

10. Filial Piety and Modernity

Some people say that while filial piety may be promoted, in the modern age it should receive a new interpretation. The view sounds reasonable enough — yet no one has actually produced one.

In China, filial piety possesses a complete and systematic body of theory, which is precisely why it became a "Way" — a principled path, not merely a custom. If someone does not even understand this body of theory, does not understand the Way of filial piety, yet insists on producing "a new interpretation," then what is really at work is nothing more than a trend-chasing mentality: running after "modernity" with one hand and "cultural revival" with the other — and nothing more.

This complete body of filial-piety theory is the Xiaojing, the Classic of Filial Piety. I have read closely through its eighteen chapters and have found nothing in them that is unreasonable, nor anything that fails to suit the modern age. If one claims they do not suit the modern age, it is because modern people do not know the Way of filial piety and do not live in accord with it — that is the true reason.

The Opening Chapter of the Classic of Filial Piety

Let me cite just the opening chapter, "Establishing the Theme and Clarifying the Meaning":

"Our body, hair, and skin are received from our parents; we dare not damage or injure them — this is the beginning of filial piety." This "beginning of filial piety" is entirely a parent's loving and protective heart toward their children, hoping that the children will treasure themselves and not cause their parents heartbreak. If "modern people" use this as a pretext for refusing to cut their long hair, that is merely an unworthy person making excuses and has nothing to do with truly appreciating a parent's heart.

"Establish oneself and practice the Way, make one's name known to later generations, and thereby bring honor to one's parents — this is the completion of filial piety." This "completion of filial piety" is still entirely a parent's loving and protective heart toward their children, hoping that the children will grow into mature, self-reliant persons who conduct themselves well and do their work well, so that the parents — having raised and educated good sons and daughters who contribute to human society — may feel proud. What is there about this that does not suit the modern age? Must one necessarily yield to today's unworthy notion of individualism for it to count as fitting the times?

"Filial piety begins with serving one's parents, extends in the middle to serving one's ruler, and culminates in establishing oneself." This is the full course of filial piety, expressing the hope that a person can be a good son or daughter in the family, a good citizen in the nation, and a person of

contribution and achievement in human society. What is wrong with this? If someone says it is wrong, it is probably aimed at the two characters "serving the ruler" as being undemocratic. But since you already understand democracy, you should also understand that "serving the ruler" can be read as "serving the people." What, then, does not suit the modern age?

Confucius's Summation

Confucius summed it up: "Filial piety — it is the constant principle of Heaven, the proper fitness of Earth, and the practiced norm of the people." Here, "constant principle" means what is normal; "proper fitness" means what is appropriate; and "practiced norm" means a life principle. I ask you: if a person is not filial, is that normal? If it is not normal, is it appropriate? Then what kind of life is such a person living?

Today the Way of filial piety is not upheld — and that is precisely what is abnormal. Abnormality serves no one. We need normalcy, and therefore we must begin with reviving the Way of filial piety.

Revision #2

Created 2026-03-08 17:43:20 UTC by Phil

Updated 2026-03-08 17:55:06 UTC by Phil