

SELECTIONS FROM THE CLASSIC OF FILIALITY (XIAOJING)

Introduction

"The Classic of Filiality" (*Xiaojing*, also translated as "Classic of Filial Piety") was written during the Former or Western Han dynasty (206 BCE-8 CE). Although it is not a classic in the sense of being a document dating from the Zhou period, "The Classic of Filiality" has been a popular and highly respected text throughout East Asia up through the twentieth century. The text is cast in the form of a conversation between Confucius and Zengzi, one of his students. In the text, "Confucius" explains the concept of filiality, or filial piety, and its central importance in family, community, and spiritual and political life.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Selections from The Classic of Filiality (Xiaojing)

Our body, skin, and hair are all received from our parents; we dare not injure them. This is the first priority in filial duty. To establish oneself in the world and practice the Way; to uphold one's good name for posterity and give glory to one's father and mother -- this is the completion of filial duty. Thus filiality begins with service to parents, continues in service to the ruler, and ends with establishing oneself in the world [and becoming an exemplary person].

...

Loving one's parents, one dare not hate others. Revering one's parents, one dare not be contemptuous of others. When his love and reverence are perfected in service to parents, [the ruler's] moral influence is shed on all the people and his good example shines in all directions.

...

As one serves one's father, one serves one's mother, drawing on the same love. As one serves one's father, one serves one's prince, drawing on the same reverence. The mother draws upon one's love, the prince on one's reverence. Therefore, if one serves one's prince with the filiality one shows to one's father, it becomes the virtue of fidelity (loyalty). If one serves one's superiors with brotherly submission it becomes the virtue of obedience. Never failing in fidelity and

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obedience, this is how one serves superiors. Thus one may preserve one's rank and office and continue one's family sacrifices. This is the filiality of the scholar-official.

Questions:

1. What concrete ways is filial piety to be carried out in the practice of everyday life, both in the long term (thinking about one's entire life) and in the short term (thinking about daily practices)?
2. Are there similarities between the principle of filiality as described here and the expected roles of children in the family in other cultures in other places and times?
3. The text draws parallels between filiality as practiced in the family and the proper relationships between rulers and officials. Would the principles described here work in a democracy? Why or why not?
4. Given the principles of filiality as described here, is there any room for a child to correct the immoral behavior of his or her father, or for an official to offer corrective advice or even admonition in response to the immoral or counter-productive behavior or decisions of his ruler?

Longer Selection

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1. Introduction to Basic Principles

Confucius was at leisure, with Zengzi in attendance. He asked Zengzi, "Do you know by what surpassing virtue and essential way the early kings kept the world in order, the people in harmony both with their relatives and at large, and all, both high and low, uncomplaining?" Zengzi, rising from his seat, said, "Unenlightened as I am, how could I know that?" Confucius said, "Filiality is the root of virtue and the wellspring of instruction. Take your seat and I shall explain.

"Our body, skin, and hair are all received from our parents; we dare not injure them. This is the first priority in filial duty. To establish oneself in the world and practice the Way; to uphold one's good name for posterity and give glory to one's father and mother -- this is the completion of filial duty. Thus filiality begins with service to parents, continues in service to the ruler, and ends with establishing oneself in the world [and becoming an exemplary person].

“As it is said in the *Daya* [of the *Classic of Odes*]: ‘Forget not your forebears; cultivate the virtue received from them.’”¹

2. *The Son of Heaven*

The Master said, “Loving one’s parents, one dare not hate others. Revering one’s parents, one dare not be contemptuous of others. When his love and reverence are perfected in service to parents, [the ruler’s] moral influence is shed on all the people and his good example shines in all directions. ...”

...

5. *Scholar-Officials (Shi)*

As one serves one’s father, one serves one’s mother, drawing on the same love. As one serves one’s father, one serves one’s prince, drawing on the same reverence. The mother draws upon one’s love, the prince on one’s reverence. Therefore, if one serves one’s prince with the filiality one shows to one’s father, it becomes the virtue of fidelity (loyalty). If one serves one’s superiors with brotherly submission it becomes the virtue of obedience. Never failing in fidelity and obedience, this is how one serves superiors. Thus one may preserve one’s rank and office and continue one’s family sacrifices. This is the filiality of the scholar-official. ...

6. *Commoners*

In keeping with Heaven’s seasons and Earth’s resources, by one’s industry and frugality one supports one’s father and mother. This is the filiality of the common people.

From the Son of Heaven down to the common people, if filiality is not followed from beginning to end, disaster is sure to follow.

¹ Ode 235.