

COMMENT ON “TEACHING WITH FILIAL PIETY: A STUDY OF FILIAL PIETY THOUGHT OF CONFUCIANISM”

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The concept of “filial piety” (孝) is not unique to the Chinese nation but a social phenomenon shared by various cultures in a particular stage of development worldwide. However, regarding which country or ethnicity resembles the ancient Chinese ancestors, in terms of “revering filial piety” and “valuing filial piety,” it is unlikely to find another.

The fundamental meaning of “filial piety” in Chinese traditional culture has transformed a utilitarian prayer for blessings, associated with “respecting ancestors and venerating the ancestors”, to a humanitarian significance of “caring for parents and providing for the elderly” and “fostering affection among family members.” According to surviving classical texts, the character “孝” for “filial piety” first appeared in the “Book of Documents”, as seen in records such as “Make efforts to harness and drive the cattle, travel to distant places to engage in trade, and show filial piety by supporting and caring for your parents” (JI, 2007, p. 77). However, the Book of Documents records are not the origin of the character “孝” in traditional culture. The character “孝”

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was first seen in oracle bone inscriptions from the Yin Dynasty and bronze inscriptions from the Shang and Zhou Dynasties. According to scholars' research and analysis, the meaning of the character “孝” in oracle bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions differs from the modern understanding of filial piety during one's lifetime, primarily referring to obedience and respect towards one's living parents. In the context of oracle bone and bronze inscriptions, filial piety refers to the reverence, worship and sacrificial rituals offered to deceased parents, ancestors, deities and even higher powers.

Wang e Tian (2023) point out that the flourishing period of filial piety can be traced back to the Western Zhou Dynasty, a widely accepted view among scholars. During the Western Zhou period, filial piety primarily revolved around the worship of ancestors and surpassed that of the Shang Dynasty. The Zhou people regarded King Wen as a heavenly deity. Initially, King Wen was a family's leader, but after being deified, he became a figure revered by the Zhou people collectively. The concept of filial piety, during this period, did not yet embody moral and ethical implications but had religious and political undertones. Confucius inherited the concept of filial piety from the Western Zhou Dynasty, but there were significant changes in its connotation, meaning and value.

During the Western Zhou Dynasty, “filial piety” had three main characteristics. Firstly, the primary objects of filial piety were deceased ancestors rather than living individuals. Secondly, filial piety, in the Western Zhou Dynasty, had distinct hierarchical features, with strict divisions and related ritual systems for the emperor's filial piety targets, feudal lords, high-ranking officials and scholars. Thirdly, religious worship practices mainly expressed filial piety in the Western Zhou Dynasty. Confucius had a different concept from the people of the Western Zhou Dynasty. He emphasized the universal sense of “filial piety” in terms of family ethics, which involved caring for and being kind to one's parents. In the *Analects*, in the “Advance” section, Confucius praised Min Ziqian, saying: “How admirable is this virtue of Min Ziqian! No one is indifferent to the way of his parents and brothers.” Confucius praised Min Ziqian's filial piety because of his exceptional devotion to caring for his parents. From the perspective of the development of filial piety culture, Confucius can be regarded as the innovator, who emphasized the inclusion of living parents as objects of “filial piety” and significantly transformed and developed the concept of filial piety inherited from the Western Zhou Dynasty.

Furthermore, Confucius proposed that “filial piety is the foundation of benevolence.” Based on existing research findings, “benevolence” under Confucius is the highest category of his ethical and moral doctrine. Confucius spent his entire life advocating and persuading rulers to adopt his concept of “benevolence” to realize a well-governed world. In the ideological context of Confucianism, virtuous emotions serve as the source of morality. Among the many emotions, the innate natural love between parents and children and the affection between siblings are the origin of all virtuous emotions. “A son’s love for his father, a younger brother’s love for his elder brother, all arise naturally from blood relations. These genuine emotions give rise to true sentiments, and these true sentiments are expressed as ‘filial piety’ and ‘brotherly respect.’” Thus, in the *Analects*, in the section “The Duke of Tai Bo”, it states: “The Master said, ‘When a noble person is sincere in their relations with family, the people thrive in benevolence.’” Confucius’ disciple Youzi understood this principle well and further summarized his teacher’s thoughts: “The superior man seeks to establish the root; being rooted, true principles grow. Filial piety and brotherly respect—these are the root of benevolence!” In other words, superior individuals should focus on cultivating themselves and nurturing their character, starting from the fundamental aspects of filial piety towards parents and brotherly love. These form the foundation of being a good man.

Confucius also emphasized the important concept of respecting parents. If animalistic instincts merely drove the support and care for parents, then “filial piety” would no longer belong to the realm of human conduct. Many believe that providing parents with financial backing fulfills their obligation of filial piety, but according to Confucius, more is needed. Filial piety not only involves providing food and sustenance to parents, but also encompasses respecting and honoring them, hence the concept of “respecting parents”. There are three situations regarding respecting parents: when parents are superior to their children, it is only natural for the younger generation to show reverence; if parents and children are on equal footing, they should understand and respect each other; if parents are considered inferior to their children, showing respect can bring out the goodness in people and influence their parents positively. The latter two situations require even greater acts of respect, especially in modern times when younger generations seem to have an absolute advantage in rapidly changing societal dynamics. Respecting the elderly holds even greater significance under such circumstances.

This also indicates that Confucius had high expectations for “filial piety”. It has transitioned from external social norms to internal psychological pursuits. However, Confucius emphasized the importance of sincerity and conscious moral agency from within the individual. Filial piety is not only about managing the relationship between children and their parents, but it is a lifelong endeavor that individuals must carefully cultivate. Its significance surpasses individual willpower.

Mencius, another important philosopher of Confucianism, who lived during the Warring States period and was revered as the Confucian master second only to Confucius, further developed Confucius’ ideas on filial piety. Mencius believed that filial piety is based on great love, primarily emphasizing benevolent ethics and the pursuit of righteousness. “Those who serve as subjects should embrace benevolence and righteousness in serving their rulers, children should embrace benevolence and righteousness in serving their fathers, and younger siblings should embrace benevolence and righteousness in serving their elder siblings. However, one has never possessed such virtues without being a king” (JIAO, 1986, p. 38). Mencius advocated for benevolence and righteousness, highlighting that great love is the foundation of fulfilling filial piety. Furthermore, Mencius emphasized funeral rituals and stressed that children should observe a three-year mourning period when parents pass away. He believed that conducting funeral rites was an act of filial piety and emphasized the children’s responsibility to arrange a proper burial for their deceased parents. Only by doing so can one fulfill filial piety to the fullest and repay the kindness of parents’ nurturing.

The philosopher Xunzi’s concept of filial piety differs significantly from that of Mencius during the late Warring States period. Xunzi believed that funeral rituals were intended to adorn the deceased with the trappings of the living, symbolizing the continuity from life to death. He stated: “In mourning, we adorn the beginning of life; in funeral rites, we adorn the end. When the beginning and the end are complete, the filial duties of a virtuous child are fulfilled, and the path of the sage is perfected.” He argued that elaborate external forms of ancestral worship were unnecessary, and true sincerity and heartfelt reverence were the most important. Fulfilling filial piety during the parents’ lifetime was sufficient. Xunzi advocated a filial piety concept rooted in ritual and righteousness, primarily addressing the ethical and legal aspects of the time to maintain social stability from a governance perspective rather than emphasizing the foundation of human relationships.

Wang e Tian (2023) also specifically mentioned the May Fourth Movement (1915-1923) in the article, during which filial piety was criticized. China was in a semi-colonial and semi-feudal social state at that time, and foreign cultures influenced indigenous culture. Some progressive intellectuals, driven by the desire for national salvation, comprehensively rejected traditional Chinese filial piety. Chen Duxiu, in particular, criticized the fusion of loyalty and filial piety, arguing that filial piety suppressed the individuals' freedom and their independent personalities. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, people who had experienced revolutionary fervor began to engage in rational reflection, reexamining the rationality and value of filial piety within the context of the new China. It was determined that filial piety should be based on equality, mutual respect and care. After the reform and opening-up period, there has been continuous development in the social economy, and people's living conditions have been increasingly changing. Therefore, it is important to contemplate how filial piety should establish itself in the new era and how to promote its better development. These are the questions that people should pay attention to.

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