Filial Piety In China Essay, Research Paper

Introduction

Xiao, the Chinese word for filial piety is the defining feature in Chinese culture as filial piety was extolled as the highest virtue in China for centuries. I subscribe to the school of thought that filial piety is the root of Chinese ethics and “with it all enlightening studies come into existence.” Chinese society was built upon the doctrine of filial piety and that it is the theme in Chinese culture, influencing all aspects of Chinese lives.

In this essay, I will examine the significance of filial piety in Chinese culture. Albeit I have no wish of making the mistake of generalization, what I seek to define is the undercurrent theme in all Chinese families which I believe is filial piety. As I believe that filial piety is the common thread that runs in every Chinese family. I am fully aware that my study of filial piety does not apply to every Chinese family, so I can only say that I am sure filial piety endures in different forms, having been infiltrated through many generations and eroded by different events.

In order to make my stand, I will be exploring the traditional meaning of filial piety in China, if and how various incidents may have impacted filial piety in China. I will also be analyzing the implications of the erosion of filial piety and the importance of filial piety in modern China.

Traditional Filial Piety

To define traditional filial piety in Chinese culture, it is imperative that I draw on the works of Confucius as Confucianism is the system that has dominated Chinese thought throughout most of history, controlling Chinese education, society and government for some 2,000 years. It would be necessary to take into account Mencius’s philosophy as he was also a strong influence on Chinese culture.

Xiao in traditional Chinese societies fundamentally means gratitude to one’s parents for giving one life and the duty and obligation to repay one’s parents for having brought one up. It means love and uncompromising respect for one’s parents and total obedience to one’s parents. It also means honouring one’s parents after their death.

However, Xiao has many other connotations in the traditional Chinese culture. It pertains to servitude towards one’s parents and the duty to continue the family lineage by producing offspring. It also refers to ancestor worship and respect for all who are more elderly than oneself, love for one’s older siblings and good behaviour so as not to bring disgrace and shame to one’s family.

As early as 87 B.C., Xiao-Jing or Classic of Filial Piety was one of the first texts mastered by children. The compulsory learning of Xiao-Jing served two main purposes. Firstly, children were taught filial piety as a foundation for other virtues such as propriety, wisdom and fidelity. Chinese parents generally believed that if children were brought up in the right environment, they would grow up to become responsible and morally correct adults. Confucian scholars instituted that filial piety is the root of good conduct and without filial piety, men would be rebellious, dishonest and undisciplined. It is stated in the Analects of Confucius, “?filial piety and fraternal submission! – are they not the root of all benevolent actions?” It was believed that filial men would possess the qualities of benevolence, righteousness, desire for peace and harmony and impartiality. Therefore, by teaching children filial piety, parents believed that they were at the same time, providing them with cardinal moral education.

Secondly, the traditional Chinese societal and governmental systems as prescribed by Confucius are based on hierarchy. Thus, it was essential that children are trained to respect authority. Filial piety is believed to inculcate the qualities of loyalty to one’s country, responsibility towards society and state. If children are taught from young to respect and obey the key authoritarian figure in the household, that is the father, they would from there learn how to respect and obey society’s and government’s laws and advocates.

Mencius held that, ” the root of the empire is in the state, and the root of the state is in the family.” At the same time, their learning of filial piety would also ingrain in them the importance of maintaining peace and harmony in the family, translating into upholding peace in harmony in society and country, as the family is the primary unit of society in Chinese culture. It is said in The Great Learning that,

“?wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivate the persons. Wishing to cultivate the persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts?”

Traditionally, filial piety was only deemed so in its purest definition. It was not only adhered to as a code of conduct, but more importantly, as a code of thought. The most important aspect of filial piety as stated by Confucius was sincerity. He instituted that,

” the filial piety of 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 from the other?”

The Change of Filial Piety in China

The erosion of filial piety started as early as the Former Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 8) . It was a period of upheaval as traditional values and social order started to take a backseat to individualistic values. Nonetheless, the value of filial piety survived, only to come under attack again during the May Fourth Movement in 1919.

During the May Fourth Movement, many intellectuals such as Xin Qin-Nian and Lu Xun, Wu Yu and Hu Shi criticized the concept of filial piety, claiming it to be the instrument for unquestioned governmental authority, producing citizens who were not capable of original thoughts and opinions, thus creating an obstacle for China to modernize. They also claimed that filial piety, with its connotations of obedience and loyalty “eliminated any desire to protest or rebel on the part of the people.” One intellectual condemned filial piety as hypocrisy as he stated,

“The father wishes his son to be filial and exacts this by fear and force, and the son becomes a slave and a beast. So filial devotion is the father’s personal gain?The son wishes the father’s benevolence only for his own benefit?and parents become ‘ox and horse to posterity’?So parental benevolence is the son’s personal gain.”

In fact, during the May Fourth Movement, the spirit against Confucianism and with it, filial piety, was so strong that the slogan “Overthrow Confucius and Sons” enjoyed great popularity.

If the May Fourth Movement provided the ammunition for the collapse of filial piety, the Cultural Revolution definitely pulled the trigger. During the Cultural Revolution, students were taught to be politically and socially active, to revere the Chinese Communist Party and to study the Marxist-Leninist classics, in place of the study of Chinese Classics. Children were taught that they should love Chairman Mao more than they love their own parents and that their country should come before their families. A popular song during the Cultural Revolution enunciated, “?Father and Mother are dear but not as dear as Chairman Mao”

Many children were also pressured to criticize and disown their parents. In an account of a girl grew up in the midst of the Cultural Revolution, it was told that she disowned her father completely after being told by her teacher that her fathers was a “Rightist”. She wrote her father a letter to denounce him and did not even write a salutation at the top of the letter as she did not feel that an enemy of the people was fit to be her father. Like her, many others blamed their parents for the hardships that they had to endure and had no qualms in reporting on their parents, criticizing and disowning their parents. In a similar account of a girl who left home during the Cultural Revolution, she made a clean break with her family as she was expelled from the Red Guards and suffered all kinds of discrimination after her mother was labelled a “renegade”.

In fact, children of former landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries, bad elements, rightists, the bourgeoisie and capitalist roaders could only join the Red Guards after they renounced their class and denounced their parents.

Parental control over their children was disintegrated as many families were separated with students given encouragement to travel country-wide with free transport or parents with “black” backgrounds being sent to reform camps. In Niu-Niu’s autobiography , after her parents were incarcerated, she was left in the care of her grandmother who loved her well and with whom she had strong attachments. However, she still rebelled, engaging in theft and getting involved in juvenile activities. Her rebellion clearly stemmed from the lack of parental control.

The Cultural Revolution can be seen as the period of temporary collapse of filial piety in China. The Confucian value system which has survived thousands of years crumbled under the political and social stress that all families in China faced during the Cultural Revolution. It is ironical that the Confucian virtues of obedience and reverence to authority which is supposedly to be rooted in filial piety was used to turn children against their parents.

Another contributing factor to the erosion of filial piety in China is the modernization of China. Since implementation of the “Open-Door Policy” in the 1980’s, Chinese youth has been exposed to Western culture, which is often described as “decadent”. Although the concept of filial piety was a strong cultural factor in the history of Western civilizations, it gradually declined whereas it remained a central theme in Chinese culture. In the United States, close ties with parents are perceived as inhibitions of autonomy, initiation, industry and personal identity.

From a Western perspective, the Confucian concept of filial piety would be seen as a weakness and is “unhealthy” as many Westerners view individuality autonomy as the basis for freedom and societal progress. Therefore, it is inevitable that Chinese youth who are exposed to Western influences through various media such as literature, television, publications and music would unconsciously be shaped to accept Western cultures. More so that Chinese youth perceive Western culture as more “desirable” than Chinese culture as they are perceived to be more modernized, affluent and sophisticated. Therefore, Chinese youth may be seeking to adopt the Western value system, which contrasts with the Confucian value system that articulates filial piety.

Implications of the Erosion of Filial Piety

The most dramatic implication of the erosion of filial piety in China was the Tiananmen Incident on the fourth of June in 1989. Even though the motive of the student demonstrators was to protest against the government, in many ways, the Tiananmen Incident can be linked to the erosion of filial piety. In the Declaration of Hunger Strike, the students wrote,

“?But we know that we are still children, the children of China?We say to our dear mothers and fathers, do not feel sorry for us when we are hungry?farewell, father and mother, forgive us that we’re being unfaithful as your children?we must first be faithful first to our country?”

This indicated that the students placed the country before their parents, which is a violation of the Confucian concept of filial piety. It also indicated that the students were willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of democracy rather than living on to repay their parents the debt of giving them life and having brought them up, which is another violation of the Confucian concept of filial piety. However, the students also wrote,

“Dear Mother and Father, I am part of this student movement because I love my country?Rest assured that your son will not bring shame upon you. I will not die in disgrace…Perhaps I will not fulfill my filial duty?it has been impossible to satisfy the demands of both loyalty to one’s nation and filial duty to one’s parents?please understand why your son takes this action.”

They were clearly aware of the aspect of Confucian concept of filial piety that one should not behave irresponsibly so as to maintain the reputation of one’s family. From their point of view, they had a greater cause to attend to and that their parents should be proud of what they are doing for China. So, in that sense they did see themselves as unfilial. However, their Confucian concept of filial piety was not complete or rather it has been self-modified to suit their needs as they have neglected the aspect of the Confucian concept of filial piety that one should first serve one’s parents in order to serve one’s country.

Another implication of the erosion of filial piety is the rise in juvenile delinquency. The Chinese news media reported a dramatic increase in juvenile crime and that juvenile delinquency accounts for nearly 70% of all crime in China. In fact, juvenile delinquency has increased more than ten times since the early 1960’s. Although this can be attributed to many factors, I believe that the erosion of filial piety is one of the major causes.

The emergence of any form of juvenile delinquency can be seen as double failure of if incorrect thought and incorrect behaviour. This is true in the context of Confucianism as Confucian ideology establishes that people should be obedient to their parents and to the state, and that people should seek to maintain harmony in their families and in society. From that point of view, it could also be the lack of authority on the part of the parents and the lack of obedience and respect for their parents on the part of the children that contributed to the rise in juvenile delinquency.

Filial Piety in Modern China

Does filial piety still exist in China today? I will say that it does, only that it has greatly deviated from the traditional Confucian ideology of filial piety. Its importance has decreased substantially as it has been modified to suit the lifestyles of the people in China and young adults have a somewhat larger say over their own lives.

This can be seen in the diminishing role of parents as the decision-maker in the choice of their children’s marriage partner. In the Chinese tradition, parents play the dominant role in the selection of a suitable marriage partner for their children. In today’s Chinese society, more than 80% of young married couples met their marriage partners through their own social circles. Furthermore, a very high proportion of young married couples prefer to live apart from their parents.

However, survey results also show that a large majority of young couples sought and respected their parents’ view of their marriage. Married couples also tended to maintain close ties with their parents even if they are not living with them. In addition to that, children generally consulted with their parents whenever they faced difficulties in their lives.

Today, the relationship between parents and children is still one of respect, but it is definitely a far cry from the kind of parent-child relationship that used to exist in traditional Chinese societies. As parents do not play the dominating role in their children’s lives anymore, their control over their children is somewhat limited. On the other hand, parents in China today are comfortable with their children having more autonomy.

Therefore, parent-child relations are not as formal as they used to be. There is stronger affection between parents and children, and less authority and obedience. Today’s definition of filial piety seem to be more of one that is of genuine care and concern for one’s parents, not one that was enforced by the legal and social structures or one that was out of obligation.

Conclusion

As Chinese society is undergoing drastic change, the question is whether the doctrine of filial piety is one that is worth preserving and utilized in the exchange of cultures between the east and the west. This question is of utmost importance, as it seems that filial piety is in a very clear danger of extinction.

One of the reasons why filial piety would be a valuable trait to be adopted in the west is that societies in western countries such as the United States are desperately in need of a value that entails better treatment of the elderly and greater family cohesion. Many social problems that exist in the United States today can be linked to the lack of such values. In fact, filial piety can be looked at as the affirmation of affection for human life and society, and it could serve as a consolidating factor of society.

Another reason why filial piety should be preserved is that it has been the core of Chinese societies for thousands of years, it would be equivalent to the extinction of the Chinese language if this value were allowed to just erode till it ceases to exist. Subscribing to the school of thought that the Chinese were a cultural identity before they were a nationality, the Chinese do not deserve being called the Chinese anymore if they were no longer filial sons and daughters.

From my point of view, filial piety serves more good than it does harm. As China approaches an age that is very focused on technology and consumerism, it sometimes seems to me that the Chinese are becoming more self-centred, materialistic and impersonal. Perhaps with the reinstillation if the importance of filial piety, China could once again gain the respect of the world and re-emerge as the world power that it rightfully should be.

From a personal point of view, having grown up in a Chinese family, albeit not a traditional one, has ingrained the concept of filial piety deeply in me and it is as natural to me as breathing, even though filial piety was a virtue that was never spoken of explicitly in my family. I would never be able to explain where and how I absorbed it. All in I know is that it is the determinant of my “chineseness”.

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