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## Explanatory Comments on *Di Zi Gui* (Students' Rules) – 2 Verses 6 – 9: **XIAO (BEING GOOD TO PARENTS) - 1**

by Feng Xin-ming, Jan. 17, 2008, revised Feb. 10, 2008, May 20, 2008

For the *Di Zi Gui* text for verses 6 – 9, see p. 6 at [http://www.tsoidug.org/dizigui/dizigui\\_web.pdf](http://www.tsoidug.org/dizigui/dizigui_web.pdf).

This is the second page of the text of *Di Zi Gui*, and starts the section on *xiao* 孝 or being good to parents.

For my explanatory comments on the main concept of *xiao*, see “Explanatory Comments on *Di Zi Gui* – 1, First Page: the Main Summary” at [http://www.tsoidug.org/dizigui/Exp\\_Comm\\_1\\_DZG.pdf](http://www.tsoidug.org/dizigui/Exp_Comm_1_DZG.pdf). For an authoritative Confucian classic on *xiao*, also see *Xiao Jing (The Classic of Xiao)* on this website at [http://www.tsoidug.org/Papers/Xiao\\_Jing\\_Comment.pdf](http://www.tsoidug.org/Papers/Xiao_Jing_Comment.pdf).

(6) 父母呼，應勿緩。

*fu` mu^ hu-, ying^ wu` huan^*

**When parents call, don't be slow to answer.**

### **Explanatory Comments:**

There's a very good reason why *Di Zi Gui* puts answering parents immediately when called as the first thing in the section on *xiao* (being good to parents): this is a most basic first sign of respect and common courtesy.

Some time ago in public I saw this young Chinese guy, about 15-16 years old, and he was being called by his father from across the room. Well, the boy never responded. The father kept calling out but the boy just ignored all the calls, kept talking to his friend, and acted as if he never heard them. After a number of ignored calls, the father stopped and went about his business, not going to the boy and reprimanding him. The mother, who was right there with the father and witnessed the whole affair - in fact, she stared hard and long at the boy once, but she also never said a word and went on about her business.

Now just what was all that about? It was the most brazen display of disrespect for one's parents, and it was the saddest display of parents not demanding civility from the offspring. It is basic manners, basic civility, basic politeness, to respond when one's

name is called. Especially when it's one's parents who are calling. Even when it's just the dog barking one would respond and say, hey, what's the matter? How much more so when it's one's parents?

Parents must teach manners to their kids, and those manners must first and foremost include being polite and civil to parents. Answering immediately when called is a basic sign of respect. As Confucius is quoted to have said, "Courtesy is nothing but respect." To not teach courtesy, i.e. manners, is to not teach respect. To have no respect 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.

Of course, it could also be that the boy was ashamed of his parents. Sadly, a lot of kids seem to be ashamed of their parents – they are not fashionable enough, or they speak with an accent. Well I say, first of all, no matter how ashamed you are of your father or mother, your father is still your father and your mother is still your mother: you still must show some basic respect! Second, to think that one needs to dress fashionably or to speak unaccented English to be deserving of respect is the height of folly and the mind of every boy, or girl for that matter, ought to be cleared of that arrogant notion.

Yes, *Di Zi Gui* recognizes that the first thing a child must learn is basic respect, and that basic respect starts with the most basic act of respect for parents: when parents call, answer immediately. Therefore, in its wisdom, *Di Zi Gui* sets forth the exhortation about answering one's parents immediately as the very first sentence in prescribing proper conduct. Parents are well advised to teach their children this conduct, and to insist on it as a minimal standard of civility.

What kind of civility will a person possess if he's not even civil to people who have been kindest to him in this whole world, who have given birth to him and who have raised and educated him: his parents? What kind of person is uncivil to his greatest benefactors by far? It is a most callous character who reneges on his most basic obligation. One who is not civil to his parents cannot be expected to grow into being civil to others. Parents who allow their offspring to be uncivil to parents are grooming such offspring for failure when they grow up.

Traditionally, Chinese have for thousands of years prided their country as The Land of Courtesy and Righteousness. Answering one's parents immediately is a basic first requirement in that authentically Chinese culture of courtesy.

( 7 ) 父母命，行勿懶。

*fu`mu^ming`, xing`wu`lan^*

**When parents give an order, act, don't be lazy.**

#### **Explanatory Comments:**

Although obeying parents is a key precept in the traditional Chinese concept of xiao, among a lot of parents nowadays, it's no longer fashionable to demand that children be obedient. Often it's asked, why should children obey their parents?

The reason is that parents have the duty to care for and educate their children, and children are:

- 1) Not as logical in their thinking as the parents;
- 2) Not as knowledgeable;
- 3) Weaker; they have less self-control, less resistance to temptation, and less ability to defer gratification.

Therefore, parents know better. On many occasions then parents will have to tell children, for their own good, to do things that children don't want to do, or to refrain from harmful things that children want to do. So it will be distasteful for the children. If they are not taught and required to obey their parents, on those occasions children won't do what is good for them or refrain from what is bad for them.

Thus, precisely because parents have to get children to do things they don't want to do, children must obey parents. Indeed, if parents need only to get children to do things that are fun and enjoyable, there's no need to demand obedience.

Indeed, at least initially until it becomes a habit, most children would want to play rather than do their homework, let alone doing chores around the house or, when older, perhaps help out with the family business. In order to get children to do these things, parents must insist on obedience from their children.

Besides, the very fact that children obey their parents and do things that are not enjoyable trains the children to be stronger, more self disciplined, more resistant to temptation, more capable of deferring gratification, less self-centered, more considerate of others, more aware of their own responsibilities, and more capable of discharging such responsibilities.

Moreover, the household has to function, and how can a household, or any unit, function if the wiser, more knowledgeable, and morally stronger individuals do not guide and direct the less wise, less knowledgeable, and morally weaker individuals? Or even worse, submit to and are directed by them, as in so many cases nowadays where parents obey their kids?

Of course, as children grow older there should be less and less need to order them about, as they should know what's good for them. By the time they are fifteen their brains have matured enough to be competent at abstract and logical thinking; thus they should know right from wrong and should be responsible enough that parents don't need to give them orders very much, if at all.

(8) 父母教，須敬聽。

*fu` mu^ jiao-, xu- jing` ting`*

**When parents teach, one must listen respectfully.**

**Explanatory Comments:**

Offspring must reverently and thoroughly receive and absorb parents' teachings; paying complete attention and achieving full understanding of the parents' teaching is a must. Parents' teachings are precious, and must be treated as such. Only by listening respectfully can one fully capture parents' teachings in their entirety.

Listening respectfully also facilitates and elicits complete and thorough teaching from one's parents. It makes it easier for the parents to go on talking and to expand on what they are trying to teach. On the other hand, not paying attention or displaying a disdainful attitude distracts parents from the topic at hand into trying to make their offspring listen, and really makes it difficult for parents to expound fully on what they are trying to teach.

Parents must be listened to respectfully even if one doesn't agree with the parents' teachings at the time. That's because one must consider the parents' teachings seriously even if one doesn't agree, and only by paying full attention and understanding the teachings thoroughly can one consider distasteful arguments seriously. Why should one seriously consider teachings that one thinks are wrong? Because usually parents are right, even if it takes decades or until one has children of one's own for one to realize it. "As I get older my father appears smarter and smarter, and the things he has told me over and over, things that I used to find so ridiculous and out-of-date, have now become not only reasonable, but downright brilliant!" So one of my high school teachers have said to me decades ago, to my then great puzzlement but now total agreement.

And even if one's parents truly turn out to be dead wrong they are acting out of concern for one's interests, and so deserve a respectful hearing and serious consideration.

At this point we must digress to talk a bit about motives. Suspecting one's parents' motives for telling us things we don't want to hear is absolutely wrong. I must emphasize in the strongest way that lightly and readily suspecting someone's motives is the most serious disrespect in the first place. Parents must be treated by offspring as acting in the offspring's interest until absolutely proven without doubt to be doing otherwise. And of course this holds for when parents are teaching their offspring: the offspring must treat the parents as acting in his or her best interest.

Finally, when people are trying to talk to someone, that someone owes them as a minimal standard of common decency and common courtesy his or her full attention. How much more so when they are doing it in his or her best interest? Thus, even merely as part of common courtesy, one must listen respectfully to parents when they are teaching one.

Of course, defiantly talking back, angrily arguing, interrupting with jeers, storming off without letting parents finish, or displaying contempt in any way should be absolutely forbidden and never tolerated by parents. One may not agree, one may not do what one's parents exhort one to do, but one must listen respectfully. Like answering immediately when parents call, it is only common courtesy and basic civility.

(9) 父母責，須我承。

*fu` mu^ ze', xu- wo^ cheng'*

**When parents reprimand, one must accept.**

**Explanatory Comments:**

Reprimanding is actually just a type of teaching. Parents reprimand when they see their offspring doing something wrong, often something very, very wrong, morally wrong, like a child sadistically abusing someone, and want to prevent them from doing the same thing again. Compared to ordinary teaching, the only difference in reprimanding is that pain or at least some discomfort is inflicted. The pain or discomfort can be verbal, as in a tongue-lashing or other kinds of verbal rebuke, or it can be physical, as in corporal punishment or deprivation punishment, where things such as the liberty of the person to move about or to engage in social interaction with friends are taken away, for example “time outs” and “grounding.” This administration of pain and discomfort is intended to strongly drive the lesson home, as the parents are quite upset about the transgression and feel an urgency to forcefully deliver a point.

Parents must be able to reprimand when necessary, because sometimes it is not possible to teach certain lessons without resorting to reprimand, to infliction of pain or discomfort. This is because the ancient, animal part of our brain is the strongest driver of desire, and must be reached to teach certain lessons of great right and wrong. Now the animal brain does not understand logic; the animal part of our brain only thinks and understands in terms of pleasure and pain, reward and punishment. Thus when an offspring commits a serious transgression such as sadistic cruelty, the parents must teach a lesson that not only reaches the reasoning, human part of the brain, but also the feeling, animal part of the brain. Serious moral transgressions must be taught a lesson by psychologically painful, discomforting, forceful and angry verbal rebuke accompanied by physical pain or discomfort.

Reprimand being merely a form of teaching, all the things said previously about parents teaching also apply to parents reprimanding. Since parents are usually wiser, more knowledgeable, and morally stronger, one must respect the right of parents to exercise their judgment and administer the reprimanding form of teaching when they see fit. Therefore, the offspring must accept reprimands from parents at all times. That means no talking back angrily or sarcastically, no leaving before being dismissed, no display of defiance, or rejection of the reprimand in any form.

What about when one thinks his parents are wrong to reprimand? Since, as we have noted above in the explanatory comments on obeying parents, due to inferior knowledge and wisdom offspring cannot know for sure at the time of the reprimand whether the parents are wrong, and indeed sometimes it takes years for one to realize how right one's parents are; therefore, even if one thinks his parents are wrong, unjust, or over-reacting in resorting to reprimand, one must respect the right of the parents to resort to this urgent and forceful form of teaching, and one must respect the good intent behind this teaching. One therefore must accept one's parents' reprimand with respect, and not reject it with displays of resentment, defiance, or anger.

Of course, in physical reprimands, as in corporal punishment or deprivation punishment, the parents must take care not to inflict injury. The offspring have a right, in fact a duty,

to escape from the punishment if it is going to be injurious. In fact, when Confucius' star student Zeng Shen (曾參 or Zeng Zi 曾子) stood still and allowed his father to hit him over the head with a stick in a fit of anger, Confucius severely rebuked Zeng Shen for being un-*xiao* (not good to parents), saying that he should have run away because by standing still and taking the hit he was acting as an enabler and accomplice to his father in committing a physically injurious and therefore morally reprehensible act.

Also, as offspring grow older reprimands should be necessary only very rarely. As for physical and deprivation reprimands, once offspring reach age fifteen these should no longer be used as fifteen year olds should be treated with the dignity due adults, since their brains are capable of knowing right from wrong at this age.

Finally, a word about the punishment called "grounding." This is where the offspring is required to come straight home from school and not allowed to go anywhere other than school for several days up to even several weeks. This is a form of deprivation of personal freedom, and is tantamount to being in jail. Moreover, it is a public form of humiliation, as the offspring's friends will come to know about it when the offspring has to explain to them why he or she is not able to socialize with them. Furthermore, this form of punishment usually lasts for days on end, if not weeks, very long times indeed for a child or a teenager. I find this cruel and unusually harsh and lengthy, and I strongly believe that such severe punishment, if used at all, should be reserved for the most serious of transgressions. In fact, in Imperial China imprisonment is considered a more severe punishment than beatings with a bamboo strip (light sentence) or a rod (heavier sentence), and imprisonment is reserved for more serious crimes. In any case I doubt the effectiveness of "grounding" as a punishment to teach a lesson, as the lesson does not reach the animal brain and as resentment against the teachers (the parents) will only build up in the youngster over the seemingly interminable days of imprisonment. In comparison, non-injurious though painful corporeal punishment, so routinely denounced as cruel and humiliating, is actually much more humane and, being private, much less humiliating, while at the same time it is much more effective if applied correctly.