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Explanatory Comments on *Di Zi Gui* (Students' Rules) – 4 Verses 14 – 21: *XIAO* (BEING GOOD TO PARENTS) – 3

by Feng Xin-ming, May 10, 2008

For the *Di Zi Gui* text for verses 14 – 21, see pp. 7 & 8 at
http://www.tsoidug.org/dizigui/dizigui_web.pdf.

This continues the section in *Di Zi Gui* 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. 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.

VERSES (14) & (15)

事雖小，勿擅為；

shi` sui- xiao^, wu` shan` wei`

Though a matter may be small, don't act arbitrarily;

苟擅為，子道虧。

gou^ shan` wei`, zi^ dao` kui-

If one acts arbitrarily, the character that a son ought to possess gets damaged.

Explanatory Comments:

The injunction here is to not *shan wei* (擅為), a term which means to act arbitrarily, to act without asking for or consideration of the relevant other people's opinions, or to act beyond what one has the right or authority to do. To act arbitrarily is to act without due consideration of what is right and wrong, or of how the action will affect other people. To act without asking for or consideration of the relevant other people's opinions is to arrogantly ignore advice regarding the best way to achieve success. To act beyond what one has the right or authority to do is to make decisions that one does not have the right to make and take actions that one does not have the authority to take. Here *Di Zi Gui* is enjoining us to not unilaterally act merely according to our own wishes and desires, otherwise the character that a son ought to possess gets damaged.

Please note how good character and good conduct is part of *xiao* or being good to parents. In this section on *xiao*, *Di Zi Gui* emphasizes that a son ought to possess good and upright character to be *xiao*. In fact, throughout the whole Confucian thought on *xiao*, *xiao* is not thought of as merely serving parent's narrow private needs and desires, but more importantly as also serving the parents' broader need for a virtuous and upright son, with a good name of integrity and competence. *Xiao* is thought of as applicable to all of one's social relationships, from the relationship with the government to the relationship with one's spouse, one's elders, one's friends, and one's coworkers, such that one always practices kindness, respect and goodness. This is because the *xiao* offspring knows that being a good person brings a good name to his parents and therefore is part of *xiao*.

This is somewhat parallel to the teaching by some religious thinkers that loving God or the god one worships makes one want to be a good person because that glorifies God or the god one worships.

VERSES (16) & (17)

物雖小，勿私藏；

wu` sui- xiao^, wu` si- cang`

Though a thing may be small, don't selfishly hoard it;

苟私藏，親心傷。

gou^ si- cang', qin- xin- shang-

If one selfishly hoards, the parents' hearts will be hurt.

Explanatory Comments:

Di Zi Gui's injunction here is that one must share inside the family and not selfishly hoard things for one's own use. In the traditional Chinese/Confucian world, family members communally own all property (and income) in common. So a parent in traditional China cannot utter to an offspring the phrase that so many parents in the West say to their children, "as long as you live under *my roof* you must obey my rules" because it's "*our roof*" and the house is "*our house*". Of course, the parent in traditional China can say to the offspring, "I am your parent so you must obey me" or "I am your parent and I know better than you what the proper rules are". At any rate, the property of the family must be shared for the common use, and not selfishly hoarded away for one's own use.

Many people will say, "But why should I share what I make with my parents and my brothers?" Ah, but they will also share what they make with you. Moreover, they will all have a great interest in helping you succeed, and you have an interest in helping them succeed. Jealousy? Sibling rivalry? Nonsense! You will always have the unshakeable support of your whole family. And since the traditional Chinese family is a big one of several generations living under one roof, you will always have the staunch support of many members of your family in your endeavors.

By the way, it is a good time to pause here to denounce the falsity and misrepresentation of many, nay, the overwhelming majority, of today's Chinese movies, TV shows and novels about the big multi-generational families in old traditional China, wherein the siblings and sisters-in-laws are usually shown to be cynically conspiring against each other in rivalry open and secret, usually "for the favor of the patriarch and therefore control of the family wealth". Many modern Chinese writers really have the utmost contempt for our forefathers; to them our ancestors are conceived as nothing but a bunch of hypocrites who mouth the Confucian teachings of *xiao* and then act the direct opposite.

At any rate, this injunction of *Di Zi Gui*'s is very good for families in today's Westernized world, where individualized ownership rather than communal ownership is the norm and is in my view over-emphasized. The trouble with children nowadays is that they are spoiled, that is, they are self-centered. Being spoiled does not mean having a lot materially; being impoverished and deprived materially doesn't prevent one from being spoiled. Being spoiled simply means being self-centered, self-important, and totally ignorant of or callous to other people's needs. Today's children need to be far less self-centered, and a good way to make them less self-centered is to not only ask them to share, but also to show them sharing behavior on the part of the adults. How can parents tell their kids to share when the parents themselves consider the house *their* house and not the kids' house, that is, when the parents don't even share the house with the people who live all their lives in it? An even better way to make children less self-centered is to have them responsible for contributing to the welfare of the whole family: back in the old days on the family farm each child had his chores to do, which were crucial to the family farm functioning and producing an income, and today's children should all be responsible for household chores. And when they do work outside the family with part-time jobs, they should not keep all the earnings. They should be asked to give all their earnings to the parents and then the parents give the same children money (liberally of course) when they need it for things, or they should be asked to give at least part of their earnings to the parents as part of their contribution to the family welfare.

VERSES (18) & (19)

親所好，力為具；

qin- suo^ hao`, li` wei' ju`

What parents like, make an effort to possess;

親所惡，謹為去。

qin- suo^ wu`, jin^ wei' qu`

What parents despise, carefully get rid of.

Explanatory Comments:

Parents know better than a child, especially when the child is not yet of age, so just follow what they like and dislike and the child will be right most of the time. Of course, with most parents what they like is what is good and right, especially if it is good and

right for the child, and what they despise is what is bad and wrong, especially if it is bad and wrong for the child.

VERSES (20) & (21)

身有傷，貽親憂；

shen- you^ shang-, yi' qin- you-

Injury to one's body brings parents worry;

德有傷，貽親羞。

de' you^ shang-, yi' qin- xiu-

Injury to one's character brings parents shame.

Explanatory Comments:

These are very important verses, and jibes with *Xiao Jing*'s famous two opening sentences in Chapter I (pages 3 & 4 of http://tsoidug.org/Papers/Xiao_Jing_Comment.pdf) regarding taking care of one's body and practicing good conduct.

The first sentence, about taking care of one's body, says:

The body, hair and skin, all have been received from the parents, and so one doesn't dare damage them – that is the beginning of xiao.

The second sentence, about practicing good conduct, says:

Establishing oneself, practicing The Way, spreading the fame of one's name to posterity, so that one's parents become renowned – that is the end of xiao.

Taking care of one's body is *xiao*, and the reverse is un-*xiao*. Practicing good conduct and possessing good character is *xiao*, and the reverse is un-*xiao*. Thus being good to oneself physically, as in taking care of one's body, and being good to oneself morally, as in practicing good conduct, are *xiao*, are part of being good to one's parents. Being good to oneself is being good to one's parents. Yes, great indeed is the love of parents for their offspring, and in turn great indeed is the love of parents by their offspring, for both lead to good and upright conduct in all spheres of life. Thus Confucius' dictum is that *xiao*, being good to parents, is the foundation of all virtue and what all teaching grows out of.

By the way, it is fair to say that a huge part of traditional Chinese culture is based on the Confucian teaching of *xiao*, and that any presentation of traditional Chinese culture is very incomplete without an exposition on *xiao* and its role.