

The Confucian Ideal of Filial Piety and Its Impact on Chinese Family Governance

Cui Gu^{1,*}, Zhongmin Li²

¹ Furong Colloge, Hunan University of Arts & Science, Changde, Hunan, 415000 China

² School of Foreign Languages, Hunan University of Arts & Science, Changde, Hunan, 415000 China

*Corresponding Author

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Abstract: Filial piety is a key concept in Confucianism, which emphasizes respect for authority, social harmony, and proper conduct. This study explores the Confucian ideal of filial piety and its impact on Chinese family governance, starting with exploring the concept of filial piety in Confucianism. It then delves into the historical development and evolution of Chinese family governance, the traditional roles and responsibilities of family members, and the impact of filial piety on Chinese family governance. Finally, the influence of filial piety on contemporary Chinese family governance was discussed, including the challenges to traditional family governance and the role of filial piety in shaping Chinese family governance today. This study highlights the enduring importance of filial piety in Chinese culture and its ongoing influence on family governance in modern China. It shows that filial piety remains a fundamental value that shapes family relationships, social norms, and cultural identity in China today.

1. Introduction

Filial piety, or “xiao” in Chinese, is the foundation of all other virtues and is essential to the proper functioning of society [1]. Confucius believed that if individuals fulfilled their duties as sons and daughters, they would become responsible citizens who would contribute to the well-being of the state. The concept of filial piety has been deeply ingrained in Chinese culture and has influenced the way that families have been structured and governed for centuries. Despite its importance, the concept of filial piety has been challenged in recent times as a result of social and economic changes, leading to a debate about the relevance of filial piety in modern Chinese society and the role that it should play in family governance. China’s one-child policy, which was in effect from 1979 to 2015, resulted in a smaller number of children responsible for caring for their elderly parents. Additionally, the rapid pace of urbanization has led to the breakdown of traditional family structures, making it more difficult for families to care for their elderly members [1][2]. As we navigate a rapidly changing world, it is important to examine the ways in which this concept can be adapted to meet the needs of modern Chinese families. By exploring the historical origins of filial piety, its contemporary challenges, and its implications for family governance, this research aims to contribute to this ongoing conversation and deepen our understanding of the role that filial piety

plays in Chinese society.

2. The Concept of Filial Piety in Confucianism

2.1 Definition and Evolution of the Concept of Filial Piety in Confucianism

The concept of filial piety has a long history in Chinese culture and is deeply rooted in Confucianism. Filial piety is the practice of showing respect and obedience to one's parents and ancestors, and it is considered a fundamental virtue in Confucian ethics and philosophy [2]. However, it has evolved over time, and different schools of Confucian thought have interpreted it in various ways.

In early Confucianism, filial piety was primarily understood as the duty of the son to provide for his parents in their old age and to perform the proper burial rituals for his ancestors. This duty was seen as a way to maintain the continuity of the family line and to honor the family's ancestors. *The Analects*, a collection of Confucius's teachings, contains several passages that emphasize the importance of filial piety.

During the Han dynasty, Confucianism became the dominant ideology in China, and the concept of filial piety became more complex. The scholar Dong Zhongshu, who lived during the Han dynasty, argued that filial piety was not just a duty to one's parents and ancestors but also a duty to the state. He believed that the ruler was like a father to the people, and therefore, showing filial piety to the ruler was essential for maintaining social harmony. Dong Zhongshu's interpretation of filial piety had a significant impact on Chinese culture and society, and it helped to cement the Confucian ideal of the harmonious society.

In later Confucian thought, filial piety was seen as a way to cultivate virtue and achieve personal fulfillment [3]. The philosopher Mencius, who lived during the Warring States period, argued that filial piety was not just a duty to one's parents but also a way to cultivate one's own humanity. He believed that by showing filial piety, one could develop a sense of empathy and compassion that would extend beyond one's family to society as a whole. Mencius's ideas about filial piety had a significant impact on Confucianism, and they helped to shape the concept of filial piety that is still widely practiced in China today.

2.2 The Role of Filial Piety in Confucian Ethics and Philosophy

Filial piety is one of the core values of Confucianism, and it plays a central role in Confucian ethics and philosophy. Confucianism emphasizes the importance of social relationships and the duties that individuals have to their families, communities, and society as a whole. Filial piety is seen as a fundamental duty that individuals owe to their parents and ancestors, and it is believed to be the foundation of all other virtues [4].

Confucianism teaches that filial piety is not just a matter of outwardly showing respect and obedience to one's parents, but it is also about cultivating a sense of inner respect and gratitude towards them. Confucius believed that filial piety was a way to cultivate the virtue of Ren, which is often translated as "humanity" or "benevolence." Ren is seen as the ideal of moral excellence, and it is achieved through the cultivation of virtuous habits and the development of a compassionate and empathetic disposition towards others.

In Confucian ethics, the practice of filial piety is also seen as a way to cultivate the virtues of loyalty, righteousness, and propriety. These virtues are seen as essential for maintaining social harmony and order, and they are closely tied to the concept of filial piety [4] [5]. For example, loyalty is seen as a virtue that is owed to one's parents and ancestors, as well as to the state and its rulers. Righteousness is seen as a way to uphold the moral order of the universe, and it is achieved

through the practice of filial piety and other virtuous habits. Propriety is seen as a way to maintain social harmony and order, and it is achieved through the cultivation of virtuous habits and the practice of filial piety.

The role of filial piety in Confucian ethics is closely tied to the concept of the family. The practice of filial piety involves not just the duty to one's parents but also to one's ancestors, and it is believed to have a positive impact on future generations. The cultivation of virtuous habits through the practice of filial piety is seen as a way to transmit moral values and virtues to future generations and to maintain social harmony and order.

2.3 Filial Piety and the Family: Confucian Ideals and Practices

In Confucianism, the family is considered the most important unit of society, and the practice of filial piety is seen as essential for maintaining its stability and continuity. Confucian ideals emphasize the importance of strong family relationships, and filial piety is seen as the foundation of those relationships. It involves showing respect and obedience to one's parents and ancestors, as well as caring for them and fulfilling their needs.

The practice of filial piety is deeply ingrained in Chinese culture and has influenced family dynamics for centuries. Confucianism teaches that the family is a hierarchical structure, with the father at the top, followed by the mother, then the eldest son, and so on [6]. The practice of filial piety involves showing respect and obedience to these family members, as well as fulfilling one's duties towards them.

One of the key ways in which filial piety is practiced is through the provision of material support for one's parents and ancestors. This includes financial support, as well as providing for their physical needs, such as food and shelter. Confucianism teaches that parents have a duty to care for their children when they are young, and children have a reciprocal duty to care for their parents when they are old.

While the practice of filial piety is highly valued in Confucianism, it is not without its challenges. Confucian ideals of filial piety are sometimes in conflict with modern values and lifestyles. For example, the traditional expectation of filial piety often places a heavy burden on the eldest son, who is expected to take on the primary responsibility for caring for aging parents. This can be difficult in modern society, where people often live far from their parents and may have other responsibilities, such as work and family.

3. Chinese Family Governance

3.1 Historical Development and Evolution of Chinese Family Governance

Chinese family governance has a long and rich history dating back to ancient times. The earliest form of Chinese family governance was based on the concept of patriarchy, where the eldest male member of the family held the highest authority in the family. This system gradually evolved into the concept of household governance, where the head of the household was responsible for the management of the family's affairs, including financial and legal matters.

During the Han dynasty, the Confucian ideology became the dominant philosophical system in China. The Confucian concept of filial piety, or "xiao", played a significant role in shaping Chinese family governance. The concept of filial piety emphasizes the respect, obedience, and care that children owe to their parents and elders. Confucianism considers the family as the fundamental unit of society, and the practice of filial piety was seen as the cornerstone of family governance.

In the Song dynasty, the concept of filial piety was further institutionalized with the introduction of family law codes that outlined the rights and responsibilities of family members. During this

period, the family became an important social institution in China, and the family head was expected to manage not only the family's financial affairs but also its social and moral well-being.

The Ming dynasty marked a significant shift in Chinese family governance with the introduction of the civil service examination system. The civil service examination system provided a path for social mobility based on merit rather than birth, which challenged the traditional hierarchy of the family. As a result, families began to prioritize education and the cultivation of talent, which had a profound impact on Chinese society as a whole.

In modern times, Chinese family governance has undergone significant changes due to the influence of globalization and urbanization. The traditional extended family model has been replaced by the nuclear family model, where each family unit consists of parents and children. However, the practice of filial piety remains an important cultural value in Chinese society and continues to shape Chinese family governance.

3.2 Traditional Roles and Responsibilities of Family Members

Chinese family governance is based on the hierarchical structure of the family, with the father or eldest male member holding the highest authority. The head of the household is responsible for managing the family's affairs and making decisions that affect the family. The role of the head of the household is to provide for the family's material and spiritual needs and to ensure the family's continuity and stability.

In traditional Chinese society, family members had specific roles and responsibilities based on their gender and age. The eldest son was expected to take over the family business and carry on the family name. Daughters were expected to marry and move to their husband's family, where they would assume the role of a daughter-in-law and help to maintain the family's harmony. The younger sons were expected to assist the eldest son in the family business or pursue a different profession.

The elderly were highly respected in Chinese society, and it was the duty of the younger generation to care for their elders. Children were expected to provide financial support for their parents in old age and to show them respect and obedience.

In recent years, the traditional roles and responsibilities of family members have been challenged due to the influence of globalization and modernization. Women have gained greater autonomy and opportunities outside of the home, and the younger generation has become more individualistic, prioritizing personal fulfillment over traditional family duties [6]. However, the practice of filial piety remains an important cultural value in Chinese society, and the family continues to play a vital role in shaping the individual's identity and social status.

3.3 The Impact of Filial Piety on Chinese Family Governance

The concept of filial piety has had a significant impact on Chinese family governance. It is viewed as the foundation of Chinese family culture and is deeply ingrained in the Chinese psyche. The practice of filial piety has contributed to the stability and continuity of Chinese families, and it has also had a profound impact on Chinese society as a whole.

One of the key impacts of filial piety on Chinese family governance is the emphasis on respect and obedience. Children are expected to respect their parents and elders and to obey their authority. This has helped to maintain the hierarchical structure of the family and has contributed to the stability and continuity of Chinese families. The practice of filial piety has also contributed to the moral and spiritual well-being of Chinese families, emphasizing the importance of family harmony and moral values[7].

The practice of filial piety has also had a significant impact on the economic and social

development of China. In traditional Chinese society, the family was the basic economic unit, and the head of the household was responsible for managing the family's financial affairs. The practice of filial piety encouraged families to prioritize education and the cultivation of talent, which helped to create a skilled workforce and contributed to China's economic development. Furthermore, the practice of filial piety has also had a significant impact on the social development of China. It has helped to maintain social order and stability, promoting social cohesion and harmony. It has also contributed to the development of Chinese culture and has helped to preserve the traditional values and customs of Chinese society.

However, the practice of filial piety has also had some negative impacts on Chinese family governance. The emphasis on obedience and respect has sometimes led to the suppression of individualism and creativity, and it has also contributed to the perpetuation of gender inequality in Chinese society. Women have often been expected to subordinate their needs and desires to those of their husbands and children, and this has contributed to their marginalization in Chinese society.

4. The Influence of Filial Piety on Contemporary Chinese Family Governance

China's family governance has undergone significant changes in the modern era due to various factors, including demographic shifts, urbanization, globalization, and the one-child policy. Despite these changes, filial piety, or xiao, remains a crucial Confucian value that has helped to shape Chinese family governance throughout history.

4.1 Challenges and Changes to Traditional Family Governance in Contemporary China

In contemporary China, traditional family governance has faced significant challenges and undergone significant changes due to various factors, including demographic shifts, urbanization, globalization, and the one-child policy. These changes have led to a shift towards a more individualistic society, challenging traditional family values, including filial piety.

One of the most significant changes to traditional family governance in contemporary China is the decline in the extended family structure. In the past, the extended family provided a strong support system for elderly family members and ensured the continuity of family traditions and values. However, with the rise of nuclear family households, the extended family's influence has weakened, and the responsibility for caring for elderly family members has shifted to the individual and the state.

The decline of the extended family structure has significant implications for the practice of filial piety. In traditional Chinese society, filial piety was not only an individual obligation but also a collective responsibility. Children were expected to care for and respect not only their parents but also their grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other elderly family members. However, with the decline of the extended family structure, the number of younger generations available to provide support for elderly family members has decreased, making the practice of filial piety more challenging.

The decline of the extended family structure and the one-child policy have also led to changes in the government's policies towards elderly care in China. In recent years, the Chinese government has introduced policies to support elderly care, including the introduction of a national senior care system and tax incentives for families who provide care for elderly family members. These policies reflect the government's recognition of the challenges faced by families in caring for elderly family members in the modern era. Moreover, China's rapid economic development and urbanization have led to significant changes in family structures and values. The rise of urbanization has resulted in a shift towards nuclear family households and a decrease in the extended family structure. These changes have led to a shift towards a more individualistic society, challenging traditional family values, including filial piety.

The rise of individualism in modern China has significant implications for the practice of filial piety. In traditional Chinese society, filial piety was not only an individual obligation but also a collective responsibility. However, with the rise of individualism, there is a greater emphasis on personal freedom and autonomy, and individuals have more agency and control over their lives. This shift challenges traditional family values, including filial piety, and raises questions about the continued relevance of filial piety in modern Chinese society.

4.2 The Role of Filial Piety in Shaping Chinese Family Governance Today

Filial piety continues to play a significant role in shaping Chinese family governance today, despite the challenges and changes to traditional family structures and values. The practice of filial piety remains a fundamental value in Chinese society, reflecting the importance of family and the intergenerational relationships that exist within it. In contemporary China, the practice of filial piety has adapted to the changing social and economic conditions, and the role it plays in shaping Chinese family governance has evolved.

One significant way that filial piety has adapted to the changing social and economic conditions in China is through the use of technology. With the rise of technology, new forms of communication have emerged, making it easier for families to stay in touch and care for elderly family members. For example, video conferencing, mobile apps, and other digital tools have made it possible for families to communicate across distances and to check in on elderly family members regularly[7]. These technologies have also made it easier for families to manage and coordinate care for elderly family members, making it possible to provide care even when family members are physically distant.

Another way that filial piety has adapted to the changing social and economic conditions in China is through changes in family roles and responsibilities. In traditional Chinese society, filial piety was primarily the responsibility of the younger generations towards their elders. However, with the decline of the extended family structure and the rise of nuclear family households, the role of filial piety has shifted. Today, both younger and older generations have a responsibility to care for and respect one another. For example, in contemporary China, it is not uncommon for elderly family members to take on caregiving responsibilities for their grandchildren, reflecting the importance of intergenerational relationships and the reciprocity of filial piety.

The role of filial piety in shaping Chinese family governance is also reflected in the government's policies towards elderly care. The Chinese government has recognized the challenges faced by families in caring for elderly family members and has introduced policies to support elderly care, reflecting the importance of filial piety in Chinese society. For example, the government has introduced tax incentives for families who provide care for elderly family members, and it has established a national senior care system to support elderly care.

4.3 Filial Piety and Modern Chinese Family Governance: Similarities and Differences

While the practice of filial piety remains an essential value in Chinese society, it has undergone significant changes and adaptations in response to the changing social and economic conditions in China. The practice of filial piety in modern China reflects both similarities and differences to traditional Chinese family governance.

One significant similarity between traditional and modern Chinese family governance is the importance of intergenerational relationships. In traditional Chinese society, filial piety was based on a reciprocal relationship between the younger and older generations, reflecting the importance of family and the obligations that existed between family members. This reciprocal relationship remains a fundamental value in modern Chinese family governance, reflecting the importance of

intergenerational relationships and the reciprocity of filial piety[8].

Another similarity between traditional and modern Chinese family governance is the importance of family harmony. In traditional Chinese society, filial piety was essential for maintaining family harmony and ensuring that the family could function effectively as a unit. This emphasis on family harmony remains a fundamental value in modern Chinese family governance, reflecting the importance of communication, cooperation, and respect within families.

However, there are also significant differences between traditional and modern Chinese family governance. One of the most significant differences is the shift towards a more individualistic society, challenging traditional family values, including filial piety. In contemporary China, individuals have more agency and control over their own lives and may prioritize their own goals and ambitions over the expectations of their families. This shift towards individualism has challenged traditional family governance and the role of filial piety in Chinese society.

Another significant difference between traditional and modern Chinese family governance is the changing role of women. In traditional Chinese society, women were expected to prioritize their families and fulfill their roles as wives and mothers. However, in modern China, women have more opportunities for education and employment, challenging traditional gender roles and family expectations. This shift towards gender equality has led to changes in family governance, with women playing a more significant role in decision-making and caregiving. In addition, the rise of technology and globalization has led to changes in family structures and values. With increased mobility and access to information, families in contemporary China are more diverse and may prioritize different values and beliefs than in traditional Chinese society. This diversity has led to changes in family governance, with families adapting to new values and expectations.

5. Conclusion

Filial piety, a core value in Chinese culture, is not only a moral virtue but also a legal obligation in Chinese society. The Chinese government has enacted various laws and policies to promote filial piety and support the elderly. Our research has shown that filial piety has both positive and negative effects on Chinese family governance. On the positive side, filial piety promotes family harmony, social stability, and moral values. It encourages respect for elders, fosters a sense of obligation to one's parents, and strengthens family ties. Filial piety also helps to reduce the burden of caring for the elderly on the state, as families are expected to take on this responsibility.

On the negative side, filial piety can create tension and conflict within families, especially when there are disagreements over how best to care for the elderly. It can also reinforce gender inequality by placing a greater burden of caregiving on women. Moreover, filial piety may limit individual autonomy and restrict one's choices in life.

Furthermore, our research has shown how filial piety has evolved over time in response to social and economic changes in China. The traditional Confucian ideal of filial piety has been challenged and transformed by modernization, globalization, and urbanization. The study of filial piety and Chinese family governance has important implications for understanding the cultural and social dynamics of contemporary China. As China continues to modernize and globalize, the traditional values and practices of family governance will inevitably come into contact with new ideas and practices. Understanding the role of filial piety in Chinese family governance can provide insights into the cultural and social tensions that arise in this context and help to promote greater cultural understanding and cooperation between China and other nations.

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