

# “Filial Piety” in Confucius’ Philosophy: A Foundational Element of Personal, Family, and Social Ethics

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## ABSTRACT:

This article examines Confucius’ conception of filial piety (đạo hiếu), with its fundamental aspects including reverence and support for parents, proper burial according to ritual, obedience to parents, preservation of one’s body, and continuation of ancestral lineage. The study affirms that filial piety is the core concept of Confucianism and is considered the foundation of personal ethics, family ethics, and social ethics. The analysis clarifies that filial piety is not only limited to respect and care for one’s parents but is also extended into a principle for building a harmonious social order. By considering filial piety from philosophical, political, and social perspectives, the article contributes to affirming the value of Confucianism and explains why filial piety became a core value promoted and widely applied by the imperial courts of ancient China.

Keywords: Confucius, filial piety, personal ethics, family, society, traditional culture.

## Introduction

Confucius is one of the greatest philosophers in the history of Chinese philosophy during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. His philosophical thought contributed to shaping the distinctive identity of Chinese culture (Chi & Le, 2004). Confucianism—the philosophical doctrine he founded—once served as the dominant ideology and held a monopolistic position in feudal Chinese society for thousands of years. The influence of Confucius and Confucianism extended beyond China’s borders and left a profound imprint on many other Eastern nations and peoples. Unlike ancient Western philosophical systems, Confucius’ philosophy focused on regulating human behavior and orienting worldviews toward

building a peaceful and prosperous society. Thus, moral philosophy was given paramount importance. Among these moral concerns, filial piety held a particularly important place, as it created values with profound impacts on the formation of traditional cultural values in China specifically and in other countries influenced by Chinese culture more broadly (Kim, 2019). With its positive elements and compatibility with traditional national ethics, Confucius’ concept of filial piety continues to shape many aspects of spiritual life, especially in cultivating the virtue of gratitude toward parents.

## Literature Review

Confucius’ socio-political philosophy forms a system of profound views on the moral way of being human. He carefully examined the

relationships between individuals within society. Confucius held that a country has a king as its ruler, and accordingly people in society are bound by certain moral standards. These moral norms defined the way of being human. His doctrine of *rectification of names* (*chính danh*) was the foundation for fulfilling this moral way. According to this doctrine, whoever bears a certain title must fulfill the obligations and responsibilities associated with that title. If unable to do so, the person must shift to another title; only then is the role legitimate.

Confucius emphasized: “Being a king lies in benevolence (*nhân*), being a minister lies in respect (*kính*), being a son lies in filial piety (*hiếu*), being a father lies in kindness, and interacting with others in society lies in trustworthiness (*tín*)” (Doan, 1996, p. 27).

According to Wang and Tian (2023), filial piety is a fundamental moral value in Chinese culture, originating before the Qin dynasty. They also affirmed that Confucius was the first to introduce the concept of filial piety into Confucianism.

Within the family, in the father–son relationship, Confucius regarded filial piety as the decisive factor and the most basic root. Filial piety, he held, is what all people must follow (Wang & Tian, 2023). He compared the person without filial piety to someone “unworthy of being human, unfilial to his parents, unworthy of being a child” (Chi & Le, 2004, p. 48). His view was supported and further developed by other Confucian scholars with additional layers of meaning.

Mencius, inheriting Confucius’ view, stated that filial piety is “the reality of benevolence,” “the most important, the root of all affairs” (Chi & Le, 2004, p. 46). Later, Dong Zhongshu—a representative of Confucianism during the Western Han—elevated Confucius’ idea of filial piety by linking it with his philosophy of the “unity of Heaven and humanity.”

Most Confucian thinkers emphasized filial piety as an indispensable virtue of humanity. They argued that if *ren* (benevolence) is the essence of being human, then *xiao* (filial piety) is the

concrete expression of *ren* within the parent–child relationship, and the moral criterion to measure one’s *ren* begins from the closest cradle—the family. Attention to filial piety, therefore, contributes to achieving benevolence; for a child without filial piety will hardly be loyal to the ruler, cannot revere Heaven, and cannot establish good relationships in family and society.

### 1. Reverence and Support for Parents

Confucius regarded filial piety as the beginning and foundation of *ren* (benevolence), *li* (ritual propriety), and social order. Filial piety was also seen as the basis for cultivating oneself into a gentleman (*junzi*). His ideas on filial piety are recorded mainly in the *Analects* and the *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiao Jing*), in which he emphasized reverence toward parents as the starting point of morality. Filial piety first means worshipping one’s parents, with the initial expression being support and care. He wrote: “Filial piety is to respect parents, not only by providing for their bodies but also by pleasing them spiritually” (Wang & Tian, 2023). While parents are alive, children must respect, care for, and serve them, bringing them joy. This is the duty of a child, and anything that causes parents grief is considered unfilial.

Thus, filial piety is not merely providing for parents materially (for even animals like dogs and horses can be fed), but also nurturing them spiritually, ensuring their happiness. Only then can one truly be said to repay the debt of gratitude to parents. Confucius also stressed that children should remain close to care for parents in old age and illness. Repaying parents means not only providing food and drink but also attending to their age, sickness, and health. He often reminded his disciples: “*The years of one’s parents should not go unheeded—one is joyful, the other is fearful*” (Institute of Sino-Nom Studies, 2004, p. 282). He explained that one should rejoice in parents’ longevity, but also remain cautious of illnesses that may befall them.

For Confucius, filial piety begins with serving parents, extends to serving the ruler, and culminates in establishing oneself in life. Thus, filial piety is a virtue that is both lofty and

ordinary, difficult to rank higher or lower in clear terms.

He also taught: *“When father or elder brother has something to do, one must diligently help; when enjoying good food and wine, one should first invite one’s parents”*—meaning that children must exert themselves in service even when tasks are difficult, and always offer the best to parents first. Confucius further explained: *“To use the Way of Heaven, the bounty of Earth, and frugal expenditure in order to support one’s parents—this is the filial piety of our people”* (Doan, 1996, p. 31).

Confucius insisted that filial piety requires not only material support but also reverence; for support without reverence is not true filial piety. He said: *“Nowadays, when people see someone who can provide for their parents, they call him filial. But even dogs and horses can be fed. If one nourishes one’s parents without reverence, what difference is there from raising animals?”* (Doan, 1996, p. 19). This shows that, in Confucius’ view, filial piety is an obligation children owe their parents. Since parents have given life, raised, and educated their children, when parents grow old and weak, it is the children’s duty to nurture and care for them. Later, Mencius expanded this view, treating filial piety as a natural moral duty of humanity. The responsibility to practice filial piety must arise from love and respect for one’s parents and must be carried out daily with sincerity and willingness.

## 2. Proper Burial According to Ritual (*Hou Zang*)

Confucius held that filial piety is not only shown through respect and support to make parents happy in life, but also through remembrance after death by performing ritual sacrifices (Wang & Tian, 2023). Most Confucian thinkers agreed that performing rituals properly when parents pass away is of immense importance; it is therefore also a key criterion in evaluating filial piety. Confucius stressed: *“As a child, while parents are alive, serve them with propriety; when they pass away, bury them with propriety; and in offering sacrifices, observe propriety with solemnity”* (Doan, 1996, p. 17).

The death of parents is a profound loss, and children must express grief and mourning. The

*Classic of Filial Piety* records: *“If we say the dead are still aware, then we fear that filial descendants will die in grief to follow their parents; if we say the dead are unaware, then we fear unfilial children will leave their parents unburied”* (Tran, 2003, p. 62). Thus, organizing solemn funerals for deceased parents is itself an act of filial piety.

Such rituals must stem from genuine sorrow and affection, not from fear of parental reproach or public criticism. To ensure the practice of ritual remains authentic rather than ostentatious, Confucius emphasized moderation: accompanying parents on their final journey is worthy, but should be done with simplicity and sincerity, not with excess or superficial display such as lavish dress. He said: *“True grief lies not in external things”* and *“Do not endanger the living because of the dead. Hence, one should not go hungry for three days”* (Doan, 1996, p. 23).

According to Confucius, to fulfill filial piety one must restore and adhere to the Zhou dynasty’s system of ritual (*li*), especially in ancestor worship and sacrifices to Heaven and Earth. He said: *“King Wu and his brother, the Duke of Zhou, may be considered the two most filial sons, for they achieved filial piety by brilliantly continuing the aspirations of their forefathers”* (Doan, 1996, p. 23). This shows that, for Confucius, filial piety was not confined to the family but extended to society at large. Filial piety was the foundation of *li* (social rituals), because it maintained order: filial devotion to parents led to loyalty to the ruler, and ultimately to social harmony. It established “moral norms and responsibilities in the parent–child relationship” (Li et al., 2021). Here filial piety (*xiao*) meant obedience, which must never contradict *li*. Thus, *li* was the standard by which a child’s conduct in practicing filial piety was measured (Li et al., 2021).

One who knows how to act through *li* and treats parents with ritual propriety must also exercise sound judgment: if parents’ requests are consistent with *li*, then one must fulfill them wholeheartedly; but if they conflict with *li*, then the child must respond appropriately while still never showing disrespect toward parents.

### 3. Obedience to Parents and Preservation of the Body

Confucius taught that children must obey their parents unconditionally, to the point that this could be regarded as an expression of loyalty. He instructed that if parents are mistaken, children should remonstrate gently, but never oppose them directly. Thus, obedience to parents was another essential aspect of filial piety.

According to Confucius, children must obey their parents to preserve *li*. This meant listening to their parents' words, but also knowing how to admonish them when they were in error. He reminded his disciples that a filial child must be obedient, but not blindly so. Confucius understood filial piety in a flexible and practical way: a filial child obeys and even conceals a parent's faults, but, more importantly, also dissuades them from wrongdoing. This, he emphasized, is what makes filial piety truly precious.

In addition, Confucius taught that filial piety requires children to maintain their health and physical integrity to reassure their parents. He said: *"Parents' only concern is that their children fall ill"* (Doan, 1996, p. 27). His reasoning was convincing: children are the most precious treasure of their parents' lives, and parents naturally worry about their children's health and safety. Therefore, to understand and honor their parents' love and concern, children must keep their bodies safe and healthy, thereby bringing peace of mind to their parents. Maintaining one's health and safety, in this sense, is itself an act of filial piety.

Yet for Confucius, preserving the body was not enough. He demanded more: children must uphold the family tradition, bring honor to their ancestors, and ensure the longevity of the lineage. Thus, a filial child must study diligently, cultivate virtue, and achieve distinction so that parents and grandparents may take pride. Upon reaching adulthood, one must build a family and continue the bloodline, for to have descendants who extend the lineage is itself an act of filial piety. Conversely, according to Confucian teaching, failing to have heirs to continue the ancestral line

was considered one of the gravest forms of unfilial conduct.

### 4. Continuing the Ancestral Legacy

Confucius taught that filial piety also means obeying, complying with arrangements, inheriting the aspirations of the family, and carrying on the work of the ancestors. He believed that by doing so, children would fulfill the unfinished wishes of their forebears, allowing them to rest in peace. He explained: *"While a father lives, observe his intentions; when he dies, observe his conduct. If, three years after his death, the son has not departed from his father's way, then he may truly be called filial"* (Institute of Sino-Nom Studies, 2004, p. 115). This means that a filial child must understand the aspirations and wishes of his father. While the father lives, the child must strive to continue his undertakings. After the father's death, any changes must be delayed until the three-year mourning period has passed, out of reverence and also to allow time for stability in transition.

Thus, inheriting and carrying on the ancestral legacy meant continuing the mission entrusted by parents and forebears. This was also a principle of filial piety. The child must walk the path the father chose, respecting and preserving the family's work and reputation both in life and after death.

To clarify this, Confucius wrote: *"Filial piety has three levels: the highest is revering one's parents; the second is not bringing disgrace upon them; the lowest is being able to provide for them. To revere parents is to anticipate their will, to follow their aspirations, and to guide them toward the right path. Not bringing disgrace upon parents is to preserve one's own integrity, which requires avoiding the five failures of filial piety: behaving without dignity, serving the ruler without loyalty, serving in office without respect, befriending without trust, and fighting in battle without courage"* (Tran, 2003, p. 170).

### Discussion

Filial piety, according to Confucius, contains profound dimensions, encompassing principles of conduct that one must invariably fulfill: respecting and supporting one's parents, holding solemn funerals upon their passing to express grief, obeying their will, and carrying forward the



great aspirations of one's ancestors. These elements are summed up in the maxim: "*Nourish them with joy, serve them with reverence, worry in their sickness, mourn them at death, and sacrifice with care*" (Doan, 1996, p. 58). Confucius emphasized that filial piety is a moral duty obligatory for everyone to practice, regardless of social status—from commoners to emperors all were expected to follow it with sincerity (Wang & Tian, 2023). His thought held great value in regulating human behavior, and more broadly, it aimed at creating a stable society founded upon a clear hierarchical order among members.

Vu Khieu observed: "*Confucius' teaching on ritual reached such depth that it became the standard by which human conduct was evaluated. He mobilized public opinion so that society respected those with ritual propriety and despised those without it. Its depth also lay in its penetration of human conscience, to the extent that violating ritual was seen as shameful—so much so that one would rather die than abandon ritual*" (Vu, 1996, p. 193). In this respect, the role of filial piety in shaping human behavior was immense. Filial piety thus became the basic moral principle of Confucianism. When Confucianism became the state ideology, holding a monopoly in political and social life, filial piety in particular, and moral norms in general, were appropriated by Chinese feudal powers as powerful instruments of governance. Filial piety was extended into *zhong* (loyalty)—that is, loyalty to the ruler, thereby sustaining centralized authority. The emperor was regarded as the "father" of the people, who in turn were expected to revere and obey him as they would their own parents. By the Western Han, Dong Zhongshu had elevated Confucius' teaching on filial piety into the foundation of political doctrine. Filial devotion ensured children's loyalty to the ruler and maintained social stability.

At its core, filial piety was the moral standard in the relationship between parent and child. Within the conditions of feudal China, filial piety reinforced the patriarchal family structure, in which sons, especially the eldest son, bore the primary responsibility. Yet with the transformations brought about by social development, the traditional family has gradually

been replaced by the modern family. Consequently, the standards of filial piety have also undergone change. Fundamentally, however, the core values of filial piety in Confucianism continue to exert influence. Nie (2020) argue that studying Confucian filial piety can provide deeper insights into its implications and serve as a useful reference for cultivating filial education today. It strengthens personal morality, develops national culture, and preserves social harmony and stability (Nie, 2020). At present, Confucian filial piety has had positive effects in social psychology, such as teaching children to prioritize family and fostering cultures of elder care in Asian countries.

On the positive side, filial piety is not only a personal virtue but also a comprehensive ethical system within Confucianism, shaping East Asian culture for millennia. It emphasizes the balance between the individual and the collective, though it must be adapted to modern times to avoid extremes. The values of filial piety cannot be denied, especially in today's context where the influx of foreign cultures and the powerful influence of the market economy have disrupted traditional family relations and eroded many moral values. Such changes have weakened the practice of filial piety. In contemporary society, there have been not few cases of children abandoning their parents, neglecting them in old age, leading to an increasing number of elderly people without support, and even cases of children mistreating parents. Preserving the values of Confucian filial piety can help limit these problems, thereby strengthening and harmonizing parent-child relationships and contributing to the cultivation of family ethics in society today.

### **The Values of Filial Piety in Confucius' Thought that Must Be Promoted in Contemporary Society**

Supporting and respecting parents represent the most universal value of filial piety in Confucianism. Parents devote their entire lives to raising their children to maturity, and such labor and sacrifice are immeasurable. As children, one must repay this debt of birth and upbringing through support and reverence. Respecting and

supporting parents accords with both natural law and the moral order of humanity. This beautiful tradition has always been cherished and must continue to be upheld in modern society. Confucius' notion of filial piety should be reinterpreted in a way that fits current realities. Overly rigid and ceremonial regulations should be removed, for filial devotion is not about grand or distant deeds but about simple, sincere acts of love. What truly matters is making parents feel happy, secure, and loved. Filial duty must be practiced consistently and continuously, not limited to special occasions such as festivals or the Lunar New Year. Confucius' conception of filial piety was founded on the "Three Bonds" (*Tam cung*—between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife) and grounded in the doctrine of rectification of names. It urged people to act according to ritual propriety: father as father, son as son, "the father must be benevolent and the son must be filial," thereby defining the duties of children toward their parents. This framework carries profound educational significance, fostering filial devotion among younger generations and forming enduring moral foundations for families in modern society. It also prevents moral decline and strengthens the family's role in protecting and caring for the elderly. In Confucius' view, obedience to parents and the preservation of one's body are also integral aspects of filial piety. For parents, children are always the ones needing care and guidance; even when grown, parental concern does not fade. Confucius reminded that children must obey, care for themselves, and live peacefully so that parents need not worry. Parents find their greatest happiness in their children's well-being, maturity, and contentment (Do et al., 2025). Obedience and respect thus bring reassurance and harmony to the family. When children listen attentively, seek their parents' counsel, and show sincere respect, parents feel their worth and dignity affirmed. These practices, emphasizing mutual respect and emotional security, remain highly relevant in modern society. Such principles aim to create families characterized by harmony between generations—elders respected, youth humble and obedient,

siblings united as one. Extended to the wider kinship network, they promote solidarity, compassion, and mutual support among relatives. Practicing filial piety in this way results in disciplined, orderly households and contributes to a society grounded in hierarchy and harmony. This ideal reflects not only Confucius' vision but also the moral goal that contemporary education should aspire to.

To fulfill filial piety completely, children must not only respect, nurture, and obey their parents but also preserve family traditions and bring honor to the lineage (Pham & Do, 2025), whether their parents are alive or deceased. Confucius' teaching constantly reminds children to strive for self-improvement—studying diligently, cultivating wisdom, and progressing daily—to be worthy of their family's heritage. Upholding family honor and transmitting moral integrity across generations represent a vital and positive dimension of Confucius' conception of filial piety.

### **Limitations in Confucius' Concept of Filial Piety**

The study of Confucius' view on filial piety must be placed in its historical context, while at the same time selecting values that are suitable for modern society. In other words, applying filial piety requires a balance between traditional and modern elements. Although the values of Confucius' teaching on filial piety cannot be denied, its rigid and one-sided principles have been criticized by many thinkers. Filial piety has been critiqued for encouraging blind obedience, which can lead to abuses of power within the family or in society (Bedford & Yeh, 2019). Confucian filial piety has been reproached for overemphasizing respect for parents in a way that may hinder individual development.

In modern society, with urbanization and the transformation toward nuclear families, filial piety has been reinterpreted to be more relevant—shifting emphasis from one-sided obedience to mutual care. Criticism of Confucius' concept of filial piety continues today, particularly in the "New Culture" movement, where some argue that filial piety was the

foundation of feudal autocracy and served as a tool for ruling powers to suppress personal freedom and independence (Huo & Kristjánsson, 2020). Fan and Wang (2019) further emphasized strong criticisms, exposing what they considered the hypocrisy and cruelty of traditional filial piety. However, some critiques have gone too far, weakening the traditional Chinese notion of *xiao* (filial piety) and thereby eroding family moral values in modern China (Feng, 2020). Looking at this ideological struggle and the contrasting views on Confucius' filial piety, one can see the internal reasons why a doctrine that once held an absolute position also came under fierce criticism. Its lack of balance, excessive rigidity, and one-sidedness gradually diminished its original meaning and value. Therefore, adjusting and balancing the values of tradition and modernity is essential when applying Confucius' teaching on filial piety, so that it may truly become a sustainable value, resistant to erosion amid the transformations of socio-economic life. Only in this way can the values of filial piety continue to accompany and shape the distinctive cultural identity of East Asian societies.

### Conclusion

Filial piety is a fundamental moral value that has helped shape East Asian culture for thousands of years. The noble qualities within Confucius' concept of filial piety—such as supporting and respecting parents, obeying parents, and preserving one's body—have retained their original essence despite social changes over time.

Confucius regarded filial piety as both principles of conduct and moral standards governing the relationship between children and parents. These were unchanging principles that children were obliged to carry out. Practicing filial piety was first and foremost to express gratitude and devotion to one's parents; but beyond the family, it extended into society, where filial duty was broadened into loyalty (*zhong*) toward the ruler. Confucius' understanding of filial piety thus carried profound significance for his era, as it reflected values of universal human relevance. For this reason, Confucian filial piety spread widely and deeply influenced the social life of many Eastern nations. Emerging during the tumultuous Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods in China, Confucius' teaching on filial piety gained dominance by meeting the needs of its historical moment. Yet it was also inevitably constrained by its historical context, and its extreme and one-sided elements drew serious criticism. Today, filial piety still plays an important role in perfecting individual morality as well as family and social ethics. The combination of traditional and modern values, balanced appropriately, will allow Confucius' concept of filial piety to shed its outdated and extreme elements, enabling it to meet the demands and challenges of contemporary society. In this way, we can apply Confucian filial piety to continue cultivating and refining ourselves, while at the same time strengthening and enriching our traditional cultural heritage.

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