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CONFUCIAN FILIAL PIETY AND THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT: A FULFILLMENT APPROACH

By Daniel Qin

Introduction

Chinese Confucians have been trying to honor their parents according to Confucianism since ancient times. The Jewish people try to honor their parents according to the fifth commandment recorded in the Bible (Exo.20:12). Both Chinese Confucians and the Jewish people have their doctrine and practice of filial piety. However, when the humanistic Confucian filial piety encounters the divine fifth commandment, Confucians can see the true meaning of filial piety from a godly perspective. Although both Confucians and the Jewish people try to honor their parents, they often fail to measure up to their standards due to human limitation. When Jesus came as the fulfiller of the Law (Mt.5:17), Chinese Confucians find the fulfillment of their aspiration of filial piety.

Confucianism, founded by Confucius (孔子, 551-479 B.C.),[1] is considered one of the most influential cultural traditions in both ancient and modern China.[2] It is "a social ethic, a political ideology, a scholarly tradition, and a way of life."[3] It has been developed by various Confucian scholars throughout history and continues to influence today's Chinese people. In the long historical process of development, Confucianism maintains its core values, including humaneness, etiquette, loyalty, filial piety, etc. Filial piety is one of the founding pillars of Confucianism that shapes Chinese people's mindset and

[1]The Chinese character of a Chinese person's name will not reappear when the same person is mentioned again. The same rule is applied to other Chinese titles/terms.
[2]The other two most influential cultural traditions are Taoism and Buddhism.
[3]Wei-Ming Tu, "Confucius and Confucianism" *Confucianism and the Family*. ed. Walter H. Stole, and George A. De Vos. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 3.

lifestyle. It emphasizes the affection and duty of the children in parent-child relationships. Children are obliged to obey, support, and honor their parents. Filial piety is both a recognized virtue and a cultural norm. In other words, it is both an inward virtue that children should follow with sincere hearts and an outward etiquette toward their parents. Filial piety is commonly recognized by humanity as an inborn affection and a virtue. However, Confucian filial piety is rooted in a huge Confucian cultural system, which is distinct from Western cultures. In the Western world, filial piety is not as highly valued as it is in the Confucian society because of the flourishing of individualism that in some way weakens filial piety. When Confucianism is considered as one of the cornerstones of East Asian civilization, Confucian filial piety has to be understood based on its particular characteristics and influence shaped by its historical and social context and at the same time it continuously shapes its environment through history.

It would not be surprising that ancient Israelites also valued the common human virtue of filial piety. However, one of the outstanding characteristics of the Israelites is that they as a nation are religious. They are God's chosen people; thus, their religion and culture are highly intermingled. They practice their faith in a way that can also be considered a cultural phenomenon, especially when perceived by non-Jews. It is not the purpose of this paper to compare Confucian filial piety and Jewish filial piety. Rather, it would be more enlightening to compare Confucian filial piety with the filial piety taught in the Bible as a divine commandment. The Bible, both the Old and the New Testament, includes many sayings concerning filial piety. The fifth commandment teaches people to honor their parents with a promise of a long life (Exo.20:12).[4] Many biblical passages give further elaborations on filial piety.

Confucian filial piety and the fifth commandment share similar connotations. They both emphasize obeying, supporting, and honoring parents. While Confucian filial piety is basically a human ethic or philosophy, it shares God's extended general grace. Likewise, although the fifth commandment is a divine command, it is practiced by the Jews and thus involves a cultural dimension. Thus, both Confucian filial piety and the fifth commandment have both human and divine involvement. However, Confucian filial piety is primarily humanistic because Confucians teach that filial piety is part of self-

[4]All the biblical passages in this paper are quoted from *New American Standard Bible*.

fulfillment, and they do not acknowledge God in their philosophy. There is a gap between humanistic Confucian filial piety and the fifth commandment, which is theistic. The humanistic character of Confucian filial piety makes it unable to see the true meaning of filial piety as described in the Bible. Besides that, the good intent of Confucian filial piety cannot be truly fulfilled due to the limitation of human strength. It is the fifth commandment that reveals the true meaning of filial piety. Thus, the fifth commandment is the fulfillment of Confucian filial piety in terms of meaning. At the same time, although the fifth commandment is the perfect expression of biblical filial piety, the Jews in their practice did not truly fulfill it, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom.3:23). It was Jesus who fully fulfilled the fifth commandment. In this sense, Jesus is the fulfiller of both the fifth commandment and Confucian filial piety.[5]

The Relationship Between Christ and Culture

The relationship between Christ and culture affects our understanding when we compare Confucian filial piety with the divine fifth commandment. Helmut Richard Niebuhr in his book *Christ and Culture* introduces and interacts with five views concerning the relationship between Christ and culture: Christ against culture, the Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox and Christ the transformer of culture. Niebuhr points out that the relationship between Christ and culture is an enduring problem because Christ is divine and culture is man-made. He admits that it is impossible to describe Jesus adequately and impossible to say anything about Jesus which is not relative to the particular context of church, history and culture.[6] However, he insists that we can still describe Jesus Christ in some way to meet certain purposes. For Niebuhr, culture is

[5]In this paper, Confucian filial piety is confined to honoring living parents and does not refer to ancestral veneration. The origin of Confucian filial piety was not involved in worshipping ancestors but just showing gratitude and praising ancestor's virtues and contributions. Cf. Yuan-Kwei Wei, "Historical Analysis of Ancestor Worship in Ancient China" *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Practices*. ed. Rin Ro Bong (Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1985), 128. Due to the particular concern of this paper, when we say both the fifth commandment and Christ are the fulfillment of Confucian filial piety, it refers only to filial piety to living parents.

[6]Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 14.

always social and it is a human achievement, and "culture cannot be possessed without striving on the part of the recipient."[7]

The first view described by Niebuhr is Christ against culture. The advocates of this view understand human culture as completely sinful, perverted and incompatible with the divine Christ. They reject the world and maintain the distinction between Christ and culture in whatever way necessary. Niebuhr makes three comments on this view: (1) it is inadequate because it is impossible for Christians to completely get rid of culture; (2) it recognizes the sinfulness of culture but overlooks the sinfulness of human nature; (3) it holds an indifferent attitude to the world and does not serve the common good.

The second view, the Christ of culture, interprets Christ in cultural terms and tries to eliminate the tension between them. The advocates of this view believe that "Christ is identified with what men conceive to be their finest ideals, their noblest institutions, and their best philosophy."[8] Niebuhr criticizes the second view: (1) they tend to take some fragments out of the complex story and interpretation of Jesus in the New Testament, reinterpret it and reconstruct their own cultural figure of Jesus Christ;[9] (2) they consider reason the highway to the knowledge of God and salvation and Jesus is the great teacher of rational truth; (3) they have often led movements that tend to uphold self-reliant humanism.

The above-mentioned two views go to extremes in viewing the relation between Christ and culture. The following three views agree that there are differences as well as in some degree unity between Christ and culture. The third view, Christ above culture, holds a synthetic view that Christ is the fulfillment of cultural aspiration, while Christ has something beyond culture and culture can never completely reach Christ because there is a gap between the two. Thomas Aquinas (1224-74) is mentioned by Niebuhr as an example of holding this view. Although Aquinas lived a monastic life, he did so not as against the corrupt world but as trying to rise above the temporal world to contemplate the unchanging reality. For Aquinas, the divine law is partly coincidental with the natural law and partly transcends it. Thus, there is a common ground for Christians and nonbelievers to have cooperation in doing civic work and, at the same time, it is possible for Christians to maintain their distinctive Christian faith and life. Niebuhr comments on the synthetic view: (1) the synthesists are easily tempted

[7]Ibid, 33.
[8]Ibid, 103.
[9]Ibid, 109.

to absolutize the relative culture and reduce the infinite Christ to a finite cultural dimension; (2) although the synthesists recognize human sinfulness, they do not actually have sufficient understanding on the radical evil present in all human work and treat it accordingly.

The fourth view, Christ and culture in paradox, recognizes the duality and authority of both Christ and culture and the opposition between them as well. The dualists, holders of this view, admit that all human achievements, including those outside and inside the Church, philosophy and theology, are in one way or another corrupt.[10] However, God sustains them in culture and does not intend for them to get out from it. Niebuhr comments on the fourth view: (1) "dualism tends to lead Christians into antinomianism and into cultural conservatism;"[11] (2) they cast aside the rules of civic living; (3) they are deeply concerned with religious affairs and show little or no interest in transforming culture.

The fifth view, Christ the transformer of culture, holds that culture is fallen and the opposition between Christ and culture is clear. However, Christ is understood as the converter of man in his culture and society. The advocators of this view highly value God's creation and view it, not as taking place in a distant history, but as the immediate origin of everything that exists today. God's creative activity is a major theme and it is not overshadowed by the theme of atonement. God rules men in their corrupt personal and social existence.[12] At the same time, Christ restores what has been corrupted and redirects what has been perverted.

In his conclusion, Niebuhr suggests an attitude of humility. He admits that the five typical answers are unconcluded and inconclusive. "The types are by no means wholly exclusive of each other, and that there are possibilities of reconciliation among the various positions."[13] He also mentions that our reasoning and our decision are historically and culturally relative.

It is true that the reconciliation among various positions could do a better job. However, a central position is needed in order to address the problem in a particular context. In this paper, the third view, Christ above culture, will be employed as the methodology. This is basically because on the one hand, Confucian filial piety and the fifth commandment share many similarities, even some identical points, but

[10]Ibid, 153.
[11]Ibid, 187.
[12]Ibid, 213.
[13]Ibid, 231.

also some obvious differences; on the other hand, while the fifth commandment in its meaning is the fulfillment of Confucian filial piety, Christ is the fulfiller of both Confucian filial piety and the fifth commandment. Another reason is that this view fits the Chinese context best. While employing the fulfillment view, the view of Christ the transformer of culture will be suggested for further studies. This is because the gap between Christ and Confucian filial piety is obvious due to the sinful side of Confucian filial piety and this sinful side, as part of the Confucian culture, needs to be transformed for the common good of both the Church and the society.

Historical and Cultural Background of Filial Piety in Confucianism

The Historical and Cultural Background of Confucianism

Confucianism was formally established in the Spring and Autumn Period (771-476 B.C.) and the Warring States Period (476-221 B.C.), which are the two periods of the Eastern Zhou dynasty. It was a time of war and turmoil. With the collapse of the Western Zhou dynasty, China was split into many small nations. The feudal lords and warlords fought against one another. However, a fragmented China, in which there was no authoritarian power, objectively provided an open environment that allowed people to think freely and seek solutions in dealing with life, world, politics, etc. In the Warring States Period, thoughts were flourishing. It is called a time of "Hundred Schools of Thought." Among many schools of thought, Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism were the most outstanding. It was in this time of turmoil and freedom that Confucius lived, searched and laid the foundation of Confucianism that would thrive for centuries.

Confucius held a mindset of looking backward. This was basically because he highly admired the glory of the previous Western Zhou dynasty (1046-771 B.C.). He did not consider himself as inventing something new. Rather, he understood himself as trying to transmit the ancient glory into the present time. He admired the Duke of Zhou (周公) who refined the feudal ritual system and helped the Western Zhou to survive and prosper. Confucius is not considered as fulfilling the highest Confucian ideal. Rather, Confucians in history acknowledged that only the legendary sage-kings like Yao (尧) and Shun (舜) fully fulfilled the Confucian idea of "inner sageliness and

outer kingliness."[14] Confucius and his followers considered themselves part of a tradition that was initiated since the ancient time of the sage-kings Yao and Shun who had their exemplary teaching.

Confucianism was not fixed by Confucius. Instead, many of his teachings like the *Analects* were recorded and compiled by his disciples. Mencius (孟子, 372-289B.C.) and Xun zi (荀子, 313-238B.C.), subsequent scholars after Confucius, developed his teachings into deeper understanding and wider areas. For some time, Confucianism was just one of the schools of thought. In the Qin dynasty (221-206B.C.), the first emperor of a unified China, Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇), carried out severe legalism and banned all the other schools of thought, including Confucian ideas. It was only in the Han dynasty (206B.C.–A.D.220) that Confucianism was adopted as official doctrine and became dominant for both the imperial aristocracy and the masses. In the Song (A.D.960-1279) and Ming (A.D.1368-1644) dynasties, Confucian scholars developed and transformed Confucianism in order to deal with the challenges caused by the rising Buddhism and Taoism. In this process, Neo-Confucianism emerged. Neo-Confucianism utilized metaphysical concepts and language to develop Confucianism in a new historical environment. Zhu Xi (朱熹, A.D.1130-1200) was the most prominent Neo-Confucian scholar during the Song dynasty. In dealing with Buddhism and Taoism, he proposed an idea, saying that intellectual pursuit is the cornerstone of moral cultivation. This implies that those who are intellectually disabled cannot reach sagehood. Confucian scholars like Lu Jiu-yuan (陆九渊, 1139-93) and Wang Yang-ming (王阳明, 1472-1529) disagreed with his idea, which preferred to emphasize the potential in each and every human being to choose good and reach sagehood. Regardless of such controversy, Confucianism continued to thrive in the form of Neo-Confucianism. From the beginning of the Ming dynasty, the Four Books of Confucianism, *The Great Learning (大学)*, *the Analects (论语)*, *Mencius (孟子)*, and *The Doctrine of the Mean (中庸)* became the major texts for both primary education and civil service examinations for imperial China.

In the early 20th century, with the military and economic invasion imposed by Western powers, the painful and humiliating experience caused by it, and the collapse of the feudal and imperial system, Confucianism underwent severe attack. It was accused as the

[14]Tu, "Confucius and Confucianism", 4.

source of imperial corruption and injustice and an obstacle to China's modernization. Chinese scholars launched the New Culture Movement (1910s-1920s) and called for democracy and science. When the Communist Party gained power over China (1949), Confucianism was seriously and officially attacked, at least until the 1970s. After the Reform and Opening policy (since 1980s), aspects of Western culture like individualism and Postmodernism started to influence Chinese people's mindset and lifestyle. However, with its deep influence in Chinese people's roots for centuries, Confucianism is by no means fading away in today's China. Confucian scholars like Xiong Shi-li (熊十力, A.D.1885-1968) tried to reinterpret and develop Confucian ideas to fit the new environment. In 1984, the People's Republic of China began to celebrate the official birthday of Confucius (September 28), therefore joining Taiwan and South Korea in honoring the Confucian sage. Confucian ideas seemed to be gaining a new dynamic that brought them into the 21st century and grasped the name "New Confucianism."

As we have seen, Confucianism has gone through a long history. Most of the time, it was shaped by and shaped the feudal and imperial China. New Confucianism, bringing new interpretation that tries to address new ethos and movements like democracy, individualism, science, globalization, modernity and postmodernity, makes up only a small portion of Confucian history. Although the New Confucianism tries to deal with new situations, its reinterpretation is still based on the Old Confucianism, which has originated and developed since ancient feudal and imperial times. Some of the reinterpretations proposed by New Confucian scholars are debated and disagreed with by some Chinese scholars. For example, Zehua Liu and Quan Ge disapprove of "the argument of the New Confucianism that traditional Confucian thought advocated human dignity and independence."[15] Walter H. Slote mentions the continuous influence of Confucianism in modern China, "External form and ancient style [of Confucianism] for the most part have disappeared. However, the substance of Confucianism, particularly in terms of interpersonal relationships and ethical values, is still alive and flourishing."[16] Thus, it is safe to say that Confucianism, which has originated and developed

[15]Ze-hua Liu and Quan Ge. "On the 'Human' in Confucianism." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 313.

[16]Walter H. Slote, "Psychocultural Dynamics within the Confucian Family" *Confucianism and the family* ed. Walter H. Slote and George A. De Vos (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 38.

since ancient China, still bears the characteristics of feudalism and imperialism.

Filial Piety in Confucianism

Filial piety, in a general sense, means children's affection and duty towards their parents. It is not easy to give a universal definition of filial piety. Simon Keller introduces three theories of "filial duty": the debt theory, the gratitude theory, and the friendship theory.[17] He argues that all three theories are insufficient: for the debt theory, filial duty cannot be discharged once for all as debt is paid; for the gratitude theory, a heart of gratitude does not necessarily require support, while filial duty requires grown children's constant support for their aged parents; for the friendship theory, while friends are rarely lifelong and they can dispose friendship as they wish, parents and children have a lifetime binding and they cannot choose each other. Keller proposes a "special goods theory," saying that filial duty is based on a reciprocal relationship manifested in many aspects between children and parents. Children should take care of the well-being of the parents as long as they are living. This well-being includes the whole being of parents physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, etc. Keller's special goods theory is well developed in terms of filial duty. Besides filial duty, parent-child affection is needed.

Confucians emphasize and give great significance to filial piety in the Confucian system. While humaneness is considered as the dominating thought of Confucius and the central theme of the whole Confucian system, "the basis of *jen*[18] is to be found in the virtue of filial piety and fraternal love."[19] Filial piety is considered the root of all virtue and the basis of philosophy.[20] Confucians believe that "moral self-cultivation begins with the recognition that biological bondage provides an authentic opportunity for personal realization."[21] Filial

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[17]Simon Keller, "Four Theories of Filial Duty." *Philosophical Quarterly* 56, no. 223 (April 2006): 254–274.

[18]*Jen* is the old Chinese term for "humaneness." In modern time, the Romanized form is "*ren*" rather than "*jen*."

[19]Chu Chai, *Confucianism* (New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1973), 35.

[20]David K. Jordan, "Filial Piety in Taiwanese Popular Thought", *Confucianism and the Family*, ed. Slote and De Vos, 267. David K. Jordan quotes from *The Classic of Filial Piety*.

[21]Wei-Ming Tu, "Probing the 'Three Bonds' and 'Five Relationships' in Confucian Humanism," *Confucianism and the Family*, ed. Walter H. Slote and George A. De Vos, 128.

piety is relational and familial. Confucian society is relationship-oriented. The Five Relationships (五常), which were first advocated by Mencius, stand at the center of Confucian thought. The Five Relationships are "love between father and son, duty between ruler and subject, distinction between husband and wife, precedence of the old over the young, and faith between friends."[22] In Western society, the husband-wife relationship is considered primary. However, Seong-beom Yun suggests that filial piety is a human order more fundamental than marriage. This is based on an understanding that among the five relationships, only the father-son relationship is unchangeable.[23] Confucians believe that when the father-son relationship is properly maintained, the other relationships will be dealt with properly because "One who respects his parents will not behave arrogantly to others."[24] Thus, Filial piety is considered the basis for all human relationships. Besides the Five Relationships, the Three Bonds (三纲) are fundamentally held by Confucians. The first textual evidence for the idea of Three Bonds occurs in the *Han Fei Zi (韩非子)*, the Legalistic classic, "The minister serves the king, the son serves the father, and the wife serves the husband. If the three are followed, the world will be in peace; if the three are violated, the world will be in chaos."[25] In this saying, filial piety is upheld and it is associated with political and social concern. Thus, filial piety bears great weight in the Confucian system.

Biblical References to Filial Piety

The term "filial piety" does not exist in the Bible. However, it's meaning is clearly expressed in many passages. One thing one needs to be aware of is that although the word "piety" is inclined to have a religious connotation, the idea of filial piety in the Bible does not indicate a religious affection or duty towards parents. Rather, it is a moral instruction for God's people.

The Bible contains rich passages concerning filial piety. Among them, the fifth commandment bears the greatest significance, since it is in the written covenant that God made with the Israelites. In Exodus 20:12, it says, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you." This commandment is mentioned again in Deuteronomy 5:16 and cited a

[22]Ibid, 125. Cf. *Mencius*, IIIA. 4.
[23]Seong-beom Yun, *Filial Piety and Religion* (Seoul, Korea: S.I., 1998), 146.
[24]Ibid, 163.
[25]Tu, "Probing the 'Three Bonds' and 'Five Relationships' in Confucian Humanism," 122.

few times in the New Testament (Mt.15:4, 19:19, Mk.7:10, 10:19, Lk.18:20, and Eph.6:2). Similar to honoring parents, it is the children's duty to respect their earthly fathers who discipline them (Heb.12:9). Every son and daughter should treat his/her parents with reverence (Lev.19:3). In honoring parents, children should make their parents glad and joyful (Pro.23:25). While honoring parents is in a general sense, obeying parents is a more concrete instruction. The son/daughter is obliged to observe the commandment of the father and not forsake the mother's teaching (Pro.6:20). Children are taught to be obedient to their parents in all things (Col.3:20). They shall obey their parents in the Lord (Eph.6:1). The filial son should hear and accept his parents' instruction and discipline (Pro.1:8, 13:1). Biblical filial piety is applied in a material area as well. In 1 Timothy 5:1-8, the Apostle Paul clearly teaches that children and/or grandchildren should provide material support for their aged parents and other elderly people in the family. Filial piety also includes some passive duty that a filial child should observe. Children should not dishonor their parents (Deu.27:16) or bring shame to their mother (Pro.29:15). Children shall not mock, scorn, or curse their parents (Pro.30:17; 20:20; Lev.20:9). Children shall not assault or drive away (Pro.19:26), rob (Pro.28:24), or strike (Exo.21:15) their parents. They shall not despise their parents (Pro.23:22). They shall not humiliate their parents (Pro.28:7). If children fail to observe filial piety, they are shameful (Pro.10:5; 19:26) and become a grief to parents (Pro.10:1). The unfilial children are cursed (Deu.27:16) and they shall be put to death (Lev.20:9; Exo.21:15, 17). Their lamp will go out in time of darkness (Pro.20:20).

Besides the above-mentioned instructions, we can see Jesus' filial attitude in some passages. His filial duty towards His mother can be seen at His boyhood (Lk.2:48-51), the beginning of His ministry (Jn.2:1-12), and at the end of His ministry (Jn.19:25-27). He emphasizes the fifth commandment (Mt.15:2-6; 19:19), an obedient son (Lk.2:48-51), the new family of God (Mk.3:31-35), and preference for God (Mt.8:21-22). While the Old Testament describes God as the Father (Exo.4:22-23; Deu.1:19, 30-31; 8:5; 32:18; Isa.1:2, 5:12, 63:16, 64:8, Hos.1:10, 11:1; Jer.3:22, etc), in the New Testament, the Fatherhood of God is sufficiently expressed by Jesus. Jesus constantly calls God "my heavenly Father," "my Father," "Father" and "the Father." In His prayer, Jesus calls God "Abba Father" (Mk.14:36). He also speaks of "your Father," "your heavenly Father" and "our heavenly father" to His disciples. While the Father has authority over the Son, Jesus indicates obedience to the Father in His prayer

(Mt.26:39), and He obeys the Father until His death on the cross. Thus, Jesus was filial to both His earthly parents and His heavenly Father.

Comparison and Evaluation

Although Confucian filial piety and the fifth commandment are from different contexts, they share some similarities based on the fact that they are all about filial piety, which is a universal virtue. Their differences are due to their own meanings in the context in which they exist and develop. On the one hand, Confucian filial piety contains the common meaning of filial piety such as obeying, supporting, and honoring parents; on the other hand, it needs to be understood in the Confucian system when we compare it with the fifth commandment. The fifth commandment emphasizes honoring parents. Although it does not elaborate the full meaning of filial piety, it implies further meaning of filial piety as described in other biblical passages. Thus, the fifth commandment needs to be understood in the biblical context.

Similarities

Both Have Cultural Basis and Divine Element

Confucianism is a man-made cultural product. Although Confucius and some Confucian scholars respected heaven and the mandate of heaven, Confucian thoughts address human issues. Its concern is basically and primarily about cultivating humans and not about searching the divine. They by no means claimed any divine revelation. For Confucius, what man can do and should do is to develop human potential and reach sagehood. However, even though Confucians do not know God, what they practice in filial piety is to a great extent in line with the fifth commandment. This can be seen in the following section. Besides that, Confucians' practice of filial piety shares God's extended general grace. Due to structural arrangement, this argument will be explained later.

Although honoring parents is the fifth commandment of God, filial piety is also part of the Jewish culture. Filial piety is universally practiced by all peoples, including those who are unreligious. It is carried out by the Jewish people on this earth, and it is practiced by Confucians on the other side of the planet. Since both have human involvement, they all have cultural dimensions. The Jews, even though they follow a divine commandment, have to face issues whenever

humanity is involved. The presence of cultural basis indicates common issues for both Confucians and Jews. For example, they all have to deliberately carry out filial piety with effort. In the process, the inner situation may reflect what human nature is, although Confucians and Jews hold different views on human nature. Human strengths and weaknesses, for both Confucians and Jews, will be revealed in practicing filial piety.

They Share Similar Connotations of Filial Piety

In *the Book of Rites (礼记)*, it is written, "Tseng Tze (曾子) said, 'There are three kinds of filial piety. The highest form of filial piety is to honor your parents; the next one, not to humiliate them; the next, to feed them'."[26] These can be considered three levels of Confucian filial piety. Honoring parents is the highest level. In *The Classic of Filial Piety (孝经)*, it says, "developing our character to the full and putting into practice the true Tao, leaving a good name for later generations, and thus honoring our parents, this is the final, full perfection of filial piety."[27] In other words, making parents illustrious based on one's self-fulfillment is the highest form of filial piety. We can see a similar idea in the Bible, "Let your father and your mother be glad, and let her rejoice who gave birth to you" (Pro.23:25). This verse does not explain how to make parents glad and joyful. However, in the Jewish context, developing one's godly character, practicing the Jewish faith, and leaving a good name for later generations is no doubt a reason for it, although the Jewish faith and the Confucian Tao is not the same thing. For Confucian parents, when they are honored because of their children's fulfillment, they will surely be glad and joyful. Both Tseng Tze's saying and the fifth commandment use the word "honor" to express children's filial duty. Although the fifth commandment does not elaborate on what honoring parents means, we can discern its connotation from other passages. For instance, children should respect parents (Heb.12:9), treat parents with reverence (Lev.19:3), observe parents' commandments (Pro.6:20), and obey parents in all things (Col.3:20, Eph.6:1). Similarly, we can see the same requirement of obeying one's parents in Confucian filial piety. For example, in the

[26]David Hock Tey, *Chinese Culture and the Bible* (Raffles City, Singapore: Here's Life Books, 1988), 75.
[27]Yun, 175.

Three Bonds, "son serving the father" obviously indicates the son's obedience to the father.

The next level of Confucian filial piety is not to humiliate parents. This includes the idea of not misbehaving outside the family. A child or even an adult's misbehavior somewhat reflects his/her upbringing and education in the family. Observers will wonder what kind of parents raise up such children. They can easily assume that the children are just like their parents. If the children misbehave, this will bring disgrace to the parents. Another idea is that children shall not humiliate parents within the family circle. They shall not mock, scold, and curse them. They shall not physically abuse their aged them in ways like not providing food, clothing, room, etc. If this kind of physical abuse is exposed before neighbors, the humiliation is severe and the unfilial children will be blamed by outsiders. The Bible expresses the same idea of not humiliating one's parents: do not dishonor them (Deu.27:16), do not disgrace one's mother (Pro.29:15), do not mock or scorn parents (Pro.30:17), shall not curse but bless them (Lev.20:9, Pro.20:20, 30:11), do not despise them (Pro.23:22), do not assault or drive away them (Pro.19:26), do not rob them (Pro.28:24) and do not strike them (Exo.21:15).

While Confucians consider feeding parents the lowest level of filial piety, they are aware that feeding should go with respecting, and this is the difference between feeding dogs and feeding parents.[28] Similar to the Confucian idea of feeding parents with respect, the Bible also teaches that children and grandchildren should provide materials for parents and the elderly in the family (1 Tim.5:1-8). Although respecting parents is not mentioned together with feeding in this verse, it is mentioned in Hebrews 12:9.

Filial Piety is Considered the Foundation of a Broader Moral System

As we have seen earlier, filial piety is within a broader Confucian system. While filial piety is a universal virtue, Confucian filial piety bears a label of Confucianism. This distinguishes Confucian filial piety from other forms of filial piety practiced in other cultures. For example, in Western society, the aged parents usually do not want to live with their married children. In the Confucian society, the aged parents normally would like to live with their married children, and

[28]Chan, Ping, ed. *Commentary on the Four Books* (Taiwan: Cheng Yen Publishing Co. 1974), 53. Quoted in Tey, 79.

their married children will be considered unfilial if they do not allow it. When filial piety is embodied in the Confucian system, it is no longer filial piety in a general sense but Confucian filial piety that bears distinctive Confucian characters.

Ted R. Weiland introduces filial piety as the foundation for the rest of the instructions on human relationships in the Ten Commandments.[29] Weiland explains, "All sin is the consequence of rebellion against godly authority, especially of one's parents."[30] The family is the first environment in which a child grows. The parents stand in the place of God for a little child. If a child did not learn to obey and honor parents in the family, it is unlikely that he will learn to obey and honor God. When a child is rebellious against parents and then consequently against God, he is likely to commit murder, adultery, stealing, giving false testimony and coveting his neighbor's wife, house, as well as other properties. On the contrary, if a child learned to be humble and obedient and to honor parents and then subsequently to obey and honor God, he would treat other people accordingly. Thus, he would be able to avoid committing those sins listed from the sixth to the tenth commandment.

Differences

Although the similarities between Confucian filial piety and the fifth commandment are obvious, the differences between them are numerous and they bear vital significance for searching for the answer to the proper relation between Christ and Confucian filial piety.

Humanistic Versus Theistic

Although Confucius mentioned heaven and the mandate of heaven, he did not tell how heaven could affect human fate and how we as humans can interact with heaven. Rowley explains Confucius' attitude towards heaven:

> His confidence in the power of Heaven to preserve him, and his sense of a mission to men appointed by Heaven, is as strong as that of the prophets of Israel. Where he falls short of them is in the remoteness of God, and in the small place that God had in his teaching. While for

[29]Ted R. Weiland, *The Fifth Commandment: Honour Thy Father and Thy Mother*. http://www.missiontoisrael.org/5thcom.php.
[30]Ibid.

> him God was real and His purpose was clear, his unwillingness to talk about Him meant that he did little to make Him real for his followers. There might be a will of God for him, but he said nothing to make men feel that there was a will of God for them, and worship was but the offering of reverence and not the receiving of grace. Hence, in effect, his teaching was reduced to ethics, instead of the communication of the religion which he himself had.[31]

Confucius's concept of heaven is simple, general, transcendent, and impersonal. It is not explained as a clear concept of God as understood by Jews and Christians. Away from direct divine revelation, Confucius' concentration is on man's self-cultivation and self-fulfillment. Self-cultivation without divine intervention is carried out by human concern and effort. Self-fulfillment is thus the fruit of humanity, by which man can boast for himself. Through centuries, Confucius and his followers maintained the humanistic character of Confucian thought. Thus, Confucianism is considered an ethics or philosophy rather than a religion.

While Confucian filial piety is humanistic, biblical filial piety is theistic. Honoring parents appears primarily as a divine commandment rather than a human virtue. The reason for honoring parents is not human reasoning but God's command. Children should obey their parents, not under man-made ethical principles but in the Lord (Eph.6:1). Confucians discuss to what extent children should obey parents. It is their general consensus that even if parents are wrong, children should not revolt but just obey parents' will.[32] Contrary to that, although many biblical passages highlight parents' authority over children, it is clear that children should obey God rather than parents when parents' will is against the Lord's will (Mt.10:21-22, 37-38; At.5:29).

Cultural Norm versus Divine Commandment

The parent-children affection is originally natural and genuine. However, ancient Confucians developed a ritual system and gave it great significance, "Who fails to know *li* [ritual] will have no means of standing firmly."[33] Confucius highly valued rituals, "Among the functions of *li*, the most valuable is that it establishes harmony. The

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[31]Rowley, *Prophecy and Religion*, n.p., 125-26. Quoted in Hans Küng and Julia Ching, *Christianity and Chinese Religions* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 111.
[32]Jordan, "Filial Piety in Taiwanese Popular Thought", 270. Cf. *Analects* 4.18.
[33]Confucius, n.p. XX-3. Quoted in Chai, 42.

excellence of the ways of ancient kings consists of this. It is indeed the guiding principle of all things, great and small."[34] This saying reflects Confucius' admiration of ancient ritual system. The ancient ritual was originally sacrificial and religious. However, Confucius transformed it into a system of ethics that includes all kinds of ceremonies considered as the proper conduct of the aristocrats. In this system of ethics, "Confucius emphasized the need of having the right inner dispositions, without which propriety becomes hypocrisy."[35] Thus, during its early time, Confucianism emphasized both the outward performance of ritual and the inward disposition of Confucian followers. Nevertheless, as Confucianism developed, it was embodied into a social system in which the ruling class was making Confucian thought a means for their political practice. As time went on, Confucian thought was little by little turned into a cultural norm that had the power of forcing people to follow without genuine attitude. Slote explains the loss of genuine attitude in the Confucian system:

> A child might be seething inside, but it was forbidden for him/her to reveal how he felt. Not only was the expression of anger toward a parent forbidden, but the conscious awareness of hostile impulses was also stringently prohibited. The source of this was filial piety, which, together with ancestor worship, constituted the central underpinning of the Confucian ethic. . . Historically, it made for a stable society; psychologically, it was the source of inner turmoil.[36]

This does not mean that filial piety necessarily and totally lost its genuineness. In a family in which the parent-children relationship is to some extent healthy, filial piety can still be genuine. However, when filial piety turns into a cultural norm, the parents can easily fail to treat their children rightly due to their authoritarian mindset. The children, on the other hand, cannot freely release their emotion, and this can hinder their personal cultivation. One example of the distortion of genuine filial piety is the funeral ceremony. The children might not honor their parents as much as they could when the parents were still alive. They might even abuse their living parents. However, when the parent's funeral comes, they spend lots of money and invite lots of relatives, friends, and guests to the funeral. Such a funeral has two functions: 1) maintain the host's social connection and influence; 2)

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[34]Confucius, n.p. I-12. Quoted in Chai, 43.
[35]Hans Küng and Julia Ching, *Christianity and Chinese Religions* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 71. Cf. *Analects* 15:17.
[36]Slote, "Psychocultural Dynamics within the Confucian Family," 47.

indicate how filial the children are. In a case like this, the genuineness of filial piety gives way to insincere outward performance of a cultural norm.

Contrary to Confucian filial piety as a cultural norm, the fifth commandment is issued by the ultimate divine authority with which man has no right or power to argue. Honoring parents is not only being obedient to parents but also to God. Gladly, the ultimate divine authority, which is Yahweh, is revealed as a merciful, gracious, righteous, and loving God. Biblical filial piety, though observed by mankind, is not imposed by fellow humans who have defects in themselves and have no ultimate authority over other men. Confucian scholars have no intent to claim filial piety as divine order, and whatever reward a Confucian filial child can get is given by the people around and probably also by the state in general. Different from that, the divine promise of living a long life is given to believers who honor their parents as being obedient to God.

Male-dominated versus Male-Female Equality

In Confucianism, the father has the authority over the son, and the husband has the authority over the wife. While the father-son relationship is emphasized, mother/wife and daughters are marginalized in the Confucian family. Traditionally, after a child is born, the mother is called the child's mother rather than being called by her own name. The mother now has to call her husband's siblings uncle or aunt. Her status in the husband's family is dragged down to her child's level. When the old father dies, the old mother should follow the son, especially the eldest son. Confucianism is a rigidly male-dominated culture. In such a culture, Slote explains,

> The primary emotional tie was between mother and son, not husband and wife, a condition that perpetuated itself from one generation to the next. The mothers turned to the children, especially the sons and in particular the eldest son, for the comfort and devotion that they did not find in the husbands. . . the result has been that most males, particularly in the past, were not able to replace the mother with a contemporary woman of equivalent significance.[37]

The love between husband and wife is downplayed due to an emphasis on the father-son relationship. As I quoted earlier, one reason given in modern time is that among the Five Relationships, only the father-son

[37]Ibid, 42.

relationship is unchangeable. However, in ancient times, the motivation of prioritizing the father-son relationship was not based on its unchangeability but primarily based on a male-dominated mindset, which is still influential in today's China.

In the fifth commandment, both the father and the mother are to be honored. The father being mentioned before the mother does not indicate a male-dominated idea. In many biblical passages, father and mother are interchangeable terms, and the sequence of their appearing does not imply any superiority of the male. This can be understood when God created mankind, He created both male and female in His own image (Gen.1:27). Although Eve was created to help Adam, despite different roles that they play, there is no indication that woman is inferior to man. In the biblical context, the father-son relationship does not surpass the husband-wife relationship. Rather, the husband-wife relationship is highly valued and honored. A family emerges when God brings together a husband and a wife, and it is God's intent for the married couple to bear and raise children together. Although the husband-wife relation is changeable due to human depravity, it is against God's will because God hates divorce (Mal.2:16). It is alien to the biblical context for Confucians to prioritize the father-son relation in the family. Only when husband and wife live in godly harmony, can the parent-children relationship be healthy and blessed. In this way, the biblical filial piety that has no gender prejudice can be expected.

Humanly Manipulated versus Biblically Maintained

Confucianism, initiated as ethical principles, has been manipulated by the ruling class since ancient times. Wei-Ming Tu (杜维明) points out that while the Five Relationships are concerned with the benevolence of people, they "served as an ideological background for the Three Bonds;" and when the Three Bonds were established, they started to serve as "a deliberate attempt to utilize Confucian values for the maintenance of a specific social order."[38] The family has been considered a political unit in the Confucian society. Throughout Confucian history until modern China, the term "father-mother offices" is widely used to address magistrates. The imperial emperor was perceived as the father of the whole empire. The familial dimension and the state affairs are deeply intertwined. In imperial

[38]Tu, "Probing the 'Three Bonds' and 'Five Relationships' in Confucian Humanisn," 130.

China, filial piety is misused as the basis of developing an ideology that serves the feudal politics, nepotism, authoritarian hierarchy, etc.

Confucianism has also been criticized as an obstacle to China's search for modernization. Tu points out that the works produced during the May Fourth Movement (1919) "reminds us that the Confucian idea of 'home,' in the perspective of contemporary consciousness informed by Western liberal democratic ideas, is actually a 'prisonhouse' denying the basic rights of the individual and enslaving the creative energy of the young."[39] In modern time China, the strongest critic of Confucianism was probably Lu Xun (鲁迅, 1881-1936). In his writings, Lu Xun "attacked the cannibalistic ritual religion which stifled human freedom and individual initiative in the name of passive, conformist virtues."[40] In such a Confucian system, filial piety, while it somewhat maintains genuineness inside the family, is misused to serve political and social purposes. We may say that Confucian political and social affairs are not in themselves filial piety, but Confucian filial piety cannot stand alone as innocent in the broader Confucian system.

Different from the manipulated Confucian filial piety, filial piety is expressed and well maintained in the consistent biblical context. Neither the ancient Jews, nor Jesus, nor the New Testament Christians embody filial piety into a system outside of the Bible. Although Jews and Christians may have some extended filial practice not mentioned in the Bible, they surely understand that the teaching of filial piety in the Bible shall not be distorted for other purposes, and the Bible itself has authenticity as the Word of God. Biblical filial piety is never humanistic or used for political or social purpose. Rather, biblical filial piety is connected with being pious to God.

Christ and Confucian Filial Piety: The Fulfillment and the Gap

As Niebuhr explains, culture is man-made. Confucian culture generates in its environment and is inherited through generations. Wittingly or unwittingly, for the good or the bad, e Confucian is shaped by Confucian filial piety and thinks and acts accordingly, no matter that he is free or imposed to do so. When the Confucian is not reconciled to the living God, man-made Confucian filial piety plays a crucial role in his life and exercises a great power upon him. Humanity is what he possesses. However, although the image of God in man is perverted

[39]Ibid, 133.
[40]Küng and Ching, 83.

after the Fall, the image to some extent remains. We discern this in our conscience, through our experience, and in Paul's teaching on the Gentiles' conscience (Rom.2:14-15). Confucian filial piety, in a positive sense, is the remnant of a general divine provision to Confucians. Although it has been manipulated and misused by the ruling class for some pragmatic purposes, those other Confucian principles should be considered something else rather than Confucian filial piety per se. Even in the broader Confucian system, filial piety maintains some positive values while applying to family life. We have seen that Confucian filial piety and the fifth commandment share many connotations like obeying, supporting, and honoring parents. To a great extent, Confucians in their filial piety practice the things that God intends, and in their practice, there is God's extended general grace. As Thomas Aquinas' view says, the natural law is partly coincident with the divine law.[41] The remnant of the image of God in Confucians can still bring out the good that comes from God's general provision. However, as we have seen earlier, the differences between Confucian filial piety and the fifth commandment reveal the corrupt side of Confucian filial piety. It falls short of the divine commandment because it is a man-made culture that fails to know God and His command. Confucians are not able to fulfill the good intent and aspiration of Confucian filial piety. Meanwhile, as we can see in the comparison between the two, the corrupt side of Confucian filial piety can be mended in the fifth commandment. The fifth commandment expresses the perfect meaning of filial piety when understood in the biblical context. Thus, we can say that the fifth commandment is the fulfillment of Confucian filial piety.

As we have seen earlier in this essay, Jesus sets an example of being filial to both His earthly parents and His heavenly Father. Jesus, being fully man and fully God and the only Mediator between God and man, reveals to mankind the true meaning and practice of filial piety, and the connection between being filial to both earthly parents and our heavenly Father. Jesus exalts the divine Law and claims that he does not come to abolish but to fulfill it (Mt. 5:17-19). He also shows respect to civil authorities: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's" (Mt. 22:21). Jesus fulfills the divine Law, including the fifth commandment, by his words and his deeds. The fifth commandment is part of the divine commandments given to the Israelites. However, even when the divine

[41]See page 5.

commandment is perfectly revealed, humans in their perverted condition fail to fully fulfill the divine commandment (cf. Jn.7:19), including the fifth commandment. If they did, Christ would not need to come and inaugurate the era of grace. Humans fulfill neither their cultural aspiration nor the divine commandment. As we have seen earlier, the fifth commandment in its meaning is the fulfillment of Confucian filial piety. Jesus came, by his words and deeds, as the fulfiller of both the fifth commandment and Confucian filial piety.

The approach of Christ above culture is adopted to address Confucian filial piety also because it has constructive applications in the Chinese context. In current China, Confucianism still has great influence and atheism is adopted as the official doctrine. Other religions and ideologies like Taoism, Buddhism, Chinese folk religion and postmodernism are influential. Christianity is still considered by the majority to be a Western religion. Many Chinese people hold an indifferent feeling or even hostility toward Christianity. It would be constructive if the common ground between the fifth commandment and Confucian filial piety were emphasized to the Chinese. When the positive part of Confucian filial piety is recognized, the Chinese will find that their tradition is in some way in accordance with the divine commandment. Beyond that, Christ as the fulfiller of both Confucian filial piety and the fifth commandment sets an ideal example for Confucians' cultural aspiration. By setting this example, Jesus Christ has the advantage of drawing Chinese people to Christian faith in which they can find the fulfillment of filial piety.

The fulfillment approach brings certain advantages to Chinese Christians as well. While Christianity is not widely accepted in China, some Chinese Christians marginalize themselves when they fail to find a proper and effective way to connect with the civil world. In the approach of Christ above culture, they can find common ground in which they can work with Chinese Confucians and then have opportunity to impact them. This gives them an active attitude and an open mind to deal with many other controversial issues between Christ and culture in the Chinese context. For example, while ancestral worship becomes an obstacle for the Chinese to accept the Christian faith, filial piety towards living parents provides an opportunity for Chinese Christians to try another way to build up trust with traditional Chinese people and then evangelize them. The fulfillment approach is also helpful for foreign missionaries. While there are some obstacles to missions, there are also many ways of doing contextualized missions. Chinese people prefer "seeking common ground while reserving

differences."[42] The differences and obstacles might be solved later, while the common ground and mutual interest shall serve as the beginning of trust and cooperation. To a missiological concern, we need to offer a contextualized beginning understandable to unbelievers, and let the Holy Spirit solve the difficulties later.

While the fulfillment approach fits the Chinese context and Christ is upheld as the fulfiller, we need to consider the advantage of Confucian filial piety. Confucian culture has been shaped by and has shaped its environment for centuries. It provides a sense of cultural identity for both the ancient and the modern Chinese. It possesses the force, for good or for bad, to maintain the consistent Confucian value and even civilization. Confucian filial piety as a cultural norm provides the power and strength for executing filial piety. It does not always or necessarily bear negative consequences, and inner turmoil is not always the outcome. Rather, Confucian filial piety may produce genuine harmony among people; it can provide an environment in which people can cultivate virtues like patience, humility, self-sacrifice, a strong sense of community, and love towards parents and other people. Contrary to Confucian culture, Western cultures highly value individuals and thus, in some degree, neglect communal value. Most Westerners do not carry out filial piety with the great conviction and strength that Confucians do. Individualism as a cultural force prevails in the West where Christianity is taken as the major faith. Martin Dibelius says that the Bible does not intend to teach everything in daily life.[43] Culture plays another, if not a complementary, role and possesses the force to prevail for or against faith. Confucian filial piety, when redeemed by Christ and surrendered to God, should continue to provide the traditional strength for fulfilling filial piety. Thus, although the approach of Christ above culture is employed, the distinctive advantage of Confucian filial piety shall be inherited.

Although Christ as the fulfiller stands above Confucian filial piety, Confucian filial piety by itself cannot reach Christ. The huge gap between Christ and Confucian filial piety cannot be wishfully bridged. Confucians by themselves are not able to remove the evil elements of Confucian filial piety like humanism, self-centeredness, self-reliance, not knowing or denying God, pride, hypocrisy, nepotism, male-dominated mindset, etc. They may not even be able to see the corrupt

[42]This is a policy often taught by China civil authorities and widely accepted by ordinary Chinese people.

[43]Martin Dibelius, *A Fresh Approach to the New Testament*, n.p. 219. Quoted in Niebuhr, 71.

side of Confucian filial piety, and thus cannot know what the true fulfillment of filial piety is. Even the Jews who knew the fifth commandment were not able to fully fulfill it. Confucian Christians, while knowing God, may be tempted to neglect the sinful side of Confucian filial piety and not pay enough attention to the gap between Christ and Confucian filial piety. The redemption of Confucian filial piety by Christ is needed, and such redemption can never be found by cultural aspiration or striving. It is by this concern that the approach of Christ the transformer of culture is suggested for further studies. The sinful elements of Confucian filial piety can all be redeemed when Confucians are, in their lives and culture, converted to Christ. Christ redirects Confucians' perverted filial piety, enhances what is right in it, and restores them to a godly understanding and practice. For centuries, China has been suffering the corruption caused by the manipulation and abuse of Confucianism. Transforming the Confucian cultural system, including filial piety, is for both Christians and non-Christians, for the common good of all, as God's mercy and grace are extended to all (Mt.5:45).

Conclusion

As Niebuhr admits, the five typical answers for the relation between Christ and culture are unconcluded and inconclusive, and our reasoning and our decision are historically and culturally relative. However, the approach of Christ above culture fits the issue of filial piety in the Chinese context best. Although I suggest the transformation view for further studies, we cannot say how much we can transform Confucian filial piety in this broken world. The transformation view brings on more opposition between Christ and culture. This does not fit the Chinese context in which people highly value harmony rather than opposition. The view of Christ and culture in paradox gives a passive attitude to the issue. It is the view of Christ above culture that reveals the common ground between Confucian filial piety and the fifth commandment and Christ. While the perverted Confucian filial piety finds its true meaning expressed in the fifth commandment, Christ came as the fulfiller of both the fifth commandment and Confucian filial piety. In this approach, the Chinese find harmony between their filial piety and the divine command. Instead of being opposed or passive to divine commandment, they find a sense of belonging when they realize the true fulfillment of their filial piety is in the divine command and in Christ as well. The fulfillment view also gives

Confucians an understanding of God's grace. Since Confucian filial piety is to an extent recognized, Confucians do not need to be anxious about how much they can transform their culture, nor do they need to hold a passive attitude towards their traditional filial piety. Rather, they have Christ the fulfiller of their culture in whom they can find answers, consolation, and the grace of God.

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