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# Differentiating Ideals versus Practices in the Discussion of Confucian Influences on Chinese Parent–Child Relationships

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# Differentiating Ideals versus Practices in the Discussion of Confucian Influences on Chinese Parent–Child Relationships

## Abstract

The primary purpose of this essay is to call for a renewed understanding of Confucianism in the discussion of Chinese parent–child relationships. Citing historical evidence, we present the evolution of Confucianism as a school of thought in China. In addition, we present research on Chinese parent–child relationships, which to a varying degree are said to be associated with Confucian influences, in contemporary Chinese communities. By comparing Confucian ideals versus practices in the name of Confucianism, we conclude that Confucianism has been through transformations throughout history and its influences on Chinese parent–child relationships are intertwined with practical needs of the specific historical time and social context. In addition, we suggest focusing on social class variability in the study of Confucian influences represented in parent–child relationships. To conclude, it is important to study the actual beliefs and practices of families, taking into consideration to specific historical time, social contexts, as well as individual circumstances and characteristics of participants.

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## Introduction

The primary purpose of this essay is to call for a renewed understanding of Confucianism in the discussion of Chinese parent-child relationships. Citing historical evidence, we present the evolution of Confucianism as a school of thought in China. Next, we present research on Chinese parent–child relationships, which to a varying degree are said to be associated with Confucian influences, in contemporary Chinese communities. By comparing Confucian ideals versus practices in the name of Confucianism, we conclude that Confucianism has been through transformations throughout history and its influences on Chinese parent–child relationships are intertwined with practical needs of the specific historical time and social context. It is important to study the actual beliefs and practices of families, taking into consideration to specific historical time, social contexts, as well as individual circumstances and characteristics of participants.

## Historical and Contemporary Contexts of Confucianism and the Family

### Classical Confucianism

Confucius developed his philosophical school and started his teaching career at a time when China was plagued by constant warfare between neighboring states due to a powerless and ineffective central government (Feng & Bodde, 1960). Given that the family is the foundation of the state, he suggested an elaborate set of principles, according to the *Analects* (a book believed to be compiled by his students), to guide the functioning of family relationships. Specifically, individuals need self-cultivation with the ultimate goal of contributing to the government. Filial piety comprises of the core of self-cultivation. Confucius asked that individuals not only take care of parents' material needs, but also do this deferentially and sincerely. Most importantly, a finely cultivated person should feel all he does for his parents is pleasurable and comes from his natural tendency. After all, it is the attitude and self-awareness that differentiate the parent–child relationship of humans from that of other species. As will be discussed in the next section, this philosophical ideal has been materialized in divergent forms in the political and social realms.

The goal of philosophical Confucianism is to provide justification for a family system that functions based on the authority–subordinate role division between parents and children in an agrarian society, and identify ways to regulate individual behavior within the system (Feng & Bodde, 1960). In an agrarian society, the most important and valuable asset is the land. On the one hand, farmers follow fixed, predictable seasonal rhythms in cultivating their land. Accordingly, within-family work distribution has to follow the fixed, predictable agricultural cycle. On the other hand, because the land cannot be moved (or exchanged like in a commercial society), and the normative way to obtain land is through inheritance, parents can be assured of old age security as long as they have the power of distributing the land. Consequently, individuals need to perform their designated roles within the family hierarchy to which they belong. In Confucius' terms, whereas parents are

charged with responsibilities to educate their children, manage family property properly, fairly distribute family property to the next generation, and ensure prosperity and sustainability of the family, adult children are obligated to tend the needs of senior parents and will inherit the family estate. As such, the family as a system is maintained and extended generation after generation in an agricultural society. Confucius the philosopher, however, attached a great deal of philosophical beauty and elegance to the deferential demeanor on the part of children, as well as to the wisdom and moral virtues of the parents (Lau, 1979).

### **Contemporary Context**

Confucianism and all of its related entities, which included school education and familism, were virtually obliterated in China during Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s. After the chaos was calmed in the country, the Communist Party has tried to revive Confucianism as the orthodox ideology and a symbol of cherished tradition attached with a national identity, while at the same time shift the focus of the Party from political movement to economic development. Only selective Confucian values, however, have been invoked by the Communist Party (Bell, 2006). For example, filial piety and other pro-family values appear constantly in the government propaganda, which serves several purposes. First, behaviors such as avoiding divorce, staying in marriage, as well as caring for the young and the old in the family, are believed to bring social stability. Second, as China is still a long way from establishing an effective social security system, espousing values like filial piety largely shifts the responsibility of caring for senior citizens from the government to individual families.

Nevertheless, there is recognition among contemporary scholars that if Confucianism is to be utilized to complement modern ideologies in which the concept of human right is at the center stage, it needs to be reorganized and practiced selectively and critically (de Bary & Tu, 1998). Contemporary criticism of Confucianism comes from concerns about its incompatibility with individuality, especially among scholars who have experienced Western education. Ho and colleagues (Ho, 1994; Ho & Ho, 2008) overviewed the center place of filial piety in parent–child relationships as well as in teacher–student relationships and suggested that filial piety underlies authoritarian moralism and cognitive conservatism in Chinese societies. As challenge to authority has been severely sanctioned in Confucian societies, it is argued that children brought up to believe in and practice filial piety are unlikely to embrace modernity, democracy, individual rights, and equality in society.

In sum, different aspects of Confucianism have been (re)interpreted throughout history conditioned by changes in the socioeconomic and sociohistorical circumstances. Surely, the assumption that Confucianism is a set of static attributes of Chinese people is not a solid one. As is elaborated in the next section, the manners in which Confucianism influences Chinese families are more easily understood when ideals and practices are differentiated. Specifically, beliefs and practices concerning a central concept in Confucianism, filial piety, are examined.

## **Filial Piety in Parent–Child Relationships: Ideals and Practices**

### **Philosophical Confucianism: Ideals about Parent–child relationships**

Mencius believed that humans are born with a kind heart that is capable of further development and cultivation (Lau, 2004). This heart is so important that it is the benchmark of humanity. It is at the same time so vulnerable that without consistent cultivation it will die out, which means the humanness is lost. With cultivation, however, this heart may lead one to sagehood. One of the most important themes in self-cultivation is filial piety: serving one's parents. In another Confucian classic, *Xiao Jing* (Rosemont & Ames, 2009), it is proposed that filial piety is the foundation of individual morality, and family harmony is the foundation for social harmony, as society is organized as an extension of the family. Further, only a filial person would become a reliable family member, community leader, and most importantly, government official.

Within the family, according to the *Analects* (Lau, 1979), parents are supposedly noble and capable individuals who exercise authority in a wise manner, manage the family estate, attend to the care of both seniors and youngsters in the household. In turn, children who benefit from parents' wisdom and diligence are obliged to cultivate filial piety in their character, from demonstrating a respectful demeanor at young age, to providing for senior parents when the time comes, to following proper rituals after parental death. As such, a harmonious family is composed of wise parents and filial children, who understand their social positions and follow the social norms. The parents' social position allows them to be authoritarian and make decisions for their children, whereas the children's social position requires them to be deferential and ready to act upon parental wills.

### **Social Confucianism: Contemporary Practices in Chinese Parent–child Relationships**

The discussion of social actualization of filial piety is focused upon two aspects of parent–child relationships: elderly care and parent–adolescent relationships, as a great deal of discrepancy between ideals and practices might be witnessed in these two issues. Elderly care remains the central concern in Chinese parent–child relationships. After all, ensuring proper older-age care is the ultimate goal of parents in an agrarian society, which is discussed extensively in Confucian writings (Lau, 1979). However, elderly care is no longer an issue that is simply arranged according to traditions, as the idealized image of a self-sustaining, multi-generational family falls apart in practice (Liu, 1998). Specifically, the economic reform in the urban areas has left numerous state-owned enterprises dissolved and therefore a great many senior citizens without any prospect of pensions or social security, and the economic reform in the rural areas has deprived senior parents of land ownership, which used to be the ultimate bargaining chip for proper old-age care (Zhang, 2003). Moreover, in spite of the rapid economic development in the past few decades, the Chinese government has yet to implement a social security policy that guarantees basic livelihood for many, if not most, of its senior citizens. Not surprisingly, the political agenda resort to the extended family to fill in the gap in the name of filial piety (Liu, 1998). In fact, it is stipulated in the Marriage Law that adult children are obligated to provide care and

support for parents, which diverges significantly from the idealized filial piety that is supposed to be practiced pleasurably.

The arrangement of elderly care involves negotiation, compromising, and adjustment of expectations in the modern market economy of China. The ultimate solutions, varying across families and individuals, result from consideration of finances, personalities of family members involved, and perceptions of cultural expectations. Above all, institutional care for aging parents is becoming more and more common (Zhan, Feng, Chen, & Feng, 2011). Due to a lack of living space in urbanized areas and mobility of adult children, residing in institutions is more of a necessity than an option for many senior parents. Nevertheless, both adult children who are making the arrangement and the senior parents who are residing in institutions perceive the need to negotiate and manage the conflict between personal circumstances and cultural expectations, namely, filial piety. Moreover, in the process of reinterpreting the contents of filial piety, adult children and senior parents are ready to appreciate other forms of filial piety (Lin & Yi, 2011; Zuo, Wu, & Li, 2011), including monetary, instrumental (e.g., cooking, personal care), and emotional support, although parents who co-reside with a married son or a married daughter are most likely to consider their children as pious (Mao & Chi, 2011). Meanwhile, as institutional care with professional services involves high cost, more prestige and less stigma start to be attached to institutional care (Zhan, Feng, & Luo, 2008), and monetary support has become all the more salient. Finally, senior parents provide both economic support and instrumental support to their adult children, especially right after the birth of grandchildren (Schwarz, Trommsdorff, Zheng, & Shi, 2010; Zuo et al., 2011). In this way, reciprocity in filial piety is upheld. As such, the concept of serving in modern China differs dramatically from what was prescribed in Confucian classics. It is practicality, rather than propriety, that families choose to focus on, although it is still expected that adult children are obligated to make arrangements for or make contributions to the care of their senior parents.

The authority–subordinate relationship is another central issue in Confucianism. In the family setting, parental authority built upon social recognition and ownership of the family estate calls for filial piety on the part of the child, manifested as a deferential demeanor and obedience when the child is young. Nonetheless, adolescence in modern times is a period when parental authority might be questioned and challenged. Adolescent children in contemporary China expand their social relationships at school and their personal aspirations are no longer constrained by the family estate. They are psychologically less dependent on their parents than when they were younger, and yet they are not old enough to be expected to take on the duty of caring of senior parents. Consequently, major clashes might be generated between parental expectations for filial piety, or more specifically obedience, and adolescents' interpretation of the cultural models for their own generation (Fong, 2007).

Fong (2004) found that Chinese adolescent singletons struggled to define boundaries between respecting parental authority and upholding personal autonomy. In a sample of Chinese adolescents aged from 13 to 18, Helwig, Arnold, Tan, and Boyd (2003) found that these adolescents are highly conscious of personal autonomy, individual rights, and democratic norms and do not yield to adult authority blindly. Adolescent participants were asked to evaluate several decision-making scenarios and provide justifications for

their evaluations. Adolescents favored the majority rule followed by consensus. Even though the focal child in the hypothetical scenarios was only 8 years old, adolescent evaluators believed the child should have equal rights as parents in making decisions. Similarly, Chen-Gaddini (2012) found that Chinese adolescents were more likely to refer to personal jurisdictions for parent–adolescent conflicts than their mothers were. In other words, they were more likely than their mothers to consider an issue to be a personal one, on which parents do not have authority to make decisions. Also, Yue and Ng (1999) found that young people tended to endorse high respect for elders but not obedience. Taken together, Chinese adolescent children demand autonomy and independence, and Chinese parents, willingly or not, need to negotiate with their children regarding everyday authority issues, which is not much different from the typically depicted Western family (Xia et al., 2004). Nonetheless, Chinese children might consider attentive parental monitoring and organization, instead of expressive affection, as indicative of parental love and warmth (Bush, Peterson, Cobas, & Supple, 2002). In other words, compared with typical Western children, Chinese children might have higher thresholds and expectations for parental strictness and authoritarianism.

As can be seen in the social practices involving elderly care and parent–adolescent relationships, Confucianism is diverted from its philosophical form in contemporary Chinese families (Slote & de Vos, 1998). It is the parent generation, rather than the child generation, that emphasizes the value of filial piety. Adult children tend to tailor filial responsibility to their own circumstances, capabilities, and willingness. Young children and adolescents, especially singletons, are far from cultivating or demonstrating any tendency to be deferential (Fong, 2004). Deference in the child seems to be forced and rewarded from outside rather than cultivated from within. Parental authority, either for adult children or for adolescent children, is no longer taken for granted. As such, the image of authoritarian parents and conforming children, regardless of age group, does not characterize the practical aspects of filial piety.

### **Reinterpretation of Confucian Influences on Chinese Parent–Child Relationships**

Rarely is the term Confucianism clearly defined in cultural and cross-cultural studies on Chinese parent–child relationships, albeit it is frequently used as a theoretical backdrop, or used for a brief background introduction as a synonym for authoritarianism. Nevertheless, Confucianism means different things for different people, in different social contexts, and during different historical periods. As filial piety represents the core of Confucian influences on Chinese families, reinterpreting the concept of filial piety is critical for understanding Chinese parent–child relationships. This section focuses on two approaches to utilize the concept of filial piety in the study of Chinese parent–child relationships. First, when filial piety is examined as a multi-dimensional construct, researchers will be able to explain the behavioral differences among individuals who claim to embrace filial piety in general. Second, when filial piety is examined as a dynamic set of characteristics that vary across cultural subgroups, researchers will be able to explain the within-group differences in cultural beliefs and practices. In the following exposition of these two approaches, studies

conducted with samples from Taiwan and Hong Kong, besides mainland China, are included. The objective is not to compare the research findings, but rather to collect useful examples of a certain research approach that can be applied and replicated across settings.

### **Reinterpreting Filial Piety**

Filial piety can be represented as a multi-dimensional construct. Yeh and Bedford (2003) proposed the dual filial piety model in which the reciprocal component of filial piety was differentiated from the authoritarian component. The reciprocal component entailed caring for one's parents out of gratitude for their childrearing efforts, whereas the authoritarian component entailed complying with parental wishes for fear of social pressure or stigma. Results confirmed the distinctiveness of the two components by relating them to indicators of personality, attitudes, and social behaviors. Similarly, Leung, Wong, Wong, and McBride-Chang (2010) found that early adolescents' beliefs in the reciprocal aspect of filial piety were associated positively with self-esteem and social competence, whereas beliefs in the authoritarian aspect of filial piety were associated negatively with self-esteem and social competence. Additionally, Chen, Bond, and Tang (2007) differentiated filial attitudes from filial behaviors and found that filial attitudes did not necessarily predict filial behaviors. They found that men scored higher in filial attitudes, but women scored higher in filial behaviors. That is, it is women who undertake the major responsibility of caring for senior parents, yet men might still feel the pressure of endorsing the filial principles. The items in the filial attitudes scale correspond to Yeh and Bedford's authoritarian filial piety, whereas the items in the filial behaviors scale correspond to reciprocal filial piety of the dual filial piety model.

Also, filial piety should be operationalized differently for children of different age groups. Traditionally, filial piety concerns mostly about preparations, prospects, and practices of elderly care, which is preconditioned upon children's dependency on the family estate that is controlled by parents (Feng & Bodde, 1960). Nonetheless, the topic of elderly care might not be as salient between parents and their young children and adolescents. As such, parents' conceptualization of filial piety is likely to change with time. Take families with adolescent children for example, parents and adolescents tend to value mutual respect, good communication, and warm relationships, without concerning too much about propriety (Wang, 2014). Moreover, ordinary parents in contemporary China cannot and will not expect their children to be dependent upon the family estate, and in fact want their adolescent children to be independent and competitive in the modern economy (Fong, 2007). Therefore, the quality of being conforming and showing deferential demeanor is unlikely to be the central elements in what parents view as filial piety in adolescents. Taken together, individuals might value different aspects in their parent-child relationships and relate those aspects to the term of filial piety broadly. It is important to identify those aspects and examine how those aspects are associated with developmental and relational characteristics in the study of Chinese parent-child relationships against the cultural backdrop of Confucianism.



### **Probing Social Class Variability: Urban versus Rural**

Confucianism is originally advocated by the literati, the educated class, yet prescribed for those who are less educated and engaged in agrarian work (Lau, 1979). It is conceivable that different levels of adherence to and different ways of interpretation of Confucian principles exist across social classes (Ikels, 2003a). In contemporary China, one form of manifestation of the social class distinction is the rural versus urban divide. The residency status, *hukou*, categorizes Chinese people into different packages of social status, social benefits and infrastructure (Chen, Bian, Xin, Wang, & Silbereisen, 2010; Chen & Li, 2012), and is conveniently termed rural versus urban. In general, urban residency is associated with better educational and career prospects, whereas rural residency is associated with a lack of modern infrastructure and a lack of opportunities for higher education.

Research on comparison of rural versus urban families with adolescent children in China has provided some evidence of the social class variability in terms of beliefs and practices regarding parental authority and filial piety. Chen et al. (2010) found that rural parents are, more so than urban parents, likely to feel incapable of grasping opportunities provided by the changing economy. Consequently, rural parents might be more ready to release their parental authority because they are uncertain about their own ability to help their children navigate the pathways to success in a changing world. Moreover, Chen-Gardini (2012) found that rural adolescents actually used more personal justifications for conflicts than urban adolescents, suggesting that rural adolescents might be more likely than urban adolescents to recognize the legitimacy of adolescent decision authority. As such, rural parents and adolescents in China seemed to concern less about parental authority, and accordingly, conformity in adolescents, compared with their urban counterparts.

Research on beliefs and practices regarding elderly care and death rituals in China also witnessed variability across urban and rural settings. Whereas it is inevitable that traditional filial practices, primarily coresidence with elderly parents and serving them, have been weakening in rural areas (Wang, 2003; Zhang, 2003), adult children living in urban areas tried desperately to hold on to traditions (Ikels, 2003b). It appears that urban families, compared with rural families, need to deal with greater practical challenges to afford traditional elderly care (Zhan et al., 2011), but are willing to make greater efforts to uphold Confucian values.

Taken together, urban families in China seemed to be more ready than rural families to adhere to traditions, in this case, values and practices related to filial piety, despite the fact that they tend to have higher levels of education and more experiences with a lifestyle in an industrialized society. Given that China is a country with a vast population as well as tremendous geographical and historical diversity, examining within-group variability, such as utilizing the perspective of the rural-urban contrast, is a reasonable and necessary focus for future research on Confucian influences on Chinese parent–child relationships.

### **Conclusions**

To conclude, this essay reviews the historical roots of Confucianism in China, suggesting

that traditional parent–child relationships guided by the principle of filial piety were established and reinforced in an agrarian socio-historical context. Then it compares the philosophical propositions of filial piety versus actual behaviors in the name of filial piety, noting that the beliefs and practices involved in parent–child relationships of contemporary China are more practical than idealized. Finally, it proposes that research on parent–child relationships in China will benefit from providing a clear conceptualization of filial piety, as well as exploring social class variability in the beliefs and practices involving parental authority.

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### Discussion Questions

1. This article focuses on the origin and decline of the authority-subordinate hierarchy in Chinese parent–child relationship. In a presumably Confucian society, how is this hierarchy represented in teacher–student relationship and government–citizen relationship as well?
2. Is it plausible that as parent–child relationship is the foundational context where one acquires cultural values, beliefs and practices, how an individual handles authority issues psychologically and behaviorally in parent–child relationships is extended to teacher–student relationship and government–citizen relationship?
3. How is parent–child relationship connected to husband–wife relationship in terms of the manifestation of Confucian influences?
4. How are Confucian influences represented differently across the various phases of parent – child relationship?
5. Is there a way to gauge the degree to which Confucianism remains relevant for Chinese people in the modern day?
6. How to resolve the differences between ideals that individuals claim to embrace and practices that individuals actually are engaged in?
7. In what ways Confucian influences are blended with influences from Socialism and Capitalism in China? Specifically, how is this blend represented in Chinese parent–child relationship?
8. How shall one compare and contrast between parent–child relationship characterized as being influenced by Confucianism and parent–child relationship characterized as being influenced by individualism? What about parent–child relationship characterized as being influenced by Christianity?

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