
How Strong is Your Love for Your Parents? Childlike Mindset and the Confucian View of Filial Piety

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In the West, it is debatable whether children, adult or dependent, have filial obligations to their parents. By contrast, filial piety serves as one of the essential virtues in the Confucian tradition, which had not only dominated pre-modern East Asian societies but is recently promoted by 21st century Chinese government. Loving one's parents, in turn, is said to be the most fundamental and strongest human emotion praised by Confucians. This paper is not to provide justifications for treating filial piety as a virtue. But using a temporal framework, it offers a more complicated reading of the affection for parents presented in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*. While young children have strong emotional attachment to parents, adults' love to their parents is sporadic and inconsistent. To address the deficit of emotions in adults' interaction with their parents, Confucians use young children's mindset—strong affection to parents—to both justify and motivate filial actions. This paper criticizes the view that simply equalizes consanguineous affection to *xiao* (filial piety). It contends that *xiao*, as a virtue, cannot be automatically generated by original family affection. Instead, filial-oriented rituals, as Confucians advocate, is supposed to foster an affectionate relation between parent and child.

Keywords: Filial piety, Confucius, the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, affection for parents

The parent-child relationship is an important topic studied by various disciplines from philosophy to sociology, psychology and medical research. In the West, discussions generally focus on how parents should treat young children. Filial obligation—how children, especially adult children, should treat their parents—is a question that people often encounter but that seldom triggers heated discussion. Christian Sommers says that “[t]oday, not a few moralists dismiss it [filial obligation] as an illusion, or give it secondary derivative status.”¹ Indeed, it is still debatable whether children, adult or dependent, have a filial obligation to their parents.² By contrast, filial piety serves as one of the fundamental virtues in the Confucian tradition. In the early 20th century, filial piety was blamed for suffocating individual autonomy and creativity and for preventing China from modernizing.³ However, with China’s rapid economic development in the past 20 years, Confucianism, especially the concept of filial piety, has returned.⁴ Being a filial child has become a core Chinese value promoted by the government (Figure 1: poster

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- 1 Christina Hoff Sommers, “Filial Morality,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 83, no. 8 (1986): 439. See also Philip J. Ivanhoe, “Filial Piety as a Virtue,” in *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*, ed. Rebecca L. Walker and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 297–312.
 - 2 Amy Mullin surveys this debate in her article “Filial Responsibilities of Dependent Children,” *Hypatia* 25, no. 1 (2010): 157–73. See also Nancy S. Jecker, “Are Filial Duties Unfounded?,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (1989): 73–80. For a survey of ideals of filial piety in the Western tradition, see Jeffrey Blustein, *Parents and Children: The Ethics of the Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).
 - 3 May Fourth intellectuals have written various articles to criticize filial piety; see Wu Yu 吳虞, “Jiazhu zhidu wei zhuanzhi zhuyi zhi genju lun” 家族制度為專制主義之根據論, in *Wu Yu ji* 吳虞集, ed. Zhao Qing 趙清 and Zheng Cheng 鄭城 (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1985), 61–66; idem, “Shuo xiao” 說孝, *ibid.*, 172–77; Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀, “Dongxi minzu genben sixiang zhi chayi” 東西民族根本思想之差異, in idem, *Duxiu wencun* 獨秀文存, vol. 1, *Lunwen* 論文 (Hong Kong: Yuandong tushu gongsi, 1965), 35–40; Lu Xun 魯迅, “Ershisi xiao tu” 二十四孝圖, in idem, *Zhao hua xi shi (zhushi ben)* 朝花夕拾 (注釋本) (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian, 1958), 18–24.
 - 4 For 20th century intellectuals’ criticism of filial piety, see Lu Miaw-fen 呂妙芬, *Xiao zhi Tianxia: Xiao jing yu jinshi Zhongguo de zhengzhi yu wenhua* 孝治天下：《孝經》與近世中國的政治與文化 (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan; Lianjing chuban, 2011).