Throughout China’s premodern history, xiao (filial piety) was its most significant social value. It enjoyed such favor because it strengthened both the family’s coherence and the state’s authority. In modern times, despite repeated attacks by anti-traditionalists, xiao has continued to play an important role in Chinese social life; however, the one-child policy threatens to diminish its long-term significance.

In China, no virtue or value carries greater importance than xiao, which translates as “filial piety” or “filial reverence.” This commitment to those who have gone before has been in place since nearly the beginning of China’s recorded history. Since that time, whether one was viewed as a moral person largely depended on his or her manifestation of this virtue. Filial piety was regarded as so instrumental to the welfare of both the state and society that it was soon viewed as a metaphysical principle that unified the cosmos. Thus, performing filial acts was not only perceived as a social requirement but also as a natural religious obligation. Although the importance of filial piety has remained fairly constant over the last three thousand years, how one should express this virtue has differed markedly over time. Although filial piety was frequently attacked and discredited in the twentieth century, it has now regained some of its former prominence; but, due to changing social and economic conditions, its influence has weakened.

Changing Definitions of Xiao

The word xiao first appears in texts and inscriptions during the Western Zhou period (1045–771 BCE), when it usually designated sacrifices in honor of ancestors. Hence, its earliest meaning seems to have been “to make food offerings” to one’s ancestors, lineage, in-laws, and even friends. Yet it was also applied to the living, in which case it meant “to support or nourish,” or “to follow one’s elders’ wishes.” By the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), Confucians reinterpreted xiao by narrowing its focus to serving one’s parents. When his parents were alive, a good son should fulfill their material needs, cater to their whims, and obey their commands; when they died, for three years he should mourn them and continue their traditions. Mourning for three years, a Confucian innovation, meant enduring a number of austerities, such as quitting office, wearing rough hemp robes (rather than silk ones), living in an exposed lean-to, and avoiding meat, sex, alcohol, and music. In short, Confucians redefined xiao so that it would serve one’s immediate family rather than the lineage.

With the emergence of a unified empire in 221 BCE, some educated men, more of whom were becoming state officials, emphasized the political and metaphysical aspects of filial piety. Politically, they stressed what the historian Norman Kutcher has termed “the Confucian parallel conception of society” (1999). That is, if a son is loyal to his parents, he will more than likely also be obedient to the emperor. Analects 1.2 states this concept as, “Few are those who by character are filial and brotherly yet are still fond of opposing those above.” Due to the stabilizing effects of filial piety, nearly every imperial
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dynasty esteemed and propagated the third-century BCE Classic of Filial Piety (Xiaojing 孝經), which clearly articulates xiao as loyalty to political authority. When steppe nomads conquered China, Xiaojing was the first text that they translated into their own language. At the same time, the Classic of Filial Piety and other early imperial Confucian texts stress the metaphysical properties of filial piety. Xiao is not only a type of behavior but is also a spiritual essence that literally connects people with the cosmos. As a result, Heaven responds favorably to those individuals who are loyal and punishes severely those who are not.

In early imperial times, filial piety reached a fever pitch: scholar-officials were not merely performing the mourning rites; many were exceeding them. Some sons mourned each parent for six years rather than just the customary three; others forever declined to consume meat and alcohol. Remarkable feats of filial action were disseminated widely through books called Accounts of Filial Children (Xiaozhi zhuan 孝子传). Illustrations of stories from these works soon decorated everyday objects, the walls of schools and government offices, and tomb interiors. By the early twentieth century, the most ubiquitous book in China was the Twenty-four Filial Exemplars (Ershisi xiao 二十四孝), which every child knew by heart. These narratives received such a welcome no doubt because they strengthened the patriarchal family system. They urged adult sons to live together and to submit unconditionally to their parents’ commands. Filial piety was of such great consequence in Chinese society that to compete with the Confucians, both Daoists and Buddhists found it necessary to craft and market their own version of it.

Xiao’s Modern Fate

During the early twentieth-century’s New Cultural Movement (also known as the May Fourth Movement),

This paper cutout depicts the legendary figure of Mu Lan, a woman who expressed her filial piety by disguising herself as a man to join the army and serve twelve years in place of her elderly father.

A father sits on a park bench, sharing lunch with his child. Photo by Joan Lebold Cohen.
modernist reformers sharply attacked filial piety and the patriarchal family system it promoted. Many cultural forms that expressed filial piety, such as the three-year mourning rites, were abandoned. Despite the fact that it never lost its importance in Hong Kong or Taiwan, filial piety came under even more duress during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). With Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms of 1978–1997, filial piety has regained some of its former stature. To provide care for an aging and pensionless rural population, the state has once again promoted filial piety: children are required by law to take care of their parents. Hence, the state has redefined filial piety as supplying the material needs of elderly parents. But other factors have significantly reduced filial piety’s social importance: adult children usually no longer live with their parents, and their parents oftentimes do not control significant economic resources. Thus, although filial piety remains important as a moral value, its grip on social life has significantly weakened.

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Further Reading