

Some Comparative Remarks About Transgressive Attitudes of Care as Expressions of Filial Piety

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Abstract

By contrast with the Western tradition where it seems to be a value of minor importance, filial piety (xiao 孝) is often presented as a core virtue of Confucianism. Indeed, in the Analects and the Classic of filial piety, filial piety seems deeply connected with the moral project of Confucius. Interestingly, in both classics, when asked about it, Confucius evokes an attitude of serving parents with sense of etiquette (li 禮). To be filial means that a good son/daughter has to serve his/her parents, not only as a child but also when, as an adult, they fall sick and get old.

In later dynasties in China, narratives illustrates explicitly what was expressed as a normative or general statement in earlier classics. For example, during the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368), Guo Jujing compiled and edited a Selection of twenty-four stories on filial piety. Several of the collected stories describe the devotion of children towards their parents when they suffer from illness. At first, these stories depict what could be seen as "abnormal" behaviors. However, they are highlighting that preserving a fundamental relationship (i.e., a relationship that gave life) is worth transgressing what is usually understood as "normal, "natural" or "appropriate" behaviors. Surprisingly these attitudes can resonate with elements initially present in Ancient Rome and the reappropriation of this ancient heritage in Modern Ages. To be a good son/daughter has, therefore, been portrayed as a feature of moral excellence in the West too. More precisely, it has also been described as a virtue that allows transgressing "normal" or "natural" customs. Nowadays, reinterpretations of traditional filial piety in contemporaneous cultures can be seen as an effort to preserve the symbolic and original value of an attitude of receiving life from other generations.