

Inheritance and Innovation of Chinese Filial Piety Culture

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Chinese traditional filial piety culture has gained widespread acceptance in contemporary social life and has been inherited and carried forward in a variety of ways instead of fading away with the development of economy and society. Meanwhile, under the background of urbanization, industrialization, and modernization, traditional filial piety also faces many new challenges. This paper puts forward the reflections and countermeasures concerning the inheritance and innovation of filial piety culture in the new era from perspectives of concept connotation, publicity and education, institutional guarantee, funding source, and social organizations.

Keywords: China, filial piety culture, inheritance, innovation

With the rapid change and development of times and society, people's material and cultural demands have been gradually increasing. However, in transition of social culture, many traditional Chinese virtues such as filial piety have been inherited, which should not fade away with time but be carried forward with new connotations of new era.

Inheritance of Filial Piety in Modern Social Life

On the whole, traditional filial piety has gained widespread acceptance in contemporary social life and been inherited in various ways instead of fading away with the development of economy and society. Meanwhile, under the background of urbanization, industrialization, and modernization, traditional filial piety also faces many new challenges.

Filial Piety Is Still Highly Recognized and Actively Inherited

General Secretary Xi Jinping has repeatedly called for the promotion of filial piety. In the report of the 19th CPC National Congress, the General Secretary said that people should be encouraged to practice filial piety to the elderly and love their parents. At this year's Spring Festival party, the General Secretary's speech also addressed the promotion of filial piety. He said, "filial piety is the foundation of morality" as the ancients said. Since ancient times, Chinese people have advocated filial piety and love for parents, asking people to respect and love the elderly of the whole society as they were their own parents, and love and care for the young of the whole society as they were their own offspring. China has entered an aging society. It is an issue essential to social harmony and stability to ensure the elderly to have a supportive, secure, and happy life. We should encourage the whole society to respect, care for and support the elderly, and vigorously develop aging related programs, to make all the elderly live a happy life in their old age.

In recent years, promoting filial piety has been incorporated into the decision-making and institutional arrangements of the central and local CPC committees and governments. Article 29 of the *Punishment*

Ordinance for Civil Servants Working in Administrative Organs states that those who refuse to undertake the obligations of supporting, bringing up and maintaining family members, and those who ill-treat or abandon family members shall be given corresponding punishment according to the seriousness of the situation. In some places, filial piety is taken as one of crucial considerations in the evaluation and promotion of officials. “Practicing filial piety to parents” has been part of the daily behavior norms of primary and middle school students. Some colleges and universities regard filial piety as one of the criteria for independent enrollment. More than 10 provinces have issued the only-child nursing leave policies. According to the *Regulations of Henan Province on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Elderly People*, during the hospitalization of the elderly parents of the only-child, the only-child shall be granted at least 20 days of paid nursing leave every year by their working units. According to the *Regulations of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Elderly People*, during the hospitalization of the elderly, their children shall take paid accompanying leave, with only-child’s leave no more than 15 days a year, and the non-only-child no more than seven days a year. Heilongjiang Province stipulates that when the elderly are hospitalized, their children should be granted the nursing leave by their working units. The only-child’s nursing leave totals 20 days a year, and the non-only-child’s 10 days a year. Some regions have set up filial piety funds and filial piety associations, explored and publicized local filial piety resources, compiled and printed filial piety learning materials with local characteristics, and carried out various forms of filial piety education. For example, many places such as Xiaogan City have carried out the selection and commendation of filial piety stars. Changshan County, Zhejiang Province, has formulated “a set of standards” for promoting filial piety, stipulating that children should give each elderly parent an annual support payment of no less than 3,600 yuan, while families with lower income should pay no less than 1,800 yuan, with an average of 10 yuan and 5 yuan per day. Children should visit the elderly parents every half a month or contact them no less than once a week. The “Notice of Filial Piety for the Elderly” was issued, which required Party members to take the lead in signing the letter of commitment for filial piety for the elderly, and made the standard of filial piety a part of the village rules and regulations, so as to give it institutional guarantee and make it the common consensus and conscious behavior of citizens in the whole county. The county also requested to implement “ten practical things” of filial piety; set up the “May 20” Respect Elderly Day; selected and commended the “filial piety models in 100 villages”; carried out “partner assistance” project, that more than 4,500 Party members and cadres formed pairs with more than 3,300 empty nested, widowed, difficult and disabled elderly people in the county, paid regular visit to comfort and help the elderly people; promoted “all people respect the elderly” program; set up “happy grandparents” care fund for the elderly of the whole county, established village-level filial piety charity foundation; encouraged enterprises and non-governmental organizations to participate in the public welfare program of filial piety for the elderly; compiled the book of Changshan Filial Piety and widely distributed; developed local courses to facilitate filial piety culture deeply rooted and passed on from generation to generation.

Many sampling surveys in recent years have also proved that filial piety continues to be carried forward in the new era. A survey of college students in Chongqing shows that all respondents believe that filial piety should be promoted in modern society, with 98% saying it is very necessary. According to a survey of college students in Fuzhou, 99% of them think it is necessary to advocate traditional filial piety in modern times. A survey of middle school students in Hubei Province shows that 87% of the respondents still believe filial piety is a virtue, and it is necessary or very necessary to be filial to parents in contemporary society. According to a

survey of students of universities, middle schools, and vocational schools in Beijing, 84.4% of the respondents think that they have done a very or fairly good job in practicing filial piety to their parents. In the survey of elderly people in some provinces, 90% of respondents believe that young people nowadays are more filial than before or as filial as before (Du & Qu, 2013).

Changed Content and Structure of Filial Piety

The specific content of filial piety has changed with the core of it which remains the same. Traditional filial piety contains many aspects including supporting, respecting, obeying, bringing glory on parents, and so on. In modern society, “respect” is still the core content of filial piety. Different from traditional filial piety, which focuses on upholding the family honor and bringing glory on ancestors, raising heir and accompanying parents, modern parents pay more attention to the success of their children’s family life and career. The establishment and improvement of the social security system has weakened the parents’ demand for material support while the status of spiritual support has become increasingly important. In current society, spiritual support does not only focus on meeting parents’ affectional needs, but also on meeting the expectations of the elderly to participate in the society, play a positive role, and realize the value of life.

Continuous Innovation in Ways of Fulfilling Filial Piety

There are more diverse ways of fulfilling filial piety nowadays. Many married daughters share the same responsibility for supporting their parents as sons. The responsibility person and implementation person of filial piety are gradually separated. Many adult children practice filial piety to their parents by purchasing socialized elderly care services. The ways of fulfilling filial piety tend to be rational and diversified. There are fewer and fewer “blind filial piety” phenomena that go against the law of science, such as by sacrificing life or in inhuman way. The evaluation standard of filial piety is more pragmatic. It is filial piety for children to stay with their parents and take care of them. It’s also filial piety if parents can feel gratified by children’s successful career and happy family life. It is filial piety to live with parents; it is also filial piety to respect parents’ choice and let them stay at hometown. It is filial piety to visit parents frequently; it is also filial piety to call parents often when the children cannot go back home.

New Contradictions and Challenges of Filial Piety Inheritance

Traditional filial piety emerged and developed on the basis of ancient agricultural society. In ancient agricultural society, farmers were confined to the land, so there was an ancient saying “Adult children should not travel far away when their parents are alive”. In ancient times, occupations were hereditary; thus there was a saying that “Son should stick to his father’s occupation for three years”. Ancient people lived in big family, and the children were supposed to attend upon their parents personally and pay respect to them every morning and night. In the new era, “filial piety” is still one of the ways to balance blood relationship, while the content and methods of filial piety need to keep pace with the times. And there are more favorable conditions for the inheritance of filial piety: The economic income of the elderly has increased; the medical and health conditions have improved; the communication technology has developed; and the law has improved. At the same time, the rapid development of industrialization, urbanization, and population aging has raised new issues for filial piety inheritance.

First, with the development of society and progress of science and technology, some requirements of traditional filial piety are out of date. The traditional ways to practice filial piety (such as feed the mosquitoes

with one's own blood to avoid their parents being beaten; warm the bed with one's own body heat before their parents go to sleep; children try the medicine before parents take it; choose a doctor from a medical family with generations' experience for parents) which are commendable, have been replaced by more appropriate and effective ways.

Second, with the change of times and social conditions, it is difficult to fulfill some traditional filial piety requirements. For example, according to traditional filial piety requirements, a filial adult child should provide parents a smooth and steady life without taking any adventure, which is difficult to realize in modern world.

Third, with the progress of social civilization, the unreasonable and inhumane requirements of traditional filial piety should be abandoned. The requirements such as that "when parents are alive, the children should not keep any money for themselves", or "children are supposed to eat or drink nothing for 7 days to mourn one's parent's death" (Zeng Zi proposed) (*The Book of Rites*) should be discarded.

Reflections on Ways to Inherit and Develop Filial Piety Culture in New Era

Under the background of urbanization, industrialization, and modernization, traditional filial piety also faces many new challenges. China puts forward the reflections and countermeasures concerning the inheritance and innovation of filial piety culture in the new era from perspectives of concept connotation, publicity and education, institutional guarantee, funding source, and social organizations.

Incorporate Filial Piety Into the Core Socialist Values and Endow It With Connotation and Requirements of New Era

It is necessary to integrate the concepts of universal love, freedom, equality, justice, and the rule of law into filial piety, so as to form a socialist filial piety culture with the characteristics of the new era. Since modern times, there have been many valuable thoughts and concepts facilitating the traditional filial piety to transform into modern one. For example, around 1888, Kang Youwei advocated in the *Complete Book of Universal Axiom and Public Law*: "according to the universal axiom, the children have no obligation to practice filial piety to parents and the parents have no responsibility to take care of the children. People have the right of autonomy" (Zhang, 2015, p. 28). On November 7, 1919, Shi Fuliang (formerly known as Shi Cuntong), then a sophomore of No. 1 Normal College of Zhejiang Province (five-year system), published an article entitled "Non-filial Piety" in the second issue of *Zhejiang New Trend*, which clearly stated: "oppose unequal 'filial piety' and advocate equal 'love'" (Shi, 1920, p. 119). Many literature works emphasized the natural love between parents and children, and advocated replacing the "En (grace)" in the old filial piety with "love". Lu Xun advocated that parents' love for children should be a kind of selfless love with responsibility and obligation, which is an equal love. Hu Shi believed that children's filial piety should correspond to parents' love. "If I were infected with venereal disease, and gave birth to a son who was deaf, blind and disabled for life, should he love and respect me? And if I took the family's money to gamble and lost, so my son lived in condition of lack of food, clothing and education, should he love and respect me? And if I betrayed my country and became a guilty man, should he love and respect me?" (Suh Hu, 2003, p. 658).

He demanded that modern filial piety should not only educate people to be filial children, but also qualified citizens. Zou Enrun (Taofen) pointed out in his article "What Is the Meaning of Non-filial Piety" (*John's Voice*, Vol. 32, No. 1 and No. 2, 1921) that the present filial piety should be filial piety with reason, filial piety with true feelings, and filial piety with right and wrong (Zou, 1995, p. 214). Wu Yu advocated:

“parents and children should not have the concept of superiority and inferiority, but should have the responsibility to help each other. They are all human beings, and act as human, it has nothing to do with the ‘grace’ and ‘virtue’. We should recognize that our children have their own personalities and human rights, and we all go on the way of ‘human’” (Tian, 2013, p. 17). Wu Zhihui (1991) said: “If father and son commit the same crime, they should pay the same penalty, which respects the rule of law and is not against the natural love between parents and children” (p. 15).

Strengthen and Improve the Publicity and Education of Filial Piety to Adapt to the New Situation and Requirements

Lin Yutang (1988) pointed out that the Chinese character “教 (teach/educate)” evolved from “孝 (filial piety)”, that is the character “孝” plus a character component “文” (make sb do sth), meaning “make sb practice filial piety” (p. 154). Xie Youwei (1946) said: “Filial piety is the origin of morality. Keep and maintain this origin, nourish and cultivate people’s inborn love and respect for parents, and thus morality can be developed. It is a defect of Mohism and a shortcoming of western morality to talk big about universal love and saving the world but fail to cultivate filial piety with people’s natural love and respect for parents fading away” (p. 2).

First, expand filial piety education resources. Yan Fu once suggested, “we should select the events of loyalty, filial piety and righteousness in history books and biographies, translate related words and deeds of foreign celebrities, and incorporate these materials into textbooks of normal colleges and primary schools; we should create popular songs, dramas and pictures based on the historical facts of loyalty, filial piety and righteousness for all citizens to sing and watch; we should repair the ancestral halls of loyalty, filial piety and righteousness and hold regular ceremonies; we should publish books about loyalty, filial piety and righteousness to spread the spirit widely” (Huang, 2014, p. 332).

Second, expand filial piety inheritance media. Promote filial piety literature creation, school education, social education, and family education in line with the characteristics of the times. We should make full use of folk songs, plays, cartoons, etc., which are easy to understand and popular among the people, so that people may unconsciously be exposed in filial piety culture.

Third, choose rational ways of practicing filial piety. In some places, washing parents’ feet is regarded as a model behavior to promote the spirit of gratitude and filial piety. In some middle schools, students were required to kneel down on the playground to show their gratitude to their parents on the “Youth Ceremony”. On one Mother’s Day, 100 students at a primary school in Jiangxi Province washed their mother’s feet on the playground to show their filial piety. At a middle school in Shanghai, students were asked to wash their parents’ feet. Each time they finished the assignment, parents signed on the calendar cards. And the final records were regarded as an important evaluation standard for moral scores at the end of the semester. These overly formalistic practices are easy to arouse resentment and have negative effects.

Strengthen the Institutional Guarantee for the Implementation of Filial Piety

In Tang Dynasty, there were a series of policies and regulations to encourage filial piety. For example, according to the law, if one official takes post in places other than his hometown and there is no other children or grandchildren in the family to take care of the old or sick parents and grandparents, he must abandon his official post and go home to serve the elderly. If the name of an institution or official post has the same character as that of someone’s grandfather or father, that person cannot work in the institution or take up the official post. Otherwise, once reported, he will be punished. During the mourning period for their parents,

officials cannot continue to work in the government. They have to mourn for their parents at home. They can only resume their posts after the mourning period. If they take the official posts during the mourning period, they will violate the law and be punished. In Tang Dynasty, filial piety leave system was also implemented, that is, for the adult males who should pay taxes, when their parents died, they were exempted from the official duties.

In contemporary China, there are many laws and regulations that encourage citizens to practice filial piety. For example, the *Civil Law* states that “parents have the obligation to raise and educate minor children, and adult children have the obligation to support and assist their parents”. According to the *Marriage Law*, if children fail to perform their support duty, parents who are unable to work or have difficulties in providing for themselves shall have the right to demand support payments from their children. But it only protects the lowest level of filial piety—“supporting parents”, and does not mention the higher level of filial piety—“respect for parents”, only emphasizing material support, but not spiritual support. *Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Elderly People* has relevant provisions, but there are no quantitative standards and punishment measures.

South Korea promulgated and implemented the *Filial Piety Award and Subsidy Act* in 2007, which states that the state or local government shall provide household facilities and appliances to parents who live with their children in the same house or residential area as an award; the state or local government shall provide subsidies to providers of the household facilities and appliances. The experience in history and abroad is worthy for us to study and learn from.

Expand Funding Source of Filial Piety Reward

South Korea has established many foundations (consortia) for promoting filial piety. Some religious or business chaebols have initiated and established a variety of welfare consortia to encourage filial piety, and set up various filial piety awards to reward filial sons and daughters. The most famous ones are Samsung Welfare Foundation and Holy Mountain Youth Education Foundation. The purpose of the Samsung Welfare Foundation is to promote the traditional filial piety culture and create a healthy social environment. Since 1976, the foundation has set up a nationwide filial piety award to reward outstanding people practicing filial piety. The award candidates are recommended by local and municipal governments, the Ministry of Education, and religious organizations. After two rounds of review and on-site investigation, 12 winners are finally selected each year. Holy Mountain Youth Education Foundation is a non-governmental consortium initiated by Incheon Full Gospel Church. The purpose of the foundation is to strengthen the cultivation of youth’s morality, especially filial piety. The foundation has set up “Model Youth Award” to reward model youth with outstanding filial piety deeds. The foundation recommends more than 700 candidates annually mainly through local education departments, and then selects eight winners of “Model Youth Award” and seven winners of “Good Children Award” through review and investigation. The establishment of these foundation filial piety awards has rewarded outstanding figures, set a benchmark for the whole society, and encouraged the promotion of filial piety movement nationwide, which is worthy for us to study and learn from.

Make Full Use of Social Organizations

For the promotion of the South Korean folk filial piety movement, there is an important unified coordination organization—the South Korean Federation of Filial Piety Movement. The role of the federation is to formulate blueprints and plans for the development of the entire filial piety movement, to unify the

declaration of the folk filial piety movement groups, to coordinate the daily promotion activities of these groups, to avoid contradictions and conflicts between them, and to effectively organize each filial piety promotion force. The South Korean academic community also established the “South Korean Filial Piety Association” for the promotion of filial piety culture. China should also encourage the development of social organizations at all levels to promote the inheritance and innovation of filial piety.

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