

Xu Fuguan's View on Confucian *Filial Piety*

Qinghai Sun

Qilu Culture Research Institute of Shandong Normal University, Shandong, 250014, China

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ABSTRACT

The Confucian concept of filial piety had deeply influenced the character, morality and spirit of the Chinese people, but in modern China, it had suffered many setbacks and once became synonymous with "autocratic politics", and thus Mencius was also labeled as the spokesman of the "filial piety school". Based on his profound insight into Confucian culture, Mr. Xu Fuguan reinterpreted the filial piety of Confucius and Mencius and clearly pointed out that the concept of filial piety originated from the system of passing on the throne to the son in the early Zhou Dynasty. Confucius universalized, emotionalized and popularized filial piety by "establishing a teaching based on filial piety"; while Mencius took human emotions as the foundation of filial piety and constructed people's inner morality with filial piety. The Confucian concept of filial piety should not only not be labeled as the "filial piety school", but also bred the buds of "democratic politics". Xu Fuguan's profound analysis of filial piety was of great significance for us to promote the culture of filial piety and then re-understood and reposition the status of Confucian filial piety in Chinese culture.

As we all know, filial piety had a profound impact on the character, morality and spirit of the Chinese people, and had become the "cultural gene" of the Chinese people. It could be said that if you didn't understand "filial piety", you could not understand Chinese culture. It was in this sense that Xu Fuguan pointed out that filial piety was "one of the major cultural phenomena in China. Its merits and demerits can be said to be the merits and demerits of Chinese culture."^① However, the Confucian filial piety concept, which was interwoven with strong emotions and Taoist traditions, had been fiercely criticized in modern Chinese history, especially before and after the "May Fourth Movement", when the Chinese people

pointed the finger at the Confucian filial piety concept under the slogan of "Down with the Confucius Shop". At that time, a radical figure named Wu Yu pointed out the key point of Confucianism: "Confucianism regards filial piety and brotherhood as the root of the connection between autocratic politics and the family system for two thousand years, and it cannot be shaken."^② This could be regarded as a representative view of that era, that was, to simply equate Confucian filial piety with "filial piety" or "autocratic politics." Therefore, in the eyes of the May Fourth "fighters" and critics, the foundation of Confucian culture lied in "filial piety". To criticize Confucian culture, the first thing to do was to deny its "concept of filial piety." Given the important influence of the May Fourth Movement in modern Chinese history, its deconstruction

^① Xu Fuguan, "The Formation, Evolution and Various Issues in the History of Chinese Filial Piety Thought", "Xu Fuguan's Collected Works" Volume 1, Wuhan: Hubei People's Publishing House, 2002, page 55.

^② Wu Yu, "On the Family System as the Basis of Autocracy", Wu Yu's Collection of Essays, Huangshan Publishing House, 2008, pp. 3-4.

*Corresponding Author:

Qinghai Sun

Email: andy-sqh@163.com

and criticism of the “concept of filial piety” caused devastating damage to the Confucian cultural tradition, so that it was severely damaged and had not been able to recover to this day.

However, as time went by, when modern China was completely lost in the “cultural fault” caused by the May Fourth Movement, hesitating and wandering, people began to reflect quietly: Was “filial piety”, the foundation of Confucianism, China’s “problem”? What was the status of filial piety in Chinese culture? Was Mencius a “filial piety ruler”? How did we view the Confucian view of filial piety? These questions were obviously not “hypocritical” philosophical speculations, but were related to the emotions and survival of the Chinese people: What did the Confucian “filial piety” mean to our survival? Should we continue to “criticize” it or “restore” its original appearance? This survival issue had prompted a group of modern Neo-Confucianists to begin to rethink and interpret the Confucian “concept of filial piety” and strive to “vindicate” Confucian filial piety. The most outstanding figure among them is the neo-Confucian Mr. Xu Fuguan, whose research on Chinese filial piety was unique: it not only includes “criticism” of the May Fourth Movement’s trend of thought that denied filial piety, but also attempted to reveal the true meaning and contemporary value of filial piety. This was mainly due to Xu Fuguan’s profound insight into and deep love for Chinese culture. This article attempted to re-understand the fundamental position and important significance of Confucian filial piety in Chinese culture from the relationship between Confucian filial piety and Chinese culture, and through Xu Fuguan’s explanation and analysis of Confucius and Mencius’ views on filial piety, as well as the correction of the concept of “filial piety governance”.

1. The Relationship Between Filial Piety and Chinese Culture

Xu Fuguan first pondered the question: Why was it that Chinese culture attached great importance to “filial piety” when looking at the cultures of all countries in the world? After deep thinking, Xu Fuguan gave the answer: “Filial piety is an important norm of life behavior proposed by many people in Chinese history after thinking and reflecting, and this norm has been practiced in social life for a long time. In Chinese history, it has had a profound impact on the living environment and natural life.”^① In other words, the emergence of filial piety was closely linked to

the survival choice of the Chinese people: filial piety was the starting point of the survival of the Chinese people. Because Chinese culture was dominated by Confucian culture, but in Confucian concepts, “the most practical significance of social life is filial piety.” Therefore, to deeply understand the status of filial piety in Chinese culture, it was necessary to trace back historically from Confucian culture. To this end, Xu Fuguan sought the theoretical basis of filial piety from the source of Chinese culture, especially the thoughts of Confucius and Mencius.

1.1 How did filial piety come about?

Many scholars believed that the origin of filial piety was related to primitive religion, especially the ancestor worship or fertility worship in ancient China. For example, the saying in *the Book of Rites* that “all things originate from heaven, and people originate from their ancestors” once became an important documentary basis for this saying. However, Xu Fuguan did not adopt this saying at all. Instead, he took a different approach and combined filial piety with politics, proposing that “filial piety is closely related to the political system of passing on power to sons, and it can even be said that the system of passing on power to sons originated from politics.”^② Why? In his view, the characteristic of the Chinese political system was “family rule”, so “filial piety is a moral concept that gradually formed with patriarchy as the center to consolidate family organization and order.”^③

2. Confucius’ “Establishing a Teaching with Filial Piety”

The Confucian emphasis on “filial piety” was obviously inseparable from the contributions of Confucius and Mencius. Xu Fuguan expounded on the discussion of “filial piety” by Confucius and Mencius respectively. In his opinion, Confucius inherited the filial piety concept of the Zhou Dynasty and generalized and popularized it; while Mencius emphasized the moral construction role of filial piety more, but his attempt to “cover all moral values with filial piety” instead caused more controversy among later generations, so he was labeled as a “filial piety school”. Therefore, Xu Fuguan tried to reveal the “positive energy” and positive value of Confucian filial piety, separated it from negative labels such as “filial piety school” or “autocratic politics”, and thus made a return to the original interpretation of Confucian filial piety. In the following section, we would focus on analyzing his interpretation of Confucius’ “filial piety” thought and his negation of Men-

① Xu Fuguan, “The Formation, Evolution and Various Issues in the History of Chinese Filial Piety Thought”, “Xu Fuguan Collection”, Volume 1, Wuhan: Hubei People’s Publishing House, 2002, page 55.

② Ibid., p. 56.

③ Ibid., p. 56.

cius' "filial piety school".

According to Xu Fuguan, Confucius' discussion of "filial piety" "made it undergo essential changes" in three aspects: universality, emotionality and hierarchy. First, Confucius made important contributions to the universalization and popularization of the meaning of "filial piety". In terms of universality, Confucius emphasized that "disciples should be filial at home and respectful to their parents outside", which extended the "filial piety" behavior originally belonging to the descendants of the ruling class to every young person; in terms of emotion, Confucius' discussion on "Are your sons or daughter safe?" transformed "filial piety" from an external political constraint to the "natural love" in everyone's heart; and in terms of hierarchy, Confucius's statement that "filial piety and respectful to parents were the basis of benevolence" made "filial piety" the starting point of "benevolence", the highest realm of life. Therefore, in Xu Fuguan's view, Confucius' emphasis on "filial piety" was of great significance: on the one hand, it found the emotional root of filial piety: "Filial piety comes from the love of a son for his parents, which is the root of benevolence"; on the other hand, filial piety had become a "behavior" that everyone could practice at any time and anywhere. In summary, "filial piety is in accordance with human nature and does not require any external opportunities or conditions, so filial piety has become the most basic virtue in Confucian moral practice."^① It was precisely because filial piety came from human nature and was a morality that could be put into practice that it had become the basic requirement or starting point for Confucianism to cultivate "benevolence". The result of this was that Confucianism actively advocated "establishing a teaching based on filial piety."

It should be said that Mr. Xu had put forward quite insightful views on the development of filial piety by Confucius. However, we also need to see that Xu Fuguan has a profound insight and found the emotional basis of "filial piety", but it is very regrettable that he did not mention the emotion of "respect(jing, in Chinese)" emphasized by Confucius at all. Taking "respect" as the emotional starting point of "filial piety" seemed to be more convincing than the word "safe" in "Are your sons or daughter safe". Because the debate on "Yu Nu An Fo" actually focused on the different understandings of "ritual", which seemed to be more distant from "filial piety". Therefore, on the one hand, we should see the "bright spots" of Xu Fuguan's interpretation of Confucius' thoughts, but we should also see that he had no more understanding of the role of the emotion of "respect" in filial piety, which had to be said to

^① Ibid., p. 59.

be a pity.

3. The Issue of Mencius' "Filial Piety School"

Then Xu Fuguan interpreted Mencius's filial piety thought. The question he wanted to answer was: Is Mencius a "filial piety school?" The answer was no. But why was Mencius understood as a "filial piety school" by later generations, especially the radicals represented by Wu Yu in the May Fourth Movement? This question involved two aspects: first, Mencius's own discussion of filial piety, and second, why the "filial piety school" was labeled on Mencius, not others. What Xu Fuguan did next was to try his best to restore the true face of Mencius's thought and try his best to remove the "filial piety school" label on Mencius.

First of all, Xu Fuguan wanted to answer what was Mencius' contribution to "filial piety"? He believed that Mencius also attached great importance to filial piety, and the reason was that Mencius learned from Zisi, who was a student of Zeng Zi, and Zeng Zi was "best able to pass on filial piety" in the Confucian school.^② It could be said that Mencius was the successor of Confucian "filial piety", and the spirit of Confucius was completely consistent. Mencius also greatly expanded the connotation of "filial piety" to a large extent. Why did Mencius advocate "filial piety" so much? Xu Fuguan gave two explanations: First, "virtue is supreme": filial piety came from a person's inner virtue, and a person's self-sufficiency in virtue could transcend all the external world that had nothing to do with virtue, thus revealing the infinite dignity of personality; Second, "consciousness and personality": a person's full virtue could be revealed through the act of "filial piety", thus presenting complete consciousness and the whole world of personality. Mencius emphasized filial piety, but also emphasized the "consciousness of all moral reason" behind filial piety, and intended to penetrate everything and complete a moral personality world. Xu Fuguan wanted to "correct the name" of Mencius and Confucianism: Mencius advocated "the people are the most valuable", in fact, he opposed "authoritarian politics". For example, in *Mencius · King Hui of Liang*, there were a large number of views on "being happy with the people", "being happy with the people", "being worried about the people's worries" and so on, which actually shows that Mencius "opposes

^② It should be noted that some scholars believe that Zeng Zi, as a disciple of Confucius, and Zeng Zi, as a disciple of Zeng Zi, represented the difference between the "filial piety school" and the "filial governance school", and the difference between the two is also centered on different attitudes towards politics. See Huang Jianguo, "On the Confucian School of Filial Piety," *Philosophical Research*, No. 3, 2003.

autocracy and dictatorship in politics, and takes the interests of the people as the highest criterion of politics”.^① It is precisely because he advocated the view that “the people are the most valuable”, the result was moved out of the Confucian Temple by Zhu Yuanzhang, the founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty, how could it be said that he was maintaining “authoritarian politics”?

Therefore, Xu Fuguan believed that Mencius was not a “filial piety ruler”. If we had to label him, it would only be appropriated to call him a “benevolent ruler”. Because, politically speaking, Mencius advocated that “the three dynasties won the world by benevolence, and lost the world by unbenevolence.”^② Moreover, he derived “benevolent government” in politics from the “benevolent heart” of personal virtue, emphasizing both “the reality of benevolence is to serve parents” in family ethics and “respecting the elderly as one’s own, and the elderly of others” in politics, and put forward specific measures to implement “benevolent government” in a targeted manner, such as the classic statement “a house of five mu, planted with mulberry trees, and people fifty years old can wear silk clothes”. Moreover, the idea of “well-field system” he proposed had been inspiring China to solve the land problem for two thousand years, Therefore, Mencius could only be called a “benevolent government school”. Looking at the “filial piety government school” on the other hand, Mencius did not express the idea that the world can be governed by filial piety, so it is nonsense. In fact, Mencius’s “benevolent government” theory was precisely based on the emotion of “filial piety” or “kinship”. In this regard, we could analyze it from the perspective of Mencius’s “benevolence and righteousness” thought, which in simple terms, was a kind of family relationship based on “filial piety” or “kinship”, which was a primitive social relationship and also a “proper” (i.e. “righteous”) relationship. So Mencius made the following statement:

“If one is in a lower position and does not get along with the superior, the people cannot be governed. If one gets along with the superior in a proper way, but does not trust friends, then he will not get along with the superior. If one trusts friends in a proper way, then he will not be happy with his parents, then he will not trust friends. If one gets along with his parents in a proper way, then he will not be happy with his parents, then he will not be happy with his parents. If one is not sincere in self-cultivation, then he will not be sincere in self-cultivation.”

It could be seen that filial piety to parents -- trust from friends -- getting along with the superior was an emotional concept extrapolation, which progresses layer by layer and finally reaches the way of inner sageliness and outer kingliness. This was the hierarchy of Mencius’s benevolent government theory. In this way, Mencius extrapolated filial piety from the family ethics level to the national political ethics level, thereby establishing his own political theory. ||Mr. Xu Fuguan said:

“A person fulfills the responsibility of love in the family, that is, ‘love your relatives’, love your parents; ‘respect your elders’” respect your elders. From a purely personal standpoint, this is a responsibility to others, which is ‘public’ and ‘obligatory’. But from a social standpoint, this responsibility is directly linked to one’s own interests, and is ‘private’ and ‘rights’. Therefore, ‘loving your relatives and respecting your elders’ is an act between public and private, rights and obligations. Because of this, on the one hand, it meets the minimum requirements of group life, and on the other hand, it is in line with the interests of individuals. And the bond between the two is filial piety and brotherhood, so there is no suppression of individuality and freedom. Through this family organization with love as the bond of union, society makes the public and private, rights and obligations, and the individual and the whole naturally integrated and harmonious in family life, so as to solve the contradictions contained in Yang Zhu’s disregard for facts and Mo Di’s inhuman individualism and totalitarianism. Isn’t this the most realistic and feasible way in politics and society?

In short, in Xu Fuguan’s view, Mencius was not a “filial piety school” at all. He just expanded the connotation of “filial piety” and emphasized the role of “filial piety” in moral construction. Filial piety could not only cultivate the love in people’s hearts and make interpersonal relationships more harmonious, but also help people cultivate their inner virtues and gain true personal dignity. Confucian filial piety gave individuals a more solid “life base” in society and balanced the relationship between individuals and the whole society. Therefore, Confucian filial piety would not only not cause “autocracy”, but would breed the seeds of “democratic politics”. It could be said that Mr. Xu Fuguan’s views were quite insightful, penetrating, layered, and thought-provoking.

About Author:

Title: Associate Professor
Workplace: Qilu Culture Research Institute of Shandong Normal University
Research Direction: Confucian Philosophy, Comparison

① Xu Fuguan, *The Formation, Evolution and Problems in the History of Filial Piety in China*. Xu Fuguan’s Collected Works, Vol. 1. Wuhan: Hubei People’s Publishing House, 2002, p. 65.

② Selected from “Mencius: Li Lou Shang”, see Yang Bojun’s translation and annotation, “Mencius Translation and Annotation”, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2014 edition.

tive Philosophy of China and the West

Education: Postgraduate ailing Address: No.88 Wenhua East Road, Shandong Normal University, Qilu Culture Research Institute, Jinan City, Shandong Province

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