

“Filial Piety” in The Analects of Confucius and “Filial Piety” in Today’s Society

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Abstract: Against today’s backdrop of “filial piety” in society, the “filial piety” in *the Analects of Confucius* triggered heated debates. Since ancient times, “filial piety”, which is of great importance to traditional Chinese culture, has been an important part of Confucianism. “Ingratitude” will inevitably be condemned by society. But nowadays, “irrational filial piety” will turn into “foolish filial piety”. Therefore, what people should do is to carry out “rational filial piety” and carry forward Chinese traditional culture critically so as to make contribution to building a harmonious socialist society.

Keywords: Filial piety; The Analects of Confucius; Foolish filial piety; Rational filial piety; Traditional Chinese culture

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1 Introduction

“Filial piety” is one of the values widely spread in China from ancient times to the present, and is the traditional virtue of the Chinese nation. As the Chinese saying goes, “Of all virtues, filial piety is the first”, it can be seen that Chinese attach great importance to filial piety. “Filial piety” is also mentioned in many places in *the Analects of Confucius*. In *the Analects of Confucius*, “filial piety” is mostly reflect between parents and brothers and sisters, and a small part is reflected in the aspects of God and nature. with the help of *the Analects of Confucius*, this paper mainly discusses and analyzes the phenomenon of “unfilial” and “foolish filial piety” between parents and children in today’s society, which

both need to be avoided in real life, so as to grasp the true meaning of “filial piety” and carry forward the traditional virtues of the Chinese nation better.

2 Introduction to *the Analects of Confucius*

The Analects of Confucius is a collection of quotations compiled by the disciples of Confucius and their successors. The whole book has 20 articles, 402 chapters, which mainly records the words and deeds of Confucius and his disciples, and embodies the political, moral and educational views of Confucius. *The Analects of Confucius* is one of the classic works of the Confucian school. It is called the “Four Books” together with *the Great Learning, the Doctrine of the Mean and Mencius*. And together with the “Five Classics”, *the Book of Songs, the Book of History, the Book of Rites, the Book of Changes and the Spring and Autumn Annals*, they are collectively known as the “Four Books and Five Classics”.

3 The expression of filial piety in *the Analects of Confucius*

In *the Analects of Confucius*, the word “filial piety” has been mentioned many times. Filial piety between children and their parents is mainly divided into three aspects: support, obedience and burial.

3.1 Support parents

The most basic level of “support” is “raise”. People are familiar with the story of “crows feeding its parents”. Even animals know how to repay their parents. As human beings, they should have such conscience^[1]. It is not easy for parents to bring up their children through hard work. As children, they should also “raise” their parents when their parents are old and frail. Tsze-hsia

said in *Xue Er of the Analects of Confucius* , “In serving his parents, he can exert his utmost strength^[2].” It means to do your best to serve your parents.

The deeper level of “support” is “respect”. “Respect” means “respect”. We should respect our parents while raising them. In *Wei Zheng of the Analects of Confucius* , it is written that: “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^[3]?” This means that many people think that filial piety means “raising”, but “raising” can be done even for dogs and horses. Human beings should respect their parents, and “disrespect” to their parents can not be called “filial piety”. “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^[4]?” It means that it is the most difficult thing for children to do when their elders have troublesome affairs and to let their parents eat the food and wine without giving them face Which Confucius hidden between the lines is: Children who show displeasure when they show filial respect for their parents should not be called “filial piety”. Filial piety and respect for parents means that children should be aware of the importance of nurturing and respecting their parents from the heart, so that parents can feel the happiness of being filial.

3.2 Compliance

Nowadays, what people call “filial piety” means “piety” and “obedience”. Confucius believed that children should obey their parents. In *Wei Zheng of the Analects of Confucius* , it is written that: Mang Yizi asked what filial piety was. Confucius said, “It is not being disobedient^[5].” “Disobedient” means not against the wishes of parents. However, Confucius also believed that if the parents were unreasonable or even wrong, the children would not be obedient. Instead, they should be good at admonishing their relatives and helping the parents to realize and correct their own mistakes. In *Li Ren of the Analects of Confucius*, it is written that: Confucius said, “In serving his 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.” This means that children still

need to respect, rather than resent, their parents when they know they will not obey, and they should guide their parents to have the right values in order to behave correctly.

3.3 Burial

According to Confucius, “filial piety” to parents is not only reflected in the support and obedience of parents before their death, but also reflected in the attention paid to funeral etiquette after the death of parents and three years of filial piety. In *Wei Zheng of the Analects of Confucius* , it points out that: “For parents, they should be buried according to propriety and sacrificed to according to propriety^[6].” It means to observe etiquette at the funeral of parents, as well as at the time of the sacrifice of parents. The ancients said that a baby can’t be completely separated from his parents’ arms until he is three years old. Therefore, in order to repay their parents’ kindness, children also need them to observe filial piety for three years after their parents’ death. With the development of the times, the saying “keeping one’s filial piety for three years” is out of date and impractical, but it can help people not forget their original intention and thank their parents for their love.

4 Reflection on “unfilial” in today’s society

“Unfilial” can be either intentional or unintentional on the part of the child. In recent years, a video that has been circulating on the Internet has caused people to think deeply. In the background of the video is the corridor of a residential building. A 17-8-year-old boy yells at his father who is the courier. The son has been abusing his father, saying that his father can not earn money to buy him an Apple phone, which is really incompetent. But the aggrieved father was silent in the face of his son’s behavior. What’s more, the son made his father admit his mistake and knelt down. The father choked and said, “son, I’m wrong” and knelt down slowly. In people’s eyes, such behavior is really incredible. At the end of the short video, the photographer’s sigh is clearly audible. Most netizens’ comments are: The father knew that his condition was not good, and he always tried his best to give the child what he wanted, which is the spoiling that eventually hurt the child. It is true that the son’s behavior goes against the traditional Chinese virtue of filial piety. In the traditional sense, “filial piety” requires “children kneel down to their parents”. Although this concept is not very appropriate nowadays, it also violates the “filial piety”. The main reason for this phenomenon is

“spoiling”, that is, parents have been unconditionally pleasing or even playing up to their children. Jessica, a famous parenting expert, believes that: “The ‘pleaser’ parent is unable to stand their children is unhappy. They focus on the child and don’t try to teach him what is the most effective way to interact with others. For a long time, the child will think the whole world should revolve around him and become very self-centered^[7].” If parents spoil their children too much, the inheritance of filial piety is bound to be hindered.

“Empty nest elderly” is also a hot word in recent years. It refers to that children work outside and leave their elderly parents at home, with little regard for their parents. There are many news reports that the empty nest elderly died at home a few days before his neighbors found out. With the implementation of the family planning policy, almost every couple has only one child, so pension has become a big problem in modern China. According to the statistics of Shaanxi daily , by 2017, China’s population over 60 has exceeded 24,000, accounting for about 20% of the total population. Among them, about 40% of the elderly children are far away from home. Due to the huge work pressure and work pressure, the children hardly can “come back home often”^[8]. Some empty nest elderly, even if their bodies are still strong, are also facing psychological loneliness. They are always concerned about their children, but they are afraid to disturb them. Such contradictory emotions also perplex the empty nest elderly. However, for children, they also want to be filial to their parents, but due to the pressure of real life, they have to leave their parents to work outside. Today, the government has written “the obligation of children to support the elderly” into law and plans to implement relevant welfare policies to encourage children to “come back home often”. In order to carry forward the traditional virtues of the Chinese nation, the national government has gradually begun to pay attention to the phenomenon of “empty nest elderly”. It is also necessary to add “supporting the elderly” in Chinese laws. However, supporting the elderly can not only stay in the form, but also need the children’s will from the heart. When the children are busy, they take the initiative to spend only 20 minutes talking on the phone or video with the elderly at home. The elderly will also feel cheerful. When taking time to visit the elderly at rest, chatting and walking with them, the loneliness of the elderly will be greatly reduced and the probability of disease will also be reduced. In short, the society

must form a “filial piety” ethos, publicize reasonable “filial piety” more, and put an end to the prevalence of “unfilial ethos”.

5 *The Analects of Confucius* and the “foolish filial piety” in today’s society

Children should not always obey their parents, or they will become “foolish filial piety”. However, many ignorant people misunderstand *Ba Yi of the Analects of Confucius* saying that “A prince should employ his minister according to the rules of propriety; ministers should serve their prince with faithfulness” as “The emperor makes the minister die, the minister does not die and the minister is disloyal; The father calls the son dead, the son does not die, the son is unfilial”. Today, people call this slogan “foolish loyalty and filial piety”. Foolish filial piety is “blind” filial piety to parents. Confucius believed that the word “The difficulty is with the countenance” is controversial. It is also too reckless and arbitrary to deny the filial piety of children to their parents only by “lust”. Many articles on chicken soup for the soul wrote that the children who take care of the elderly in front of hospital beds are often not the favorite children in the family. When they serve the elderly, as long as they are slightly embarrassed or sometimes do not fully comply with their parents’ wishes, their parents will not give them a good look. At this time, they show anger and sometimes scold their parents, which is not “unfilial”. Or some children get little or no love from their parents when they are young. When children grow up, they ignore their parents, which is not “unfilial”. Although filial piety is a traditional virtue of the Chinese nation for thousands of years, filial piety of children should also be based on mutual respect between parents and children. Parents also need to respond to filial piety of their children, so that their children can be more happy to be filial. If the parents do not know how to respect their children, their children still blindly obey their parents, which is also the performance of “foolish filial piety”.

Foolish filial piety is the utilitarianism of filial piety. Since the establishment of the system, filial piety has become one of the means of ruling the country. Since then, in order to encourage and carry forward filial piety, the state has also introduced policies to reward those who practice filial piety. But “filial piety” only stays on the surface, or uses “filial piety” to obtain more benefits. Recently, a video of a traditional Chinese culture lesson circulated on the Internet has aroused

heated discussion. In the video, hundreds of students kowtow to their parents and wash their feet together. The school's interpretation of this course is: Students can learn to be grateful to their parents through such courses. However, several experts and scholars believe that this is just to keep the "filial piety" on the surface, and suspect that the school is actually deliberately doing it for the sake of making a gimmick. However, kowtowing to parents and washing their feet are not "filial piety". "Filial piety" does not have to be a formal concept, nor does it have to be a gimmick, a kind of satisfaction or a means to gain profits. It is a good moral character that needs to be internalized in people's hearts.

The social customs require filial piety for children, but there are too many ancient documents that record "foolish filial piety", such as the "With deep concern, tasting his father's stool", "Buried son to support his mother". It must be admitted that "foolish filial piety" is harmful to individuals and society, and it is the "dross" of traditional culture and must be removed. Filial piety is not a game of power. Children are not subordinate to their parents. Therefore, parents and children need to rely on each other and respect each other in order to maintain the affection, and "filial piety" can be passed on better.

6 Conclusions

There are many records of filial piety in *the Analects of Confucius*. In *the Analects of Confucius*, the filial piety of children to their parents is now in the following three aspects: Support, obedience and burial. In real life, people should be filial to their parents in time,

internalize "filial piety" in their hearts, and stop the "unfilial" in society, so that the flowers of reasonable "filial piety" will bloom in the society. However, as Marx said, everything should have a degree, filial piety is no exception. Confucius said going too far is as bad as not going far enough, which should be avoided in every era^[9]. "Foolish filial piety" is also a kind of extreme filial piety, so it should be abandoned by the society. Therefore, as a new socialist country, China can learn from *the Analects of Confucius* to vigorously promote the reasonable "filial piety", so that the traditional virtues of the Chinese nation continue to lead the Chinese people to a new level.

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