

## Chapter 4

# Filial Piety

### ABSTRACT

*Filial piety is an essential aspect of ancestor worship. The Confucian doctrine of Filiality dictates that children honor their parents in both the material world while they are alive and the spiritual world when they are dead. Ancestor worship comes into play when the parents are dead and filial piety becomes ancestor worship as children venerate their dead parents. Filial piety is the embellishment of the central tenet of the Confucian system of ethics recorded in the most important cultural and scholarly books, taught by the sages, and obeyed by the people. Filial piety is perhaps the single most consequential scheme of sociopolitical and administrative control to ever have been envisioned and effectuated upon a people in the history of civilizations. Although the notion of filiality has evidently been practiced in virtually all civilizations and cultures, Confucius described filial piety as the most important virtue, which ensures the preservation of family lineage.*

### THE DOGMA OF FILIALITY

Filial piety, a doctrine that prescribes the duty and responsibilities that children show reverence for parents and due regard for the elderly, has evidently been available in antiquity to practically every civilization. In a Confucian connotation, it facilitates harmony in an intergenerational familial relationship by stipulating the behavior of children and their parents. Filial piety is not simple obedience, it connotes deference and informs the basis of moral regulation of individual conduct and promotes social harmony.

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According to Encyclopedia Britannica, filial piety is the attitude of obedience, devotion, and care toward one's parents and elder family members. The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions accentuates the reciprocal nature of filiality, suggesting that while filial piety underscores children's obligations of love and obedience to parents, it also implies the parents' obligations to love and educate children. Filial piety therefore refers to the primacy of familial bond in personal and social life (Bowker, 1997).

In Ancient Egypt, filial piety was manifested in the structure of the temples, where the gods were always enshrined as a family consisting of the father, mother, and child (Assmann, 2008). As a commandment in church doctrine, Western culture also beholds the doctrine of filial piety. Children are required to honor their parents and respect the elderly. Exodus 21:17 of the St. James Version of the Bible specifies that disobedient children risk death for disobeying their parents. Colossians 3:20, Ephesians 6:1, Exodus 20:12, and Proverbs 1:8 are examples of the Christian rendition of filial piety. Parents, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, are not only commanded to show reverence for their children but also have responsibility to refrain from harming them. Ephesians 6:4 of the King James Version of the Christian Bible commands parents to raise their children so that they grow up righteously. Parents are also commanded to protect children.

## **What Filial Piety is Not**

Filial piety is a central tenet of Confucianism based on the teachings of the Chinese sage Confucius (552—479 BCE). It involves taking care of and being good to one's parents. Filiality also involves exhibiting respect, love, courtesy, support, reverence, and loyalty to parents. Nevertheless, there is a prevailing misconception that filial piety is entirely Confucian. Nothing could be furthermost from the truth. Assyriologists who understand the archaeology, history, and languages of ancient Mesopotamia would agree that Hammurabi (1792–1750 BC), despite his great success in military conquest and as a nation builder, “did not appear to have much advantage over other great men of Babylonian and Assyrian history” (Grimme & Pilter, 1907, p. 20). This fact aside, Hammurabi enacted the first code of laws that incorporated piety to parents and children. Filial piety is convincingly analogous to the Decalogue (Kennett, 1920), the fifth commandment as recorded in Exodus 20 of the Christian Bible. Douglas (1895) suggested that filial piety, a doctrine that can be credited as contributing to stability in the Chinese sociopolitical life,

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