

The Meaning of “Filial piety” from the Antique Procreation Belief to the Contemporary Morality and Civilization

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ABSTRACT: The author provides a deep analysis on the Confucian concept of "filial piety" (hiếu) from old and modern perspectives and basing on the reality of Vietnamese society. In his opinion, "filial piety" is an indispensable content of the proclamation on equality, love, family solidarity and social stability. "The filial piety to the people" is an enlargement of the word "filial piety", and at the same time a fine combination between tradition and modernity.

In Vietnam, like in many Eastern countries, the family as understood up to now in the popular meaning comprises husband, wife and children. The family seemed to appear together with the patriarchal system toward the end of the clan society. The patriarchal society as F. Engels said, was formed from its socio-economical base, a product of the private society system. The feudal state as a product of the private property system was also based on the family. The moral obligation of a caste society included both horizontal and vertical systems, but when society was a caste system, naturally its objective was not the horizontal but the vertical system. There exist three main relationships in the vertical system, called "Three Bonds". They are king-subject, father-child, husband-wife relationships. If these three bonds were well preserved, then all other relationships would be properly maintained. Among these three relationships, two belong to the family; they are father-child, husband-wife relationships. Therefore, running a household was a prerequisite for governing a country. Father-child, husband-wife relationships in the family belong to the "family rule", but king-subject relationships belong to "national laws." The unity between the "family" and the "country" is as necessary as the unity between "rule" and "law".

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Many scholars think that the appearance of the family in the East was in relation to the procreation belief. The ancient procreation belief is expressed in the formation of the Chinese character "hiếu" (filial piety). Over 3 thousand years in the past, the word "hie" had existed in characters inscribed on tortoise shells and animal bones of the Shang–Chou period. It means that the conception on "hiếu" had existed before this time. According to researchers on ancient Chinese scripts¹, the word "hiếu" had been created on the principle of "combining two ideas", therefore it expressed a social notion. The upper part of the word "hiếu" symbolizes the sexual intercourse of man and woman. The lower part is the word "tử" meaning "child", the result of the intercourse. This activity of natural character became an extremely important condition for the life of humanity. The belief in procreation is related to the sense of respect toward life, therefore in the *Book on Rites (Lễ kí)* in the chapter "Meaning of Cults", "hiếu" had been explained also on this tendency.

"The cutting of trees should be appropriate to its time. The killing of animals should also be appropriate to its time. "Cutting a tree, killing an animal not appropriately to the time cannot be considered as "hiếu", said Confucius.

A person has both his natural and social attributes, therefore the family is both natural and social. The Marxist, materialistic viewpoint does not negate this fact. When holding that the family is a product of the economical production, F. Engels noted:

"In the materialist viewpoint, the decisive factor in history, in the last analysis is the production and reproduction of the direct life. But this production itself consists of two kinds. On one side, it is the production of means of subsistence like foods, clothes, houses and necessary tools to produce these objects; on the other side, the production of the human being or the transmission of the race."²

In this world no virtue proves to be greater than the creation of life. Therefore, who destroys life is considered as "committing filial impiety". Therefore, it is not without reason that Mencius said "There are three facts belonging to the filial impiety. The greatest filial impiety is to have no descendants." Confucius often told us "to remember the ancestors and to preserve the race," the immutable reason of ancient families. The cult of ancestors is a phenomenon more or less in relation to the procreation belief. This belief led to different manifestations in different places. In Vietnam, it is more adequate to consider this cult as a social than a religious belief. The cult of ancestors is mainly an "external" expression of the inside "filial piety".

The respect towards ancestors is an "inherently transcendental" expression and is not an "inherently supernatural" one, it does not express the human alienation. Not any event of the spiritual life belongs to religion. Thus, the word "hiếu" at the same time has a natural character and a social one, or otherly speaking, when becoming a socio-cultural phenomenon, it should be "separated" from the natural one. Therefore, when a child goes into mourning for parents, the child should avoid conjugal relations. The absence of a child is an expression of filial impiety, but when a person goes into a mourning for the parents, and conjugal relations are forbidden, this person may die before the end of the mourning time, then filial piety is mixed with "filial impiety." This contradiction has often concessions in the Vietnamese feudal society, but in the Chinese feudal society the "unnatural" rites have been severely observed.

The word "hiếu" has also relationships with the natural sense of the bloodline in relation to the procreation belief. The procreation belief attaches much importance to propagation, development, but the natural sense of bloodline attaches much importance to the "norm" of the procreation and propagation. The bloodline relationship is of course between parents and children. This relationship is not limited to human beings, most animals have "feeling" on the procreation. Even among animals, all mother loves and protects her young ones. Have not people often said that "the brutal tiger does not eat its young's flesh?" Natural feelings or instinctive feelings need not education. These feelings that are natural need not education, one can neither suppress them at will, nor easily create them. These "natural elements are creating great difficulties to the greatest academic faculties in the world when these faculties want to create robots like human beings. Despite the development of sciences, the "natural" created by sciences can never become natural. Sciences are allowed to "imitate" nature, but are not allowed to replace nature. Nature has its own determinations, its own laws. The law of existence determines the love of a mother to her child but does not determine the love of the child to the mother, and especially the love of the child to the father because the child does not know who is the father. The human "filial piety" has a natural origin but at the same time it is called a cultural action, and thus, separated from nature in stipulating that a person should be different from an animal in the fact that he should love his father, his mother. It is not easy to perform it, because "tears flow downward, not upward". Thus, the word "filial piety" includes three meanings: offering ceremonies to express the remembrance of ancestors; raising children to perpetuate the race, taking care of parents. The cultural aspect of the Eastern filial piety is based on the bloodline, a custom which persisted thousands years ago up to the present day. Has the

conservator spirit in the Eastern family bloodline an economical origin as F. Engels remarked:

"With a little developed labor, the volume of labor products and therefore of social riches is restricted and the social system proves to be more strongly influenced by the bloodline relationship."³

In this situation, there would come a moment when the economy develops, then "the old society based on bloodline relationship would explode" and "a new society would replace it". The new society would be organized into a state, but its basic unit would not be alliances that based on bloodline relationship."⁴

The present market economy is probably carrying out this fact and is revealing irremediable contradictions with the cultural tradition of "filial duty" based on the bloodline relationship that is much more strongly built in the East than in the West.

"The filial duty culture" is based on the blood relationship, on the clan, and therefore it belongs to the kind of "community culture." In the community culture, "the individual is dissolved into the family and the clan," while in the individual culture "together with a weakening of the bloodline consciousness, the individual is in the dialogue with the society and the law." This weakening of the traditional consciousness had appeared in the *Bible*.

"You should not call anybody on the earth your father, because you have but a Father, the father in heaven."⁵

"Who commits sin should die; the child is not guilty of the crime of the father; the father is also not guilty of the crime of his child."⁶

"Another disciple told Jesus: "Sir, allow me to return home to bury my father. Jesus said: follow me. Let the mortals bury their dead."⁷

Probably it is the reason why in the secular juridical state of the West, the unity of space is necessary and not the unity of the clan. In opposition to the individual culture of the West, the "collective culture" of Vietnam paid a great attention to the bloodline relationship of the kings including the first king of the dynasty "Thái Tổ" and his successor "Thái Tông."

The bloodline relationship is the base of "filial piety". Indian Buddhism did not consider "filial piety" as the base of morality like Confucianism. Kì Chí Tường was right when he remarked that the moral conception of Indian Buddhism was basically different from the Confucian conception in the fact that Buddhism hold that the highest moral degree was the inverse of the secular moral.⁸ The filial piety of

Confucianism belonged to the "secular culture" but the Buddhist moral belonged to the "supper human culture". Though Buddhism also spoke of "the four moral debts" in which the moral debt to parents held in the first place, but the "moral debt" and the way of "repaying the moral debt" in Buddhism had not the same content as the "filial piety" of Confucianism⁹. However as the proverb said "when in Rome do as the Romans do", Buddhism had to endure changes after "entering" China not less than two thousand years. Therefore it was not strange when the sacred book *Ullambamasutra* was interpreted to be *The Buddhist Sacred Book on filial piety*. In the Indian Buddhist sacred books one can not find the *Sacred book on the Great Moral Debt to Parents*. But in the translation of *Barhamajalasutra* by Curu Ma La Thập the explanation of the sentence that Shakyamuni was a "pious and obedient son toward his parents" followed the sense of Confucianist filial piety. We see how deep was the influence of "filial piety" in the area of Confucian culture.

When speaking of bloodline relationship, probably one should speak of the legend on the parcel containing a hundred eggs that was afterward called "đồng bào" (persons in the same foetus) coming from Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ. More recent examples came from the period of Hùng kings. The legends on the two rice-cakes *bánh chưng*, *bánh dày* symbolized heaven, the Earth and symbolizing also the "filial piety" of children towards their parents' moral debt which was as great as heaven and earth. The two famous law codes in the Vietnamese history, the Hồng Đức Code in XV century and the Gia Long Code in XIX century started from bloodline, from the word "hiếu" and considered filial impiety as one among the "ten crimes" as "immoral." Nguyễn Trãi in XV century spoke of the inviolability of "filial piety."

Only loyalty to the country and filial piety

Remain intact despite all violation

Up to XIX century, when the country faced the invasion, Tự Đức seemed to understand that "filial piety" had a value against copper ships, cannons of French colonialists. Tự Đức was more uncompromising than Nguyễn Trãi, in the fact that one should not only remember "filial piety" but one should die for "filial piety," and the death for "loyalty to the country" and for "filial piety" was the most legitimate death.

"Any subject should die for 'loyalty to the country'. A child should die for 'filial piety'. This is the truth of heaven and earth, from the past to the present day."

Tự Đức himself was famous as the most pious king in history. At this date though people in South Vietnam did not base themselves on Confucian books to fight

against the French, "filial piety" seemed to be a force in the moral of "piety and thankfulness." A remark: this was filial piety and not the fidelity to the king, because when the court had abandoned the people, "How could there exist an unity of "filial piety" with the faithfulness to the king?"

Thus, the concept of "filial piety" had appeared long since and had become an inherent part of our national cultural tradition and it was not a product introduced from any other countries. But the Vietnamese culture had been greatly influenced by the Chinese culture, therefore the notion of "filial piety" could not avoid a mixture with the Chinese notion of "filial piety".

The Sacred Book on Filial Piety considered by the West as *the Saved book of the East* was the earliest book systematizing "filial piety" into a model for the future.

"The first concern of filial piety is not to injure the body that had been transmitted from parents. The last concern of filial piety is carry out the doctrine, to do honor to parents (*The Sacred Book on Filial Piety*).

Thus, the ancient when educating people on the nearest moral obligations started from what was the lowest and not from what was the farthest, highest. At present, it seems that people often follow the opposite trend.

"The best way to educate mutual love among people is to educate them filial piety" (*The Sacred Book on Filial Piety*).

The Book explaining the Sacred Books summarized the content of the word "hiếu" as "to venerate the mother, to respect the father in conformity to the way".

"The conformity to the way" has been generalized into four principles: to bring up parents; to respect them; to dissuade them from errors; and to act in conformity to their desires."¹⁰

Dương Quốc Vinh held that the three words "hiếu," "khảo" and "lão" had been used in confusion in the classical written Chinese. That was because "hiếu" meant "to venerate ancestor, to respect old persons". "Hiếu" was also mixed with "giáo" (to instruct) because the main content of "giáo" was the word "hiếu".¹¹ Confucianism made of the word "hiếu" the foundation of the moral on humanity, or otherly speaking the whole Confucianist structure was based on the word "hiếu." It meant that the stability of politics depended on the moral and the stability of the moral depended on "filial piety." Hữu Nhược, a student of Confucius, had expressed quite exactly the meaning of his master when he said:

"In this life there are few people though being pious and obedient to their parents, respectful towards their elders and still like to hurt their superiors. If they did not like to hurt their superiors they would never be rebellions. A good management should preserve the core, when the core was firm the loyal ethics would immediately take place. Therefore filial piety is the core of the theory on benevolent.

Thus, the strong support of the feudal political system was on filial piety. The degree of orientation of filial piety to the feudal regime was matched by the degree of orientation of the feudal regime to filial piety. The obsolete degree in the feudal system was expressed in its orientation to filial piety. But its humanism still exists throughout the history of the Eastern society. Therefore Sun Yat Sen, the revolutionary who had upset the last feudal regime in China also recognized: "A country can only enjoy a long safety and prosperity on the base of a moral education. Filial piety is the moral appropriate to every people, every place. One can not cease speaking of filial piety" (*Sun Yat Sen's Selected works*).

In 1948, in the beginning of the resistance against the colonialist French, Hồ Chí Minh had written two Chinese verses to Võ Liêm Sơn, speaking of fidelity to the country and filial piety.

To express full filial piety to the people

And full fidelity to the country

Hồ Chí Minh was the first person to speak of "filial piety to the people". When one hears these words for the first time these words seem fairly strange because the word "filial piety" had been used in restriction to the blood relationship between parents and children. But in fact " the filial piety to the people was not an occasional word, and it contained three important meanings. Firstly, one should not radically reject all concepts pertaining to the feudal society as many persons would have thought. Secondly, one should develop the humanitarian spirit in the human relationships. Thirdly, the aim of the revolution is for the people.

Thus, the word filial piety has also a large meaning including the love of life and the hate of death, and it is not restricted to relationships between parents and children. The filial piety towards parents is based on the narrow bloodline relationship , and the filial piety to the people is based on the large blood relationship to compatriots.

The word filial piety is not identical with the feudal society. The arbitrary patriarchal system, the unequal monarchic system had been the aim of the word

"filial piety" in the past. The feudal state was "above the society and tended to be more and more isolate from the society. It had distorted the meaning of the word "filial piety" into "stupid fidelity", "stupid filial piety" and had deprived them of their own values. The market economy is the main activity of the present social civilization. Neither all that is good comes from the market economy nor all that is bad is its own product. However, the civilized society would deviate in its direction if it considered that "wealth is the ultimate and unique aim" or: "Cupidity meanness were the soul of the civilized period even in the first days of this period up to the present day; the desire to be rich, richer and always richer had not been restricted to the social richness but the richness of the private individual."¹²

Is filial piety also a medicine to treat the disease of the too great inclination to richness of the present day civilization?"¹³

If "filial piety" means the care and nurture of parents, it is all the more necessary to a society in which the rate of old people increases every day but the rate of old people who commit suicide also increases with the increase of social wealth. If "equality" is the principle, the dream of so many generations of humanity, one should not forget that the equality to old aged people is an indispensable content of equality. One should not let old age become a reality of the past. A too great extolment of old age or a too great extolment of youth are equally false. If sex equality is an expression of humanity progress, one should remind a few words on the equality of seniority in this period of technical civilization. "Filial piety" is an indispensable content of the proclamation on equality, love, family solidarity and social stability. "The filial piety to the people" is an enlargement of the word "filial piety", and at the same time a fine combination between tradition and modernity.

Reference:

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- ¹. See: Trương Lê Hồng. *The origin of "filial piety" and its value*, 2004, p. 71.
 - ². K. Marx, F. Engels. *Selected Collection*, Tomes 4, Sự Thật Publishing House, Hanoi 1984, p. 26.
 - ³. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
 - ⁴. *Ibid.*, p. 26-27.
 - ⁵. *Bible*. Hồ Chí Minh Publishing House, 1998, p. 1886.

⁶. *Ibid.*, p. 1640.

⁷. *Ibid.*, p. 1857. The Bible spoke also the respect to parents but the Bible culture is not a culture of filial piety. See Đồng Nãi Cường. *On the Idea of Filial Piety of Confucius*.

⁸. Kì Chí Tường. *Buddhism and Chinese Culture*, Hoc lam Publishing House, 2000, p.355.

⁹. See: *Kinh Tam dia quan*, book 2. The four moral debts consist of the moral debt to the parents, to the ruler, to living creature and to the Buddhist trinity.

¹⁰. See: An Tác Chương. *On the filial piety*, 2004, p. 46.

¹¹. Dương Quốc Vinh. *History of Chinese Ancient thoughts*, People's Publishing House, 1954, tr. 11-12.

¹² *K. Marx, F. Engels Selected works*. The Truth Publishing House, 1984, p. 271.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 237.