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Explanatory Comments on *Di Zi Gui* (Students' Rules) - 6 Verses 28 – 33: *XIAO* (BEING GOOD TO PARENTS) - 5

by Feng Xin-ming, Oct. 4, 2008

For the *Di Zi Gui* text for verses 28- 33, please see pp. 9 – 10 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 (28) & (29)

親有疾，藥先嘗；

qin- you^ji', yao`xian- chang'

When parents fall ill, one tastes the medicine first;

晝夜侍，不離床。

zhou`ye`shi`, bu`li`chuang'

And attends day and night, not leaving the bed.

Explanatory Comments:

When parents fall ill, that is, so ill they cannot look after themselves, it is the offspring's obligation to provide care. This usually happens when the parents are old and infirm. Tasting the medicine first refers to the care and attentiveness with which one should attend upon ill parents: in the old days medicines are prepared by boiling the herbs in water, and the preparer is supposed to taste the medicine to make sure it is prepared to the desired concentration.

It is a Cardinal Obligation of offspring to care for parents during age and infirmity. This is a major one, and is merely the reciprocating of parents' raising of us, and traditional

Chinese culture is premised on the reciprocating of good or *bao en* 報恩. Back during the days of traditional China, people who were so callous as to not care or provide support for their parents were looked down upon as people who renege on their obligation to reciprocate good, and how can you have any good dealings with people who renege on their obligations to reciprocate good?

Taking care of aged parents is probably a universal imperative: while Westerners don't usually live with parents, though "in-law suites" are getting common, the Westerners I know, and I know quite a few, as well as people from cultures other than Chinese, are very attentive and close to their aged parents. In fact, I know a number of Westerners who phone their aged parents daily. I know even more Westerners who visit their aged parents every few days, who accompany them on grocery shopping trips and visits to the doctor, and who are right there whenever their parents run into any difficulty.

This is the complete opposite of what I sometimes hear from some Chinese people, who think that since Westerners don't talk about *xiao* then they don't care for their parents in their old age, and therefore to be "as advanced as the West", Chinese should throw off the "stifling shackles of backwardness from the past" like *xiao* and act the same as Westerners supposedly do: cast off their aged parents and tell them to not burden their offspring but to fend for themselves on their own. Good gracious, how shameful, what ignorance! It's total nonsense; it's only a few Westerners who don't care for or support their parents, just as there are always a few lowly people who are not so good in any society. While it's true that Westerners don't talk about *xiao*, they do talk about love, and Westerners do love their parents – no civilized society is so callous as to cast off their aged parents.

Even when there is government support such as "social security" for the aged, care, emotional support, attention and companionship cannot be provided for by any but the offspring. It is incumbent upon the offspring to ensure not only the material things, but also the non-material, probably even more important, things.

As to attending on parents day and night and not leaving the bed, this is when they are very ill, or when it is close to the end. It comforts the aged greatly to have their offspring around when they are gravely ill, and especially when they are near the moment of death. Even Western society, which doesn't talk about *xiao*, has a custom called "family leave" where people customarily take time off from work to care for seriously ill parents and family members. How much more should Chinese people, who have a several-thousand-year-long heritage of *xiao* and reciprocating of good?

Reciprocating kindness is the fundamental principle on which traditional Chinese society has been based, and repaying parents for their kindness in raising and educating us by caring for them when aged and infirm should be something accepted without hesitation. Those who question or even seek to deny this principle by saying that parents should not demand any such thing are questioning and seeking to deny the basic principle of civilized humans. If parents have no right to expect reciprocal kindness and care from their offspring, why should anyone go through the hardships and sacrifices of having

children? In fact, as we see in a lot of “Westernized” societies today, the number of children people are having is very low. In fact, in 2007 Hong Kong has by far the lowest birth rate: only 1.0 children per woman. It’s the logical corollary of parents not having any claim on their children for support during old age.

Why, if that goes on to its logical extreme, humans will become extinct! No, parents must insist that their offspring commit to care and support during old age and infirmity, must drum this principle of reciprocating goodness into the heads of the children, and must set good examples for the children by the parents themselves caring for and supporting their own parents, i.e. the children’s grandparents.

VERSES (30) & (31)

喪三年，常悲咽；

sang- san- nian’, chang’ bei- yan-

One mourns for three years, often sobbing sadly.

居處變，酒色絕。

ju- chu` bian`, jiu^ se` jue’

The place of living should change, and one should abstain from wine and sex.

Explanatory Comments:

When parents die, it is good and normal that we grieve for them, miss them and feel sad. Formalizing grief and delineating a grieving period by living differently, perhaps in a different room, and abstaining from pleasures including alcohol and sex for a set length of time is a healthy way both to express grief and to establish an end to the grieving.

By the way, it must be pointed out here that when someone has died, Chinese culture is unlike some cultures where it is permissible or even desirable to laugh and party, such as for the Irish with their “wakes”.

Three years of mourning and sobbing, however, is in my opinion too long and may precipitate brain burnout and psychiatric depression. Confucius said in *Xiao Jing* to mourn **no longer than**, not for, three years. Moreover, Confucius said the reason was to not let “the dead harm the living”. I think that while sobbing and abstaining from all pleasure including wine and sex for something like three or six months is fine, maintaining serious grieving for any longer than that is harming one’s health, and harming one’s health goes against the first injunction of *xiao*, which is to look after the body that one has received from one’s parents.

Besides, we read about historic Chinese figures like Wen Tian-xiang 文天祥 who refrained from making possibly critical contributions to society because of this mourning period of three years. In 1258, for the reforms proposed in his essays in the imperial civil service exams, Wen Tian-xiang was personally judged by the emperor himself to be

Top Imperial Laureate and appointed to a post at court. Four days later, however, Wen Tian-xiang's father died. Because of this three-year mourning requirement, Wen Tian-xiang declined his post and returned to his hometown for three years to fulfill the mourning period. By the time he came back to the capital in 1261, a failed but very damaging Mongol invasion had taken place and an extremely corrupt prime minister, against whom Wen Tian-xiang was to later fight in vain, had ascended to almost absolute power. Had the mourning period been only three or six months and Wen Tian-xiang been at his post at court during the Mongol invasion, the corrupt prime minister may very well not have come to power and China's history may have been very different.

Furthermore, if one needs to mourn three years for one's father, mother, grandfather and grandmother, that's a total of twelve years! I doubt any of the ancients, with their average life span of only forty some years, ever did that! At any rate taking twelve years off in one's life just to mourn is not reasonable; we can't blindly accept everything that people may have done in the past.

VERSES (32) & (33)

喪盡禮，祭盡誠；

sang-jin` li^, ji` jin` cheng`

At the funeral there should be the utmost decorum; at the memorial services there should be the utmost sincerity.

事死者，如事生。

Shi` si^ zhe^, ru` shi` sheng-

Serve the dead like serving the living.

Explanatory Comments:

The funeral is where we pay the last respects to the dead and there should be the utmost decorum, that is, the utmost respect. After the burial, there should be periodic memorial services. For Chinese there is the *Qing Ming* Day every year around April 5 when people go to their ancestors' graves and pay respects. The respects should be paid with the utmost sincerity, as if the ancestors were alive – that is the meaning of “serve the dead like serving the living”.