

# Comments on Wu Yu's Critique of the Confucian Teaching of Filial Piety and Conflicts within Filial Piety

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## Introduction

Filial piety is one of the core values in Chinese culture. It refers to showing respect to not only parents and ancestors, but also superiors such as emperors, in order to bring honor to parents. As the famous Chinese scholar Xu Fuguan (1983, p.23) states, “filial piety is the fundamental power on account of which the Chinese nation managed to persist continuously.” In contrast, Bertrand Russell argues that filial piety is likely the weakest point in Confucian ethics (Li, 1997). The public opinion regarding Confucianism has varied over time. One instance of this shift in popular view was during the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement in 1919, a cultural and political movement initiated by students in Beijing after Chinese government’s weak response to the Treaty of Versailles. Many people, especially the youths, advocated reforming traditional Chinese culture and eliminating Confucianism, including the tradition of filial piety. Wu Yu, influenced by Western culture due to his education in Japan, was one of the representatives against Confucianism at that time. He was named “the scavenger in the circle of thought” by Hu Shi (胡適), a famous Chinese scholar and poet (Wu, 2008, p.28). Wu wrote an article “Shuo Xiao”(說孝) to strongly criticize Confucian filial piety. This essay will focus on five points expressed in “Shuo Xiao” which are restriction of one’s freedom / authoritarianism, the three-year funeral ritual, supporting parents, male heirs and conflict with other values. *The Book of Filial Piety*, one of *The Thirteen Confucian Classics* which explains the Confucian ethics with respect to filial piety, will also be quoted as the main source to contrast with “Shuo Xiao”. Some responses to Wu’s perspectives as well as analysis based on several concrete cases will be provided. This essay argues that some of Wu’s criticisms misunderstand Confucian filial piety while some of them call attention to drawbacks or dilemmas of Confucian filial piety precisely. I aim to restore the original thoughts of Confucian filial piety through an analysis and discussion of Wu’s criticisms.

### 1. The restriction of one’s freedom and authoritarianism

One of the most important qualities in the Chinese tradition is to respect superiors, such as parents and the emperor, as a form of filial piety. Some criticism has been raised against this notion of filial piety because of its potential to lead to restricting one’s freedom and authoritarianism (Wu, 1920). While I agree that certain restrictions exist in the practice of Confucian filial piety to some extent, I disagree that the Confucian classics instruct people to be completely submissive to superiors.

Wu (1920) argued that the political function of Confucian filial piety is to make people timid and submissive to their superiors so that they can be manipulated by rulers and dare not to be rebellious. From his perspective, China could be considered a giant

factory producing submissive people affected by Confucian filial piety. In my opinion, his views have some validity. For instance, during the Han dynasty, when Emperor Wu initially adopted Dong Zhongshu's (董仲舒) suggestion to "dismiss other schools and revere only the Confucians", he seemed to have certain motivation to dominate people and make them submissive for the centralization of authority required by the rapid economic development and territorial expansion (Li, 1988, p.32). Therefore, it can be argued that the notion of Confucian filial piety manipulated by the Han dynasty government was used as a kind of mind-control machine.

However, this version of "Confucianism" is distorted by rulers for political gain and does not represent the original Confucian intentions. In the chapter "Remonstrance of the Book of Filial Piety", Zengzi asks a question about blind obedience. He asks whether it is filial for a son to follow the orders of his father. Confucius answers, "When it is a matter of moral wrongness, the son must remonstrate against the father, and the minister must remonstrate against the ruler" (Yu, 2013, p.18). Confucius discourages the junior from blindly complying with the superior. Instead, he advocates that the junior should point out the mistakes made by the superior (Yu & Tao, 2012).

Moreover, Confucius sets a good example of objecting to blind compliance in one of stories in *The Analects*. At the end of the Spring and Autumn Period when China was divided into many small states, the state of Qi sent many beauties to the state of Lu in order to disrupt the region. Ji Huanzi (季桓子), the prime minister of Lu, indulged in the beauties and did not attend court for three days. Confucius, who worked as the vice prime minister of Lu at that time, after failing to persuade Ji Huanzi to attend court, resigned with anger and started his long exile (Lau, 1979). As evidenced by Confucius' statements and actions, he teaches us to point out the superior's mistakes rather than just blindly obey them. This strongly suggests that the junior ought not to be completely submissive to the superior and rebuts Wu's misunderstanding of true Confucian filial piety.

Some of Wu's beliefs point out the deficiencies of Confucianism reasonably, despite the numerous inaccuracies in "Shuo Xiao". One of the most important tenets in Confucianism mentioned in *Zhongyong* is advocating thinking from a comprehensive view. Even if the major part of a point is partial or defective, there must be something valuable in the remaining part. For example, Wu asserted that the scope of filial piety is so wide that it serves as the motivation for almost everything. The logic behind it is that as a filial son or daughter, one has the responsibilities to leave a good name for descendants and bring honor to parents by doing anything necessary from the country's or society's perspectives. For instance, he quotes the saying of *Da Dai Li Ji* (大戴禮記):

It is unfilial to be not solemn in behavior. It is unfilial to be not loyal to the emperor.  
It is unfilial to be not respectful to officials. It is unfilial to be not faithful to friends.  
It is unfilial to be fearful in the war. (Wu, 1920, p.28).

The same idea is also expressed in *The Book of Filial Piety* in which Confucius says, “Filial piety is the foundation of virtue, and the source of education (Yu, 2013, p.2).” Wu (1920) stated in “Shuo Xiao” that this strong notion of filial piety tends to develop the power of rulers, sages and patriarchs as well as constrains the freedom of the junior. I agree with Wu that Confucian filial piety has a tendency to promote that the focus of our actions should be on meeting our parents’ expectations and fulfilling their ambitions.

When facing cardinal issues of right and wrong, the junior is able to refuse the wrongness of the superior and point it out, according to Confucianism. However, when confronting some questions without standard answers such as the meaning of life, the junior can be trapped in a dilemma. Du Weiming, the representative of the new Confucian school, which was established after 1911 when the Republic of China was founded and people tried to fight against the trend of total westernization by recognizing the value of traditional Chinese culture, stated that the ultimate aim of self-realization is to honor our fathers who are the sources of the meaning of life (Li, 1997). For instance, one drops out of school and would like to do the work he loves while his parents demand him to go back to school for further study. In ancient China, he may have subjected himself to his parents’ requirement and given up his dream. In contrast, Federico Garcia Lorca, a famous Spanish poet, made a completely different decision. He refused to comply with his father’s demand and wrote a long letter to his father saying, “You cannot change me. I was born a poet, just like those who were born a cripple or handsome man” (Gibson, 1989, p.86). If Lorca had obeyed his father’s demand to return to school, there might have been one more ordinary scholar, but one fewer extraordinary poet in the world. In this situation, Lorca may have been unfilial, but he could not have succeeded had he obeyed his father's demands. This example illustrates the tension between living one’s life according to personal dreams and obeying the desires of one’s parents.

Based on the analysis above, I conclude that in Confucian filial piety, although the junior is permitted to insist in clear matters of right and wrong, he still needs to respect superiors. For example, he must follow his parents’ wishes to some extent and his freedom to choose what he loves to do is still restricted.

## 2. Three-year funeral ritual

In ancient China, people had to observe a funeral ritual for three years after their parents’ death, during which they were required to live reclusively. This kind of ritual was named “defending filial piety”. According to one of the Confucian classics, *Ru Lin Xue An* (儒林學案), the three-year funeral ritual is a sort of extension of filial piety which needs to be defended and is required by a personal *qing* (情) or emotion, rather than *li* (禮) or etiquette. A man with a noble character should feel sorrow when his parents pass away. Eating delicious food or dressing elaborately is related to the pursuit of happiness, which is in contrast with sadness. Hence, a man with a noble character is expected to stop entertainment and social activities for three years after his parents’ death (Chin, 2013). This practice, however, goes to extreme sometimes, and these drastic cases

cannot be considered as part of the true Confucian philosophy.

Wu (1920) criticized this tradition by quoting an example from *the Book of the Later Han* (後漢書). A man called Zhao Xuan buried his parents and lived in the tomb passage for over 20 years. During this period, Zhao's wife even gave birth to five children. People all praised him for his filial piety. Wu criticized the inhumanity of the tradition since under the pressure of it, many people, especially the officials who played quite an important role in managing the country at that time, had to waste at least three years living beside a tomb. This situation does not accurately represent Confucian filial piety. In *The Book of Filial Piety*, Confucius preached that a filial son must eat again three days at most after he loses his parent. The mourning period must end within three years. This teaches people that there is a limit, and there has to be an end.

The Confucian classics instruct that funeral rites should be done to commemorate ancestors on the premise that the offspring will not be harmed. In fact, the whole philosophical system of Confucianism is founded on the basis of human nature (Yu, 2011). *Tui Ji Ji Ren* (推己及人), one of the core values of Confucianism, indicates that one should act as a man with a noble character towards people around himself and then apply these characters to others whose relationship is relatively far away from him. In this way, being caring sons and daughters is part of human nature. Therefore, a man with a noble character should also care about others' sons and daughters in the same way, which is quite similar to the concept of the equality of all beings in Buddhism, but it advocates following one's own nature first and then expands the merits to other people. Moreover, Confucius argued that keeping *li* or etiquette without *qing* or emotion is even worse than just giving up *li* with real *qing* from the bottom of one's heart. The ethics and morals which Confucius advocates all start from humanity and follow its nature.

In conclusion, the three-year funeral ritual should be held in an appropriate way which expresses one's *qing* properly and follows human nature according to true Confucian filial piety.

### 3. Supporting parents by sacrificing oneself

An old Chinese saying goes, "raise children to provide against old age, store up grain against dearth." It is children's responsibility to support parents when they are old, which differs from many Western traditions such as the English friendship model. In that model, grown up children have much fewer filial responsibilities for their parents. For example, they do not have to give money to their parents every month (Chen, 1997). In Chinese society, some "filial" sons or daughters would like to do everything, including sacrificing themselves, for their parents. From my perspective, this kind of behavior should neither be advocated as it goes against humanity, nor banned, because we should not prevent others from trying their best to take care of their parents.

The government and society of the Jin Dynasty praised some radical behaviors as demonstrating filial piety. A man called Guo Ju was deemed very filial to his mother. After considering his family's poor living standards, he killed and buried his son to reduce the financial burden of the family so that his mother could be better supported.

Liu Xiang even put his story into the *Dutiful Son Biography* (孝子傳). Also, some “filial” sons such as Wang Hao cut flesh from their legs and arms in order to cure their father. In Shuo Xiao, Wu (1920) criticized people who committed extremely inhumane acts to support their parents. Lu Xun (2001) (魯迅) also criticizes this sort of phenomenon in his book *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk* (朝花夕拾), quipping that he was fearful that his father would become the “filial son” like Guo Ju mentioned before to bury him in order to reduce the financial burden of the family and support Lu Xun's grandparents better. Even in the present day, a man called Tian Shiguo who donated the kidney to save his mother was awarded as one of the top ten people touching China in 2004 (Wu, 2005).

Although this kind of behavior should not be condemned, it should not be advocated as well on the basis of Confucian filial piety. According to *The Book of Filial Piety*, “One's body, including hair and skin, is received from one's parents. One dares not to cause any harm to it” (Yu, 2013, p.2). If one does harm to himself or even kills his child to support his parents, the parents will feel frustrated and sad rather than delighted for his inhumane behavior. For instance, Zeng Shen (曾參), a student of Confucius, who was famous for his filial piety, damaged some seedlings by mistake when he was hoeing. His father beat him with a big stick, but he did not run away. After waking up from a coma, he asked his father, “Were you hurt because of beating me?” People all praised Zeng Shen. However, Confucius did not allow Zeng to enter the classroom. He insisted that the real filial son should run away if his parents were ready to beat him with a big stick because his father would feel extremely sorry and regretful when he was restored to reason (Chen, 1939). As illustrated in the story, Confucian filial piety advocates supporting parents by following the human nature without hurting the self or one's children. Wu misunderstands this by thinking that feeding parents regardless of the means is the way to show one's filial piety.

I am neutral about the so called “filial” sons' or daughters' radical actions mentioned before; although these actions do not follow the original intention of Confucius, we do not have the right to prevent others from trying their best to support or save their parents either.

#### 4. Succession of incense – Extension of family line

As Mencius, the second sage, said, “There are three forms of unfilial conduct, of which the worst is to have no male heir”. The strong cultural imperative for male offspring is rooted in Chinese tradition since it is thought that only a male heir is able to extend the family line, which is also called “succession of incense” in Chinese. Parents care a great deal about the extension of family line and tend to attach much importance to this

tradition. Accordingly, having at least one male heir is regarded as filial piety. Some radicals including Wu (1920) asserted that this outmoded tradition should be eliminated since it tends to cause sexual discrimination. He further stated that it is even not necessary to have offspring, which is the freedom of the descendants' choices. I can only partly agree with Wu's stance. I admit that the tradition of having a male heir is likely to lead to sexual discrimination, while the desire for male or female descendants should not be denied considering the special cultural background of China.

The cultural background of the old saying should be discussed before the origin of gender inequality is studied. According to Hsieh (1968), the meaning of life has been a motif discussed by people all over the world since ancient times. Westerners solved it by believing in god; Indians solved it by creating Buddhism; Egyptians solved it by revering the power of the Pharaoh. Differently, the Chinese solved it by establishing ethics and morality instead of resorting to religions. From the Chinese perspective, the son is the succession to his ancestors. The meaning of life is to be loved by descendants when one is alive, which is quite similar to the religious function of consolation for sentimental cravings. After death, one also looks forward to being remembered by descendants, which is analogous to the religious function of hoping for salvation from extinction like Christianity (Hsieh, 1968).

However, in some Chinese regions, especially rural areas influenced by this old notion, many parents treat boys much better than girls as they think that only the male heir can continue the family line. For instance, one traditional thought is that women should have "three obediences", namely obeying their father if not married, obeying their husband if married and obeying their sons if their husband is dead. In the story of Mulan, women are expected to stay at home and do housework, and are not allowed to join the army. Therefore, Mulan needs to dress up as a man to join the army for her father, who is unhealthy but is still expected to join the army (Chongjie, Selvi & Mariza, 2010). It is urgent to change this traditional notion to prevent gender inequality. Meanwhile, the importance of offspring should be recognized given the unique Chinese definition of meaning of life. One reinterpretation is that descendants do not have to be male heirs; daughters can continue the family line as well.

To recapitulate, the tradition of having a male heir should be changed to prevent the tendency of sexual discrimination, but having offspring is necessary for the continuation of family line and consolation for sentimental cravings.

##### 5. Conflict among different values of filial piety

The conflict of different values within filial piety is an interesting and unavoidable topic. The scope of filial piety is so wide that some of the interpretations of the term might even conflict with each other, such as loyalty to the ruler and filial piety towards parents. As a Chinese saying goes, "it is difficult to uphold the values of *zhong* (loyalty to the ruler) and *xiao* (filial piety towards parents) at the same time". A situation in which one has to choose between loyalty to the ruler and filial piety towards parents always

presents a dilemma. In my opinion, the tradeoff between them should depend on one's identity and responsibilities.

Mencius dealt with a hypothetical case about Gusuo, the father of the sage King Shun. Mencius was asked what action should have been taken if Gusuo had murdered a person. The answer he gave was that Shun ought to secretly carry his father on his back, flee somewhere where nobody would be able to find them, and live there happily without thinking about the Empire (Bai, 2008). I disagree with this interpretation of Mencius. Although there is the Chinese tradition of kin concealment among relatives (親親相隱), Shun, as a king who is different from an ordinary person, should put national interests above his private *qing* or emotion.

The tragic historical story below might provide an answer for reference to the dilemma of conflicting interests considering different values in traditional Confucian thoughts. Shi She(石奢), a minister of Chu, arrested a murderer who turned out to be his father. It was not filial to arrest his father, while it would not be loyal to violate the king's law to let him go. Finally, letting his father go, Shi She put himself into prison and committed suicide even though the king had forgiven him. Bai (2008, p.32), a professor of Chinese philosophy, comments, "in this situation, the continuation between the private and the public breaks down, and the conflict cannot be overcome in a constructive manner." In the Book of Filial Piety, filial piety is divided into three stages. It starts from taking care of one's parents, advances to serving the rulers, and completes by establishing one's integrity. One needs to climb from the first stage to the third stage step by step instead of jumping directly to the final stage. Once he enters the superior stage, he cannot go back to the previous stage. In these two cases, Shun as a king and Shi She as a minister both enter the second stage---serving the rulers or countries, which means that they have responsibilities for their countries. They cannot go back to the first stage, taking care of their parents, which means the priority of national interests should be higher than the private *qing* or emotion. In their situation, filial piety means being loyal to the ruler and contributing to their countries. It is unfilial to abandon the country for their parents' interests.

In brief, the practice of filial piety should depend on one's roles and responsibilities for the stage he is at, or, to use Francis Herbert Bradley's words, on one's "station and its duties" (Bradley, 1876, p. 166).

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, based on Wu Yu's article *Shuo Xiao*, five subtopics of filial piety, namely, restriction of one's freedom / authoritarianism, the three-year funeral ritual, the supporting obligation towards parents, the succession of male offspring or incense and conflict with loyalty are discussed in this essay. Although some of Wu's critiques of Confucian filial piety go to the extreme and he misunderstands true Confucian filial piety to some extent, some of his views are valuable and point out the drawbacks of Confucian filial piety accurately. This essay has attempted to restore the true Confucian filial piety by critically analyzing and evaluating Wu's *Shuo Xiao*.

However, it might be too difficult to avoid some dilemmas such as conflicts among different values of filial piety and among various other values, even in modern times. For example, is it correct to follow parents' suggestions and find a stable job or follow your heart and pursue your dreams? Is it still proper to work quite hard and bring honor to parents instead of spending time with parents and taking care of them? There are no right or wrong answers. What Confucius believed is that human nature is given by the god, and is innately good, so caring about others and loving parents can set us in the right direction when facing these dilemmas.

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