

Filial Piety: A Weighted Scale of Respect

Tenley Murphy

Clemson University

CHIN 4990: Chinese Culture through Films: Screening Cultural Changes in Modern Chinese

Societies

Professor Su-I Chen

December 13th, 2024

Introduction

“Families are not Democracies” says Harvard professor in McCormack and Blair’s 2016 journal the *Binding Families: Xiao 孝 in Thinking Through China*, on filial piety. Perhaps this was a subtle criticism at Western culture and our fundamental beliefs in democracy. Western culture was founded by the ancient Greeks who believed in the rule of people (A&E Television Networks, 2024). Centuries later Grecian ideology has been implemented in our social and political systems. It appears that this Harvard professor was noting that such ideologies do not apply to the family unit. Though, it should be mentioned that this opinion is not that of a Western ideal, but the ancient Chinese principle, filial piety. According to Merriam Webster dictionary (2024), filial piety can be described as “reverence for parents considered in Chinese ethics the prime virtue and the basis of all right human relations” (para. 1). Knowing this now, we can look back on the quote from McCormack and Blair’s journal and see the purpose behind using the word democracy. In Chinese families, your life does not belong to you, it belongs to your parents. Every decision you make should be for your parents, not about casting your individual vote in society as democracy suggests. As democracy is the structure of western civilization, filial piety is the mold of ancient and modern Chinese civilization. Filial piety specifies the ideology of devotion by the child to the parent, and also emphasizes duty to oblige the parent-child relationships. As Aris Teon (2016) states in his article on filial piety, “In traditional Chinese culture, ‘right and wrong’ do not depend on universal principles, but on the position of the individual in the hierarchy. In Confucian thought, *parents are right per definition*” (para. 51). Due to this structure, young Chinese people live their lives on behalf of their elders, during a vital developmental time which transforms and prepares an adolescent for adulthood. Upon entering adulthood, would a Chinese person truly know themselves, if they had been living on

behalf of others? This paper examines the concept of filial piety in Chinese culture, arguing that, far from embodying genuine respect for family and elders, it often undermines the self-respect and autonomy of Chinese youth, leading to harmful consequences for their well-being and identity.

Before providing evidence to support this claim it is important to define self-respect. Self-respect is an act of honoring your needs and desires, understanding your worth, and making choices that enable you to keep your dignity (Dillon, 2013). While this may be considered a westernized definition, the word can be described universally. As for autonomy, its definition is embedded in self-respect. Autonomy is the right to self-govern and therefore the right to make choices that enable you to keep your dignity. Self-respect and autonomy go hand-in-hand which is important to remember as we delve into how it can be undermined.

Moral Dilemma

It will first be argued how in Chinese filial piety, a child must protect their family from harm and not harm it, otherwise there will be serious consequences. This puts extreme pressure on a child to put their family's needs over their own. Said in other words by an unknown Chinese philosopher (n. d.), “One's body, hair, and skin are received from one's parents and should not be damaged or harmed. This is the beginning of filial piety”. This sentiment can be supported by scenes from the movie *Saving Face* directed by Alice Wu in 2004. *Saving Face* is about main character Wil, who navigates living with her 48 year old single mother after she is kicked out of her parents home for being pregnant out of wedlock. Wil’s mother, Ma, is not the only one with a secret. Wil does her best to hide the fact that she is a lesbian which is not accepted in her tight-knit, traditional, Chinese-American community. In Ma’s case, she was kicked out for being

a disgrace. She had a child out of wedlock which is considered damage to her body and therefore goes against the ordinances of filial piety. Her decisions and actions represent her family poorly. Ma feels incredibly ashamed as stops going out in public. Her parents treat her horribly for a decision she made and Ma must bear the consequences of public humiliation. Rather than being concerned for her own health and baby, or enjoying this time with the baby's father, she is forced to keep it all a secret which causes tremendous damage to Ma. As for Wil, living with her mom puts serious pressure on Wil because she is interfering with Wil's life. Ma begins to impose opinions about her personal love life. However, Ma is only doing what any Chinese mother does and should do according to the rules of filial piety. Nevertheless, Wil has already tried to suppress her sexuality because she knows it is wrong in her culture. Unable to change it, she stays quiet and is not heavily involved with the community. Wil faces extreme stress because she is forced to go into hiding. This all changes when her mom is around. Wil feels even more pressure because she cannot be comfortable in her own home. Ma reminds her of the fact that she is a disgrace to the family by being a lesbian. Wil may want to fulfill her own needs and express her sexuality, but filial piety surpasses that. This ultimately prevents Will from progressing her romantic relationship with Vivian as she is unwilling to go against the principles of filial piety.

We see something similar in the Taiwanese film, *On Happiness Road* directed in 2018 by Hsin-Yin Sung. Main character Shu-Chi comes home to Taiwan after receiving news about her beloved grandmother's death. While back home, she reminisces about her childhood by focusing on moments that defined her transition into adulthood. Shu-Chi questions what made her happy by reflecting on these memories and what led her to the state of unhappiness she is currently in. As she reflects, we learn that Shu-Chi is very unhappy in her marriage. While conversing with her inner dialogue and her deceased grandmother, the grandmother questions why she would stay

with her husband if she wasn't happy. Well, the answer lies in filial piety. Shu-Chi does not want a failed marriage because it looks bad on her decision-making but even worse on her family. To make matters worse, audience members later learn that Shu-Chi is pregnant. This fact alone prohibits divorce. Getting a divorce breaks the bond of family and therefore goes against filial piety. By having a child, you secure scrutiny from your family and community for not keeping your marriage in order to correctly raise a child. Such an act is selfish and harmful to your parents. Shu-Chi holds this contempt within herself which is why she does not say a word about her pregnancy and the unhappiness in her marriage. Shu-Chi is left relentlessly managing her emotions while also concealing the truth. This need to defend your family's reputation and not disappoint your parents in the name of filial piety, leaves Shu-Chi in this depressive state. She is not free to tell the truth because it will hurt her family, but doing so severely hurts Shu-Chi in her search to find happiness again.

Sharing the Wealth

As we expose the side of filial piety that disrupts an adolescent's life and turns it into a burdensome responsibility dedicated to your parents, we also see how this responsibility means to provide. Should a child become successful or have an abundance of resources, they are obligated to share it and give to the family against their will, even if their family has done nothing for them in return. We see this in Hao Wu's 2018 documentary, *The People's Republic of Desire*. The movie highlights the struggle that online streamers go through to gain popularity and success in their industry. Shen Man stars as one of the individuals who starts streaming when she is very poor but eventually finds success and amasses a huge following. Instead of worrying

about her online content, she is now solely financially responsible for her family. Shen Man is facing this pressure because she is successful. As mentioned, Shen Man came from a poor background. One would assume her parents did everything they could for her but as soon as she becomes successful, so does the family. Shen Man feels the need to go on with the career even though she is burnt out. For instance, when confronted with the question about happiness, Shen Man hesitates for a second and utters nonchalantly, “*I’m* happy. Compared to many others, I think I *should* be happy” (1:18:34). Here, Shen Man does not actually feel happy. It is easy to see that she feels this immense burden. However, Shen Man feels like she should be happy because she has money and can share it with her family. Knowing she is supporting her family by herself, she does not get the luxury to pick and choose what she wants to do in life. Everything she does is for them. Filial piety takes her success away from her. Where she could be enjoying her life, dedicated to her work, she is obligated to share her success (money) with her family, which takes away from the freedoms she could have had.

This idea is supported through Aris Teon’s article *Filial Piety in Chinese Culture* (2016). Teon emphasizes that for many Chinese or Taiwanese, love is not expressed with words. Love is shown and displayed through material care. Filial piety and parental care are shown by “providing” for someone. This rule applies to many kinds of familial relationships. Teon also notes that “the Chinese family was founded on a ‘reciprocal bargain’ between parents and children” (para.14). He means this in the sense that parents take care of their children, so then children would later give back to their parents. Hence why it is no coincidence that many stories about filial piety revolve around the subject of money. Teon observes that another consequence of this understanding of love, is that responsibility is mainly regarded as “providing” for someone, rather than as caring about each other’s feelings. For example, in traditional Chinese

society, a man could be cheating on his wife with another woman. But as long as he provided for his wife and family, he was considered a responsible husband. This is also seen in fathers who are rarely present in their children's lives and are still seen as responsible so long as they continue to provide financially. To provide for your family in regard to filial piety means to be financially responsible. Shen Man is a young woman who does not receive any love or affection in return for her generosity. Instead, Shen Man is forced to keep financially providing for her family with no questions asked even if her sanity starts to deteriorate.

Option 1: There Are No Other Options

As we continue talking about the relationship between a parent and child, filial piety also requires a child to only pursue what the parents want them to pursue. A child must do per their parents instructions even if the child has other interests or morally disagrees with the action. This takes away the passion and hope a child might have which is significant to have in adulthood. This theme is illustrated in the movie, *Einstein and Einstein* directed by Cao Baoping in 2013. Main character Li Wan enjoys studying physics and excels in it, but is forced to put it aside and study English because her father thinks English is the most impressive academic discipline. Li Wan does as she is told without question. Later in the movie she is at an English speaking competition. While her family smiles, stands, and remains enthusiastic throughout the entirety of her speech, Li Wan messes up. While her family does not see it as a failure, Li Wan must live with the embarrassment of people laughing at her over her mistakes. Such mistakes are most likely due to the fact that English may not be her best subject. What she really wants to do is study physics. Li Wan must give up on that dream and work on something she does not enjoy.

This teaches Li Wan the wrong lesson. As a 13 year old girl, she should have some degree of independence. Li Wan has absolutely no freedom and will turn to her father for every decision she makes. Li Wan's father strips her of any independence and enjoyment. The lack of autonomy dissipates her self-respect and leaves her suppressed from making any decisions and having hobbies.

Another way we see this idea in real life is shown in the 2019 documentary, *Leftover Women* directed by Shosh Shlam and Hilla Medalia. The term "leftover women" is how the Chinese describe educated, modern women who are not married and settled by the time they reach their mid-twenties. The film follows three professionally successful and content women who, under immense pressure from their families and the government, are determined to find love on their own terms. The irony of this film is that these women are incredibly successful and have most likely done everything their parents have asked them to: do well in school, get into college, get a good job, and provide for your family. But there is one thing missing. These women do everything they are told to do. Yet the one thing ruining what they have worked so hard for is not having a husband. There is no use for success when you cannot have a family. There is no use in being a good child to your parents if you do not have a husband. As stated before, marriage as a union is necessary in filial piety. You must marry and have a traditional family. And so with all their accomplishments, one is still not good enough without a husband in the eyes of the parents and in the eyes of filial piety. These women have done all they could to gain the respect of others just for it to be undermined by filial piety. Society painting these women as outcasts is incredibly damaging and makes these women feel insecure despite all they have accomplished. There are many scenes where the women cry and fight with themselves over how they feel. These women even feel guilty for expressing their feelings because they go

against filial piety. The hurdles these women must overcome just to be able to express their opinions is inconceivable. Because all of their successes are undermined by filial piety, these women are left questioning their identity and their purpose in society.

Cultural Comparison

With all that has been said about Chinese filial piety, it can be argued that the protection of parents, the emphasis on providing over care, and the expected obedience of parents is destructive to Chinese youth. It is with these reasons that Chinese Filial Piety would never survive in the United States as a direct result of our history, our fundamental morals, and our continuously developing values. As previously stated, western values were founded on ancient greek principles. Such aspects include justice, equality, balance of physical, mental, and spiritual health, and reasoning (Graham, n.d.). While these ideas exist in Chinese culture, they do not match with the meaning of filial piety. Filial piety is hierarchical therefore dismisses any claim towards equality. In Amy Chua's eye-opening *Wall Street Journal* article on Chinese mothers (2011), she blatantly says that "Chinese parents believe their children owe them everything" (pg. 4). While she credits filial piety for this belief, as a mother she believes children owe their parents everything because they put forth so much effort to insure success for their children. Amy Chua also compares this parenting style to her New York raised husband. To Amy, Westerners do not view the children as being indebted to their parents. It is her husband's belief that children are brought into this world by their parents, therefore it is the parent's responsibility to provide for them. Their duty is to their kids who do not own them anything. She thinks that a big difference lies in what each parent cares about. For Westerners, they care about their child's

self-esteem which morphs into self-respect. For Chinese parents, they sacrifice so much for their children to see their true potential and will do anything to achieve that, even if it means hurting the child's self-esteem. Westerners value individuality whereas Chinese value togetherness. This distinction alone explains why filial piety would never survive in Western culture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, filial piety prohibits a child from having self-respect because every ounce of that respect is reserved for parents. Filial piety is ingrained in every living thing in China and shows no sign of disappearing. Filial piety will forever be an inherent moral guideline that parents impose on their children as a way to teach them obedience and respect. But filial piety does not teach respect, it causes the child to lose self-respect and self-worth. This is shown by Chinese youth hiding their identity and needs in order to “do what is right” according to their parents. It is also illustrated by children being forced to “provide” and “pay back” their parents for all the sacrifices they've made, even if it means sacrificing themselves. Last, this idea is demonstrated through children having to suppress their desires because what should be valued is what the parents value. These parenting styles would not survive in the United States because individualism drives Western cultures. Filial piety is beyond important in sculpting Chinese society and is a fundamental pillar that built up their hierarchical system.

References

- A&E Television Networks. (2024, October 16). *Ancient greek democracy - Athenian, definition, modern*. History.com.
<https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-greece/ancient-greece-democracy>
- Cao, B.P. (Director). (2013) *Einstein and Einstein* [Film]. Alibaba Pictures.
- Chua, A. (2011). Why Chinese mothers are superior. Wall Street Journal.
- Dillon, R. S. (2013). *Dignity, character and self-respect*. Routledge.
- Graham, J. (n.d.). *Ancient Greek Philosophy*. Internet encyclopedia of philosophy.
<https://iep.utm.edu/ancient-greek-philosophy/>
- Hsin, Y.S. (Director). (2019) *On Happiness Road* [Film]. Happiness Road Productions.
- Medalia, H., & Shlom, S. (Director). (2019) *Leftover Women* [Film]. Medalia Productions and Shlam Productions.
- Teon, A. (2024, November 12). *Filial piety (孝) in Chinese culture*. The Greater China Journal.
<https://china-journal.org/2016/03/14/filial-piety-in-chinese-culture/>
- Wu, A. (Director). (2004) *Saving Face* [Film]. Sony Pictures Classics.
- Wu, H. (Director). (2018) *People's Republic of Desire* [Film]. Tripod Media LLC.