are supposed to not only attend to parents’ “physical needs” but also “spiritual demands”. In *Book of Filial Piety—Filial Piety Deeds*, it is said: “When serving parents, filial children should support and take care of parents with great respect and pleasant countenance.” In *Lv’s Commentaries of History—Filial Piety*, it is said: “To practice filial piety, children should support parents with good housing conditions and nutritious food, entertain them with melodious music, and serve them in respectful and pleasant manner.” “If children can fulfill all these demands, they are believed to have taken good care of their parents.” Ziyou asked Confucius about “filial piety”, and Confucius said: “Today, people think that it is filial piety to provide parents with housing and food. We can also shelter and feed dogs and horses. Without respect, what is the difference?” (*Confucius Analects—Government*). Zeng Shen said: “In serving parents, filial children should manage to make parents happy, not violate parents’ will, and provide parents with good entertainment, housing and food” (*Zengzi—Great Filial Piety*).

The rationality of traditional filial piety is mainly reflected in the following aspects.

Serve Parents With Every Effort as Well as in a Pragmatic Way

First, serve parents true-heartedly. In *Salt and Iron—Filial Support*, it is stated, “Being filial, what matters is what you really do rather than what you look like; Providing parents a safe life depends on your prudence rather than talking nonsense.” “Ritual is not imaginary. Ritual with substance is real propriety. Ungenerous support with plenty of ritual is worse than generous support with inadequate ritual.” “Dishonesty is ...one of the gravest unfilialness.” Mozi noted, “Filial piety is to benefit parents.” Mencius said,

there are five so called common unfilial acts: first, be lazy, leaving parents without provision; second, gambling and alcohol abuse, leaving parents without provision; third, be miserly and be partial to wife and children, leaving parents without provision; fourth, indulge in sensual pleasures, bringing disgrace on parents; be aggressive with reckless bravado, placing parents in danger. (*Mencius—Louli II*)

Second, practice filial piety with every effort and within one's capability. Zhong You was poor, unable to provide for his parents with good food and drink, or offer them decent funerals, but he had done his best to practice filial piety to his parents. So Confucius still commended him and said, “Zhong You practiced filial piety, doing his best when his parents were alive and often missing them when they passed away” (*The Family Sayings of Confucius—Encouragements to Reflection*). In *Salt and Iron—Filial Support*, Heng Kuan said,

A filial son does not have to provide parents with meat every day or silk clothes to wear. It is fulfillment of filial piety to do your best to serve your parents within your capability. So as long as you are diligent, even you can only provide your parents with simple diet, you can be a filial son. (*Salt and Iron—Filial Support*)

Zhu Xi said,

People's love for parents and desire to practice filial piety can be boundless, but actual ability is limited. It is unfilial not to do things you should do. It is also unfilial to do the things you should not do. What is ‘acting in accordance with ritual’ is actually accomplishing thing you should do. (*Variorum to Confucius Analects*)

Lin Jun, the minister of justice of Ming Dynasty, pointed out in *Lin Family Precept*:

No matter poor or rich, providing for parents is the first priority to be filial. The rich can provide their parents with expensive delicacies and the poor with simple diet. All of them practice filial piety in their own ways based on respective capabilities. (p.76)¹

In *Qing Dynasty History—Filiality Biography*, there are records of some disable filial children who did their best to provide for their parents and fulfill filial piety despite of their disabilities.

It Is Not Filial to Provide for Parents in Immoral Way

Traditional filial piety emphasizes “righteous provision”, requiring that providing for parents not be against morality. “It is not filial to offer parents an affluent life in unrighteous or immoral way” (*Salt and Iron—Filial Support* 25). In *History of Later Han Dynasty—Liu Zhao Chun Yu Jiang Biography*, it is explained:

We cannot play music without instruments, while instruments are not the core of music; we provide our parents with meat to practice filial piety, while meat is not the core of filial piety. Keep the instruments but forget the core, we will lose the music; play the instrument to rhythm, music will be created. It is a burden to filial piety if you gain wealth in immoral way to provide for your parents; it is a blessing to filial piety if you gain wealth in righteous way to provide for your parents. (*History of Later Han Dynasty—Liu Zhao Chun Yu Jiang Biography*)

Zhong You provided for his parents in a righteous way, thus the pluses and water are more delicious than meat. If you think the food you provide for your parents is too humble and pursue wealth in unrighteous way, it is bringing shame on parents rather than being filial. Accumulate wealth in moral way and practice filial piety sincerely, that is righteous support. In *Mother Tao Criticizes Her Son and Returns the Kipper*, it is said:

¹ Lianjiang Donglin Clan Pedigree Records Committee (2005). *Lianjiang Donglin Clan Pedigree Records*. Fuzhou: Fujian People's Publishing House.

Sir Tao used to be the official in charge of fishing industry when he was young. He asked his subordinate to send a jar of kipper to his mother. The mother returned the kipper and sent Tao a letter saying: "As a government official, you serve me with public property, which just worries me rather than benefitting me." (*A New Account of World Tales*)

Tian Jizi, prime minister of state Qi, took bribes from his subordinates and sent the gold to his mother. The mother said: "You have been the prime minister for 3 years, but the sum of your salary is not as much as this. Did you get the money in a decent and virtuous way? How can I keep the money?" Tian replied: "I took it from my subordinates. The mother said:

I heard that a superior man should cultivate his morality and do things in decent and upright way. Never think about the unrighteous matters. Never take the filthy lucre. Practice what you preach. Now the king makes you the prime minister and offers you high government pay. You are supposed to work hard to repay the king's trust. As an official in court, you are supposed to be loyal to the king like you should be filial to your father, as a son. Be honest, dutiful, devoted, upright and clean. Only in this way can you save yourself from trouble. Today you did the opposite, far away from allegiance. A disloyal official is as much as an unfilial son. The ill-gotten treasure is not yours. The unfilial son is not my son. ([Han Dynasty] Liu Xiang, *Biography of Exemplary Women—Mothers—Tain Ji's Mother of Qi State*)

Tian Jizi was ashamed and exited from his mother's room. He returned the gold and admitted his guilt to King Xuan for punishment. King Xuan knew it, regarded the righteousness of Tian's mother highly, pardoned Jizi, resumed his position as prime minister, and awarded his mother with government funds ([Han Dynasty] Liu Xiang, *Biography of Exemplary Women—Mothers—Tain Ji's Mother of Qi State*).

The Essence of "Filial Piety" Is "Respect and Love"

First, "respect" is the essential characteristic of filial piety. Shan Juli asked Zengzi: "Is there a way of serving parents?" Zengzi said: "Yes, love and respect" (*DaDai Book of Rites—Zengzi Serving Parents*). In *Filial Piety Ji*, Lv Weiqi of Ming Dynasty said: "Love and respect is the essential meaning of filial piety. Love without respect is incomplete; respect without love is insincere. Both are indispensable...thus there is no secret of filial piety, just love and respect." "The utmost filial piety is respecting parents" (*Mencius—Wangzhang I*). "There is no difference between providing for parents without respect and feeding dogs and horses." (Sima, 1999, p. 102).

Second, support without respect is not "filial piety". Zilu asked Confucius: "Some people work quite hard to provide for their parents but gain no fame of filial piety. Why?" Confucius asked in return: "Do they serve parents with respect? Do they talk with parents politely? Do they live with parents in a mild and pleasant way?" The act of "respect" must conform to "propriety". "Practicing filial piety to parents does not only mean providing delicacies but also treating parents in mild and pleasant way and acting according to parents' will and propriety" (*Salt and Iron—Filial Support*).

Third, love is the basis of respect. Li longji, the emperor of Tang Dynasty, said in *Annotations on the Book of Filial Piety*: "Love comes before respect." "Both love and respect come from heart." "Great filial piety is respecting and admiring parents for a whole life." In the *Book of Rites—Worship*, it is stated: "Filial children with true and great love for parents will definitely treat them in a gentle and pleasant way." In *DaDai Book of Rites—Zengzi*, it is stated: "A superior man practices filial piety based on love and respect." Zeng Guofan said: "If one can treat parents in the way one loves his wife and children, he can definitely practice filial piety well" (*Zeng Guofan's Family Letters*).

Spiritual Provision Is Superior to Material Provision

On one hand, “it is a great filial piety to provide parents with both material and spiritual support.” (Zhang, 2006, p. 233). Meanwhile, spiritual support is more important. In the *Book of Rites—Worship*, it is stated: “There are three levels of filial piety: the top one is to respect parents, second is not to insult parents and the third is to provide for parents.” In *Salt and Iron—Filial Support*, it is stated:

The best filial piety is to follow parents’ wishes; the second is to treat parents in a pleasant manner; the third is to provide for parents with material support. Ritual is superior to simple provision. If you can make your parents happy with ritual and gentle care, even the material provision is humble, it is filial piety. (*Salt and Iron—Filial Support*)

Lv Kun of Ming Dynasty said:

In serving parents, the best is to make them happy and satisfy their spiritual demands; second is to meet their physical needs; the worst is to only provide material support without spiritual care. And the most notorious is to provide parents nothing but empty words. (Lv, 2013, p. 4)

Queen Ren Xiao Wen of Ming Dynasty said: “The essence of serving parents is to be filial and respectful. Support is not difficult, respect is. It is filial piety to provide for parents with food and clothing, which is the lowest level” (1993). The emperor Kang Xi of Qing Dynasty said: “Ordinary people practice filial piety, if they would like to make parent happy, the most important thing is not to provide food and clothing. Do things with kindness and morality to make your parents proud of you, which is the true filial piety” (1986, p. 620). According to Buddhism, filial piety is distinguished into three levels, which are minor filial piety, medium filial piety, and great filial piety. Minor filial piety is to provide for parents with food and clothing, to obey and respect parents, which is earthly defined as “filial support” and “filial respect”; medium filial piety is to do good deeds to honor your family and parents; great filial piety is to enlighten parents with Buddhism, help them to start spiritual practice to achieve supreme wisdom and ultimate liberty. Buddhism takes “Tao” as the way to pay for parents’ raise and cultivation, requiring realizing the great filial piety to parents through spiritual salvation.

Filial Piety Means Being Obedient to Parents as Well as Giving Them Advice, With Righteousness as the Top Principle

The Key of Obedience to Parents

Filial piety suggests children being obedient to their parents. Mencius said: “It is necessary for a son to obey parents” (*Mencius—Lou Li I*). What is obedience to parents?

First, obey parents’ instructions. Children are supposed to “give an immediate reply to parents’ call, take a quick action as parents require, listen to parents’ teaching with respect and accept parents’ criticism readily” (*Guidelines for Children*).

Second, share parents’ likings and try to realize their wishes. To be filial, children should observe parents’ thoughts and “share parents’ sorrow and joy” (*DaDai Book of Rites—Obedience to Parents*). “Love what parents love and respect what parents respect” (*Book of Rites—Family Principles*). “Children dare not kill the one that parents gave life to; children dare not discard what parents created; children dare not damage what parents protect” (*Lv’s Commentaries of History—Filial Practices*). “If parents are philanthropic, children should not be stingy with money. Participate in parents’ charity deeds and share their joys of being generous” (*Advices on Filial Practices in Family*).

Third, carry on with parents' ambitions. "Filial children should carry on with parents' ambitions and complete their unfinished undertakings" (*Doctrine of the Mean*). "Filial piety is to make parents happy and fulfill their wishes" (*Book of Rites—Family Principles*). "While a man's father is alive, look at the bent of his will; when his father is dead, look at his conduct. If for three years he does not alter from the way of his father, he may be called filial" (*Analects of Confucius—XueEr*).

Filial Piety Is Not Blind Obedience to Parents

Filial piety has to be based on conformity to righteousness and morality. "Filial piety is compliance, which means to comply with way and ethics" (*Book of Rites—Sacrifice*). "A son should love and respect his father. But if the father is wrong, the son should not obey" (*Lv's Commentaries of History—Yingtong*). It is a good quality to be filial to parents and love siblings; it is a much better quality to respect superiors and care for subordinates; it is the greatest quality to place righteousness and morality above orders of prince and parents (*Xunzi—Way of Being a Son*). There are three conditions under which a filial son should not obey his parents: if he obeys his parents' order, the parents will be in danger and if he disobeys his parents' order, the parents will be safe, this kind of disobedience is loyalty; if he obeys his parents' order, the parents will be affronted and if he disobeys his parents' order, the parents will be honored, this kind of disobedience is righteousness; if he obeys his parents' order, the parents will be as rude as animals and if he disobeys his parents' order, the parents will be decent and polite, this kind of disobedience is respect. Therefore, it is unfilial for a man to disobey his parents when they are right; it is disloyal for a man to obey his parents when they are wrong. It is great filial piety for a man to understand the principle of obedience and disobedience and to carry out it with respect, loyalty, integrity, and cautiousness (*Xunzi—Way of Being a Son*). Obey father's order without considering whether it is for good or for evil, how can we call it filial piety? (Zheng Xuan, *Notes on Book of Filial Piety*).

Filial Children Are Obligated to Remonstrate With Parents About Improper Conduct

When children discover parents' improper conducts, they are obliged to tell parents what is right and wrong and advise them against unrighteousness.

To remonstrate is to avoid fault. It is rebellious for a man to disobey parents' right order. While it is to leave parents in evil if a man obeys parents' wrong order. In this condition, if a man does not remonstrate with his parents, he is treating them as strangers. Therefore, children have to argue against parents' unrighteous actions. (Sima, 1995, p. 85).

"A father with a son who gives admonition has a narrow chance to be unrighteous. It is not filial piety for a man to obey his father's unrighteous order rather than advise against, is it?" (Emperor Li, 2000, pp. 56-57). It is a blessing for a father to have a son who can give faithful admonition ([Ming Dynasty] Cao Duan, *Explanatory Notes on Book of Filial Piety*).

Compared with providing for parents with delicate food and fine clothes, it is even considered as greater filial piety to tell parents Tao and help them get to know right and wrong; Compared with searching for good medication for parents, it is even considered as greater filial piety to advise parents to do the right thing with pleasant countenance and soft voice. (p. 288)

There are three gravest unfilial practices, among which the first is to "obey parents without rational questions and fail to keep parents from unrighteousness" (*Xunzi—Way of Being a Son*). If parents have improper actions, it is critical unfilial for children to ignore parents' faults and continue to be obedient. If parents have been

committing serious mistake, children are obliged to make amends in proper way and rescue parents from being immoral. (Liu, p. 1427)

Remonstrate With Parents in Proper Way

If parents have been doing something wrong, children are obliged to remonstrate in humble and gentle way. If parents reject the remonstration, children should be filial and respect parents as much as before. When parents are in good mood, remonstrate once again. This may offend parents, but compared with letting parents continue with the behavior annoying neighbors and fellow villagers, it is a better choice. If parents become angry and beat children badly, the children should be filial and respect parents as much as before instead of resenting them. (*Book of Rites—Family Principles*)

“If children remonstrate with parents for many times but failed, they can only cry and leave it alone” (Wang, 2009, p. 263).

In serving parents, a son may remonstrate with them, but gently; when he sees that they do not incline to follow his advice, he shows an increased degree of reverence, but does not abandon his purpose; and should they punish him, he does not allow himself to murmur.

Generally speaking, children should “ignore parents’ minor flaws to avoid confronting parents” (*Book of Rites—Tan Gong*). And Kong Yingda further explains that: “If parents commit ordinary mistakes, children should not confront parents. If parents commit evil deeds, children should confront and remonstrate with them.”

The wisdom of practicing filial piety lies in sizing up the situation, grasping the timing of “compliance” & “remonstration”, “obedience” & “disobedience”, “advising mildly” & “confronting seriously” and the degree of these opposites of unity.

If parents love child, the child should be happy about it but not preen; if parents dislike child, the child should be worried about it but not complain; if parents make mistakes, the child should remonstrate but not in disrespectful way. (*DaDai Book of Rites—Zengzi’s Great Filial Piety*)

If parents’ behavior is up to principles and moralities, follow them. If parents’ behavior is against principles and moralities, remonstrate with them. If parents reject, the mistake parents make is just like the one you make. It is unfilial not to remonstrate; it is also unfilial to remonstrate in a rebellious way. A filial son should remonstrate with parents by reasoning things out rather than arguing fiercely. Arguing fiercely is a kind of disobedience and rebellion. If remonstrate with parents for the purpose of avoiding mistakes, the family will be safe and peaceful. If remonstrate with parents for the purpose of showing off superiority, it is unfilial rebellion. (*DaDai Book of Rites—Zengzi Serving Parents*)

“Obey parents’ order with pleasure, advise and remonstrate with parents in mild and patient way, share parents’ worries without complaints, it can be called filial piety” (*Book of Rites—Fangji*).

Filial Piety Is Practiced Through Rituals, Both Respectful Support and Worship Important

Filial piety, in a sense, is to follow rituals, supporting parents with rituals when they are alive and worship them with rituals when they are dead. “A superior man provides for his parents with respect when they are alive, worship parents with respect when they are dead, making parents away from disgrace for the whole life” (*Book of Rites—Worship*). “Parents, when alive, should be served according to propriety; when dead, they should be buried according to propriety; and they should be scarified to according to propriety” (*Book of Rites—Government*). “Worship is a continuation of filial piety” (*Xiao Dai Book of Rites—Worship*). Kong Yingda explained: “When parents are alive, filial son supports and cares for them. Now parents pass away, worship them according to propriety to continue with the support and filial piety.”

There are three events for a filial son to fulfill: support parents when they are alive, hold funeral when they pass away and worship them at and after the funeral. If one can be obedient when serving parents, express sorrow at parents' funeral and show respect while worshipping parents, he can be called a filial son.

How to Practice Filial Piety Rituals

“When serving parents, filial children should support and take care of parents with great respect and pleasant countenance, feel worried about parents' illness, feel sad at parents' funeral and worship parents in solemn manners.” “A filial son who lost his parents, cry without drama, act without considering propriety, talk without rhetoric, feel guilty of dressing up, is unable to be cheered up by music and delicacies, which are all manifestations of sorrow” (*Book of Filial Piety*).

Which Is More Important, Practicing Filial Piety When Parents Are Alive or Practicing Filial Piety When Parents Pass Away?

Mencius used to say: “It is not a big deal to support parents when they are alive; it is significant to honor parents when they pass away” (*Mencius—Lou Li II*). However, Confucians also propose that serving parents when they are alive is more important than worshipping them after they pass away. Ji Lu asked about the gods and ghosts. Confucius replied: “While you have not known how to serve living people, how can you serve ghosts?” (*Confucius Analects—Xian Jin*). The *Family Sayings of Confucius—Volume II—Encouragements to Reflection VIII* tells the story of Gao Yu's three mistakes: Confucius walked with his disciples and heard someone crying sadly. They found Gao Yu crying at the roadside and asked him why he cried so sadly. Gao Yu said:

I have made three mistakes. First, when I was young, I travelled around the states to study but failed to take care of my parents. Second, I am a noble man and refused to serve the bad kings. So I failed in my career. Third, I used to have some very good friends but our relationship broke down due to minor matters. The tree would like to keep still but the wind would not stop; the children would like to serve parents but they pass away. Time waits for nobody and when parents pass away, children can never see them again. I am going to follow my parents.

Confucius said to his disciples: “You should learn lessons from him.” Thus, 30% Confucius' disciples go back home to take care of their parents.

Should Funeral Be Frugal or Luxurious?

Generally speaking, the Confucians believes that it is filial piety rites to exhaust all family wealth to hold parents' funerals, mourn parents for three years, and be drowned in great sorrow even to destroy one's health. However, Confucius also said: “In ritual, it is better to be frugal than extravagant; in funerals, heartfelt sorrow is more valuable than grand ceremony” (*Confucius Analects—Zi Zhang*). Confucius' disciple, Zi Zhang said: “If a man can be reverent at rituals and sorrowful at funerals, it is all right” (*Confucius Analects—Zi Zhang*). Zi You said: “When mourning has expended itself in grief, it should end” (*Confucius Analects—Zi Zhang*). “A filial son who lost his parents, cry without drama, act without considering propriety, talk without rhetoric, feel guilty of dressing up, is unable to be cheered up by music and delicacies, which are all manifestations of sorrow” (*Book of Filial Piety*). Motzu criticized luxurious burial and funeral:

Luxurious burial is to bury a large amount of wealth; long-time mourning is to forbid people to work. The produced wealth is buried and the labor is confined. You cannot yield by forbidding farming, while the country cannot become rich in this way.

“The regulation of three-year mourning period is also harmful to population growth”. Because it will make

people vulnerable to cold winter and hot summer and hundreds and thousands of people will die of illness. And people have less opportunity and interest in sexual intercourse. If we want to increase population in this way, it is like trying to prolong our lives by placing head on sword edge.

“Make regulations of luxurious burial and long mourning period, the country will definitely suffer poverty, the population will decline and the justice and administration system will collapse”. Motzu advocates resuming the ancient burial system of saint king, which is

three-cun-thick coffin, enough to hold the body to decay; three pieces of clothes, enough to cover the decayed body; the cemetery is not necessary to be big, it is all right to be three chi wide and not necessary to be deep, it is all right for burial earth to cover body smell and not as deep as the spring.

“As long as the dead is buried, the living people should rush back into work instead of crying for a long time. Everybody work hard and benefit each other. This is the system of saint king”. Many traditional scholar officials and ordinary people had practiced the principle of frugal burial and funeral. For example, Lu You strongly opposed luxurious burial in his family instructions. He asked his family not to buy expensive wood to make coffin. During the funeral, they should not use paper men, paper horses, incense Pavilion, and soul Pavilion. They should not spend money asking monks for guidance. It is enough to hire one man to guard the tomb. (Lu, 1993). Shi Chengjin of the Qing Dynasty set 10 disciplines of funeral in the family motto. He told his family not to hold luxurious burial, not to release obituary, not to hold condolence ceremony, not to keep the body at home for a long time, not to hold extravagant funeral, not to make meat sacrifices, not to burn paper money. (Xu & Chen, 2003, pp. 700-701). In the Dexing Tang Family Disciplines, Xu Rulin proposed that sacrifice and worship ceremony should be frugal and the saved money could be used to “help the orphans and widows, help the poor who could not afford wedding and burial ceremony, expand ancestral temple and build family school”.

The Ultimate Source of Filial Piety Is Family Affection, Which Requires Both Filial Piety of Children and Kindness of the Parents

In his *New Book—Taoist Arts*, Jia Yi of Han Dynasty states: Parents loving and benefitting their children is kindness, and it is foolish not to be kind; Children loving and benefitting their parents is filial piety, and being unfilial is a sin.

Parents’ Kindness and Children’s Filial Piety Is a Virtuous Circle of Promotion

“Children should be filial and parents should be loving” (*Da Xue*). In *Zuo’s Commentary*, “parents’ kindness and children’s filial piety are included in ‘Liu Shun (six important ethnic relationships)’”. Motzu advocated “love and mutual benefit”, and acted according to this law, “If father and son love each other, they will be kind and filial” (*Motzu—Universal Love II*). “If the parents are not kind and loving, the children are not filial, the whole world will suffer” (*Motzu—Fei Ming I*). Xunzi said: “How can a man be a father? Answer: Be generous, benevolent and polite. How can a man be a son? Answer: Respect parents and be very polite” (*Xunzi—Jundao*). In *Ting Gao*, Yan Yanzhi of South Dynasty emphasized that parents’ kindness and children’s filial piety, fraternity between older and younger brothers affect each other mutually, and the requirements for the parents and older brother precede those for the children and younger brother. If you want your son to be filial, parents must be kind in the first place. Although filial piety does not necessarily have to be based on parents’ kindness, parents’ kindness can indeed cultivate and reinforce filial piety. (Guo & Li, p. 1510). Queen

Ren Xiao Wen of the Ming Dynasty regarded “upper kindness” as the prerequisite of “lower obedience”.

If the elders are always kind and loving, the younger generation will be obedient and their relationship will become closer and closer. If the elders are not kind and loving but want the younger generation to be filial, the younger generation’s heart will be uneasy, which will cause alienation between them. Alienation will lead to resentment. Resentment in hearts is the most ominous. (1993).

Father’s Kindness and Son’s Filial Piety Are Both Emotion and Obligation

On the one hand, father’s kindness and son’s filial piety is a natural emotion. “Filial children value their parents very much, and loving parents cherish their children very much. This is human nature” (*Lv’s Commentaries of History—Jiesang*). “The way of being parents and children is natural” (*Book of Filial Piety*). Lv Weiqi of Ming Dynasty explained, “Human nature is inborn and loving parents is human nature” (*Annotation to Book of Filial Piety*). The *Book of Songs* depicts the love of parents for their children:

It is very hard for parents to bring up children. Dad, you gave birth to me; Mom, you fed me. You protect me, love me, raise me and cultivate me. You cherish me so much that you do not want to leave me and embrace me when you go out of home. I want to repay my parents for their great kindness which is as grand as the heaven. (*Book of Songs*)

Zhu Xi annotated the Confucius Analects, and said: “Parents love children very much and often worry about their health”. In Ting Gao, Yan Yanzhi said: “Parents love children very much. Strict father and kind mother, it is the same in nature, but different in the way of emotional expression”.

On the other hand, fatherhood and filial piety are also obligations. Sima Guang said that children being unfilial and parents being unkind, both are sins. (1995, p. 40). “Father is the rule maker, the head of the family, the leader and educator of his children. Father is the rule maker, who educates his children with laws and standards”. (Xu, 2015, p. 206). Father is the teacher, who educates his children to love, respect, be loyal and obedient (*Book of Filial Piety—Shi Zhang*). “Father and older brothers are the first teachers of rules and moralities for children”. Parents should set good example for children and educate them with words and actions. In *Guanzi—Situations*, it is stated:

If a father does not understand the way between father and son to discipline his son, the son will not know the way of being son to serve his father. So, it is said: if the father is not father, the son is not son. (*Guanzi—Situations*)

“Once upon a time, Mencius’ mother moved three times to give Mencius a good learning environment. Once, Mencius played truant, his mother cut the cloth on the loom to teach her son”.

Loving but Strict Father Raises Filial Son

“A father should be strict with his children and should not be close but not solemn; The love between parents and children cannot be imprudent” (*Family Instructions of Master Yan*). On the one hand, father and son should be tolerant and not unilaterally ask the other side to do his duty to “me”. Don’t demand perfection in each other. Don’t nitpick. It is said that “father and son should not demand perfection in each other. Mutual blame will alienate the relationship between them, and there is nothing more unfortunate than this” (*Mencius Lou Li D*). At the same time, parents should be strict with their children. “If there is a strict father, there will be a good son” (*Volume VI of Notes on Children Education*). “The father is strict and the son holds discipline in awe” (*Instructions of Yuan Family—Harmonious Family*). Children must be educated from childhood. Sima Guang said,

Since ancient time, many fathers know how to love their children, but don’t know how to educate them, so that the children grow up and do harm to the society and finally destroy themselves. If they love their children, they should educate

them and cultivate them into righteous and responsible people. If they love them but let them go astray, how can they be regarded as loving them? Those who love their children often say: “Children are young and not sensible, so we can educate them when they grow up.” It’s like planting an improper sapling and saying trimming it when the tree grows up. Isn’t that more laborious? It’s also like opening the bird cage and releasing the bird before catching the bird, loosening the reins and releasing the horse before chasing it. Why let go of the bird and horse in advance? (*Instructions of Wen Family*)

As a mother, her responsibility is not only to raise her son so that he will not be endangered by water and fire, but also to cultivate his morality so that he will not go astray. This is a kind mother. If parents are strict and loving, children will fear and be cautious, resulting in filial piety. I see there are some people in the world who don’t educate but just spoil their children, and often can’t get that result. What to eat, what to do, indulge children arbitrarily and do not control them. When children should be admonished, parents praise, when children should be reprimanded, parents laugh. When children are sensible, they think that these principles are the way they are. When children have formed habit of arrogance, parents begin to stop it. Even if the whipping is cruel, it can’t establish dignity and majesty. No matter how angry parents are, it will only increase resentment. The children will grow up and eventually become people with bad morality. Confucius said, “What is formed from childhood is like nature, and what is used to feels natural.” It is very reasonable. (*Instructions of Yan Family*)

“During the Wu Dai Dynasty, Dou Yujun, from Yanshan, was very good at educating his sons. All his five sons were very successful and respectable”. The secret lies in correct teaching, severity tempered with gentleness, starting from childhood, and so on.

The Ultimate Goal of “Filial Piety” Is to Complete Personality, and the Extension of “Filial Piety” Is Extensive Benevolence and Self-improvement

Filial piety is the most important way of morality cultivation. Its root lies in establishing morality and cultivating people. It is significant in terms of Tao, and it deeply influences a person’s personality.

From Filial Piety to Benevolence

The essence of filial piety is benevolence. Filial piety is actually a kind of universal love for all people, the heart of benevolence gradually growing and extending to loving all people and the world. “Benevolence comes from love and love begins from parents”. “Love forms from parents” (*Book of Rites—Sacrifice*). “Filial piety was not limited to parents at first, but to care and respect all elders in society” (*Explanatory Dictionary of Ancient Characters on Bronze—Volume VIII*). “People do not only treat their own parents well and do not only treat their own children well” (*Book of Rites—Li Yun*). “Treat your own parents well and treat all other elders as your own parents” (*Mencius—Lord Liang Hui I*). The Brahmajala Sutra, Buddhist classic of Yuan Dynasty, states: “All male creatures are my father; all female creatures are my mother. I was born from this, thus all creatures in the six great divisions in the wheel of karma are my parents”. Furthermore, people who practice filial piety must love their motherland. The motherland is “the country of parents” and “the land of parents” (*Confucius Analects—Weizi*).

People love parents so they respect ancestors, they respect ancestors so they value clans, they value clans so they hold the members of clan together, they hold the members of clan together so they have a rigorous ancestral temple system, they have a rigorous ancestral temple system so they think highly of state, they think highly of state so they love ordinary people. (*The Book of Rites—Da Zhuan*)

Yan Fu said: “Filial piety means not forgetting the root. In this way, the family is nurtured, and the national morality starts here, which is the source of patriotism. No one can love his motherland without respecting his parents” (1986, p. 343). Furthermore, filial piety can be extended to loving everything in the world. Mencius said: “You love your parents so you love people; you love people so you love everything” (*Mencius—Jin Xin I*). Zhu Xi said: “Ren (benevolence), in terms of nature, refers to loving all living creatures; in terms of humans,

refers to loving people and benefitting others” (*Classified Conversations of Zhu Xi volume 67*). In Xi Ming Zhang Zai said:

Qian (a hexagram in I Ching; symbol of heavens) is father (male) and Kun (a hexagram in I Ching; symbol of the earth) is mother (female)...all people in the world are my siblings and all things in the world are of the same kind as me.

Taoist classic Taishang Lingbao Jingming Four Rules Mingjian Scriptures states:

Charm water can only cure people’s diseases, not meritorious service. Influence the whole society with personal cultivation of ‘loyalty and filial piety’ and make people who don’t believe in ‘loyalty and filial piety’ repent, their credit is the real meritorious service!

So in this way, “loyalty and filial piety” is expanded from personal cultivation to social practice.

From Filial Piety to Self-realization

Filial piety is essentially the inheritance of ancestral morality. We must cultivate personality and improve morality. Ma Yifu believes that filial piety’s “heart of love and respect” and “heart of not daring to be evil and arrogant” are the beginning of natural morality. And then the rituals, music, and divinity develop from it. When there is no heart of evil and arrogance, full of compassion, harmony, without partiality and obstruction, how great it is! (1994, p.151, p.154). Luo rufang, a scholar of the Ming Dynasty, said in the *Purpose of Filial Piety*,

The so-called self-cultivation is morality development, fostering awe-inspiring righteousness, like a great pillar standing between heaven and earth. The so-called practicing the Tao is practicing in the world to reach the Tao. Follow ethic rules and devote to career, contributing to world development and cultural inheritance. (*Purpose of Filial Piety*)

Feng Youlan analyzed filial piety from the perspective of “making a name for future generations in order to honor one’s parents”, and said,

A filial son must do moral things, because these things can make his parents get a good name, which can make ‘people say: Fortunately, you have such a good child.’ A filial son can’t do any immoral things, because it can make his parents get a bad name. (2001, p. 246).

Du Weiming stressed that filial piety is not a simple “social adaptation” and blind obedience of children to their parents, but a way of self-cultivation and self realization. “We cultivate a sense of respect for our father, not because our father is in a dominant position, nor because we dare not disobey them, but for our self realization”. (1991, p. 131).

From Filial Piety to Morality

“If people can treat parents’ funerals seriously and worship ancestors respectfully, the people will become more and more loyal and honest” (*Confucius Analects—Xue Er*). “Those who love their parents will not hate other people, and those who can respect their parents will not disrespect others” (*Book of Filial Piety*). “A filial son does not dare to behave recklessly and do whatever he wants” (*DaDai Book of Rites—Zengzi’ Filial Piety*). “Those who serve their parents would not be arrogant in the upper position, would not stir up trouble in the lower position, and would not quarrel with their fellow men” (*Book of Filial Piety*). “Being dishonest, breaking promises, being not brave in the face of difficulties and being disloyal to prince, these are grave unfilial conducts” (*Salt and Iron—Filial Support*). Buddhism advocates the unity of discipline and filial piety. What the five disciplines require is filial piety.

No killing is benevolence, no stealing is righteousness, no obscenity is propriety, no drinking is wisdom, and no lying is faith. If you can practice the five disciplines, you can become a real man and honor your parents, which is filial. If one of these five disciplines is not practiced, the direct result is to damage their own image and humiliate their parents, which is unfilial. Among the five disciplines, there is indeed the meaning of filial piety, but secular people can't see and understand it.

In *Master Embracing Simplicity Inner Part—Dui Su*, it is stated:

Merits are the best, and avoiding fault comes second. People who practice Taoism believe that saving people from danger, keeping them away from disasters, curing their diseases to save lives are the greatest merits. Those who pursue immortality should first take loyalty and filial piety, harmony and obedience, benevolence and faith as the foundation. If you just learn magic without cultivating your morality, you can't achieve immortality. (*Master Embracing Simplicity Inner Part—Dui Su*)

In short, “filial piety is the foundation of morality”. “Filial piety is the most important thing in self-cultivation” (*Sima Guang's Words*). “Filial piety brings out immense virtues and a filial person will grow into a moral man” ([Ming Dynasty] Yao Shunmu's *Medical Words*). “Parents-children relationship is the first of the five ethic relationships, and filial piety is the first of humanity” (*Variorum to Tractate of the Most High One on Actions and Consequences*).

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