

*Meanings and Expressions of Filial Piety (Xiao):
Understanding Chinese Intergenerational Relationships*

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Abstract

Filial piety (xiao) is one of the most important concepts to understand Chinese intergenerational relationships. The current study examined the definitions and expressions of filial piety, as well as differences between gender, generations, and only-child young adults and those with siblings. Reciprocating love to parents, pleasing parents, communication, sharing parents' burden, self-achievement, and taking care of parents were the most common definitions and expressions of filial piety. Female participants were more likely to list reciprocating parents love, pleasing parents, helping with housework, taking care of parents, and improving parents' living conditions than did male participants. Young adults believed the older generation focused more on material support, were more obedient and more filial, while the younger generation considered more on the emotional need of their parents. Only-child participants were more likely to list communication with parents as filial piety. Limitations and implications of the study were discussed.

Keywords: Filial Piety, Chinese, Intergenerational Relationship

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Introduction

Filial piety (*xiao*) is one of the most important concepts to understand Chinese intergenerational relationships (Ho, 1996). It was introduced to the Western world by both Chinese scholars (e.g., Lang, 1946; Lin, 1935) and Western scholars (e.g., Levy, 1949) in their books on Chinese people and families more than half a century ago. Not until the last two decades, however, has this concept been extensively studied by social scientists in psychology, nursing, sociology, and gerontology. Still, very few communication scholars have explored this concept systematically. Thus, the current study aims to examine filial piety from a communication perspective, mainly how people define and express filial piety.

Goodwin and colleagues have stressed the importance of studying personal relationships in non-Western cultures (Goodwin & Pillay, 2006; Goodwin & Tang, 1996). A non-Western approach not only helps check the assumptions of most Western relationship research but also has important practical implications (See Goodwin & Pillay for review). The concept of filial piety deserves research attention mainly because such a study “contributes a body of knowledge about the cultural definition of intergenerational relationships, of curial importance to understanding the transmission of culture from one generation to another” (Ho, 1996, p. 156). In addition, studying Chinese close relationships has its unique significance. China is the fastest-growing country in the world. Its economy has gone from sixth in the world in 2003 (Croll, 2006), to third in 2009, and to second August 2010 surpassing Japan. With the increasing interaction between China and the outside world, the number of interracial relationships in China is also on the rise (cited in Zhang & Kline, 2009). A study of Chinese intergenerational relationships would offer some practical implications for interracial relational partners.

Review of Literature

The idea of filial piety is deeply rooted in the Confucian belief that an individual’s life is a continuation of his/her parents’ lives (Hwang, 1999). In essence, traditionally filial piety emphasizes various obligations children have to fulfill towards their elders. As Ho (1996) describes:

It (filial piety) prescribes how children should behave towards their parents, living or dead, as well as towards their ancestors. It makes stringent demands: that one should provide for the material and mental well-being of one’s aged parents, perform ceremonial duties of ancestral worship, take care to avoid harm to one’s body, ensure the continuity of the family line, and in general conduct oneself so as to bring honor and avoid disgrace to the family name. (p. 155)

The basic components in the above definition of filial piety correspond with how it was measured in Chinese Culture Connection (1987): obedience to parents, respect for parents, honoring ancestors, and financial support to parents. Ho (1996), however, argues that filial piety is an “encompassing ethic, much more than what the items express” (p. 164). A few other studies have revealed more specific meanings of the concept. In addition to respect, obedience, and financial support, Cheng, Kwan, and Ng (2006) used three other items to operationalize filial piety including caring, showing regards, and pleasing. Similarly, thematic analysis by Tsai, Chen, and Tsai (2006) indicated Taiwanese college students view filial piety in five aspects: reciprocating parents’ love and care, loving parents, fostering

intergenerational well-being, a cultural tradition, and contextual dependence in terms of filial piety practice.

Social Economic Change

As indicated earlier, China has gone through enormous social and economic changes since 1970s, especially during the last two decades. To what extent has social change transformed people's traditional beliefs? Two groups of research have produced contrasting results. The first group suggests rapid social change has impacted beliefs, rituals, and communication practices in Chinese close relationships. For example, Yue and Ng (1999) argue that fast industrialization in China has enabled the younger generation to acquire financial success at a much younger age, which allows younger generations to live in separate households from their parents. Thus, face-to-face contact and potential conflicts have been reduced between generations within households. As a result, Ho (1996) suggests that one does not have to abide by the traditional sense of filial piety such as absolute obedience to parents and carrying on family lines to remain filial to their parents. Traditional beliefs are declining. In addition, adult children's busy working schedules and the geographical distance between parents and children have changed people's perception on placing elderly parents to institutional care (Zhan, Feng, & Luo, 2008), although traditionally taking of aging parents had been a common practice for almost 2,500 years based on filial piety beliefs (Gu & Liang, 2000).

A second group of research indicates that some traditional beliefs persist despite rapid social and economic change. For example, Deutsch (2004) found that some Chinese students were still surprisingly obedient to their parents. She suggests collectivistic family values such as filial beliefs are still prevalent in China. Similarly, Chappell and Kusch (2007) suggest that the ideals of filial piety have remained intact, although the practice of filial piety has changed during the "multiple, complex, and sometimes contradictory forces" (p. 33) that have conducted in China during the last 60 years.

The above review suggests that social change may or may not have changed people's view of filial piety. The following research questions are proposed in order to find out how filial piety is viewed and expressed by Chinese young adults during the rapid social and economic changes.

RQ1: How is filial piety defined by Chinese young adults?

RQ2: How is filial piety is expressed by Chinese young adults?

RQ3: What behaviors/acts are considered un-filial by Chinese young adults?

Gender Similarities and Differences

Traditionally, males hold more responsibility to carry out filial piety obligations than do females. Quite a few studies in the literature suggest that men focus more on financial support for their parents, while women are more likely to provide emotional care. Zhan, Feng, and Luo (2008) found that daughters and daughters-in-law spent more time caring for the elders' emotional well-being, whereas sons cared more about the elders' financial situations. In a similar vein, Yue and Ng (1999) found that compared with female participants, males felt more obligation to look after their family elders and to help them financially. Female participants, on the other hand, were more likely to maintain contact with older people in the family.

Still, a few other studies yield more complex results. Chen, Bond, and Tang (2007) revealed significant gender differences in terms of filial attitudes, but not in filial behaviors. Male participants in their study rated higher in filial attitudes than did females. Chen et al. suggest that males are more concerned with parents' material support, while females tend to be more attached to their parents emotionally. Another study by Ho (1993, cited in Ho, 1996) found women showed stronger filial attitudes toward their parents than men. Further, Chappell and Kusch (2007) indicated that sons and their spouses were more likely to provide support of instrumental activities of daily living, while daughters were more likely to assist with heavy care. Both genders were willing to help out with opposite-gender tasks.

RQ4a: Are there any differences between male and female Chinese young adults in their definitions of filial piety?

RQ4b: Are there any differences between male and female Chinese young adults in their expressions of filial piety?

Only-Children vs Children With Siblings

The "one couple, one child" policy was initiated in 1979 (Scharping, 2003, cited in Liu, 2008). Most people who were born in cities after 1979 were only-children, whereas in rural areas the only-child policy wasn't quite as successful (Liu, 2008). A lot of rural families still have more than one child especially when the first born was a girl. In any case, the first generation of only children has grown up. Obligation to take care of their parents might be a big challenge for only-children than those with siblings.

By interviewing college students about their life plans, Deustch (2006) found only-children were more likely to consider their parents' emotional needs as an important factor in their location of future jobs than were children with siblings. Seventy one percent of only children, compared with 31% of children with siblings, expressed their intention to live in the same city with their parents after graduation from college. In addition, only-child sons felt more responsibility towards their parents' emotional well-being than only-child daughters. Deutsch suggests that filial beliefs are still prevalent among Chinese college students. The one-child policy did not affect children's filial duty. Only-children were as likely to help their parents in the future as children with siblings. Similarly, in-depth interview data by Liu (2008) indicate only-children have strong filial beliefs towards their parents and are ready to fulfill their filial duties, although they struggle between individual self achievement and a sense of burden regarding filial duties. In addition, Liu found only-child daughters are as ready as single-child sons to take care of their parents.

RQ5a: Are there any differences between only children and children with siblings in their definitions of filial piety?

RQ5b: Are there any differences between only children and children with siblings in their expressions of filial piety?

Intergenerational Differences

Filial piety beliefs are passed on from one generation to the next generation. The fast social and economic changes in China, however, have brought challenges to "intergenerational cohesion and maintenance of filial practice" (Yue & Ng, 1999, p, 216). For example, Cai, Giles, and Noels (1998) found older adults were seen as more close-minded and controlling than were younger groups. In terms of filial beliefs, Yue and Ng indicated that young

participants' felt obligations towards elder people in terms of "looking after them" and assisting them financially" exceeded older participants' expectations. However, old participants expected younger generation to obey them more than young participants felt obligated. To explain the findings, Yue and Ng suggest Chinese elders are puzzled at "what influences they should exert on young people and what reciprocity they should expect from them" (p. 222).

RQ6: What are the intergenerational differences in definitions (6a) and expressions (6b) of filial piety?

Methods

Participants, Procedures, and Measures

A total of 260 college students from one medium-sized university in Eastern China participated in the study. One hundred forty-one of them were male, 108 female, and 11 missing data. The average age of the participants was 21.18 ($SD = 1.23$). The average age of participants' parents was 48.03 ($SD = 4.44$). All participants were juniors at the time of the survey. They filled out the questionnaires in class and returned to their professors at the end of class in exchange for extra credit.

Participants responded to four open-ended questions that were part of a larger survey on parent-child relationships. The four questions were: a) What does filial piety mean to you? In other words, how do you define filial piety in your own words? b) What do you do or say to express your filial piety to your parents? c) Are there any differences between your and your parents' generation in the understanding and expressions of filial piety? d) What behaviors/acts do you consider as un-filial?

Results

Data Coding

Open-ended responses to the questions were coded using analytic induction methods (Bulmer, 1979). The first author, a native Chinese speaker who teaches at a U.S. university, trained three other co-authors, one exchange professor from China, and two Chinese undergraduate students for data coding. For each open-ended question, categories were made, and data were coded in the following steps. First, the research team (all four co-authors) read the same 30% of the data and came up with their own categories separately based on the themes they had seen in the data. Second, the team met to discuss the possible categories. The discrepancies were discussed among the team to find the best fit for the data. A list of categories was then created after repeated comparisons and negotiations and were later used to recode the 30% of the data. The final categories were decided after more discussion and refinement. Third, the second author coded the rest of the data with the final schemes.

Coding reliabilities were conducted by the two undergraduate students, who coded the same 20% of random data. Cohen's Kappa was used to calculate the reliability coefficients. Unitizing differences were solved based on the recommendation of Simon (2006). The Kappa coefficients indicated good coding reliabilities: .70 for meanings of filial piety, .62 for expressions of filial piety, .95 for intergenerational differences, and .71 for un-filial behaviors.

Meanings/Definitions of Filial Piety

Two hundred forty-three participants out of 260 participants listed a total of 613 items ($M = 2.52$) in 11 categories (See Table 1). The most common themes were reciprocating parents' love ($n = 122$; "I believe filial piety is first and foremost a return of love to parents. Parent brought us to this world, raised us, and educated us. We must return it for the rest of our life."); pleasing parents ($n = 105$; "Not only make sure they have food and shelter, but also make them feel happy."); self-achievement ($n = 83$; "Parents want us to grow up, to succeed, and to achieve something. Do not let them down, which is the best way to return their love."); thinking from parents' perspective ($n = 74$; "Be considerate, understanding, and caring."); and respect ($n = 57$; "Filial piety is to show respect to parents. Respect their opinions. Tolerate them if they do not understand me."). Other definitions of filial piety included: communication ("Financial assistance is not enough. More important is to communicate with them heart to heart."); obligation ("Filial piety is children's obligation to parents."), obedience ("Filial piety is to obey your parents whole-heartedly."); listening, but not absolute obedience ("Obedience is core of filial piety. We listen when their opinions are right. We must skillfully let them know if we do not agree with what they say."); love ("Filial piety is a type of love, a love to parents and elders."); and helping parents in difficulty ("When they get sick or are financial trouble, we help them out.").

Table 1: *Meanings/Definitions of Filial Piety*

Categories	Examples	Total Frequency	Gender		Single Child?	
			M	F	Yes	No
Reciprocating parents' love	"Filial piety is returning favors, a way to give back what you have received." "Do not ask too much from your parents. Always appreciate and be thankful."	122	58	60	28	88
Pleasing parents	"Do not make parents feel upset." "Make them happy."	105	48	53	25	76
Self-achievement	"Filial piety is sometimes to live a happy life yourself, not let them worry about you." "Filial piety is the hope your parents see in you."	83	50	32	15	66
Thinking from parents' perspective	"Think from their perspective. Be considerate."	74	37	37	12	62

Respect	“Filial piety should be based on respect.” “Respect parents and listen to them.”	57	29	26	13	42
Communication	“Filial piety is not only take care of parents financially, but also communicate with them.”	42	20	20	7	32
Obligation	“Filial piety is responsibility and obligation to take care of parents when they are old.”	38	16	21	11	26
Love	“Filial piety is to love parents.” “Filial piety is to love parents in return.”	34	16	18	13	21
Obedience	“Listen to parents.” “The simplest form of filial piety is to listen to parents.”	31	21	9	8	22
Not absolute obedience	“Filial piety does not mean absolute obedience. We need to have our own opinions.”	13	5	8	5	8
Helping out parents in difficulty	“We help out parents when they are in difficulty.”	9	4	4	0	7
Other		5	4	1	0	5
Total		613	308	289	137	455

Expressions of Filial Piety

Two hundred thirty-nine participants listed 642 specific behaviors to express filial piety ($M = 2.69$) in 11 different categories (See Table 2). The most common ways to express filial piety were communication ($n = 95$; “Talk to my parents. Tell them my studies and life in college.”); pleasing parents ($n = 89$; “I call and tell them I am doing well. I did not tell them if I felt sad. I did not want them to feel worried.”); sharing their burden ($n = 87$; “When they feel sad, I comfort them. When they feel tired, I do what I can to help so that they can rest.”); taking care of parents ($n = 86$; “Cook for my parents and make tea for them.”); helping with housework ($n = 78$; “Help them with housework.”) and giving gifts to them ($n = 67$). Other ways to express filial piety were: to respect and obey, to improve parents’ living condition, not to waste money, and not to get into trouble.

Table 2: *Expressions of Filial Piety*

Categories	Examples	Total Frequency	Gender		Single Child?	
			M	F	Yes	No
Communicate	“Call them often. Communicate our feelings.”	95	55	40	20	73
Please parent	“I massage back for my mom. Tell jokes to make her happy.”	89	42	44	23	63
Share their burden	“I share both happiness and sadness with my parents. I try my best.”	87	54	30	15	67
Take care of parents	I would say to my father “Dad, I miss you. Do not drink too much alcohol. Be careful when driving.”	86	38	44	21	60
Help with housework	“Cook when they are busy.”	78	30	46	18	58
Improve myself	“I study hard and try not to let them down.” “I work hard to try to meet their expectations.”	73	41	30	15	55
Give gifts	“I give them gifts at different festivals.” “I send them gifts for their birthdays.”	67	22	43	21	44
Respect/obey	“I respect and obey their wishes. I try to avoid conflict with them.”	33	20	11	7	24
Improve parents’ living condition	“I try to get a well-paid job so that my parents can live the best life.”	17	5	11	3	7
Don’t waste money	“Never waste any money” “Spend money wisely.”	12	8	4	2	9
Don’t get into trouble	“Try not to get into trouble”	5	4	1	2	3
Total		642	319	304	147	463

Un-filial Behaviors/Acts

Two hundred thirty-seven participants listed 527 specific behaviors that were considered as un-filial to parents ($M = 2.22$), which were coded into 8 categories (See Table 3). The un-filial behaviors were: not showing respect ($n = 154$), not being considerate ($n = 100$), letting parents worried ($n = 66$), giving burdens to parents ($n = 57$), not taking care of parents ($n = 57$), and not improving self ($n = 51$), committing a crime ($n = 24$), and not fulfilling parents’ wishes ($n = 16$).

Table 3: *Un-filial Behaviors*

Categories	Examples	Total Frequency	Gender		Single Child?	
			M	F	Yes	No
Not showing respect	“Quarrel with parents.” “Insult parents.” “Look down up parents.”	154	82	68	40	109
Not being considerate	“Not visiting parents often.” “Abuse parents. Do not communicate with them.”	100	53	43	24	72
Letting parents worried about you	“Make them angry.” “let parents worry about you.”	66	31	34	16	49
Giving burden to parents	“Waste money. Waste food.” “Spend parents’ money unwisely.” “Do not help parents with what they could.”	59	32	24	13	43
Not taking care of parents	“Do not provide support needed.”	57	32	22	14	39
Not improving self	“Do not work hard.” “Play too much.” “Not being responsible.”	51	25	24	13	36
Committing crimes	“Commit suicide. Do other bad things.’ “Cause troubles everywhere.’ “Commit a crime.”	24	10	13	6	16
Not fulfilling parents’ wishes	“Not meeting expectations of parents.” “Do not have children to carry on the family line.”	16	7	8	4	11
Total		527	272	236	130	375

Gender Similarities and Differences

RQ4a and RQ4b asked if there were any differences between male and female Chinese young adults in their definitions and expressions of filial piety. A series of Chi-Square analyses were conducted to compare the two groups. In terms of definitions of filial piety, female participants listed more reciprocating parents love ($\chi^2 = 5.10, p < .05$), pleasing parents ($\chi^2 = 5.73, p < .05$) than did male participants. In terms of expressions of filial piety, more female participants listed helping with housework ($\chi^2 = 13.01, p < .001$), taking care of parents ($\chi^2 = 5.27, p < .05$), and improving parents’ living conditions ($\chi^2 = 4.48, p < .05$). No other significant differences were found.

Differences Between Only-Children and Children With Siblings

RQ5a and RQ5b asked if there was any difference between only-child young adults and young adults with siblings in their definitions and expressions of filial piety. Only one significant difference was obtained. Only-children were more likely to list communication with parents as filial piety ($\chi^2 = 6.60, p < .05$).

Intergenerational Differences

RQ6a and RQ6b asked if Chinese young adults perceived any differences between their generation and their parents' generation in terms of definitions and expressions of filial piety. Around 30% of the participants ($n = 75$) believed there was no differences between the generations, 65% ($n = 151$) thought there were some differences, and 2% ($n = 5$) never talked about it.

In general, young adults believed the older generation focused more on material support, were more obedient and more filial, while the younger generation also considered the emotional need of their parents, were less obedient, and less filial.

Table 4: *Intergenerational Differences in Perception of Filial Piety*

Categories	Examples	Total Frequency	Gender		Single Child?	
			M	F	Yes	No
Focus of filial piety	“I think our parents’ generation focuses more on material support. I will provide both material and emotional support to my parents.” “I think the older generation were more willing to show filial piety. Our generation have to do it for legal reasons.”	86	46	37	17	65
Degree of obedience	Our parents’ generation obeyed their parents unconditionally. We will have our own idea.	35	15	20	7	27
Outcomes of filial piety	“Our parents’ generation mainly tried to provide a better life for their parents. For us, making sure we do well is showing filial piety to our parents.”	32	18	13	7	24
Ways of filial piety	The understanding of filial piety is similar between generations. But the way to express it is different.	21	7	12	3	16
Degree of filial piety	“By observing how parents show filial piety to my grandparents, I believe my expressions of filial piety is very superficial. My parents’ generation are more considerate, and more detailed in providing care.”	11	7	4	4	7
Other		14	9	3	5	7

Discussions and Conclusion

China has been experiencing the fastest social and economic changes in its history. The current study examined one of the most important concepts in understanding Chinese parent-child relationship: filial piety. The findings, in general, suggest the Confucius' idea of filial piety is still pervasive in Chinese culture. While the original doctrines of filial piety persist, at the same it has taken on new meanings for young generations in China during this vast social change.

Reciprocating love to and pleasing parents were found to be the most common definitions of filial piety by Chinese young adults. This finding is not new, as Hwang (1999) argues the idea of filial piety is deeply rooted in the Confucian belief that an individual's life is a continuation of his or her parents. Using one participant's quote, filial piety is "returning favors, a way to give back what you have received." Traditional ideas of respect, obligation, and obedience were also present in our data. Participants seemed to have different interpretations of how obedient one should be to their parents. One participant said, "Filial piety is absolute obedience to parents before you turn 18, when you do not have the ability to tell right from wrong." But another participant believed that "Obedience is the core of filial piety. We listen when their opinions are right."

Communication was found to be the most common way to express filial piety. This suggests the importance of emotional support to elders from the young Chinese young generation. In addition, very few differences were found between single-child young adults and those with siblings. This finding is consistent with previous research by Deutsch (2004, 2006), and Liu (2008). It seems that the only-child generation has grown up and is ready to take up their filial obligations. Moreover, although not many gender differences were found, the few significant findings all suggest females were as likely as, if not more than, males to take care of their parents. This corresponds with Liu's (2006) suggestion that females are playing the role of "substitute sons" in fulfilling their filial obligations.

A few limitations deserve our mention. First, we only examined the perspectives of young adults. Future research should also look at parents' perspectives to get a more complete picture of filial piety in Chinese society during this fast social economic change. Second, because the concept of filial piety is indigenous to China (Ho, 1996), not much has been done on how filial piety is viewed in other cultures. Future research should explore whether and to what extent the idea of filial piety is present in other cultures, especially in Western cultures. Third, Liu (2008) recognizes both advantages and disadvantages of native Chinese researchers doing research on native Chinese young adults. Knowing the language and culture both enables the researchers to have open and friendly communication with participants and at the same time allows the possibility of overlooking some important aspects of the data. Lastly, while this study is informative in terms of what Chinese young adults think and express filial piety, future research should examine how filial piety plays a role in the quality of intergenerational relationships.

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