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Explanatory Comments on *Di Zi Gui* (Students' Rules) – 1 Verses 1 - 5: THE MAIN SUMMARY

by Feng Xin-ming, Jan. 6, 2008; edited Jan. 11 & 15, 2008

For the *Di Zi Gui* text for verses 1 – 5, see p. 5 at http://www.tsoidug.org/dizigui/dizigui_web.pdf.

This is the first page of the text of *Di Zi Gui*.

(1) 弟子規，聖人訓。

di` zi^ gui`, sheng` ren` xun`

The Rules for Students, are the Sage's teachings.

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“Sage” refers to Confucius. He is quoted to have said verses (2) to (4) in the book The Analects, Chapter “*Xue Er*” (學而篇), paragraph 6. In traditional Chinese, Confucius is often called “*sheng ren*,” which can be translated as “The Saintly Person,” showing the high regard reserved for him.

(2) 首孝弟，次謹信，

shou^ xiao` ti`, ci` jin^ xin`

First be *xiao ti*, i.e. good to parents (*xiao*), and respectful to elders (*ti*); next be reverent and trustworthy.

Explanatory Comments:

The most important thing and the first thing that students must achieve is to be *xiao ti*, i.e. to be good to one's parents and respectful to one's elders. The second most important thing and the next thing that students must achieve is to be *jin xin*, i.e. reverent and trustworthy. Please note how Confucius considers that being good to parents and respectful to elders (*xiao ti*) is the most important thing for a student to learn. In Confucian education, the thing that comes first is not some academic knowledge, but the fundamental tenets of conduct and character, specifically the fundamental tenets of being good to parents and being respectful to one's elders.

Let us examine in a general way these four fundamental concepts mentioned in this one verse in the following:

1. *Xiao* 孝, or Being Good to Parents

Of all people in the world, our parents are the best to us: they raise us and they educate us. No matter that sometimes we feel resentful of the things they ask us to do, but feelings don't negate the fact that children owe everything to their parents. Therefore we must repay and reciprocate this great kindness or *en- 恩*. This is the reason according to traditional Chinese ideology why we should be *xiao*.

Of course, there is also a utilitarian reason to be *xiao*: if we want our children to be *xiao* to us we must be *xiao* to our parents. We must set the example for our children to follow. Only then can we demand that our children be *xiao*.

In traditional China, 孝 *xiao*, or being good to parents, and in the expanded sense, to one's ancestors too, is considered the foundation of civil society and the guarantee of moral behavior. (See *Xiao Jing*, "The Classic of *Xiao*" on this website at http://www.tsoidug.org/Papers/Xiao_Jing_Transltn.pdf.) The idea is that when one is brought up being good to one's parents and ancestors one will be conditioned to be good & respectful to all the other people that one deals with outside the family. Also, one will diligently fulfill the duties pertaining to one's station in life, so that one will make one's parents and ancestors look good, and so that one will maintain the means to support one's parents and make offerings to one's ancestors. Thus, the Emperor or Son of Heaven will rule well and be kind and respectful to his subjects, because he has been conditioned that way by *xiao* and because he wants to bring glory to his ancestors by winning praise from his subjects. Likewise, the Dukes, the Ministers, the Officers, and the Common People, i.e. all the classes of people in society, will also diligently fulfill their duties and be good and respectful to all people they deal with. Thus great order reigns, and moral conduct is guaranteed.

Unlike most traditional societies, traditional China has basically been a secular society. Organized religion has not been the dominant force in traditional China. The foundation of morality in traditional China is not divine commandment but secular *xiao*, taught by the secular philosophy of Confucianism.

Furthermore, the supreme importance given to *xiao* is also part and parcel of the basic premise of Confucius' teachings: the world is one where people reciprocate each other's kindness. In the relationship between parents and offspring, the offspring must reciprocate and repay the *en- 恩* or great kindness from the parents, the great kindness of giving birth to and raising of the offspring. This reciprocation takes the form of *xiao*, or being good to parents.

By the way, in this basic premise Confucius is so advanced for his time: truly, contrary to the barbaric and absolutely untrue notion that somehow human society is one of "every man for himself," "ruthless competition," and "the law of the jungle," notions that have led the Western world into the horrors of Naziism, human society is actually one of mutual help, one of mutual exchange of aid and benefit. As I have written in my Blog on this website (<http://www.tsoidug.org/blog/>) in the March 4, 2007 entry, human society is mutual help on the grandest and also the most intricate scale:

An extraterrestrial visitor will find the massive and intricate amount of mutual help in human society simply amazing. Millions upon millions of people go to

their jobs at set hours and perform their tasks more or less to order, day after day, providing goods and services to help other people. These producers then go regularly to yet other people, like the grocer, the hairdresser, the doctor, and so forth, and receive help in the form of needed goods and services, just so much and no more, with little or no fighting, scrambling, or whining. Everything is very orderly, yet there is no one controlling or directing all this traffic!

This part of the traditional Chinese worldview is indeed a most advanced and most civilized worldview, compatible with the development of the modern world into a peaceful, cooperative, global village of mutual help and mutual benefit.

As *Xiao Jing* says, great indeed is *xiao*!

By the way, critics say that by emphasizing *xiao* or being good to parents, Confucius forces people to be submissive and blindly obedient to authority. Aiya! Not so! Far from it, Confucius has never advocated that. That is a distortion and a caricature of Confucius. Now China has been a totalitarian country for two thousand years, and of course during those two thousand years various people have distorted Confucius to advocate submission to authority, but that's not what Confucius advocates. We shall see what Confucius really advocates as we get further into the text of *Di Zi Gui*.

2. *Ti*, or Being Respectful to Elders

Ti means being respectful to elders, and is considered the second most important thing that students must practice. Elders include one's older siblings and those in one's generation who are older, those who are the generation or generations above: one's relatives from the generation above, one's teachers, one's parents' friends, and so forth; and those who are "ranked" above one: employer or superior at work, eminent persons, and so forth.

There are very good reasons why we should be respectful to elders. The most important one is that it facilitates the help that elders can and should extend to junior persons. Elders have more knowledge, experience, self-discipline, and so can help the junior persons; respecting elders facilitates this help. When elders are treated with respect and deference they are prompted into a mindset where it comes natural for them to help the junior persons. Also, by respecting elders junior persons are prompted into a mindset where they naturally treat the words of the elders with respect and serious consideration.

Again, as for *xiao*, critics say that by emphasizing *ti* Confucius forces people to blindly submit to authority. Again, not so, and we will see how in subsequent Explanatory Comments.

3. *Jin* 謹 Being Reverent

Here I translate *jin* 謹 in *jin*[^]*xin*[`] 謹信 as "being reverent" and not as "being careful" or "being cautious" the way most *Di Zi Gui* websites have it. That's because I believe the *jin*[^] 謹 being used here is the *jin*[^] 謹 in *gong-jin*[^] 恭謹 and not the *jin*[^] 謹 in *jin*[^]*shen*[`] 謹慎. Indeed, if one looks carefully at the verses in the section on *jin*[^] 謹 in *Di Zi Gui* one can see that they are about living life reverently: being clean, being neat, being tidy,

being careful with possessions, being careful with one's movements, and so forth. Living one's life reverently includes living one's life carefully, but it is much more than that. It means living one's life with a high degree of respect both for everyone around oneself and for oneself. Now the part about living with a high degree of respect for oneself is not an exhortation to be arrogant, but is in the spirit of the traditional Chinese exhortations to never abuse oneself and to never give up on oneself, but to value and love oneself and thus to strive to reach ever higher (切勿自暴自棄，必須自重自愛，力爭上游). We will see how this works in detail, verse by verse, in the "Explanatory Comments" on the section on *jin*^.

4. *Xin* 信, Being Trustworthy

Being trustworthy is an extremely important attribute of any good person in traditional China. Honesty and keeping one's promises are considered fundamental to being a person: as the saying goes, 人無信不立 – a person without trustworthiness has no standing.

(3) 泛愛眾，而親仁，

fan' ai`zhong`, er' qin-ren'

Love everyone, and be close with the kind-hearted.

Explanatory Comments:

After being good to parents, respectful to adults, reverent and trustworthy, next in importance is to universally love people, and to be close with the kind-hearted. Universally loving everyone is being kind, and being close with the kind-hearted is also part of being kind. This emphasis on kindness is an important part of the conduct and character that Confucius demands of students.

(4) 有餘力，則學文。

you^ yu' li`, ze' xue' wen'

If there's energy left over, then study books.

Explanatory Comments:

Notice that book-study is left to the last place. In the traditional Chinese worldview, character and conduct by far and away take precedence over any book knowledge. Since *Di Zi Gui* doesn't go into this point again in the text, let's elaborate somewhat here.

Of course, the two, conduct and character on the one hand and academics on the other, are by no means opposite and mutually exclusive. In fact, the two should go together: the youngsters who have good conduct also know they should exert themselves at academics and achieve the best they are capable of. In fact, achieving the best one can in all areas of endeavor, study as well as career, is considered an indispensable part of *xiao* or being good to one's parents.

Nowadays there seems to be an idea among some parents that as long as their children get good grades, it does not matter that they are often impolite, inconsiderate, rude, self-centered, mean, disrespectful, and sometimes even dishonest, especially to parents and siblings.

Actually to not have good character and conduct is to not know how to interact with people, and to not know how to interact with people is to guarantee failure and misery in life. Also, to not have good character and conduct is to have no inner, moral strength, and to have no inner, moral strength is to not be able to cope with the many storms and setbacks that are bound to be encountered through one's life. Also, to not have good character and conduct is to have no compass in life, to not know right from wrong, to bend every which way the wind blows and not be able to choose the correct option at critical junctures of life. Only with good character and conduct can a successful and happy life be guaranteed.

Real life and modern psychology have fully confirmed the wisdom of traditional Chinese culture: those who are most successful in adult life are not necessarily those who have achieved the highest academic honors or the highest I.Q., but those who have the highest “E.Q.” or “Emotional Quotient” as opposed to “Intelligence Quotient” in I.Q. And what is E.Q.? Nothing but conduct and character!

Therefore, even though traditional Chinese culture is one that values and emphasizes academics for thousands of years, authentic traditional Chinese culture in all its wisdom knows that, despite the importance of academics, character and conduct is more important than academic success.

(5) 右總敘。

you` zong^ xu`

The preceding is the main summary.

Explanatory Comments:

The above verses constitute the quote from Confucius, and the main body of *Di Zi Gui* that follows is to elaborate on Confucius' quote.

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