

## **Filial Piety and Good Leadership**

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### **Abstract:**

There is a Chinese saying that goes, “百善 孝为先” *Hanyu Pinyin: bǎi shàn xiào wéi xiān* meaning among all things, filial piety (respect) is the utmost virtue. All the positive social relationships to attain peace and harmony in a society must start with the practice of filial piety or respect at home, perhaps similar to the English proverb “charity begins at home”. Here in this leadership paper, the authors examine and interpret the concept of Confucianism that the Chinese believe and practice for many centuries, and the paper is oriented towards attaining good leadership by practicing the value of filial piety. The authors also explain the ways or how the ancient Chinese studied and followed the traditional ways of loving one’s parents and offering them respect which is the fountainhead or starting point from which other forms of filial piety flows. Using various examples and analogies, the authors indicate, draw parallels as well as examine and highlight the key lessons drawn from being filial towards one’s parents and simultaneously (or later on) being loyal towards one’s nation .

**Key words:** Filial Piety, Confucianism, Leadership, Confucian Values; loyalty to nation.

### **Introduction**

In Confucianism, when an individual embraces and practices the value of filial piety, (s)he is, in fact, cultivating and developing him(herself) to become a good leader (君子, *Hanyu Pinyin: jūnzǐ*). Only with the good characteristic and behavior of *jūnzǐ* that one can lead people and encourage people to carry out a proper lifestyle and livelihood. When people are kind and helpful to each other, this would create good relationships within the society. This friendly and

conducive environment would further influence and encourage more and more people to attain similar good virtues such as filial piety; and if this continues to be so, there would be fewer frictions or less conflicts in relationships, and thus this would create positive energies in group dynamics and teams. All would then be working towards a peaceful and harmonious society, and since everybody behaves in a socially responsible way, the people in business and in the government when relating with their stakeholders (community and society) would be able to prosper in doing their daily living and in executing their social responsibilities. Furthermore, there would be fewer problems in the community dealings and business transactions in the wider society and country. In Confucius' mind, a good leader has an obligation to cultivate and improve him(her)self morally; (s)he demonstrates filial piety and loyalty; and (s)he acts with benevolence towards his or her fellow people. Therefore, good leadership requires correct moral and ethical behavior of both the individual and the government. It underscores the importance of social relationships, solidarity, justice and sincerity. In short, it is aimed at creating peace and harmony in a society with social responsibility. Interestingly, Aung San Suu Kyi who received the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize for her non-violent struggle for democracy and human rights, said repeatedly, "Loyalty to principles is more important than loyalty to individuals." (Michael, 1991. pp. xxvi Introduction). This is uncanny, similar to what *Yǒu Zǐ* (有子, a disciple of Confucius) said, "It is rare for a man who is filial towards his parents and respectful to his elder brothers to go against his superiors; never has there been a person who does not like to go against his superiors and at the same time likes to rebel or cause trouble. A gentleman devotes himself to basics or core values. Once the core values or basics are established, the principles and actions of government and behaviour will grow from there. The basics (principles) are to be filial toward one's parents and respectful to one's elder brothers!" (*Analects Of Confucius, I: 2*). Therefore, in this respect, to achieve good leadership, the people should, in a way, embrace and be loyal to such principles as filial piety.

### **Purpose & Objectives**

The paper seeks to explain the ways or how the ancient Chinese studied and followed the traditional ways of loving one's parents and offering them respect which is the fountainhead or starting point from which other forms of filial piety flows. By using various examples and analogies, the paper highlights the simple leadership lessons drawn from the wisdom of

Confucius; and also examines and highlights the key lessons of being filial towards one's parents and simultaneously (or later on) being loyal towards one's nation. Wherever appropriate, Chinese visitors and perspectives are added in the discussions.

### **What Is Filial Piety?**

In general terms, being filial refers to the duties, feelings, or relationships which exist between a son or daughter and his or her parents. Piety is a strong religious belief, or behavior that is religious or morally correct. Filial piety is the virtue of a child to his or her parents or parental figures, both living and deceased. Originating with Confucianism which was significantly practiced in China, it is an essential element of Chinese culture. Filial piety is not a religious concept in the Chinese culture, but it has formed an acceptable part of the way the Chinese relate to their parents and ancestors, or elders. In Western cultures, Judaism and Christianity both stress on the importance of honoring and respecting one's parents. In the authors' view, filial piety is one of the most basic virtues universally found in diverse cultures throughout human history.

For Confucians, the right actions are indeed critical (Low, 2011). Essentially, filial piety, the basis for the right actions, is one of the correct relationships for which Confucius advocated. *Zi You* (a disciple of Confucius) asked about being filial and Confucius said, "Nowadays, one is called a filial son only because one is able to support one's parents. Actually, even dogs and horses are no less able to do this. If one does not treat one's parents with reverent respect, what is then the difference between him and animals?" (*Analects of Confucius*, II: 7). What Confucius meant is that those who practice with the value of filial piety must include each person's responsibility to respect their parents, obey them, take care of them as they age; each person also advises one's parents, and overall takes care of them and love them. Loving one's parents and offering them respect is the starting point from which other forms of filial piety flow. A relationship with one's parents must be based on love and respect. The practice of filial piety starts at home with the son doing and practicing loving kindness and respect to the elders. This good behavior would then apply and extend to the community at large. There are four other relationships, which Confucius expounded, that are of importance and if we do them right, then it is believed that the society we live in would attain peacefulness and social harmony. They are namely:

- 1) the relationships between ruler and the ministers.
- 2) the relationship between husband and wife.
- 3) the relationship between siblings.
- 4) the relationship between friends.

All these positive relationships of aiming to attain peace and harmony in a society should start with the practice of filial piety or respect at home.

Figure-1 shows the influence of filial piety on the stability of social relationships.

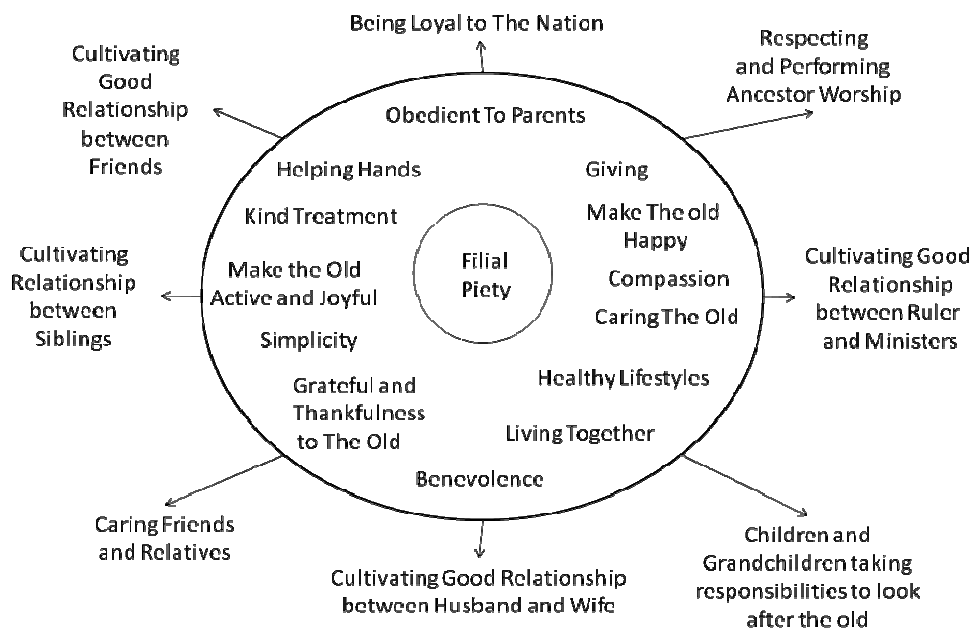


Figure-1 Filial Piety and The Positive Social Relationship

The practice of filial piety enables a leader to have the appropriate emotions and inner states as well as moving him or her to act in a virtuous way. A virtuous or good leader develops through learning and practice. The road to becoming virtuous requires a leader to be consistently motivated by moral goods in his or her actions. After a time of repeating such actions, (s)he acquires good habits leading to good leadership.

### What Is Good Leadership?

Leadership, the driving force of organizations, often plays an important role in every profit or non-profit organization, society, and nation (Low, 2010). Leadership is “about creating the climate or culture where people are inspired from the inside out” (Wilson, 2008, pp. 9; Low, 2011a). Leadership can also be defined as the process of influencing others to facilitate the attainment of organizational relevant goals and this definition is applicable to both formal and informal leadership position in order to exert leadership behavior. (Ivancevich et al., 2008, pp. 413). With regard to good leadership, Confucius said, “If the ruler acts properly, the common people will obey him without being ordered to; if the ruler does not act properly, the common people will not obey him even after repeated injunctions.” (*Analects of Confucius* XIII: 6); this also means that good leaders do act properly such as: they do not impose or seek to force; rather they seek to enthuse or inspire. Let alone not being selfish or self-centered, they do not impose their will on others; rather, they live according to core beliefs and principles that attract others; they initiate change because they foresee or visualize a better way, and others follow that pathway because they believe it is a better avenue (Bacon, 2012: ix; cited in Low, 2011a). In sum, Low (2011a) further remarked that ‘when leaders act with values – that is, when they show their goodness, values, and positivity – the effects are great, enlarged because leaders serve as vision creators, exemplars and sources of recognition and rewards; and good feelings or positive emotions also occur among members within the organization’. In the similar manner, leaders who practice the value of filial piety would lead well or in other words, attain good leadership. And this does not stop here; continuous efforts are made to improve the leadership ways.

There are six major factors in good leadership by practicing the value of filial piety:

### **1) Being a Good Leader**

One must understand one’s potential, capability; and what one can do and contribute to the group/organization/nation. A leader should know that it is the followers or other people who determines if (s)he is good or successful. If the followers do not trust or show lack of respect and confidence in their leader, then they will not be inspired or motivated to work for him or her. Therefore, to be a good (successful) leader, an individual should convince his or her followers that (s)he is worthy of being a leader for them to follow. In this regard, Confucius said that a leader should be upright and act with integrity in order

to lead his people effectively and he said this in a very positive manner that the leader should ‘act properly’ (*Analects of Confucius XIII: 6*).

## 2) **Treating Followers/Supporters with Respect**

This is actually linked to the Confucian value of brotherhood, peer-ship and equality (悌 *Hanyu Pinyin : ti*)

It is important to have a good understanding of one’s followers/supporters because different people require different styles of leadership. Take for example, in an organization, (1) a new recruit requires more guidance and supervision than an experienced employee. (2) An employee who lacks motivation requires a different approach than one with a high degree of motivation. This means that a leader must know and understand his or her followers’ human nature, such as culture, needs, emotions, and motivation. Obviously, being a gentleman (*jūnzǐ*), a leader must take care of the interests and needs of all his followers and supporters. (Low and Ang, 2011, pp. 200). Leaders should also encourage the followers to unleash their hidden potentials/talents and to add value to the organizations. Low (2010a, pp. 29) stressed that ‘talent or human capital is the primary driver of any successful company, better talents will definitely differentiate higher performance companies from the rest; and talent management is critical when it comes to business excellence and success.’ In this regard, excellent leaders have a good number of good, loyal followers or teams. Such leaders grow their people and achieve success through tapping the strengths and gifts of their own teams, co-workers and employees.

## 3) **Leading by Ongoing Responsive Relationship**

This concept and practice is actually linked to reciprocity or The Golden Rule (恕, *Hanyu Pinyin: shù*)

One leads through two-ways of communication. Much of it is non-verbal. Take for instance, when one sets the example to his or her people and communicates to them that (s)he would not ask them to perform anything that (s)he would not be willing to do. This obviously means that what and how an individual does or communicates may either build

or harm the relationship between the leader and his (her) employees. In this respect, *Zi Gong*, a disciple, once asked Confucius, “Is there a single word that a man can follow and practice as his principle of conduct for life?” Confucius replied, “It is, perhaps, the word, *Shu* (恕) or reciprocity. That is ‘not to do unto others what one does not want others to do unto oneself.’” (*Analects of Confucius*, XV: 24; Lin, 1994, pp. 186). The authors are inclined to favor the Confucian’s overall anchor, the Golden Rule, that is, in a positive way, as a gentleman, “One should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself”. Applying this principle into the human relationship, this meant that one moves away from oneself and becomes less self-centered, more thinking of others, and in fact, more altruistic. Good leaders should recognize their responsibilities to the employees and to the public at large and make decisions that reflect these responsibilities in clear and transparent ways. Here, leaders can then engage the people moving from inactive to reactive to proactive and to interactive. The basic point is that one can argue that leadership cannot avoid communication but has to enter into dialogue, do something, and engage with the people– government or non-government in an ongoing responsive relationship.

#### **4) Understanding The Situation/Environment**

All situations are different. What an individual does favorably in one situation may not always work in another. One must study, analyze and use one’s judgment to decide the best course of action and the leadership style needed for each situation. In other words, one must be able to feel the “pulse” of the system/situation/environment constantly in order to apply the appropriate leadership style. Take for example, a leader may need to confront an employee for inappropriate behavior, but if the confrontation is either too late or too early, too harsh or too weak, then the results may come out to be ineffective.

#### **5) Being Ethical**

At this juncture, it is critical to note that “a leader gains moral grounds and attracts his followers through his examples. His actions are louder than words” (Low, 2008, pp. 49).

Stressing on the importance of an upright leader, Confucius remarked confidently, “Why should a leader have any difficulty in managing and administrating his country if he is upright? How could a leader correct others if he himself is not upright?” (*Analects of Confucius* XIII: 13). So, what does he mean by an upright leader? Considering the Confucian socio-political norms for the leader, Confucius suggests that those who want to be leaders have to be ethical in having virtuous characters and attitudes based on personal cultivation. He urges for harmonious interpersonal relations in social organizations, that is, reciprocally obligatory relationship on the ground of hierarchical relations. Furthermore, Confucius remarked, “The *jūnzǐ* (君子, gentleman or person) understands what is right; the petty man understands what will sell.” (*Analects of Confucius* IV: 16). In other words, the gentleman (lady) has the proper virtue and understanding of doing things right. (S)he understands what is right and what is wrong when doing his or her daily duties or businesses. The petty person, on the other hand, only understands what can make him or her rich.

## 6) Embracing Peace and Harmony

This is related to the concept and practice of respect (*li*) and brotherhood (*ti*). And with the practice of brotherhood, exchanges, spontaneous helping one another (on-going responsive relationship) and mutual respect, everyone in the team is happy with each other. According to Confucius, a good and responsible leader can resolve social conflict by concentrating on three kinds of favorable relationship through the practice of filial piety. Firstly, (s)he searches for peace and harmony between the self and others by working on human nature, calling for cultivating one’s virtues conscientiously. [For Confucius, “when virtue is practised, one enjoys a clear conscience” (Low, 2008a, pp. 33) and thus enjoying peace and harmony.] Secondly, (s)he seeks to harmonize family, relatives and friends relationships through cultivating the sense of mutual responsibilities amongst them. Thirdly, (s)he looks for a way to diminish the possibility of violent conflict by establishing a humane government in which virtues overwhelm selfish contention (see also Figures 1 and 2). By these three methods, a good leader attempts to build up a mechanism that sustains and maintains a comprehensive social structure in which no conflict goes unnoticed and no opposition is allowed to exceed certain limits.



And team leadership, being applied in this way, will be at its best. Harmony also prevails.

In sum, the practice of filial piety supports good leadership. Figure-2 illustrates the practice of filial piety and its associated core values would enable a leader to attain good leadership.

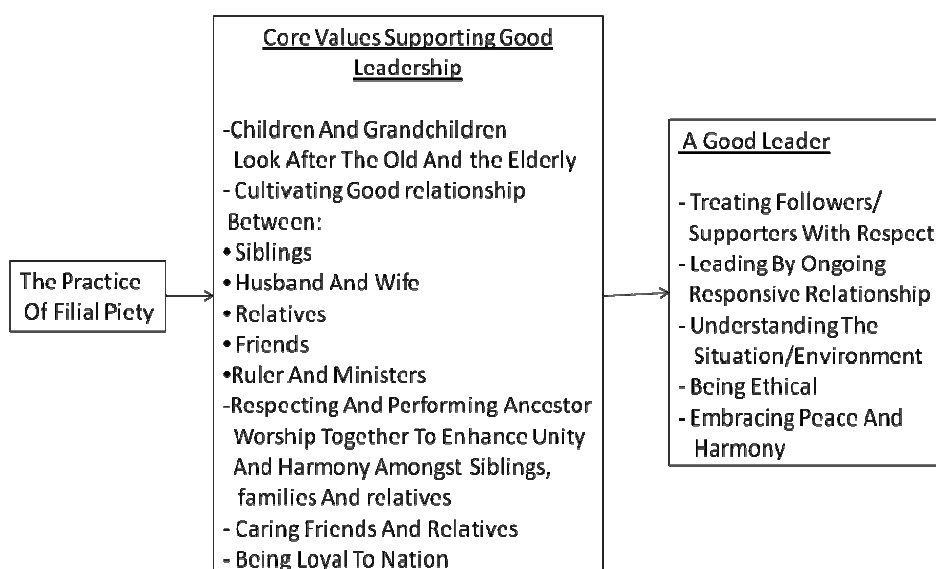


Figure 2 The Practice Of Filial Piety Supporting Good Leadership

## Conclusion

Leaders who practice with the so called the Eastern traditional value of filial piety are different from those who practice with some other normative theories in the Western philosophical tradition because the former addresses the question of “Who should I be?” rather than “What action(s) should I take?” Good leadership in this respect is concerned with the character and the personal disposition of a leader him(her)self rather than right conduct of a leader that people perceived.

Another different aspect of good leadership is the way in which, through its focus on social context and a sense of collective purpose, it is readily applicable to situations, such as nation-building or business activity, where an agent is involved in a shared enterprise. In good leadership of this kind, what makes an action right is that what a virtuous leader would do in the same circumstances. This makes it important when seen through the particular context in which

an action is considered. This focus on character rather than on action itself is underlined by the way in which a range of qualities is seen as worthwhile. These qualities, such as loving-kindness, respecting others, courage or integrity, are valuable for themselves (i.e. they contribute to the flourishing of the agent; to a good life in a peace and harmonious setting) rather than for instrumental reasons (i.e. because they produce some other instrumental goodness).

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