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# The Filial Piety Thought in *The Analects* and Its Implications for the Filial Culture Education in Rural Areas of China

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**Abstract** *The Analects* is the source of Confucian culture, and filial piety is the traditional virtue of the Chinese nation. The filial piety thought contained in *The Analects* is profound and concrete. From the macroscopic perspective, it is embodied in the filial piety and loyalty; from the perspective of family filial piety, it manifests itself as the four aspects of the individual's support, respect, courtesy and loyalty to parents. Through the in-depth interpretation of the filial piety in *The Analects*, and combination of the issues of endowment, education, empty nesters and left-behind children in rural areas, this paper explored its value in the individual, family and social construction.

**Key words** *The Analects*, Filial piety thought, Inheritance of filial piety

## 1 Introduction

"Of all the virtues, filial piety comes the first". Filial piety is the traditional virtue of Chinese nation. There are many interpretations of filial piety in the Chinese Confucian classical work *The Analects*. These involve personal behavior and responsibilities for family and nation. Through using the filial piety of *The Analects* as reference, combining filial piety culture with the present society, and analyzing its implications for the inheritance of filial piety in rural areas, it is not only helpful for inheriting the fine traditional Chinese culture, promoting the traditional virtues of China, but also favorable for regulating people's words and deeds and building a harmonious family ethical relationship, and promoting rural filial piety and social stability.

## 2 Cultural connotation of the filial piety

The term "filial piety" first appeared in *Yu Shu*. The meaning of "filial piety" was originally not limited to the family filial piety, as stated in *Ji Yi* (also known as *The Meaning of Sacrifices*) of *Liji*, that "If a man in his own house and privacy be not grave, he is not filial; if in serving his ruler, he be not loyal, he is not filial; if in discharging the duties of office, he be not reverent, he is not filial; if with friends he be not sincere, he is not filial; if on the field of battle he be not brave, he is not filial."<sup>[1]</sup> All these indicate that "filial piety" is a very broad at the beginning of its creation, and the content covered is extremely profound. In the process of inheritance and development for thousands of years, the filial piety thought has infiltrated all aspects of society like blood, and gradually merged into a kind of emotion like respecting ances-

tors, honoring parents, and loving the country, and united the entire Chinese nation together.

Family is the basic unit of the society. To build a harmonious society, family happiness is the key. Respecting the elderly and caring for the young is a course that everyone should be exposed to since childhood. Family education is the earliest form of education we come into contact with. Parents naturally become our earliest teachers. Couples respect each other like guests. Parents care for young children. Brothers and sisters love each other. And children clearly know etiquette and respect the elderly. The simple daily life is dotted with elements of "filial piety". A harmonious family must be built on the harmonious relationship between family members, and among them, "filial piety" plays an indispensable role. In *Xue Er of The Analects*, the Master said, "A youth, when at home, should be filial, and, abroad, respectful to his elders. He should be earnest and truthful. He should overflow in love to all, and cultivate the friendship of the good. When he has time and opportunity, after the performance of these things, he should employ them in polite studies."<sup>[2]</sup> In other words, a person must respect his parents, love his brothers, behave in a consistent manner, have a heart of love, and be close to those who have benevolence and morality; if he still has strength after doing this, he is qualified to learn the basics of culture. Simply to speaking, to learn science and culture knowledge, we should start with learning to be a person, and connect theory with reality, rather than be a nerd who can only read and are unreasonable. Therefore, in the modern society, all kinds of schools at all levels have set up "moral education" public courses, and even set up full-time "teachers of moral education" to put moral education before intellectual education, and advocate "first being a man, then doing things, then doing learning". All of these are practice of inheriting the Confucian tradition.

According to the Confucian doctrine, whether a person is fili-

Received: August 25, 2019 Accepted: September 25, 2019

Supported by Social Science Development Research Project of Chenzhou City in 2019 "The Classical Cultural Gene of Family Rules and Its Implications for the Construction of Contemporary Family Rules" (2019117).

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al to his parents or respects his elder brother is definitely not merely a matter of one person or a problem within the family, but a big issue involving social stability and peace in the world. Filial piety in the family is a loyalty to the country. Filial piety is the foundation of the ethical relationship between people and also the foundation for maintaining the social stability. There is a talk between Ji Kang and Confucius in *Wei Zheng of The Analects*, Ji Kang asked how to cause the people to reverence their ruler, to be faithful to him, and to go on to nerve themselves to virtue. The Master (Confucius) said, "Let him preside over them with gravity; then they will reverence him. Let him be final and kind to all; then they will be faithful to him. Let him advance the good and teach the incompetent; then they will eagerly seek to be virtuous." [2] In the opinion of Confucius, participation in politics does not necessarily require making state affairs and does not necessarily require going to the court. Taking the custom of respecting the elderly and caring for the young, filial piety and respecting friends to the politics is also indirectly participation in politics. Such concept is the idea of "regulating the family and ordering the state". As long as we achieve the filial piety in the family, and carry forward and apply it into the political affairs, even if we are not officials, we can make our contribution to the administration of the state.

### 3 Thought of filial piety in *The Analects*

*The Analects* gave a comprehensive interpretation of the filial piety from multiple perspective. According to statistics, the word "filial piety" appeared 19 times in *The Analects*. There are 5 places of mentioning "parents" that are closely related to "filial piety", and 8 places where neither "filial piety" nor "parent" was mentioned, but closely related to the "filial piety". All these contents reflect the idea of Confucius about the filial piety.

**3.1 Filial piety is taking care of parents** Meng Wu asked what filial piety was. The Master said, "Parents are anxious lest their children should be sick." (*Wei Zheng of The Analects* [2]). This means that children should first take care of the physical health of parents. The Master said, "The years of parents may by no means not be kept in the memory, as an occasion at once for joy and for fear." (*Li Ren of The Analects* [2]). This means we should know the age of our parents, we should be glad at their longevity, and should also be concerned with their aging at any time. When our parents get old, we should be glad and gratified at their longevity. Zi Xia asked what filial piety was. The Master said, "The difficulty is with the countenance. If, when their elders have any troublesome affairs, the young take the toil of them, and if, when the young have wine and food, they set them before their elders, is this to be considered filial piety?" (*Wei Zheng of The Analects* [2]). In the opinion of Confucius, we should be kindly and genial when we offer filial piety to our parents. This is difficult. When we have good things and delicious foods, we should

offer to our parents first. However, when getting old, people are often suffered from various diseases. As children, we should immediately take them to hospital and accompany them all the way. When the disease becomes serious, we should accompany and take care of them day and night, and pay close attention to the change of their physical conditions. Caring for the physical and mental health of parents is the manifestation of filial piety. On the contrary, the care of parents for children is a kind of unselfish love. Confucius believed that children have the responsibility and obligation to protect their own physical and mental health. Therefore, as children, taking care of parents is a kind of comfort for parents.

**3.2 Filial piety is respect** Both the filial piety and respect are basic contents of filial piety, but the respect is higher than filial piety in the level. Confucius once questioned the view that "filial piety is equal to taking care of parents". Zi Xia asked what filial piety was. The Master said, "The difficulty is with the countenance. If, when their elders have any troublesome affairs, the young take the toil of them, and if, when the young have wine and food, they set them before their elders, is this to be considered filial piety?" (*Wei Zheng of The Analects* [2]). In the opinion of Confucius, students do things for their teachers, and let teachers enjoy good and delicious things. This is good but it is not the whole content of the filial piety. Apart from the physical care, the filial piety should include mental matters. In other words, children should give more care to parents and the elderly at the mental level, because what they need is not just a delicious dinner, what they need is the accompany of family members. Zi You asked what filial piety was. The Master said, "The filial piety nowadays means the support of one's parents. But dogs and horses likewise are able to do something in the way of support; without reverence, what is there to distinguish the one support given from the other?" (*Wei Zheng of The Analects* [2]). If the filial piety of children to parents only remain at the food and cloth level, it is similar to animals. The Master said, "While his parents are alive, the son may not go abroad to a distance. If he does go abroad, he must have a fixed place to which he goes" [2]. The core of not going abroad to a distance is to make parents rest assured, reduce the worry of parents. This is the most active manifestation of children's caring for parents. In real life, children may not be able to stay with their parents often because of work or other reasons. Therefore, regular greeting becomes the best way of showing filial piety to parents. Certainly, Confucius did not deny the requirement of "filial piety equal to supporting parents". From a rational point of view, although Confucius criticized the narrow filial piety, it is very accurate in terms of being able to set forth such pragmatic requirement. If we do not support out parents well, we are not better than animals.

**3.3 Filial piety is etiquette** Meng Yi asked what filial piety was. The Master said, "It is not being disobedient." Soon after, as Fan Chi was driving him, the Master told him, saying, "Mengsun asked me what filial piety was, and I answered him: 'not be-

ing disobedient'. " Fan Chi said, " What did you mean?" The Master replied, " That parents, when alive, be served according to propriety; that, when dead, they should be buried according to propriety; and that they should be sacrificed to according to propriety. " (*Wei Zheng of The Analects*<sup>[2]</sup>) From this, we can see that "not being disobedient" refers to obeying the etiquette. When parents are alive, we should support them according to the prescribed etiquette. When they are not, we should bury them and arrange funeral in accordance with the etiquette. As stated by Confucius, in festive ceremonies, it is better to be sparing than extravagant. In the ceremonies of mourning, it is better that there be deep sorrow than a minute attention to observances (*Ba Yi of The Analects*<sup>[2]</sup>). Under the premise of not being extravagant and wasted, it is a gift of filial piety to be able to do the funeral have affection, rules, and etiquette<sup>[3]</sup>. In other words, not being disobedient does not mean not following any rule. When parents say the right thing, we should follow them; when they are wrong, we should explain our views to them. However, when we explain our views to them, we should be kind, polite, and courteous, do not deny them without any reasonable reason. We should not deny our parents completely even if we believe our views are reasonable. Communicating with parents should create a harmonious atmosphere, like talking between friends, so that parents feel their importance and respect at all times.

**3.4 Filial piety is loyalty** In the opinion of Confucius, as children, we should keep in mind the instructions of our parents, respect our parents, and maintain the authority of our parents in the family. The Master once said, " 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. " (*Xue Er of The Analects*<sup>[2]</sup>). This can be explained in two aspects. When the father of a person is alive, we should investigate his inspiration; after the death of his father, we should investigate his behavior. If he can follow his father's ideological behavior without change for a long term, it can be said that he is filial. In the opinion of Confucius, when parents are dead, we bury them according to propriety; and provide sacrifice to them according to propriety and have the sad emotion all the time, but these should not be the entire content of the filial piety. As filial children, we should also inherit the will of our parents, be loyal to our parents' wishes, complete their unfinished business, and carry forward their spirits. This is a great respect for parents. The filial piety mentioned by Confucius includes the guidance as parents and inheritance as children. In the opinion of Confucius, only through carrying forward the inspiration of fathers, may children be considered to be filial to their fathers. " If for three years he does not alter from the way of his father, he may be called filial. " This way may be not completely right, but every person is independent and has its own selection right. If the parents' wishes are not in line with their children's ambitions, it will violate the children's autonomy to a large extent and do not

conform to the laws of social development, and it is not conducive to the children's personal growth and entrepreneurial development.

## 4 Implications of the filial piety thought in *The Analects* for the filial culture education in rural areas

**4.1 Filial piety is the beginning of cultivation oneself to be benevolent** "The benevolent loves others". This clearly defines the realm of benevolence. "Loving others" is a moral code. We should love parents and brothers and sisters, love friends and relatives, and love ourselves. Taking the filial piety as the essence of truth and kindness has an indispensable connection with the benevolence. The "filial piety" is the premise of all virtues and the inevitable requirement of becoming benevolent. At the individual level, the filial piety is not only the instinct of natural blood relatives, but the virtue of personal self-cultivation<sup>[4]</sup>.

Not forgetting the love and care of parents, respecting the elders, and thus pushing to the elders who respect others; loving themselves and knowing the truth are the most basic characters of an individual. Everyone grows up from an infant, and everyone will become old. Thinking about this, we should do the following things. First, show filial piety to our parents. On the one hand, we should support our parents when they are old and guarantee their basic living necessities. On the other hand, we should become their dependence when they become old, and communicate with them to satisfy their mental needs. Second, we should love our children. Here, the love is not spoilage, it is not giving children the best foods, clothes and toys. Raising children is a responsibility and obligation. It is also important to educate children correctly. Parents are the best teachers of their children. First, parents should do themselves well, respect the elderly to let the children see their behavior and action, and let the children show the filial piety to you when you are getting old, so as to maintain the inheritance of the filial piety.

**4.2 Filial piety is the foundation of harmonious family relationship** In traditional Chinese culture, the definition of a happy family is "strict father, loving mother, and filial son". However, from the perspective of social reality, with the advent of an aging society, the pressure on rural children to support their parents will affect the harmonious relationship between parents and children to a certain extent, and will undermine the family harmony and social stability. Therefore, to study Confucius's filial piety thought, it is able to cultivate temperament to help us form a correct understanding, alleviate the tension of family, and repair broken family relationships, thus promoting the establishment of a happy family. Nowadays, children's life pressure is very big, parents should understand the difficulties of their children, rather than blindly demanding and blaming, family members have more communication and understanding less blame and disputes, and then can live a happy and harmonious life. As the proverb goes, "A family with an old person has a living treasure of gold." The social life experi-

ence of the elderly is definitely much richer than that of young people. Learning from them can also enrich our knowledge. It also makes the elderly feel that they are needed. When the elderly are alive, we should give them what we can, and do not regret when they are not alive.

Excellent family virtues also lie in brotherhood. At the same time of being grateful for the raising of parents, we should not forget that someone in this world is connected to our blood. As the old saying, the oldest brother is like father. Thus, we should treat our brothers like father, yet brothers should also behave like father. In the actual situation, it is not uncommon for brothers and sisters to evade responsibility for supporting parents. Such kind of behavior is not only the cruelty to the elderly, but also the embarrassment of the brothers. If everyone can correct their own posture, use their own feelings to influence others, and consider more for others, there is nothing difficult to deal with.

**4.3 The "filial piety" is the guarantee of social stability** The materialized development of society has brought about more conflicts of interests, less emotional exchanges, and indifference to the world. In the present rural areas, some people go out to do migrant work. Although they have filial piety, they cannot stay with their parents day and night. Therefore, we must correctly handle the relationship between work and filial piety. Showing filial piety to parents at home and caring for children is the lowest level of filial piety. In the work, we should abide by our duties, loyal to our duties, and we will be able to put the interests of the country and the people in the first place, all of these raise the filial piety to a higher level.

The filial piety thought extending from the individual to the family and then expanding to the society is a gradual process. Loving oneself and showing filial piety is the premise and foundation of loving the family. Loving the family is the root and motivation of loving the society. It is even harder for a person who can't afford family responsibilities to take up his own social responsibilities. Carrying forward the filial piety thought has a positive effect on helping people return to their families and caring for the society. On the one hand, China has proposed a good wish to build a harmonious countryside. As a Chinese citizen, we have the responsibility and obligation to contribute to the country's construction, hundreds of millions of families form the whole society, and every family is an important part of the society. The filial piety thought has been passed down to the present, and it has been the dominant thought of maintaining family harmony and maintaining social stability since ancient times. Through interpreting the filial piety in

*The Analects* and extracting the essence of the correct guiding effect on the family and society, it is favorable for forming the concept of respecting the old and loving the young among the family members, and forming a culture of respecting the old and loving the young in the society. On the other hand, the excessive materialization of society has made people's relationship with no longer purely gracious, and there is more competition in the interests of others. This creates a hidden danger to the harmonious and stable society. The filial piety in *The Analects* allows us to see the excellence of kind and beautiful human nature, teaching people to do good deeds and caring for others. Adjusting the attitude, upholding the correct attitude, handling the relationship with the people around us, moving people with emotion, bringing more warmth to this frozen society, bringing a lot of fragrance to the social relationship that is tainted by bad social customs.

## 5 Conclusions

The "filial piety" is a traditional virtue fostered in the long history and culture of the Chinese nation. It occupies an important position in the ethical norms of Confucianism. In the Confucian classical work *The Analects*, the filial piety embodied in the support, respect, courtesy, and loyalty, the essence contains the individual's responsibility to the family, the country, and the society. The self-love, filial piety, and caring for children in the small family can be extended to the whole society, forming a kind of respect for the old and loving the young. From small to large, and from shallow to deep, the filial piety education will exert its influence gradually and form a centripetal force and cohesiveness of the Chinese nation. Therefore, it is of huge value to vigorously carry forward the thoughts of filial piety to show the filial piety to the old, respect the old and love the young, respect the etiquette and love the country, for the individual growth and development, family harmony and social development.

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