

15 THE CLASSIC OF FILIAL PIETY

The family has always been considered by the Chinese as the fundamental unit of their society. Filial piety had been praised by Confucius, and thinkers of all schools took for granted that a well-run family was one in which parents looked out for the interests of their children and children obeyed their parents and supported them in their old age. In the Han dynasty, the exaltation of filial piety was carried to new heights. Men could be made officials if they were recommended as paragons of filial piety. The brief Classic of Filial Piety was probably written in the early Han. Purporting to be the recorded conversations between Confucius and his disciple, Zeng Zi, it extolled the vast powers of wholehearted devotion to parents and superiors more generally. Filial piety was presented as a political virtue, tied to loyalty to political superiors up to the Son of Heaven (the emperor). The Classic of Filial Piety was widely used in the Han and later as a primer to teach children basic moral maxims while they were learning how to read.

OPENING THE DISCUSSION

Confucius was at home and Zengzi was attending him. The Master said, “The former kings had the highest virtue and the essential Way. By using them they kept the world ordered and the people in harmony, and neither superiors nor inferiors resented each other. Do you understand this?”

Zengzi rose from his seat and replied, “Since I am not clever, how can I understand this?”

The Master said, “Filial piety is the root of virtue and the source of civilization. Sit down again and I will explain it to you. Since we receive our body, hair, and skin from our parents, we do not dare let it be injured in any way. This is the beginning of filial piety. We establish ourselves and practice the Way, thereby perpetuating our name for future generations and bringing glory to our parents. This is the fulfillment of filial piety. Thus filial piety begins with serving our parents, continues with serving the ruler, and is completed by establishing one’s character.”

THE SON OF HEAVEN

The Master said, “Those who love their parents do not dare to hate others. Those who respect their parents do not dare to show contempt towards others. The filial piety of the Son of Heaven consists in serving his parents with complete love and respect so that his moral influence reaches the common people and he becomes a model for the distant regions in all directions.”

THE FEUDAL LORDS

“Although in superior positions, they are not arrogant and thus can hold lofty positions without peril. By exercising restraint and caution they can have plenty without going overboard. Holding a lofty position without peril is the way to preserve high rank for a long time. Having plenty without going overboard is the way to preserve wealth for a long time. If they retain their wealth and rank they will later be able to protect their heritage and keep their people in peace. This is the filial piety of the feudal lords.”

THE MINISTERS AND HIGH OFFICERS

“They do not dare wear garments not prescribed by the former kings; they do not dare use words not approved by the former kings; they do not dare to behave in any ways outside the virtuous ways of the former kings. Thus, they will not speak improper words and will not follow anything outside the Way. Their words are not arbitrary, nor their actions capricious. Their words reach all in the world, yet offend no one. Their words fill the world, yet give no one cause for complaint. When these three conditions are fulfilled, they are able to preserve their ancestral altars. This is the filial piety of the ministers and high officers.”

SCHOLARS

“They serve their mothers as they serve their fathers; the love shown them is the same. They serve their rulers as they serve their fathers; the respect shown both is the same. Therefore mothers get love and rulers elicit respect, and fathers combine them both. To serve a ruler with filial piety is to be loyal. To serve an elder with filial piety is to be obedient. Never failing in loyalty or obedience in their service to superiors, they are able to preserve their offices and salaries and maintain their family line. This is the filial piety of the scholars.”

THE COMMON PEOPLE

“They follow the laws of nature to utilize the earth to the best advantage. They

take care of themselves and are cautious in expenditures in order to support their parents. This is the filial piety of the common people. Thus from the Son of Heaven to the common people, unless filial piety is pursued from beginning to end, calamities will surely result.”

THE THREE POWERS

Zengzi said, “How exceedingly great is filial piety!”

The Master responded, “Filial piety is the pattern of Heaven, the standard of the earth, the norm of conduct for the people. When people follow the pattern of Heaven and earth, they model themselves on the brilliance of Heaven and make use of the resources of the earth and through these means comply with all under Heaven. Thus, [a ruler’s] instruction succeeds without being stringent, and his policies are effective without being severe. The former kings, realizing that their instruction could transform the people, showed them an example of universal love. As a consequence, men did not neglect their parents. These kings set an example of rectitude and virtue, and as a consequence the people enthusiastically copied them. The kings showed an example of respectful yielding, and the people did not contend with each other. They taught through ritual and music, and the people lived in concord. They made clear to them the difference between good and evil, and as a consequence the people knew restraint.”

GOVERNMENT BY FILIAL PIETY

The Master said, “Formerly the illustrious kings brought order to the world through filial piety. They did not dare neglect the ministers of small states—not to mention their own dukes, marquises, earls, counts, and barons. Therefore they gained the hearts of all the states and were able to serve their former kings. The rulers did not dare insult the widows and widowers—not to mention the upper class or the common people. Therefore they gained the hearts of all the people and were able to serve their former rulers. The heads of families did not dare mistreat their servants and concubines—not to mention their wives and children. Therefore they gained their hearts and were able to serve their parents. Accordingly, while living, parents were well taken care of; after their death, their ghosts received sacrifices. In this way the world was kept in peace and harmony. Calamities did not occur nor was disorder created. Such was the way the former illustrious kings brought order to the world through filial piety.”

THE RULE OF THE SAGES

Zengzi said, “May I ask if there isn’t anything in the virtue of the sages that surpasses filial piety?”

The Master replied, “Of all the creatures in Heaven and earth, man is the most important. Of all man’s acts, none is greater than filial piety. In the practice of filial piety, nothing is greater than respecting one’s father. For respecting one’s father, nothing is greater than placing him on the level with Heaven. The person who did all this was the Duke of Zhou. In former times the Duke of Zhou sacrificed to the Spirit of Agriculture, placing him on a level with Heaven. He sacrificed to his father King Wen, in the Bright Hall, placing him on a level with the Supreme Lord. Therefore, within the four seas all of the lords, according to their stations, came to sacrifice. Thus, how can there be anything in the virtue of the sages that surpasses filial piety? From infancy a child’s desire to care for his parents daily grows more respectful. The sages used this natural reverence for parents to teach respect and used this natural affection to teach love. Thus, the teachings of the sages were effective though not severe and their rule was orderly though not harsh. This was because they relied on what was basic to human nature.

“The proper relation between father and son is a part of nature and forms the principles which regulate the conduct of rulers and ministers. Parents give life—no tie is stronger than this. Rulers personally watch over the people—no care is greater than this. Therefore to love others without first loving one’s parents is to reject virtue. To reverence other men without first reverencing one’s parents is to reject the rules of ritual. If one copies such perversity, the people will have no model to follow. Although a person who does not do good but only evil may gain a high position, a man of honor will not esteem him. The practice of a man of honor is different: his speech is praiseworthy, his behavior is pleasing, his standards are respected, his management of affairs can be taken as a model, his department is pleasant to observe, his movements are deliberate. When a man of honor deals with his people they look on him with awe and affection; they imitate and seek to resemble him. Thus he can carry out his moral instruction and put into effect his political directives.”

FILIAL CONDUCT

The Master said, “In serving his parents a filial son renders the utmost reverence to them while at home. In supporting them he maximizes their pleasure. When they are sick he takes every care. At their death he expresses all his grief. Then he sacrifices to them with full solemnity. If he has fulfilled these five

requirements, then he is truly able to serve his parents. He who really loves his parents will not be proud in high position. He will not be insubordinate in an inferior position. And among equals he will not be quarrelsome. If he were proud in high station he might be ruined. If he were insubordinate in an inferior position he might incur punishment. If he were quarrelsome among his equals, he might end up fighting. Thus, unless these three evils are eliminated, a son cannot be called filial—even if every day he supplies his parents the three choice meats.”

THE FIVE PUNISHMENTS

The Master said, “There are three thousand offenses subject to the five punishments, but of these none is greater than lack of filial piety. To use force against the ruler is to defy authority. To deny the sages is to be unprincipled. And to decry filial piety is to renounce kinship ties. These are the road to chaos.”

ELABORATING “THE ESSENTIAL WAY”

The Master said, “For teaching men to love one another there is nothing better than filial piety. For teaching men ceremonial behavior and obedience there is nothing better than fraternal love. For transforming their manners and habits there is nothing better than music. For giving security to the rulers and governing the people there is nothing better than ritual. Ritual is essentially reverence. The son is happy when his father is revered. The younger brother is happy when his elder brother is revered. The ministers are made happy when their ruler is revered. Everyone is happy when the One Man, the Son of Heaven, is revered. Only a few are revered but multitudes are made happy. This is said to be the essential Way.”

ELABORATING “THE HIGHEST VIRTUE”

The Master said, “A man of honor in teaching the duties of filial piety does not need to go daily to the people’s homes to observe them. He merely teaches the principles of filial piety and all the fathers in the world receive the filial respect due to them. He teaches the principles of fraternal love and all the elder brothers receive the respect due to them. He teaches the duties of subjects and all the rulers of the world receive the reverence due to them. The Odes say: ‘The man of honor, affectionate, is the father and mother to the people.’ Unless he possessed the highest virtue, who could educate the people to such an extent?”

ELABORATING “PERPETUATING ONE’S NAME”

The Master said, “The man of honor’s service to his parents is filial; the fidelity involved in it can be transferred to his ruler. His service to his elder brothers is deferential; the obedience involved in it can be transferred to his superiors. Self-disciplined at home, he can transfer his good management to official life. Through these means when his conduct is perfect at home his name will be perpetuated to later generations.”

REMONSTRATING

Zengzi remarked, “As regards kind affection, loving respect, comforting one’s parents, and bringing glory to one’s name, all this I have understood. May I ask if a son can be called filial if he obeys all of his father’s commands?”

The Master replied, “What kind of talk is this? In ancient times if the Son of Heaven had seven ministers to remonstrate with him, he would not lose his empire, even if he were imperfect. If a feudal lord had five good ministers to advise him, he would not lose his state, even if he were imperfect. If a high officer had three officials to remonstrate with him, he would not lose his home, even if he were imperfect. If a gentleman had a friend to correct him, he would not lose his good name. And if a father had a son to advise him, he would not fall into doing wrong. Thus, when he might do something wrong, a son must not fail to warn his father against it, nor a minister fail to warn his ruler. In short, when it is a question of doing wrong, one must remonstrate. How can following a father’s orders be considered fulfilling filial piety?”

MUTUAL INTERACTION

The Master said, “In ancient times the illustrious kings, because they were filial to their fathers were able to serve Heaven intelligently. Because they were filial to their mothers they were able to serve earth with circumspection. Superiors could govern inferiors because the young obeyed their elders. Thus, because Heaven and earth were served with intelligence and care the spirits manifested themselves brilliantly. Even the Son of Heaven had someone he paid reverence to, that is to say, his father. He had someone he deferred to, that is to say, his elder brothers. At the ancestral temple he was reverential, not forgetting his parents. He cultivated his character and acted prudently, for fear of disgracing his ancestors. When he paid reverence at the ancestral temple, the ghosts and spirits sent blessings. When his filial piety and fraternity were perfected, his

influence reached the spirits. He illuminated the four seas; there was no place his virtue did not penetrate.”

SERVING THE RULER

The Master said, “In serving his superior the man of honor makes every effort to be faithful when he is in office. In retirement he tries to make up for his shortcomings. He encourages his superior in his good inclinations and tries to keep him from doing wrong. In this way, the relations between superiors and inferiors can be cordial.”

MOURNING FOR PARENTS

The Master said, “When mourning a parent a filial son cries without wailing loudly, he performs the rites without attention to his appearance, he speaks without attention to the beauty of his words, he feels uncomfortable in elegant clothes, he gets no joy from hearing music, he does not relish good food—all of this is the emotion of grief. After three days he eats again to show men that the dead should not hurt the living and that the suffering should not lead to the destruction of life. This was the regulation of the sages. The period of mourning is not allowed to exceed three years, thus showing the people that everything ends. [The filial son] prepares a double coffin and grave clothes. When he sets out the sacrificial vessels, he grieves. Beating the breast, jumping up and down, and crying, he bids a last sad farewell. He divines to choose the burial place where the body can be placed to rest. He prepares an ancestral altar, so that the ghost can receive sacrifices. Spring and autumn he offers sacrifices thus thinking of the dead once every season. When his parents were alive he served them with love and reverence; in death he grieves. With the man’s fundamental duty fulfilled, relations between the living and the dead are complete, and the filial son’s service to his parents is finished.”

Translated by Patricia Ebrey