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Explanatory Comments on *Di Zi Gui* (Students' Rules) – 5 Verses 22 – 27: *XIAO* (BEING GOOD TO PARENTS) – 4

by Feng Xin-ming, May 10, 2008

For the *Di Zi Gui* text for verses 22- 27, please see pp. 8 – 9 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 (22) & (23)

親愛我，孝何難；

qin- ai` wo^, xiao` he` nan`

When parents love me, it's easy to be good to parents;

親憎我，孝方賢。

qin- zeng- wo^, xiao` fang- xian`

When parents detest me, then it's truly virtuous to be good to parents.

Explanatory Comments:

Sometimes parents detest us, or more likely, we have the false impression that they detest us. Truly, it is only human instinct for parents to love their offspring, and while aberrations are always possible, it is usually the mistaken impression on the part of the offspring that they are being detested by their very own parents.

Beginning at the age of 13 to 15 we often start to question authority and it often seems that our parents hate us. Otherwise, why would they insist on tormenting us with orders to do things that aren't fun, like study and homework, and refrain from things that are fun, like play and computer games? Of course, this is just the ignorance of immature children and the true matter is that only because parents love us do they insist that we do things that may sometimes be unpleasant but are immensely beneficial. It is exactly one of the

parents' vital duties to ensure immature children gain the absolutely essential benefits of such sometimes unpleasant things, and parents routinely, selflessly, sacrifice some of their offspring's goodwill ("love") to ensure that the offspring gain such vital benefits. This just proves the selfless love of parents for offspring and shows how much we owe to them and how much we need to be *xiao*. Nay, it is exactly the other way around: it is when parents don't insist on us doing homework and studying that maybe the question whether they detest us should be raised.

Then yes, there's the question of favoritism, and often parents do favor the younger ones over the older ones. This is because of animal instinct. Animal instinct or instinctive love tells parents to reprimand the older sibling and protectively come down on the side of the younger one whenever there's a dispute between an older and a younger sibling. Therefore, even when the younger sibling is being completely unreasonable, grabbing for the older one's toy, the very fact that the younger sibling screams when the older one repels the aggression brings the parents scurrying to scold the older one and to order him or her to surrender to the younger one's demands. Alas! Humans today are civilized, and civilization calls for the overcoming of mere animal instincts. That's why the sages' teachings are so revered through the ages: such teachings enable humanity to overcome certain base animal instincts, to supplant them with rational behavior, and to strengthen other, nobler instincts. Parents must suppress their animal instincts and not only inquire into the merits of the case, but also insist, as Confucius and *Di Zi Gui* teach, that the younger sibling always respect the older one.

At any rate, no matter what our impression of our parents' love or hate of us, whether they love or hate us does not determine whether we carry out our obligation to carry out *xiao*. The Cardinal Relations call for the rendering of Cardinal Obligations, and the need to render such obligations are independent of subjective feeling. While the Cardinal Obligations of parents to offspring is to raise them and to teach them, the Cardinal Obligations of offspring to parents is to be *xiao* to them. The very point of this admonition in *Di Zi Gui* is exactly that the obligation to be *xiao* is not based on subjective feelings, on whether the other party loves us.

The case of the legendary Sage Emperor Shun, 舜 (traditional 2317 – 2218 B.C.E.) shows how a person is indeed truly virtuous when he is *xiao* to parents who detest him. Being one of those aberrant situations, while young and before he was emperor his parents (father and stepmother) hated him and with the acquiescence of the father, the stepmother on more than one occasion tried to kill Shun. Yet Shun remained *xiao* to his parents, respecting them and providing for them, step-mother and all. Eventually his *xiao* moved them; they realized the error of their ways and reformed. Such exemplary *xiao* was one of the reasons he was recognized as being truly virtuous and eventually chosen to be emperor.

So whether one's impression that one's parents detest one is valid or not, one needs to be *xiao*. Indeed for one's parents to detest one when one remains true to *xiao* means that one's parents are mistaken. Then it is even more important to be *xiao* because one of the duties of *xiao* is to help one's parents correct their mistakes, as we shall see in the next verses.

VERSES (24) & (25)

親有過，諫使更；

qin- you^ gou`, jian` shi^ geng-

When parents are doing something that's wrong, counsel them to make them change.

怡吾色，柔吾聲。

yi' wu' se`, rou' wu' sheng-

Make my expression pleasant, and soften my voice.

Explanatory Comments:

As we can see here, *Xiao* has never meant blind obedience to parents. If they are doing something wrong, we need to counsel them to make them change. Of course, it's got to be something seriously wrong, something morally unrighteous, not like preferences for a certain movie over another, or something like they are telling us to study now and we think we should surf the internet now and study later. So for the overwhelming majority of people, such need to counsel parents is going to be a very rare circumstance. Indeed, hopefully this will never happen.

According to Confucius as quoted in *Xiao Jing*¹, however, if one's parents are engaging in moral unrighteousness, one must not obey or cooperate with them in that activity because by doing so one is further “entrapping one's parents in moral unrighteousness” (陷父母於不義 *xian fu mu yu bu yi*). Of course, if they haven't done something morally unrighteous yet but are planning to do it, one must try to do one's best to keep them from doing it. All this is called “dissuading and disputing” (諫爭 *jian zheng*) and is considered a prime duty of *xiao*. By the way, this duty to dissuade and dispute is indeed considered in the Confucian and traditional Chinese world view a prime duty of a loyal subject to his or her ruler and of a loyal subordinate to his or her superior. The importance of this duty to dissuade and dispute can be seen in Confucius' emphatic response when his student asks him whether obedience to one's parents makes one *xiao*: “What kind of talk is that? What kind of talk is that? (是何言與? 是何言與? *shi he yan yu? shi he yan yu?*)”²

In Confucianism, the reason why it is a prime duty of *xiao* to dissuade and dispute one's parents when they are doing something morally wrong is that if one doesn't do so, one is, as we have said already, “entrapping one's parents in moral unrighteousness”. If one doesn't dissuade and dispute, then one is allowing one's parents to harm themselves or even aiding and abetting them. Therefore, it is a great trespass to refrain from dissuading and disputing. In fact, Mencius, an important Confucian thinker and generally considered second only to Confucius, is said to have pronounced that there are three things that are un-*xiao*, and the very first one is to sycophantically obey one's parents

¹ *Xiao Jing* (孝經), Chapter 15, “Dissuading and Disputing” (諫爭章底十五), see http://www.tsoidug.org/Papers/Xiao_Jing_Comment.pdf on this website.

² *Ibid.*

even when there is error and thus to entrap one's parents in moral unrighteousness. (於禮有不孝者三，事謂阿意曲從，陷親不義，一不孝也。 *yu li you bu xiao zhe san, shi wei a yi qu cong, xian qin bu yi, yi bu xiao ye.*)³

There is, however, a catch. Years and years ago, after I had taught my kids to persist in trying to stop parents from transgressing against moral righteousness, my kids would argue with me when I ask them to do certain unpalatable but in my opinion necessary things, saying, "You told us to dissuade you from doing what is wrong" and "You said we didn't have to obey or cooperate when we sincerely believed you to be wrong." Of course, allowing that would have been tantamount to issuing young children a license to disobey parents and be uncooperative.

So I gave them a simple rule to use to tell when one needs to disobey and dissuade one's parents. It wasn't just when one believed parents to be mistaken, it had to be when one's parents were about to or in the process of committing an offense against moral righteousness. It was when obeying and cooperating would have helped your parents succeed in committing that offense. The test for children who were still too young not to be self-centered and still too young to be versed in abstract thinking, was that it had to benefit the parents, not benefit or please the children, to not have the orders followed. And, it was emphasized, the need to disobey parents rarely arose, if ever, for most offspring.

Otherwise, even if they sincerely believed the order to be dead wrong, like studying some more instead of playing when they believed themselves to have already mastered the material, they were still to defer to their parents' judgment and obey the order.

It is on big and moral issues such as, say, acting dishonestly or, say, philandering and wanting to divorce the other parent that children must speak their opposition and attempt to dissuade, and persist in the performance of this duty no matter what.

Again, hopefully one never has to oppose one's parents.

Should that unfortunate occasion arise, one must do one's duty of dissuading and disputing in a respectful way. One must make one's expression pleasant and soften one's voice, to make the dissenting view palatable. When one dissuades or disputes, one must be considerate of the other party's feelings and take care not to offend the sense of pride; this especially applies to one's own parents, who are usually in the role of the wiser ones. One should speak softly so as not to hurt their feelings and so as to make one's suggestions easier to accept.

Just because one thinks one is in the right and one's parents are in the wrong doesn't give one the right to raise one's voice at them or to speak self-righteously to them. Any such action is absolutely wrong and is an act of sabotage. One must speak humbly, offering

³ *Mencius (Meng Zi)*, Chapter *Li Lou* (《孟子：離婁篇》), Annotated by Zhao Qi of the Han Dynasty (漢朝趙岐注), "The Thirteen Classics Annotated (十三經注疏)", published by Zhonghua Shudian (中華書店), Beijing, 1980, Vol. II, p.2,723.

counsel and advice to one's parents, and not angrily or loudly, condemning or denouncing one's parents.

VERSES (26) & (27)

諫不入，悅復諫；

jian`bu`ru`, yue`fu`jian`

If the counsel is not accepted, wait until parents are happy then counsel them again.

號泣隨，撻無怨。

hao`qi`sui`, ta`su`yuan`

(If still not accepted,) weeping and wailing should follow, and beatings are borne without complaint.

Explanatory Comments:

Often parents reject one's dissenting, oppositional views. After all, they are used to being the teachers and the counselors and now their offspring is claiming to be right while they are wrong. In *xiao*, a one-time attempt is not enough. To try once to get one's parents to refrain from doing wrong and then if they don't listen, to just shrug and say, "Oh, well, I tried" is not enough. No, it's a duty of *xiao* to persist in opposition and dissuasion until one is successful. It is in the parents' fundamental interest, in the long term if not in the short term, that they act in line with moral righteousness. So, since it comes down to safeguarding one's parents' fundamental interest, one must keep at it until one succeeds.

So, to be considerate of the parents' feelings and to maximize the chance of success, one waits until the parents are in a good mood and then raises the issue again. If one's parents keeps rejecting one's counsel and continue down the morally unrighteous path one must resort to weeping and wailing, and persist even if one's parents get so angry that they punish or beat one. Since it's the duty of *xiao* to dissuade and dispute, one bears any pain or punishment without complaint.

By the way, we should note that even in a children's primer like *Di Zi Gui*, the need to dissuade parents from doing wrong is taught as one of the duties of *xiao*. How wrong for people nowadays to distort the traditional Chinese doctrine of *xiao* as being "blind obedience to parents"!

Also by the way, we must digress here to deal with an issue related to when parents are engaged in morally unrighteous things: if one's parents aren't "respectable" or "loveable", if they've turned themselves into something "repulsive" like alcoholics or drug addicts, then does one still owe them *xiao*? Can one not disown them? The answer is, no, if you are so unfortunate that your parents aren't "respectable" or "loveable", then you need to be *xiao* even more! One part of this *xiao*, of course, is to respect them, love them and care for them, and goodness knows that people who are not on the right path in life need a lot more caring for. The other part of this *xiao* is to try to counsel them and change them. Again this is amply illustrated by the legendary Chinese emperor Shun 舜

(traditional 2317 – 2218 B.C.E.), whom we have mentioned earlier in this paper, who by persisting in being *xiao* even when his parents were morally so repulsive as to try to kill him repeatedly, eventually reformed his parents.

Yes, as the author of *Xiao Jing* says, great indeed is *xiao*! It is not just love or respect; even more importantly, *xiao* is acting in the fundamental interests of the parents, such as the offspring always engaging in good conduct, the offspring always looking after his own health, and, as we discuss here, when the parents are engaging in moral unrighteousness, the offspring pointing it out to them and dissuading and disputing them. As Confucius says in *Xiao Jing*, if a Son of Heaven has seven ministers who will dissuade and dispute wrong then even if he is not a good person he will not lose his empire, and if a father has one son who will dissuade and dispute wrong then the father will not become entrapped in unrighteousness. Dissuading and disputing is such an important duty precisely because it is so vital to the fundamental interests of one's parents.