





An Interpretation of the Three Classics of Confucianism in the West

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Mingxin Li at Henan Polytechnic University

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INTRODUCTION

I.Xiao Jing (The Book of Filial Piety) and the Twenty-four Filial Piety Examples

1. Part One deals with "Xiao Jing" (孝经), English translation The Book of Filial Piety is generally held to be the work of an unknown pupil of Tsêng Ts'an (曾参), the disciple of Confucius, to whom is attributed the famous Confucian classic known as The Great Learning. Certainly it can be traced back as far as 400 B.C., within a century from the death of Confucius. The preservation of the text in its present form is due to the Emperor Tang Ming Huang (A.D. 685-762), who had it engraved, together with eleven other of the Confucian writings, on tablets of stone and set up in his capital of Chang-an. He afterwards added a commentary of his own, which is still extant, and has proved invaluable to all commentators of a later period. The Book of Filial Duty is often recited in China bound up with DiZi Gui, of which the following is a specimen: The way to become a student is with modest and humility, receiving with confidence every word spoken by the master. The pupil, when he sees men of virtue, should try to follow in their steps; when he hears wise sayings, he should try to conform to them. He must not harbour evil designs, but always act honorably. Whether at home or abroad, he must have a fixed abode, and resort with those who are well disposed, regulating his demeanour with care and self-disciplinary. Few books have enjoyed greater popularity amongst all educational

classes in China than The Book of Filial Piety. Equally it is The Book of Youth(蒙学), being the first treatise of importance placed in the hands of children, after the horn books of elementary instruction. The reason for its survival after so many centuries is not hard to seek, since Chinese family life has always been, from time immemorial, the foundation-stone of the Chinese Empire, and filial piety is the foundation-stone of family life. Nor does this duty of son to father merely extend to the living. The living head of the family pays due reverence to the countless ancestors who have preceded him. Chinese believe the spirit of ancestors and the essence of teachings of a family should be inherited generations by generations. Family reverence is the core teaching that makes up the collective conscientiousness. The Oriental ideas are so quite different from that of the West. We will venture to judge that the Oriental ideals of family life are superior or inferior to the Occidental ideas. For centuries, a large number of western scholars hold the view that the Oriental ethics emphasizes the collective, the interests of the family are always greater than the interests of the individual, and the individual must submit itself to the collective; but in fact, in Chinese philosopher and education, the collective and the individual never the opposite pole, the individual is the smallest unit to constitute the biggest society. The individual grows up in a family, what he/ she abide by is the family's teaching which has been tested by history and universally accepted by Chinese people. In that case, filial piety in Confucianism has been greatly focusing for ages, because it constitutes the essence of traditional culture. What Confucianism to Chinese is what Christian to the west. So the meaning of "filial piety" can extend, not only to one's parents, to one's siblings, but also to one's departed for-fathers. They will not be forgotten, for it will be the duty of their sons to offer sacrifice to their shades. The death-days of two generations of parents are kept sacred with solemn festival, and the nameless and unnumbered dead have their special days of ceremony and remembrance in the spring and autumn. Every house has its family shrine, every village its hall of ancestors. Thus the filial piety of the survivors honours those who have gone.

As regards the living, respect is the great essential of daily intercourse. The subject respects his emperor, the son his father, the wife her husband, and the younger brother his elder brother. But respect is not only for those older than us, or of superior station. The wisdom of Confucius is nowhere more clearly shown than in his utterance concerning the respect to be paid to youth: A youth is to be regarded with respect. How do we know that his future will not be equal to our present? The Chinese national spirit is a spirit of continuity; the spirit of the Confucian philosophy is a spirit of harmony with the environment of daily life. The Way (Tao) of Confucius is nothing more than the way in which he as a particular person chose to live his life. The power and lasting value of his ideas lie in the fact that, as we will endeavor to show, they are intuitively persuasive and readily adaptable.

Confucius begins from the insight that the life of almost every human being is played out within the context of his or her particular family, for better or for worse. For Confucius and for generations of Chinese to come, the basic unit of humanity is this person in this family, rather than the solitary individual or the equally abstract notion of family. The first environment of the human soul is that of the family. Before we can become good subjects, before we can aspire to study nature and mold ourselves upon the laws of heaven and earth, we must first of all learn to become good sons, to complete the unity of family life. All things will be added in their due course. To the Chinese mind the successful policy in life aims at harmony by adjustment. This policy runs from highest to lowest, and back again from lowest to highest. The emperor adjusts himself to the requirements of his great ministers, they in their turn to the provincial governors, they in their turn to the local magistrates, and so on down the scale of social order. It is important to note that in promoting the family as the pervasive model of order, Xiao that is focused on the bottom-up deference and respect that children owe their elders must be distinguished clearly from that shown to the pater-families. Being truly filial within the family, like being a loyal minister within the court, requires obligatory remonstrance rather than automatic compliance. In the Book of Filial Piety 15, Confucius responds to Master Zeng's question on reverence can be understood as obedience as follows: if confronted by reprehensible behavior on his father's part, a son has no choice but to remonstrate with his father, and if confronted by reprehensible behavior on his ruler's part, a minister has no choice but to

remonstrate with his ruler. Hence, remonstrance is the only response to immorality. In this sense, filial piety never means simply obedience and subject to the above.

2. The Twenty-four Examples of Filial Duty

For early education, The Twenty-four Examples of Filial Duty by way of illustration to the Hsiao Ching which is usually grouped with The Book of Filial Piety. They are naïve and terse, and yet not without their simple charm. Even where they lend themselves to exaggeration, as in the story of the old gentleman who dressed himself in gay garments and frisked in front of his very venerable parents, they are not meaningless nor devoid of humanity. The lesson to be drawn is that our duty towards our parents is the first obligation in life, and that we should go, if necessary, to all lengths to fulfill it. Nothing is known of the authorship of these stories, or the time in which they are written. Each story is accompanied by its commentary, and probably the stories themselves originated during the Ming dynasty (A.D. 1368-1644), the commentaries belonging mostly to the latter years of that dynasty. The period dealt with in these tales is a very wide one, and ranges from the time of the great Emperor Shun (circa 2300 B.C.) down to the Sung dynasty (A.D. 900-1200). There have been many editions of The Twenty-four Examples of Filial Piety in Chinese, mostly embellished with quaint and original woodcuts, Nowadays, it spreads all over the world and arise the modern educationist's attention to reflect the moral education.

With the Chinese the natural joys of life, love always been the most sought after. Home, family, friendship and nature —these are the pleasures which they delight in. The religion of Confucius is the religion of daily life. On the side of the parent there is responsibility; on the side of the child, obedience, but not a blind one. Family reverence is functioning effectively within the home, all is well within the community, the polity, and indeed, the cosmos. Family filial piety is the root, and as Confucius states in the Analects explicitly: Junzi focus on the moral root since the root having taken hold, the proper way will grow there from (君子务 本, 本立则道生)To teach children to grow up to be a worthy man is the greatest job for parents, and parents should reflect on themselves if there is misdoing in the children. On the other hand, the obedient son must be able to discriminate and not follow blindly, when the father is at fault. In the Li Chi, or Book of Rites, the sage taught the young how to behaviour himself when his parents are in error, the son must remonstrate with them with respect and gently. If they do not receive his reproof, he must strive more and more to be dutiful and respectful towards them till they are pleased, and then he must again point out their fault. In this way, the awe-in-spring righteousness will prevails in a family even influence the society.

II. The Base to be a Upright Person----An Interpretation of Dizi Gui

DiZi Gui or The Standards of Being a Child and Student in English, is an ancient Chinese book handed down to us from

ancient Chinese saints and sages. It was written by a scholar Yuxiu Li in Qing dynasty of China. The source for the outline of this book was selected from *The Analects of Confucius*, Book 1, Chapter 6, where Confucius said:

"A young man's duty is to behave well to his parents at home and to his elders abroad, to be cautious in giving promises and punctual in deepening them, to have kindly feelings towards everyone, but seek the intimacy of the Good. When all that is done, he has any energy to spare, and then let him acquire knowledge and arts to uplift his cultural and spiritual life."

The main outline of this book is based on the teachings of Confucius, a great Chinese scholar, philosopher and educator. He was born in China about twenty-five hundred years ago, about the same time that Shakyamuni Buddha was born in India. Confucius deeply influenced Chinese culture, and this influence extends throughout the world even today. He believed that moral principles, virtues, and discipline are the foundation of society, which should be the very first lessons to be taught to a child, and a child needs to practice them daily. It was most important for ancient Chinese parents to teach their children to aware that the moral principles and virtues prior to any other subjects, because without it, the learning of all other subjects would be futile.

The sequence of ancient Chinese educational system that based on the Confucian teachings is as follows:

A young man's duty is to behave well to his parents at home and to his elders abroad;

To be cautious in giving promises and punctual in keeping them;

To have kindly feelings towards everyone, show affection towards his subjects in general;

When all that is done, he has any energy to spare, then can start the arts learning.

We need to understand that Confucius and Shakyamuni Buddha shared almost the same principles and teaching methods. They both taught us that being dutiful to one's parents and being respectful to one's teachers are the basis of a person's good virtues. If we can appreciate the fact that the study of virtues was a child's first subject in school, then we will realize how important it was for a child to be dutiful at home.

The principles of Confucian teachings make it a person's duty to strive to be fully enlightened, to practice universal love and to be a perfectly virtuous person who rests in harmony. This is the summation of Confucian beliefs. Therefore, the usage of ritual is stressed, both small matters and great depend upon it. If things go amiss, people knows the harmony will be able to attune them. But if harmony itself is not modulated by ritual, things will go amiss. Those who in private life behave well towards their parents and elder brothers, in public life will conduct themselves properly to their superiors. When the ritual is firmly set up, "The Way" grows, and proper behavior towards parents and elder brothers is the trunk of Goodness. Shakyamuni Buddha's forty-nine years of teaching never deviated from the principle that a person has to be dutiful to

his or her parents, and be respectful and be of service to his or her teachers. Therefore, both Confucius and Shakyamuni Buddha shared the same beliefs and stressed on the important duties stated in *The Analects of Confucius* which were compiled in this book. Altogether there are seven chapters, with each chapter listing one duty. They are presented in sequence according to the ancient Chinese educational system.

The contents of this book contain the recommended standards of being a good student and child. Confucius, Mencius and all the past Chinese saints and sages all agreed that those duties are the very basic disciplines a child should learn and practice every day while still young. They felt that without strict discipline and moral standards, a child would amount to nothing. Without knowing what it meant to be dutiful to one's teachers, a child would grow up in self-approbation. Such a child would become a person without virtues. At that time, "a person without virtue" was not qualified to serve his country and his people.

In this part, it can provide some guidance and enlightenment for parents and children today. As mentioned before, a good student and child must first learn to be dutiful to his parents, and also be respectful and loving to his siblings.

Dizi Gui consists of seven chapters. The first chapter is on "Xiao," (孝) means being dutiful to one's parents. All the ancient saints and sages thought "Xiao" (孝) was the foremost important duty in a person's life. Part two is the original version in Chinese. Chapter one gives an intensive interpretation of "Xiao" (孝),

treating of the proper conduct of children in front of their parents, and what their correct attitudes and manners should be at home. Children should follow the rituals to serve their parents when they are alive, and mourn them when they departed.

The second chapter states the principle and standard of conduct for children, especially how to keep close brotherhood at home. In Chinese, the word "Ti," which means sincere fraternal love, describes the love between siblings. In Buddhism, its meaning extends further to include conduct towards all persons who are older and as the same generation as ourselves. This chapter then further expands this concept towards our elders. It teaches us how to show respect to the elders and what our correct attitudes and manners should be.

The third chapter teaches us how to be self-discipline in our daily lives, whether we are interacting with people, matters or things. The fourth chapter is about how to be a trustworthy person. It teaches us that we need to be cautious in words we use, in our behavior and in our thoughts. We must also believe in the teachings of the saints and sages who perfect themselves with moral force and guide others to behave in a socially beneficial manner, to achieve goodness. The fifth chapter tells us that a person must love all equally. The love here refers to universal love, not worldly love. It teaches us that as human beings we should have universal fraternity for all people, to be a person of "Ren" (means Goodness, the good man is in private life, courteous; in public life, diligent; in relationships, loyal).