

Confucius's Notion of "Filialness" and Its Significance on Filial Education in Vietnam Nowadays¹

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Abstract

Filial piety is an important ethical and fundamental category in human behaviour. From past to present, both Western and Eastern scholars have had much discussion about Filialness. Confucianism, a doctrine of moral and political society in the period of from the Spring-Autumn and Warring states in China founded by Confucius, discusses a lot about filial piety. Especially in the thoughts of Confucius, filialness is considered fairly comprehensively and profoundly. In this article, the author would like to clarify the basic contents of filial piety in Confucian thoughts, from that figure out the value of its contribution to the development of filial piety today.

Keywords: Confucius, Confucianism, filial, moral, filial education.

1. About Confucius and Filial Piety

- **About Confucius:** Confucius is a famous philosopher of ancient China whose theory has formed the basic foundation of Confucianism. He is regarded as the founder of Confucianism, a philosophical school with profound influence on the social life of China for thousand years of history and also many other countries in Asia as well as around the world.

Confucius's family and personal name respectively was Kong Qiu, his courtesy name was Zhongni. He was born in 551 BC, died in 479 BC in Zou, Lu State, presently Qufu, Shandong province, China. Author Phan Van Cac, when introducing and translating-noting the work Analects wrote: "Confucius was one of the few great and outstanding men of humankind, the great thinker, culturist and educator who had great influence on the history of half of Asia during the past two thousand five hundred years; and until now, whether conscious or unconscious, deep or light, there are about a billion and a half people are influenced by his doctrine, which has become the core of what we call the Eastern culture. Of course, Confucius and his doctrine cannot avoid limitations, especially the limitations of his time, but indeed, rarely has a person had so much dedication to the humankind" (2002, p.177). Confucius's thoughts expressed in many different fields; especially his ethical ideas not only valid for a certain time but it has enduring value for forming personality for people of all time. After his death, his doctrine kept existing and developing. Since the second century BC, Confucianism started to be used by feudal class in governance, thus occupied the unique position and became the orthodox ideology in China. Despite its fluctuation, the ideas of Confucianism and Confucius have become the longstanding cultural features of China and affected many other Asian countries, including Vietnam.

Today, the world is facing the huge changes with advantages as well as challenges, threatening the peace, stability and development of the mankind. The doctrine of Confucius once again is acknowledged with its everlasting value. In 1988, after the Nobel Prize for Peace Ceremony, the Council consisting of 74 members gave a unanimous judgment that "if the human beings want a lasting peace, they need to find the way to live in harmony in the doctrine of Confucius 2500 years ago. In a not too distant future, Confucian doctrine will receive more and more acknowledgement, and will gradually become the core of human culture" (according to *International Confucian Association Bulletin*, 1996, p.5). Thus, we can affirm that Confucius' thoughts have long-time and profound effects on spiritual life of many people and many countries around the world. An understanding of his thought in general and his ideas about filial piety in particular is essential for society today.

Filial piety: Filial piety or *xiao* is one of the basic moral values of human being, an important aspect of human behaviour. In the Introduction part of "Twenty-four filial stories" – the book about twenty four typical stories of filial piety declares that no people were born without parents, so the children should live in the way that deserves their parents'

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nurturing and caring. Showing gratitude and attempting to repay one's parents for the tremendous amount of love and caring that they devoted are the evidences of filial piety.

Filial piety is a good moral value in Eastern traditions, is the need and a spirit product of the society. In larger scale, Filial to parents is not only the concept of East Asian countries but also the mental phenomena of the West, the Middle East and the world. Thus, it can be observed that Filial piety is a universal ethical category, associated with the existence and development of human society. Practicing filial piety means to repay their parents' huge nurture and caring favor; it is an expression of Gratitude – a lasting principle in the history of each nation. It can be concluded that Filial piety is the most important in Humaneness; it is necessary and also possible for everyone. Filial piety derives from that most fundamental human bond: parent and child. Parents and elders have the responsibility to provide for children and raise them to have the appropriate cultivation. In return for the care and material goods, children and younger family members are expected to be obedient and respect their elders. The rules for family relationships are also connected to beliefs about how a government or a state should be run. In Confucianism, the family is taken as a model for the state, with the leader as the father of the family and the subjects as the children. As such, citizens of a country are seen as owing piety to their leader, then Filial piety is extended to the scope of society, with close association with Loyalty.

In Confucian doctrine, humaneness (or *ren*) - the care and concern for other human beings- is considered the most important. Nevertheless, humaneness takes its origin from oneself, his family and his close people then extends to other human beings and things. Thus, Filial piety is an important element in the Confucian thoughts of family. It is attributed to a conversation between Confucius and one disciple named Zengzi, later was compiled into a book named *Classic of Filial Piety*, in the Han Dynasty was listed the *Seventh Classics*, along with *Six Classics* or *Six Canonical Books of Confucianism*.

Acquiring ideas of Confucius and Confucian representatives, Vietnamese children since a little child has been taught that "Caring for parents wholeheartedly is taught in filial piety and morality."

2. The Main Contents of Filial Piety in Confucian Thoughts

2.1 *Filial Piety is the root of other moral values.*

In Confucius's doctrine, filial piety has a very important position among moral values of human. Filial Piety is not only the prime virtue but also an origin of philanthropy. "Steady filialness/ Goodness is followed/ True philanthropy/ Grows much blessings" (in *Spring Family Education*). Then, Filial piety is the root, the profound origin of other moral values. The love for parents, brothers and sisters within family expands to the love for outsiders. If a person is not filial to his parents and does not get on well with his brothers and sisters, then hardly can he become a good person.

Confucius said: "Filial piety and harmony are the root of humaneness; the junior must be filial to family members and in harmony with other people" (*Analects*). In Confucian conception, love and respect are the roots of humaneness, while love and respect originates in filial piety. In the doctrine of Confucius, Filial piety is not just filial to parents, but it is also the foundation of the ways of being a mandarin. Talking about the King's ways of governance, Confucius stated that "Humaneness is started with the love for the close people like parents, then expands to others. If you want to educate someone, you must model yourself. During the education process, applying humaneness and harmony will make people love you and treat you like their close relatives. If you teach the people to respect their elders, they will follow you. By being filial to parents and following the orders, your morality will be widen across the country, everyone follows" (in *Book of Rites*, 1999, p. 198).

Talking about Filial piety, Confucius thinks that the Doctrine of Mean must be conserved. He believes that respecting to parents is not the final expression of Filial piety; but Filial piety must be developed to Humaneness, or philanthropy, because when someone is filial, it means that he is philanthropic. Filial piety and philanthropy are often accompanied; therefore the people who have essential social positions must be the filial people. "If the high-position gentleman is filial to his parents, the people will be leaded to 'philanthropy'; but if the high-position man abandons his old friends, then the people will be ungrateful and cold-hearted" (in Tran Le Sang, 2002, pp. 358-359). The gentleman here is the one with social power and position and being a good model for people. If he is unfilial and cold-hearted, then the people cannot be philanthropic, grateful and affectionate. So, to evaluate the moral values of a person within his various social relations and positions, his filial piety to parents must be considered initially. Only when he is filial to parents, always respects his relatives can he become a warm-hearted person with other people no matter what social position he has.

Filial piety is not only the responsibility of the child to his parents, but also the principle of the mandarin: he always

has to take care of the state affairs in order to be loved and respected by the people. When a disciple asked in what ways that the people could love and respect the mandarin, Confucius said that: "Having a truthful behavior makes the people respect. Being filial to parents, loving children and other people make them loyal. Promoting the good people and educating the bad ones makes them lead to good things" (in Tran Le Sang, 2002, p.248).

2.2 *When parents are alive, being filial means caring and respecting parents, advising when parents make faults, taking care of the health and learning hard.*

Vietnamese people believes in the saying "The young depends on parents, the old depends on children". Since the child was born, he has been nurturing, raising and educating with the great love of parents. When he is grown up, his parents become older and weaker, they must depend on his respect and caring. There are many children who try to repay the parents' favor by meaningful words and actions; they are always praised and acknowledged. Whereas, the unfilial children neglecting and hurting their own parents are always strongly criticized. With that point, Confucius emphasizes the caring for parents when they are alive, considered it as the obvious expression of Filial piety. However, this action must start from the heart, the respect of a child to his parents; caring without respecting is not different from raising an animal. When Tuzi asked about Filial piety, Confucius said. "Nowadays, anyone who supports his parents is considered filial. But an animal like a dog or a horse also can be supported. Then caring parents without respecting is not different from raising an animal." (in Tran Le Sang, 2002, p.246).

In the process of implementing Filial piety, Confucius does not highly evaluate the material values, but he emphasizes the spirit, attitude and the harmonious atmosphere. Nothing satisfies parents more than the harmony of brothers in the family. It is also an impression of Filial piety. Filial piety cannot be implemented unwillingly; it must be motivated from the one's true heart. Especially, when implementing Filial piety peaceful countenance must be maintained. When Zi Xia asked about filial piety, Confucius said that the most challenging thing is to keep harmony within the family. Helping parents in hardship or inviting them for meal is not enough to be filial. Respecting parents when they are alive, wholeheartedly caring them, and try to take care of them when they are sick, those are expressions of Filial piety.

Filial piety is only caring for parents and keeping harmonious among brothers, but also paying attention to his own health and avoiding parents' worry that may lead to diseases. Answering Manh Vo Ba, Confucius declared: "Parents are always worried that children may have diseases. So the child has to keep himself healthy, avoid parents' anxiety; those are expression of Filial piety. In Tran Le Sang, 2002, p.245). Confucius reminds: if the child is filial, he should not go far away when his parents still alive. If going, he must tell parents the destination so that they do not worry. Moreover, being the child he must know the age of parents, then when they become older, he is not only happy because of the parents' longevity, but afraid of their sickness as well. However, nowadays, the development of society sometimes makes the youth forget their responsibility for parents.

Being filial, the child should respect and obey their parents. However, it does not mean that he must do whatever his parents order. When parents do something wrong, he must find the way to calmly and gently dissuade them. Even when parents still makes mistakes he must keep respecting and obeying regardless any difficulty.

2.3 *When parents died, Filial piety is expressed by organizing funeral and dead anniversary, mourning and worshipping*

Filial piety is not only to take care of parents and supporting them when they are alive, but also to organize the funeral and mourning when they died. These occasions must be arranged in the way to express all the sorrow, grief and gratitude in return for their parents' favor but not ostentatiously. When a disciple used to complain that three years of mourning is too long: "Only a year of mourning is such a long time. The gentleman has not implemented rites for three years, the rites will be destroyed, has not played music, the music will be forgotten. All the old rice is eaten; the new rice has just been harvested. Thus a year of mourning is sufficient. Confucius replied that: "when parents died for less than three years, do you feel relieved when eating raw rice instead of fragrant rice, wearing silk instead of hemp clothing? If you feel relieved, then do it your self. The gentleman when mourning, eat without feeling delicious, listen to music without being happy, living without being comforted. If you feel comforted, just go on". When the disciple left, Confucius said that he is a heartless person. The parents have to embrace the child until he is three years old; therefore three year of mourning is a universal and worthy action. (in Tran Le Sang, 2002, p. 531). Confucius also stated that "When parents are alive, the child must base on the rites to serve them; when they die, he also must base on the rites to bury; even the worship must be based on the rites" (in Tran Le Sang, 2002, p.245). Thus respect and rites are essential standards of the

child's attitude towards his parents, also the important criteria to evaluate his filial piety.

2.4 *Being Filial is to continue parents's career and bring pride to the ancestors.*

Being filial also is to continue parents' life purposes, evaluate parents' achievement to know what is good, what is bad. Confucius teaches that "When father is still alive, consider his life purposes; when he dies, evaluate his behaviors. After three years, if the father's direction is still maintained, it is considered Filial piety" (according to *Classic of Filial piety*, 2006, p. 84). In other words, when the father is alive, the child should consider his life purposes to follow good things and dissuade the bad ones. Even if what father did should be changed, it must be carried out after three year of mourning to express the respect of the filial child.

Another expression of Filial piety is to train and self-improve, bring pride for the parents and ancestors. In *Four Books* (2002), Confucius said "one must self-improve in order not to insult the ancestors" (p.248). Inheriting father's career, continueing the family's career and bringing pride to the ancestors, those are considered great filial piety. As Vietnamese people often say, the family with the son surpassing his father is the family with bless."

2.5 *Filial piety is closely associated with Loyalty.*

In Confucian ideas, filial piety has close association with loyalty: filial to parents, loyal to the king. Filial piety and loyalty are united with each other. When answering why he did not do state affairs, Confucius said that "being filial to parents, getting on well with brothers, they are also state affairs" (In *Four Books*, 2002, p.248).

Confucian conception of filial piety is quite exhaustive and comprehensive, covering thoughts, speeches, countenances and actions, since parents are alive, until they pass away and even and the worship after the death. Implementation of filial piety should be frequently and continuously throughout the life of every human being. Thousands of years of history have passed, until today, from Confucian ideology of filial piety we still find meaningful values to implement filial piety today.

3. **The Meaning of Confucian Ideas of Filial Piety to Filial Implementation in Vietnam Today**

In Vietnamese behavior culture and morality since ancient times until today, naturally filial piety is always emphasized and considered as the foundation of humaneness. Vietnamese children are always reminded:

*"The merit of the father is like Thai Son mountain,
The righteousness of the mother is like water coming from the source.
Worshiping mother and respect father with one's totally devoted heart
Doing these things wholeheartedly so as to fulfill the child's filial piety".*

The filial implementation in Vietnam influenced much by the Confucianism. Nonetheless, Vietnamese filial piety has its own unique features, not as harsh and rigid as in the concept of Confucianism. Even with people in the upper class who was adequately trained Confucianism, they learned about filial piety but adapted into values and ethical standards with Vietnamese identity.

Historically and currently, during thousands of generations, filial piety is considered very essential in moth family and society. Vietnamese people always appreciate filial piety; many stories of the filial people to his parents have been widely acknowledged in the society like Nguyen Dinh Chieu, Nguyen Trai, Chu Dong Tu ... However, in the modern life with the urgent rhythm, people tend to we focus too much on personal goals and sometimes lack of attention to their parents and grandparents. Many unfilial people are condemned by society. Thus the notion of filial piety in the nation's history, the filial mirrors of our ancestor, along with of Confucian ides on filial piety will contribute to remind and educate each person to fullfill filial piety in the present context.

Confucian concepts of filial piety, after leaving out unsuitable elements in the current social context, still contain valuable ideas to contribute to the implementation of filial piety in society today. Filial piety is always the root of other ethical values; it reminds children to be grateful, respect, support the elders wholeheartedly, care for their parents and grandparents eve when they pass away. The child also should train and improve himself, build their own career in order to bring pride and face to himself, his family and clan, so that their parents can see that their work and raising has paid off...

On August 16th, 2013 in Vietnam, Venerable Thich Thanh Huan - Phap Van Pagoda - deputy of Vietnam Buddhist

Central Office had an online answer with readers of the website VnExpress.net about topic "Filial piety of Vietnamese nowadays". The meeting attracted a lot of young people. Hundreds of questions were posed and answered. It is proved that, despite busy lives dominated by material values, many children still concern about how to fulfill filial piety to their parents. Many examples of filial piety are still honored by the society. The writing contests on Filial children have truthfully reflected the filial piety in the present social context. On December 1st 2012 at the Youth Editorial office in Ho Chi Minh City, the awarding ceremony of Filial son was organized. The ceremony was also the meeting place for contemplation on filial piety. There are children who are committed to overcome any difficulty and achieve successful career so that their parents may also be glorified. Many people are aware of fulfilling filial piety by taking care of their parents with respect, even at old age and poor health. When the parents passed away, they organized the funeral and death anniversary warmly but not ostentatiously.

Besides the filial examples, there are still people who do not fulfill their duty; they are disrespectful, rude, cruel, unfilial, and disloyal to parents. Many old people are abandoned; many parents are mistreated by their children; a cold, dark picture about filial piety still exists. To many people, filial piety is just the form that they have to make because of the public opinions. Even some people hurt their own parents when committing the social crimes. There are several causes of unfilialness, including the lack of model by the adult in the family, the unawareness of people, and the insufficient education of filial piety in families, schools and society. The more the society develops, the more seriously people should mediate and consider the filial piety to parents, thereby contributing to personal and social moral perfection.

4. Conclusion

Living in a fragmented and chaotic era of the country, with his doctrine Confucius desires to restore the moral norms of contemporary society in which people treat each other by rites and principles, started within the family where children are filial to parents. Despite historical limitations and unsuitable ideas to the current society, generally Confucian ideas of filial piety still has meaningful values for us to inherit and promote in order to fulfill the filial piety in the family and in society.

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