

Cognitive Interpretation of Confucian Filial Piety

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Abstract:

Filial piety, as a key component in Confucianism, together with other virtues like benevolence, righteousness, rite, etc. plays crucial relationship in Chinese culture, making Chinese nation survive in good and bad times. Books like *The Analects of Confucius*, *Classics of Filial Piety*, record and enrich this idea, making filial piety get improved and widely accepted in China. In the new era of socialist society, due to the influence of market economy and western thought, some more attention was paid to earning money and higher social status, causing degradation of certain virtues, especially moral standard. Then, filial piety has its significance in such a situation.

Keywords:

Filial Piety, Connotation, Denotation, Contemporary Value

1. Introduction

Filial piety, together with benevolence, righteousness, rite, wisdom, loyalty, etc. forms core ideas of Confucianism. Such elements are independent but interdependent. In Confucianism, filial piety is regarded as the most fundamental virtue, also the root of other virtues, which means that in Confucianism, filial piety comes before and counts more than any other virtues like benevolence, righteousness, rite, etc. In Chinese history, thinkers and ideologists have always been trying their utmost to interpret, enrich and carry forward Confucian filial piety, in order to make people have a happy family, stable society and powerful state.

Enjoying popular support in Chinese, filial piety has existed for a long time, but without affirmation about its proposer. Despite such fact, it is still universally acknowledged that filial piety was only kind of earthy and spontaneous moral form in initial stages of its production and early development. Another widely accepted idea of it was that it plays a critical role in Confucianism. There is no better saying than filial piety is the foundation of all virtues, to confirm the decisive role of filial piety in Confucianism. This saying tells the truth that filial piety has long been existing in Chinese spirit. It also displays the position and significance of filial piety in the Chinese nation. Meanwhile, such concept can also be understood as that filial piety works as the root of other virtues, like benevolence, righteousness, rite, etc.

Undoubtedly, filial piety derives from conscious love and respect to one's parents and ancestors. Filial piety has got elucidated in several Confucian classics, like *the Analects of Confucius*, *the Classic of Filial piety*, *Bai Hu Tong Yi*. Such elucidation displays the developing clue of filial piety. In *the Analects of Confucius*, filial piety was only a kind of natural emotion, reflecting the tender feelings and love in a family, also a virtue. While in how to deal with the relationship between filial piety and monarchical power, Confucius thought that when a king values filial piety and kindness, people would naturally be loyal. In *the classic of Filial Piety*, filial piety got dominated by paternity, a kind of responsibility and obligation, which led to the absolute position of monarchical power, extending filial piety from family to society and politics, ensuring the concept of monarchical power exceeding paternity. Later, *Bai Hu Tong Yi*, after combining Confucian concepts of paternity, monarchical power and Legalist concept of Three Cardinal Guides, produced the doctrines of "father guiding son" and "king guiding subjects". Till then, filial piety kind of became a tool used to shackle people's ideas in feudal autocracy.

Based on these, it is safe to say that the development of filial piety in Chinese history is a process of making filial piety become a whole ideological system from its original spontaneous morality, a social norm from original family moral norm, led by the Confucian thinkers, represented by Confucius.

2. Connotation and Denotation of Filial Piety

About the content and essence of filial piety, people hold various opinions because it really covers many fields, like family, politics, etc. Some people even discussed certain aspect of it. For example, Xiao Qunzhong [1] once expressed his idea of the moral essence of filial piety. He holds that morally speaking, filial piety should cover four meanings, affection, respect loyalty and obedience of one's ancestors. Therefore, it is necessary to interpret filial piety in its connotation and denotation.

2.1. Connotation of Filial Piety

Xu Jianyong [2] holds that, five implications can be generalized from Confucian Filial Piety, especially the 19 times of filial piety mentioned in *the Analects of Confucius*. One is that filial piety functions in both a family and a patriarchal clan. Another is the connotation of filial piety, supporting, burial, sacrificing, respecting and entertaining. A third is that equity is the guarantee of the right and interest of filial piety. A fourth is the criteria deciding filial piety are inheriting, honoring and compromising. The last is filial piety is a standard to judge a person in life and politics. Such generalization tells not only the ranges from family to society that filial piety works, but also shows the exact stages and patterns, namely, supporting, burial, sacrificing, respecting and entertaining, that filial piety works in a family. Meanwhile, it displays the equity in human relationship, namely, between father and son, and that between king and subjects.

Meanwhile, Tu Yaowei [3] holds that filial piety includes three cultural connotations. One is the base of filial piety, that is, a father covers a son, and vice versa, which means that father and son should cover the opposite, even if such covering might lead to mistakes, even a crime. A second is the way to practice filial piety. The way is that a son should treat his parents with rite when they are alive and bury them with rite when they are dead. The third is the dual character of filial piety, namely, the extension of filial piety to loyalty. Such extension is mainly about the

scope and application of filial piety. The Confucian book *Classic of Filial Piety* puts it this way, “To begin with, filial piety works on family matters. Later, it deals with the king. At last, filial piety works in the whole world.

While Xiao Qunzhong [1] holds that filial piety enjoys three connotations, namely, respecting one’s ancestors, treating one’s parents well, and carrying on the family line. The three connotations represent the past, the present and the future respectively. Therefore, through the idea of filial piety, ancestors, parents, people of the same generation, of the following generations, and the past, the present, the future are connected closely in Confucianism, demanding people paying attention to the past, the present and the future, especially the future of the family and the whole state. Such ideas are the best proof for the fact that Confucianism contributed to the formation and development of the feelings of family and state among Chinese.

2.2. Denotation of Filial Piety

Apart from the limited but profound connotation, filial piety shoulders profound and far-reaching denotation as an important aspect of Confucianism, which means that it has much to do with other moral items of Confucianism.

a. Filial Piety and Benevolence

Duan Youguo [4] considers that Confucian benevolence consists of six aspects of connotation, namely, the benevolent love others, principle of benevolence and loyalty, love all the people and animals, people are more important than the rules, principle of communication, and unity of heaven and man. Among them is the most important essence of benevolence, that is, to love people. Of course, parents are part of people. Therefore, the first and foremost request of loving people is to love parents, which is to show respect to them. That is to say, there is natural connection between filial piety and benevolence. However, it doesn’t mean that filial piety and benevolence could be displayed as one pleases. Anyone should follow certain rules and norms in loving others or honoring their parents. Only when one is holding benevolence, will he behold filial piety to his parents. Likewise, only when one holds and displays his filial piety to his parents, will he be really benevolent to others. People often think that the way a benevolent person deals with things is quite like the way a dutiful son treats his parents. Therefore, Confucianism sticks to the idea that filial piety is the root of benevolence, which can also be understood as that once a person bears the cultivation and quality of filial piety, he can treat his parents well, which will usually lead to treating others well. Hence, filial piety in a family can be regarded as the basis of dealing with people outside of a family, which usually requires benevolence. So, it is still true that benevolence is the ultimate goal of filial piety. Moreover, Zhang Chuang [5] holds that filial piety is the foundation of benevolence, while benevolence is the spiritual core of filial piety, which means that there is no filial piety, there is no benevolence, and filial piety without benevolence would become hollow.

b. Filial Piety and Righteousness

Duan Youguo [6] holds that what filial piety transmits is the relationship in a family, affection between family members, and the relationship between the elder and the young. And righteousness bears five connotations, being righteous, being good, being courteous, being voluntary, and being obligatory. Therefore, filial piety is a family morality, stressing love and affection, while righteousness is a public virtue, based on rationalism, bearing objectivity and universality.

While in the very beginning, *The Classic of Filial Piety* says “Filial piety is the root of good virtues, including righteousness.” Such saying reveals the close relationship between filial piety and righteousness. However, they also differ from each. Before being a governing rule in politics, what filial piety stresses first is the human relationship between father and son. While what righteousness stresses is the standard by which people conduct themselves in society, which means that righteousness covers wider ranges than filial piety. As a son, anyone should first show filial piety to his ancestors. Filial piety here includes the meanings of compliance and obedience. But as man in the society, anyone should take the criterion of righteousness into consideration when doing anything, which means that the correctness and sense of justice counts first in one’s behaviors. Therefore, some conflict between filial piety which means obedience and righteousness which means correctness and sense of justice will become unavoidable. In certain situation, it is true that to show filial piety (obedience) is likely to do something wrong, an action against righteousness. It is also true that to do something correct might mean disobedience, which is opposite to filial piety. Thus, despite the fact that filial piety is the root of righteousness, righteousness will not always follow filial piety. Sometimes they may run counter to each.

c. Filial Piety and Rite

Duan Youguo [7] argues that Confucian rite should be interpreted in both broad and narrow ways. The broad rite says rite covers political, religious, cultural , personal, moral fields; while the narrow rite mainly refers to basic moral norms, etiquette and politeness, like social rules, customs, manners, behavior, etc. As mentioned above, Tu Yaowei [3] mentioned the ways to make filial piety come true, namely, a son should treat his parents with rite when they are alive and bury them with rite when they are dead. Actually, this is also the basic criterion of filial piety proposed by Confucius. So, compared with filial piety, rite here is in its narrow sense, which means one should treat his parents with rite anytime, live or dead. When they live, a son should know more about their preference and living habits, comfort them spiritually, but not support them with material only. Besides, to treat parents with rite should also be obedient and compliant. To be obedient does not mean to follow one’s parents blindly. It means not to quarrel with them immediately when a son has some different opinions, but to discuss the difference with them at a better time. This put-aside method is quite different from overtly agreeing but covertly opposing. To be compliant is close in meaning to being compliant. But to be compliant pays more attention to inherit and carry forward the ambitions of the parents. When parents apart, apart from carrying forward their ambitions, a son should first bury them with rite, then offer sacrifice to them, which is a way to express the son’s gratefulness and to share his recent advancing.

Based on these, it’s safe to say that within a family, filial piety and rite supplement each other. Filial piety is what one carries in mind and does in action, while rite is how one does in action. Generally speaking, how one does in action usually happens after what one has in mind. And then what one holds in mind increases. It means that one will treat his parents with rite when one bears much filial piety in mind. Vice versa, treating his parents with filial piety will increase one’s filial piety and appreciation to his parents.

d. Filial Piety and Loyalty

Loyalty is a traditional fine morality in Chinese nation. Nowadays, the daily mentioned loyalty mainly refers to loyalty to the king. According to Confucianism, loyalty works on both king and normal people, about which, Zhu Xi [8] put it this way, “Anyone should be loyal to his words and deeds”. It clarifies the principles of being loyal to people and to what one does, which endows loyalty with the meanings of trying one’s utmost, unselfishness, and integrity, etc. It also declares that loyalty is a moral rule of treating others with integrity, stressing the importance of connection between people. Therefore, both loyalty and filial piety work hard at trying to persuading people to head for goodness or charity. As time went on, loyalty and filial piety worked side by side to produce the political ideology of governing by filial piety, which resulted in a standard of selection and appointment, that is, one must be loyal if he could treat the king with filial piety, which is also a product of the development of moral principles and patriarchal society bonded by kinship.

Ren Yue [9] insists that in Confucianism, loyalty and filial piety possess strong correlation and consistency, but in practice, such conflicts and dilemmas as “No one can display loyalty and filial piety at the same time” become unavoidable. In Neo-Confucianism, Cheng-Zhu School tried to defuse such dilemma with the idea of “Treat parents with humble filial piety, while king with great one”. In concept, such idea formed new demarcation between ideas of family and state, public and private, etc., which circulates in new context in modern times and has had profound influence on Chinese thinking mode and behavior, helping to mould the national collective consciousness of state-first- family-second and public-business-come-before-private-affairs.

3. Contemporary Value of Filial Piety

After thousands of years of spreading and consistent change, filial piety still has top status and value in Chinese. It is also an important criterion by which Chinese regulate family relationship and govern the country. At present, China is in a new era of socialism and social transition. Developing socialist market economy, building harmonious socialist society, the whole nation are making arduous efforts to realize the beautiful China Dream. In such a special era, the whole society is experiencing an unprecedented revolution, which may lead to all kinds of negative factors, leading to negative results. Then it is more than necessary and urgent to have a spirit to maintain a happy family, keep a stable society, ensure economic development, and promote social progress. Filial piety is such a spirit. Xiao Qunzhong [1] asserts that to call for filial piety at present benefits two aspects. One is to make parent-child relationship more harmonious, and to help to solve the increasingly severe problem of supporting old people in China; the other is it helps to cultivate better sense of moral responsibility in Chinese, and improve Chinese moral quality. Ye Jianlan [10] insists that to carry forward the good tradition of filial piety does not only conform to natural law and China’s national condition, but also contributes to overcome the negative influence brought about by the utilitarian of market economy, building harmonious and warm family circumstance. Still, it conduces to the talent cultivation of patriotism, which contributes more to the building of better morality.

Based on the above interpretation of the connotation and denotation of filial piety, taking the present situation into consideration, it is safe to draw the conclusion that it is of much significance to carry forward this very fine tradition of Chinese nation, which works in many aspects of modern world, like the building of happy family, stabilizing of orderly society, conquering the negative influence of market economy,

enhancing the construction of socialist morality, promoting the building of law-ruling society, etc.

3.1. Helps to Build and Maintain a Happy Family Life

According to the idea of filial piety, a son should first be obedient to his father because fathers are usually more knowledgeable, more experienced, especially when the kids are still young. However, the obedience doesn't mean blind following. It means that when there is different opinion between a father and a son, especially the father is on the wrong side, the son should wait for a better chance to persuade his father instead of doing that immediately. Filial piety also grants superiority to parents. Apart from the superiority and obedience of a son to his father, equality should also stand between father and his son. Equal status in a family ensures equal chances for all generations in almost everything. Therefore, obedience is to respect the father, which is also a good way to set an example for next generation. Equality talks about mental status in a family, which helps people to put down their mental burden when dealing with matters. With respect inside and equality outside, happy family life must be on the way.

3.2. Helps to Build a Harmonious Society

Social harmony covers many aspects, including politics, economy, culture, etc., which means to coordinate and alleviate any possible conflicts in all aspects in the society. As mentioned above that filial is the root of all other virtues. Filial piety will lead to benevolence, righteousness, rite, etc. Benevolence in mind, no one will hurt others because they should love all. Righteousness in mind, no one will commit a crime, not even a mistake because they will think twice before doing anything. Rite in mind, people will be more likely to give but not take. Loyalty in mind, people will keep to their promise, and remain true to their original idea. Thus, a harmonious society will be touchable.

3.3. Helps to Build Better Socialist Rule of Law

As one core element of socialist core values, rule of law means a lot, especially taking the past rules of governance in China, which depended more on rule of people. The biggest problem in rule of people is the relationship instead of actual rules counts more when making some judges. Gu Rongxing [11] holds that promoting the substantive rule of law is an important way to realize the development of the rule of law and improve the quality of the rule of law. At the same time, the promotion of the substantive rule of law should follow the "people-centered" nature of the rule of law and the objective is conducive to the promotion of the rule of law and the formation of the "rule of law ecology". As mentioned above, filial piety covers dealing with the relationships both between father and son, and king and subject, which means that in dealing with social matters, rules instead of relationship will count as long as the one holds social equality and justice, and national interest in mind. Nowadays, there is no longer a king. A subject, neither. But there is still country, social equality and justice. Therefore, what the law-executors should bring in mind when executing laws is rules and laws, which stand for equality and justice.

4. Conclusions

As an important theoretical category in Confucianism, despite the changes it has experienced, filial piety has played decisive role in the stability and development of

Chinese nation. Through unremitting efforts of numerous ideologists, both connotation and denotation of filial piety have got largely expanded and enriched. Filial piety did not only lead to the changes to Chinese nation ideologically and psychologically, but also maintained social stability and kept family harmony actively.

Currently, unprecedented changes and revolution is happening to the whole country and family values. Su Xi'e [12] emphasizes that in China, serious moral abnormality phenomena and more ill-treating-parents cases become much common due to deficiency of moral education, and deficiency of family education and school education as a result of the fact that too much attention was paid to education in money and social status. At present, based on socialist core values, and aiming at making great rejuvenation of Chinese nation, the whole nation are trying their utmost to construct harmonious socialist society and realize great China Dream. At such a crucial time, such evil phenomena will not only bring stigma to the traditional virtues, but also will cast shadows over our long-term goal. Therefore, it is high time to interpret and publicize Confucian thought of filial piety comprehensively and systematically to make its proper values come into play, which could be used as example for dealing with inter-personal relationship, especially father-and-son relationship. Such interpretation and publicity will also work in preventing and treating many social and family problems China is being and will be faced with, because all families are closely connected with the state. Harmony in a family will contribute to national stability. Vice versa, national stability will surely promote harmony in a family.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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