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## *The Conception of Filial Piety in Early Confucian Texts*

Märt Läänemets

In the present study I aim to sketch some observations on the concept of filial piety (*xiao*) one of the central teachings of early Confucianism, as it is presented in the three most ancient and authoritative Confucian texts – the *Analects* of Confucius, Mencius, and the *Canon of Filial Piety (Xiaojing)*. I use the term „early Confucianism“ for marking the pre-Qin Confucianism, or the teaching of *rujia*, the school of scholars, in order to distinguish it from the ideologised and institutionalised Han Confucianism.<sup>1</sup> Of course, the question, to which extent these three texts contain the authentic pre-Han materials, and to which extent they are the compilations of Han scribes, is still unsolved, because no pre-Han manuscripts have survived. However, as integral semiotic phenomena, these texts undoubtedly transmit the essential patterns of the early *rujia* thinking in both form and content.

In all evidence, the concept of filial piety was formed in quite early period of the history of Chinese civilisation on the basis of the traditional tribal way of life which sanctioned the patriarchal and hierarchical relationships in the clan and family, according to which the elders and seniors kept a leading role in the society. The worship of ancestors was a necessary component of the cultivation of filial piety, and it was transferred into the religious cult as early as in the Shang-Yin period.<sup>2</sup> In the early Zhou period, the concept of filial piety had obtained a sacred dimension, and the cultivation of that was considered as the main guarantee for the maintaining of the stability and order in the society. So it was evaluated as a necessary virtue of an ideal king, as we can see in the Ode to Wuwang, the semi-legendary founder of Zhou dynasty, in the *Canon of Poetry (Shijing)*:

„He secured the confidence due a king,  
And became the pattern for all below him.  
Ever thinking how to be filial,  
His filial mind was the mode (which he supplied).  
Men loved him, the One man,  
And responded (to his example) with a docile virtue.

1 I am also in favour for using the very suitable term „Ruisim“ for early Confucianism, introduced by Robert Eno. See, R. Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, Albany 1990.

2 L. S. Vasilyev, *Problemy Genezisa Kitaiskoi Mysli*, Moscow 1989, 65.

Ever thinking how to be filial,  
He brilliantly continued the doings (of his fathers).<sup>3</sup>

The graphic shape of the character *xiao*, meaning filial piety, very clearly refers to the original idea of the word, probably of very ancient origin. The character consists of two parts the upper one and the lower one. The upper graph means „old“ or „an old person“, the lower one – „a child“ or „a son“. The ideographic explanation of the whole character may be as follows: „a child carrying or supporting an old person“, or „the elder being superior to the younger“.<sup>4</sup> In that way, the ancient Chinese visually expressed the idea of a young person's filial attitude towards an old person.

Confucius and his followers, according to their own words, followed the way of the ancient sage-kings. The antiquity (*gu*), especially the early Western Zhou period, was considered by them as a higher ideal. Their supreme goal was to re-establish the ancient „golden age“ under the Heaven, i.e. in China, which in their minds was equal to the whole civilised world. Unlike the early legalists, for instance, Guan Zhong, who tried to do it through the establishment of strict laws and brilliant administration,<sup>5</sup> the early Confucianists' attempt was to improve the people's mind and behaviour through the education and practising the rituals so that the people's Way and state's ( society's) Way would function in one rhythm and full harmony. In Confucian understanding we can interpret the Way (*dao*) as nothing abstract or superhuman, but just a conscious life of the human being, rooted on one's moral qualities and intellectual abilities. The ultimate goal of a man must be to improve one's nature, to extend the limits of one's consciousness and conscious activity, and to enlarge and manage the Way. Therefore, in the Analects 15: 26, Confucius said:

„Man can promote the Way, Way can not promote the Man.“

The actual manner, how to „promote the Way“, by Confucius, is the transformation of the man's self through the cultivation in himself of certain virtues. The core of Confucius' teaching is nothing but to explain the essence of these virtues and to point out the way how to practise them.

Confucius took a set of ancient words-graphs, and, setting them into a new mental context of his own, enlarged the field of meaning of these terms and

3 *Sacred Books of the East* III, Oxford 1879, 394.

4 The famous Han dictionary *Shuo Wen jiezi* gives the following meanings of the character *xiao*: „good service to parents“; „to maintain“, „to bring up“; „to be obedient“; „to act in accordance with Dao“; „not to oppose to the rulers“; „son's obedience to parents“. *Shuo wen jie zi zhu*, Shanghai 1986, 398.

5 L. S. Perelomov, *Konfucianstvo i Legism v Politicheskoi Istorii Kitaya*, Moscow 1981, 43.

attributed new denotations to them. The characters, denoting the main Confucian virtues, such as *ren* - „humanness“, *yi* - „righteousness or dutifulness“, *li* - „ritual, ceremoniousness“, *zhi* - „wisdom“, *xin* - „fidelity“, but also *dao* - „way, natural course“, *de* - „virtue“, *wen* - „culture“, etc., all occur also in pre-Confucian scriptures, for instance, in the *Documents (Shu)* and *Poetry (Shi)*, but never or in very rare occasions as terms in the Confucian sense.<sup>6</sup> In Confucian texts all these and many other key terms appear as terms in the philosophical or even (quasi-) scientific sense, forming together a fixed conceptual framework of the whole teaching.

The concept of filial piety, as mentioned above, had reached a universal acceptance in Ancient China long before Confucius' time as a regulative principle of the relationship between parents and children, the elder and the younger, rulers and subordinates, and as a sacred virtue of the kings. So Confucius did not add anything special or new in order to develop the conception of filial piety, but adopted it into his own teaching as a necessary and self-evident attitude followed by every civilised people. In the *Analects* the term *xiao* occurs in relatively rare occasions, 14 times all in all. Only in the second book (2: 5-8) a compact cluster of sayings on filial piety is present, where the accent is laid on the necessary respectfulness towards one's parents, considered as the very source of the further moral growth. In the *Analects* 2: 7-8 the Master said:

„Nowadays one who can maintain one's parents is said to be filial. Dogs and horses also can be maintained. Without respect, where is the difference?“

„Forcing a smile when having service, the young man though, doing well his duties and maintaining his parents with wine and food – can he be called filial?“

The given passages involve some critics in the address of the situation of the practice of the filial piety in Confucius' era, that, according to the Confucianists' point of view, must grow out from the deepest heart, but not be only a formal posture.

In the *Analects* 2: 5 the interdependence of *xiao* and *li*, the ritual, the central concept of early *rujia* teaching, is mentioned in the context, how a filial son must treat his parents in their lifetime and after they have passed away:

„The Master (on being asked about filial piety) said: „When they are alive, serve them in accordance with ritual; and

6 On the comparative analysis of the meanings of the key terms in the canonical books of early Confucianism see: P. Nikkilä, *Early Confucianism and Inherited Thought in the Light of some Key Terms of the Confucian Analects*. Part I. *The Terms in Shu Ching and Shih Ching*, Helsinki 1982. Part II. *The Terms in the Confucian Analects*, Helsinki 1992.

when they are dead, bury them in accordance with ritual and sacrifice to them in accordance with ritual“.

To follow thoroughly the pattern of one's father, at least during the three-year mourning period, is an event of great importance in the Confucius' view on filial piety, as it is said in the *Analects* 1: 11:

„When the father is alive, you only see the son's intentions. It is when he is dead that you see the son's actions. If for three years he makes no change from the ways of his father, he may be called filial.“

The same idea is expressed also in one later Confucian text, *The Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong)* 19:

„Filial piety means to carry out successfully the ideal of one's ancestors, and to extend successfully the services of one's ancestors. /.../ To serve the dead as well as to serve the living, and to serve the deceased as well as to serve the present – this is the utmost of filial piety.“

There are some passages in the *Analects*, where Confucius points out the importance of the filial attitude of the ruler as a main guarantee for maintaining peace and harmony in the state. In 2: 20 the Master said:

„Be filial and regardful, and people are loyal to you“,

and, quoting the *Documents*, continued in the next passage:

„To be filial and to love one's brothers are the very basis of good government.“

The most significant, in my opinion, saying on filial piety is presented in the *Analects* 1: 2. The whole paragraph, the authorship of which is attributed to the disciple of Confucius – You-zi, sounds as follows:

„Among the people there are few who (following the spirit of) filial piety and fraternal duty, like to oppose (their) superiors; there are none who, not liking to oppose (their) superiors, like to rise in revolt. The noble man is striving for the root. When the root is steady, the Way springs up. Filial piety and fraternal duty are the root of the humanness, are they not?“

In the first section of this paragraph filial piety together with its twin virtue of fraternal duty (*di*) are again explained as a guarantee for maintaining peace and order in the society, because the man, being filial and fraternal, as is said, does not oppose his superiors nor rise in revolt. In the second section the position of the noble man (*junzi*), the ideal personage of the Confucian

teaching, is stated. The noble man is said to be „striving for the root“. The word „root“ (*ben*) is explained in the next sentence as something, from which the power of the noble man's Way is dependent. To set the noble man's way in motion is said to be the realisation of the abovementioned virtues with humanness (*ren*) on the top, as stated in *Mencius* (VII B, 16):

„Only he who has perfected the humanness in himself,  
is a real man; to fulfil it is said to be the Way.“

The final section of the *Analects* 1:2 may be interpreted in the following way. Here filial piety (*xiao*) and fraternal duty (*di*) are said to be the root of humanness (*ren*). Humanness is embodied in the subject of the Confucian teaching the noble man (*junzi*). On the realisation of the humanness depends the functioning of the noble man's Way (*dao*). The visible results of the latter are peace and order in the society, and harmony among the people. The very basis of these, in its turn, are the filial piety and fraternal duty, as is said in the first section of the given paragraph. So we can sketch a logical chain, in order to show how the Confucian Way actually functions. From the cultivation of filial piety (*xiao*) and fraternal duty (*di*) that are the very basis of the moral growth of man as a social being, the humanness (*ren*) grows out. A man who has realised the humanness in himself and made it a ground of his character and behaviour, is called a noble man (*junzi*) in the Confucian framework. The noble man's activity in the society is the fulfilling his Way (*dao*). The fulfilling of the noble man's Way means the establishment of peace and order in the society. So we can interpret the given paragraph as a brief summary of the Confucian socio-ethical theory and practice.

In the *Analects* we do not find a more detailed statement on the essence and meaning of filial piety. However, in all evidences, we may suppose that in a certain stage of the development of the early *rujia* teaching a branch emanated from the main trend, where filial piety was elevated to the status of the supreme virtue. That „filialism“ consolidated, perhaps, in the third century BC, and a disciple of Confucius called Zeng-zi or Zeng Shen, famous because of his deep filial attitude, was considered as its patron and main authority. The famous Confucian scripture called the *Canon of Filial Piety*, which is presented as a dialogue between Confucius and Zeng-zi, supposedly was compiled in that period.<sup>7</sup> In the first chapter of the book the Master turns to the disciple with a question:

„The ancient kings had perfect virtue and all-embracing rule  
of conduct, through which they were in accord with all under  
heaven. By the practice of it the people were brought to live

7 R. Dawson, *Confucius*, Oxford 1981, 46-49.

in peace and harmony, and there was no ill-will between superiors and inferiors. Do you know what it was?"<sup>8</sup>

Getting the answer from Zeng-zi that he did not know what is that virtue, Confucius declared that the subject that he was talking about was nothing else as filial piety. And an exhaustive definition of the concept follows:

„Now filial piety is the root of (all) virtue, and (the stem), out of which grows (all moral) teaching. Sit down again, and I will explain the subject to you. Our bodies – to every hair and bit of skin – are received by us from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or wound them: this is the beginning of filial piety. When we have established our character by the practice of the (filial) course, so as to make our name famous in future ages, and thereby glorify our parents: – this is the end of filial piety. It commences with the service of parents; it proceeds to the service of the ruler; it completed by the establishment of the character.“<sup>9</sup>

As we see, the all-embracing relevance is attributed to the virtue of filial piety here. It contains several dimensions of conscious life of the human being, beginning with love and thankfulness towards one's parents for giving birth to us, and completing by the maximal realisation of one's all moral and intellectual potentialities. Filial piety may be seen as the basis of the socialisation of the man.<sup>10</sup> In the Confucian sense it starts from the family relationships, and continues with the accumulation of virtues that form our character, and fulfilling the social roles in correspondence with everybody's abilities. In order to concretise the actual functioning of the filial piety in the social life, the description of the duties of the Son of Heaven, the princes of the states, the higher officials, the inferior officials, and common people are presented in the next chapters of the *Canon of Filial Piety*. In the seventh chapter, the explanation of the virtue is completed with the attribution of cosmic dimensions to the filial piety in the triple co-ordinates (Heaven, Earth, and Man) of the ancient Chinese cosmology:

„Filial piety is the constant (method) of Heaven, the righteousness of Earth, and the practical duty of Man.“

Mencius who paid much attention on the question of human nature, has elaborated the concept of the filial and fraternal spirit as a congenital virtue of man. Explaining that point of view in *Mencius* VII A, 15, it is said:

8 *Sacred Books of the East* 3, Oxford 1879, 466.

9 *Ibid.*, 466-467.

10 R. Eno, *o.c.*, 73.

„The men’s abilities possessed by them without learning are the congenital abilities; the knowledge possessed by them without making inquiries is the congenital knowledge. There are no infants in arms who don’t know how to love their parents; there are no adolescents who don’t know how to respect their elder brothers. To attach oneself to parents is humanness; to respect superiors is dutifulness. Nothing else is needed under the Heaven.“

So we see that, by Mencius’ view, the filial piety and fraternal duty which, with the growth of the man, develop into respect towards superiors, belong to the kind of virtues that could not be learned but are intrinsic components of the human nature. The higher social virtues – humanness (*ren*) and dutifulness (*yi*) – directly grow out from these intrinsic attitudes of filial piety and fraternal duty, as is also said in Mencius IV A, 27:

„The essence of humanness is to serve one’s parents;  
the essence of dutifulness is to follow one’s elder brothers.“

Though the spirit of filial piety, by Mencius, is congenital and proper to everybody, in his social theory Mencius also touched upon the external conditions necessary for the cultivation and practice of the filial piety. In I A, 3 and I A, 5 he expresses the opinion, according to which the duty of ideal king is to take care for the education and inspiration of filial piety and fraternal duty among the people, besides of maintaining their needs for material welfare. Then the loyalty of the people will grow to such an extent that they are able „using only cudgels to defeat the strong armies of Qin and Chu.“

By way of conclusion, we can abstract the main aspects of the term *xiao* in the early Confucian texts, and derive some rather hypothetical judgements on the development of the concept of filial piety in early Confucianism. In the *Analects* no special theory of filial piety is given. Only in the latest, perhaps, strata of the text (Books II-I) an attempt is made to present filial piety as a root of humanness and the noble man’s Way, as a basis of peace and order in the society and good government, and as general moral conduct that lies in the respect towards one’s parents and worship of one’s ancestors in accordance with the ritual. In *Mencius* the spirit of filial piety is considered as a congenital virtue, an intrinsic component of the human nature, the maintenance and cultivation of which, however, needs certain conditions of social welfare, the maintaining of which is the duty of the king. Only then the supreme virtues of the man’s character humanness and dutifulness – may appear and extend. In the *Canon of Filial Piety* the filial piety is elevated to the status of the supreme virtue and the cosmic principle ruling the whole universe and social life. Every social rank from the common people up to



the king, as a functional component of that socio-cosmic organism, has its own fixed duties to fulfil, in order to realise the ideal of filial piety.

In order to try to reconstruct the possible developments of the conception of filial piety during the first centuries of the history of Confucianism, we can sketch the following model. In the Confucius' lifetime (the late Springs and Autumns period, VI-V century BC), filial piety was widely accepted in the Chinese society as an imperative principle of the social regulation of the human relationships, especially on the family and clan level. Therefore, Confucius and his closest disciples, whose first aim was to establish the ritual as a ruling power of the man's actions and social life, did not take filial piety into consideration as a concept of the first importance. Further developments in China evoked the need for an unifying ideology, understandable and acceptable to everybody. Because the deepest meaning of such virtues as ritual (*li*), humanness (*ren*), dutifulness (*yi*), etc., was fully understood only by the very small circles of scholars educated in the Confucian spirit, using them for popular ideology was out of question. The socially more active and, perhaps, more conventionally minded later Confucianists, therefore, turned the ancient and well known concept of filial piety into the core of a new ideology and religion, flourishing in China since the Han dynasty up to our days. We can assume with a full conviction that the many thousand year old tradition of cultivation of the filial piety by the Chinese people is one of the main factors, on the basis of which we can understand and interpret the „Chinese phenomenon“, i.e. the extraordinary viability and stability of the Chinese civilisation and the traditionalism of the Chinese character and mentality. The contribution of the early Confucianists to the development of the concept of filial piety is that they raised the filial piety from the merely unconscious level of cult and customs to the status of a conscious moral imperative, the element of culture and written tradition.<sup>11</sup>

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11 L. S. Vasilyev, *o.c.*, 65.



Mencius (MENG - ZI)

## RESUMÉ

**Koncepce poslušnosti dětí k rodičům v raných konfuciánských textech**

Koncepce poslušnosti dětí k rodičům patří mezi ústřední učení raného konfucianismu. Toto tradiční pojetí vztahů v čínské rodině a společnosti je ve studii demonstrováno na nejstarších a nejautoritativnějších textech Konfuciových a Menciových (*Kánon poslušnosti dětí k rodičům*). Prastarý čínský kult předků byl faktor, vytvářející a udržující strukturu a chod společnosti. Tento činitel, který byl formujícím prvkem koncepce poslušnosti dětí k rodičům, byl do čínské tradice přenesen již v nejrannějších dobách a svůj význam neztratil dodnes. „Čínský fenomén“ (výjimečná vitalita a stabilita čínské civilizace) je tedy vysvětlitelný i za pomoci raného konfuciánského principu poslušnosti dětí k rodičům.

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## Poznámka k přepisu čínských pojmů a jmen

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ben - pen	ren - žen	yi - i
Chu - Čchu	rujia - žu-t'ia	Zeng-zi - Ceng-c'
dao - tao	Shi - Š'	Zeng Shen - Ceng Šen
de - te	Shijing - Š'-t'ing	zhi - č'
di - ti	Shu - Šu	Zhongyong - Čung-jung
gu - ku	xiao - siao	Zhou dynasty - Dynastie Čou
junzi - t'ün-c'	Xiao-jing - Siao-t'ing	
Qin - Čchin	xin - sin	(Oldřich Král)