

Filial Piety in Confucianism

Posted on January 30, 2020

This paper is essentially based on the “Filial Piety in Confucianism” and also plans to cover the four books which are also scholarly works related to Confucianism. Moreover, the paper will address the concept of family system and Filial Piety as found in the teachings and knowledge of Confucianism. It will also discuss the importance of virtue in Confucianism and the ties and orders in the present-day family system of Chinese culture.

Confucius and His Major Work

Confucius is known as a teacher; however, he was also a politician, philosopher, and editor of primarily the autumn and spring periods of Chinese Culture. He was of Chinese descent, born on 28th September 551 BC, Lu. He died in 479 BC, Lu. His teaching and philosophy were quite well known and are entirely taught in the modern era as well. His “Four Books and Five Classics” are considered the definitive books of Confucianism in the Chinese region. His four books are the classic Chinese texts that illustrate the major and core values, and belief systems in Confucianism. The first book called Great Learning was originally a part of the Book of Rites. It involved the short primary texts that attributed to Confucius. It further added nine commentary chapters by Zeng Zi who is also one of the disciples of Confucius’s teachings.

Moreover, it is highly significant and influential in the philosophy area as it has expressed various themes that cover political thinking and ideas related to the Chinese attitude. Hence, it is considered highly significant in the current area as well as the classic one. It has further provided Chinese thoughts related to government, investigation, and self-cultivation. All of them were linked and created a broader perspective on the political systems of the different eras.

The second book is another chapter from the Book of Rites. It is formerly known as the Doctrine of the Mean. It is attributed to the grandson of Confucius known as the Sisi. The purpose of this book was small, and hence it just wanted to explain and construct the value and usefulness of the “golden way to gain perfect virtue.” It is a 33-chapter book. It majorly focuses on the “Way.” The way in the Chinese language heavily signifies the path, key, route and doctrine. The philosophy of the book covered the mandate for all and not just the rulers of the era. By following such teachings, the person will be able to gain the “Confucian virtue.” According to his teachings and perspective, it has been stated that Heaven is the only way to perfect virtue. Hence, it is not that difficult to follow the steps of holy rulers, but people must discover the “Way” to owning perfect virtue on their own as that is the only right way.

The third book of Confucius is his most widely-known one, called Analects. It is a compilation of speeches that is written by Confucius about his disciples. Analects is still known and celebrated in the

current moral and social values of China. Moreover, it is also quite acknowledged in the East Asian region. It discusses the imperial examinations that were begun in the Sui dynasty and eventually the founding was destroyed by the origination of the Republic of China.

The fourth book, and also the last book talked about Mencius. It was basically a collection of conversations regarding the well-known scholar Mencius who was with the kings at his time. On the contrary of Confucius, the Mencius has basically quite extensive, deeply elaborated and long dialogues. On the other hand, his five classics were also one of his authoritative works.

The Five classics are known as the Classic of Poetry, Book of Rites, Book of Documents, I Ching and Spring and autumn annals. Confucius mastered himself in six different kinds of arts such as music, archery, ritual, charioteering, arithmetic and calligraphy. The work of the man of high morals was quite based on the lack of morality in his province, the responsibility of people for their actions, etc. Moreover, his work covered the “Way of Heaven” as previously discussed. He believed that high morals were the only way to attain perfect virtue and to discover the gateway to heaven. He further addressed that each human should live his life harmoniously by maintaining perfect virtue. He also taught it students to maintain a healthy body, pure soul, alert mind and an exploring nature that helps in knowing the truth. Instead of praying to God, people should be responsible for their actions and take measures to fix them. Therefore, he also said that all humans are naturally kind and genuine. However, the evil learned from the bitterness of the universe.

Although, his work was heavily misunderstood Hsun Tzu managed to understand his alternative viewpoint and concluded in writing 32 essays that clarified the Confucian stance on life. His attitude toward life was to teach people to act with virtue, justice, and compassion. He was also humble enough not to take any credit for his wisdom but rather addressed that studying the ancients was the reason why he was wise. He further emphasized constant self-improvement and learning from the ancestors that will help every individual to become a better person in future. Thus, humans hold a duty to act as the perfect guardians of heaven’s creation. His five virtues were Jen, Yi, Li, Chih, and Hasin.

Jen teaches empathy, goodwill, and generosity. On the contrary, Yi aims to show duty as the guardians of heaven, nature, and humanity. It also teaches rightness. Moreover, Li teaches people to follow the right conduct and propriety. It helps in examining the person’s inner attitude with their outward expressions. Chih portrays wisdom. Lastly, Hsin talks about trustworthiness and faithfulness. According to the philosopher, these virtues must be inhibited in every human being and in particular leaders.

The reason why Confucius has learned all of the above-mentioned noble qualities is that previously he experienced a humiliating youth that forced him to be a wise man and learned about people’s behaviours.¹

The View of Confucius on Family and Society

According to the Confucius perspective, a family is considered a social unit. He quite usually connected the relation of man with his fellows, family, propriety and how self-development is impacted by such surrounding factors. In addition of this, he also stated that a man's relationship with the members of the household explains a lot about his well-being and growth. He, himself had a tough childhood.

He further stated that "The regulation of one's family depends on his self-development"²

This means that men are partial when they feel positive emotions like love and a sense of friendship. On the other hand, they are also partial when they show despise and dislike. They are also partial when they position themselves in reverence and awe, partial when they sense sorrow and empathy, and finally partial when they get harsh and egotistical. Thus, it is highly rare that men who love know their negative qualities at the same time. Hence, it is a common saying that a man who is not aware of the wickedness of his son; does not know the productivity of his growing corn.

In simpler words, he meant that there is no self-development and self-progress if the person can't regulate a family. This was initially expressed in his book "The Great Learning," which was his first book of the Book of rites. It further delivers the thought that the love of a weak or inferior man for his family is not the actual sign of affection. Without respect, there is no love, and without love, there is no respect. Respect and love serve as the union of a healthy relationship. Family system and marriage were further discussed in his book Li Ki also known as the Book of the Rules of propriety. The prime reason for a wedding and family is to regulate the human conduct that springs out of the relationship.

His perspectives about family also created a new concept of "Filial Piety." In his philosophy, this is known as the virtue of respect and friendliness towards the parents, ancestors, and elders. Filial piety is highly important to learn as it teaches the moral values of a person, and how they must be. The moral values of a person start from his home and hence serve as an important way of judging his virtues. Filial Piety further teaches us to be kind to one's parents, to take care of them, engage with them in good conduct and bring a noble name to the ancestors and parents. In the Classical of Filial Piety, Confucius wrote, "In serving his parents, a filial son reveres them in daily life; he makes them happy while he nourishes them; he takes anxious care of them in sickness; he shows great sorrow over their death that was for him, and he sacrifices to them with solemnity." Hence, "filial piety" is not completely blind love towards parents but rather learning their behaviour and showing understanding to their being.

Hence, the union of all the sentiments and emotions that compose the piety of a son towards his parents explains his moral virtues. According to Confucius, a superior man will reverently nourish his parents while they are alive. And moreover, he will reverently sacrifice them when they are dead. The son's chief thought is not to disgrace them till the end of his life. This sums up Confucius's theory of filial piety and the family system.

Moreover, as per research and observations, it is found that Early Buddhism did not find filial piety in their manners and morals. They hardly had a strong tradition of filial piety. More than that, the Buddhism that exists in India is also quite the same as early Buddhism. Buddhism in India involves many people, especially men who disgrace their families. They leave their parents, abandon them and send them to shelter homes. They even abandon their wives, children and other members of the families to become monks. According to them, a true Buddhist will reject all of his family ties to become a monk. He will also reject class ties to pursue himself as the nirvana. Eventually, this is not Confucius's philosophy and is against his ideology.

To further understand it, Theravada Buddhism which is mostly found in the Indian region is said to be quite stressed about their very individual salvation. This kind of thinking is unsupported by Confucius's followers and his teachings. Confucianism in China has highly embarked upon the importance of community, societal unity, and family ties. In India, there is also an advocacy primarily celebrated by the Buddhists who refuse to follow Confucianism. It is called celibacy. However, such arguments were not quite supported by Buddhism in China. The country's philosophy is quite based on filial piety, and some of the stories also became quite famous.

The stories included the story of Shani and Moggallana. Shanxi was a man who spent his entire life aiding his blind parents until he was accidentally killed. His whole life was determined to practice the theory of filial piety. He was also quite miraculously revived. He was a man of high morals and his life must be taken as an example.

His tale is quite famous in China and Buddhist writers. Hence, he is the true and prime example of filial piety. While the story of Moggallana stated that he was a Buddhist monk. He went to great lengths to rescue his mother from the criticism for her undue life. His story also gave an appearance in the Ullambana Sutra. There are other certain stories. However, these are the most known in the Chinese region. Thus, every human must follow the filial piety way of living so he can earn his way to Heaven. According to Confucius, practicing filial piety is one major way to attain heaven; hence everyone should practice it and learn the importance of moral virtues. The beginning of moral virtues mostly depends on a person's behaviour with his parents.³

Significance of Virtues in Confucianism

There are some virtues that are already mentioned in the paper, as per as the previous discussion. These were the virtues that were followed by Confucius and were taught by him to other humans as well. He believed that virtues like empathy, righteousness, compassion, acceptance, and building a relationship with nature and humanity help a person in paving his "Way" to heaven. Instead of playing and not practising these virtues, a person should more focus on the practice of virtues rather than the prayers themselves. These attributes will also help the individual in advancing his life, and practice self-development to the greatest extent. As per researchers, "Confucian thought focuses on the cultivation of virtue and maintenance of ethics. Some of the basic Confucian ethical concepts and

practices include rén, yì, and lǐ, and zhì. Rén (benevolence or humaneness) is the essence of the human being which manifests as compassion.

It is the virtue-form of Heaven.”⁴ Therefore, in Confucius’s philosophy virtues, morals and ethics are given more importance than prayers. Instead of devoting one’s life to becoming a monk, and abandoning the parents an individual should keep a balance between his personal responsibilities as well as religion. Five constant virtues are practised in the Republic of China, which are quite related to the Confucian philosophy and perspective.⁵

The Virtues of Confucianism in Modern-day China

First of all, the five constant virtues are benevolence, propriety, wisdom, righteousness, and fidelity and these are the most important virtues for every human in the world. To be a moral person and earn his way to heaven, a person must continuously monitor and evaluate the five constant virtues that are mentioned above. Benevolence is the first and foremost virtue out of all five. It focuses on the manifestation of the inner mind. It believes that people should not keep any hatred and envy for each other; instead, they should love each other and respect each other’s point of view. Regarding behaviour, a person must be amiable and kind towards everyone regardless of their difference of religion, caste, race, colour and creed. To cultivate a person’s attentiveness towards the idea of benevolence as the most important form of virtue; he must use the Confucian version of the Golden Rule.

The golden rule says that treat others, how you want to be treated yourself. On the other Confucian version says, “What one does not wish for oneself, one ought not to do to anyone else; what one recognizes as desirable for oneself, one ought to be willing to grant to others”⁶

The Confucian way is completely based on the idea of harmony and peace among people. One of the examples is Han from the Han Dynasty who was so poor himself, but he tried his best to help others. One day, an old woman passed by his river, and he offered her some food. The other example is of Fan Zhongyan of the Song Dynasty who was a local official who found out that one of his subordinates went dead to severe illness, and all he left behind was his young wife and ⁷two children. Fan Zhongyan gave sufficient financial support to his family. Such examples are the prime reason why Confucius’s philosophy should be taught, and spread and students should be aware of it.⁸

The second virtue out of five is righteousness, which is also preached by Confucius. This attribute works in contrast of benevolence and refers to thinking and acting according to one’s point of view.

This is why they are less aware of the meaning of real values and more inclined towards the materialistic lifestyle and standards that capitalism promotes. Righteousness was practised by some unsung heroes such as Bao Zheng. He was quite known for his very uncompromising attitude towards any corruption that took place in the government in bit times. The third virtue talks about propriety and its importance. It includes filial piety, loyalty, chastity, fraternal duty, and respect. To perform

this, one must maintain a hierarchy.⁹

In the older days, besides the relationship of monarchs and subjects, there was also a relationship between the father and his son. The sense of propriety also involves the spirit of equality among people which is highly important to be present. A person should maintain the same kindness with unfamiliar individuals. The renowned story of “Taste Liquid Medicine for Mother” explains the virtue of filial piety quite well. Han Wendi of the Western Han Dynasty is one of the prime examples that abundantly practised propriety in his relationships, as well as actions.

Another virtue of wisdom is also imperative for a person’s well-being. Wisdom is the innate knowledge of a person by which he/she judges whether something is right, evil or good for him. This is highly necessary to be aware of. This helps people in shaping up their moral norms and behaviours. They further create a common sense of ethics, wisdom and social skills. All they need is attentiveness and mere determination to keep up with them forever. Lastly, the virtue of fidelity is the most important one. Infidelity, it refers to honesty and integrity in actions. This means that a person’s outward deeds must match his inner thoughts.¹⁰

Fidelity is the major key to maintaining perfection in one’s actions and authenticity in actions. Confucius taught his disciples about the importance of honesty. He further stated that “study, if you know a thing, say you know it; if you don’t know, say so.”

Even if a person is wrong or makes a mistake, they should have the courage to admit their deeds. And, every individual must be honest and accurate about their actions.

Conclusion

The paper has successfully managed to discuss the importance of virtues in Confucius’s perspective. To understand Confucius’s perspective on a different set of a way of living the paper has covered his views on marriage, and his concept of filial piety which includes the relationship between children and his parents.

Works Cited

Muesse, Mark W. *Four Wise Men: The Lives and Teachings of Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017.

Dawson, M. “CHAPTER IV: THE FAMILY.” *The Ethics of Confucius*. Sacred Texts, 1st May. 2017. Web. <<http://www.sacred-texts.com/cfu/eoc/eoc09.htm>>.

Hofstede, Geert, and Michael Harris Bond. “The Confucius connection: From cultural roots to economic growth.” *Organizational Dynamics* 16.4 (1988): 5-21.

Berling, J. “Confucianism.” Centre of Global Education. Asia Society, 1st May. 2017. Web.

<<http://asiasociety.org/education/confucianism>>.

Chen, Guo-Ming, and Jensen Chung. "The impact of Confucianism on organizational communication." *Communication Quarterly* 42.2 (1994): 93-105.

Griffiths, Carol, et al. "Focus on context: narratives from East Asia." *System* 43 (2014): 50-63.

Yeung, Irene YM, and Rosalie L. Tung. "Achieving business success in Confucian societies: The importance of guanxi (connections)." *Organizational Dynamics* 25.2 (1996): 54-65.

Lu, Luo, and Jian Bin Shih. "Sources of Happiness: A qualitative approach." *The Journal of Social Psychology* 137.2 (1997): 181-187.

Suen, Henry, Sai-On Cheung, and Reuben Mondejar. "Managing ethical behavior in construction organizations in Asia: How do the teachings of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism and Globalization influence ethics management?." *International Journal of Project Management* 25.3 (2007): 257-265.

Park, Mijung, and Catherine Chesla. "Revisiting Confucianism as a conceptual framework for Asian family study." *Journal of Family Nursing* 13.3 (2007): 293-311.

End Notes ^[1]

1. This can be viewed from Dawson's book *The Family* Chapter 4. This statement can be viewed in Chapter "The FAMILY," Dawson. This can be referred back to the "The Confucius connection: From cultural roots to economic growth." *Organizational Dynamics* 16.4 (1988): 5-21.

See . Berling, J. "Confucianism." Centre of Global Education. Asia Society, 1st May. 2017. Web.

These virtues can be understood by registering the "The impact of Confucianism on organizational communication." *Communication Quarterly* 42.2 (1994): 93-105.

This saying of the Confucianism version can be studied in Carol, et al. "Focus on context: narratives from East Asia." *System* 43 (2014): 50-63.

The examples that have been mentioned are guided in Achieving business success in Confucian societies: The importance of guanxi (connections)." *Organizational Dynamics* 25.2 (1996): 54-65. Yeung, Irene YM, and Rosalie L. Tung.

See Lu, Luo, and Jian Bin Shih's journal article Sources of Happiness: A qualitative approach." *The Journal of Social Psychology* 137.2 (1997): 181-187.

The management of hierarchy in constructing organizations is evident from Suen, Henry, Sai-On Cheung's project called "Managing ethical behavior in construction organizations in Asia: How do the teachings of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism and Globalization influence ethics management?"

See the related study written by Parks to get a complete insight of this theory. ↑