Obey, Except:

Contextualizing Filiality in the *Analects*

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One of the core Confucian ideals elucidated in the *Analects*, *xiao* or “filiality,” paradoxically endures as one of the most culturally recognizable and yet most poorly misconstrued. I believe its common textbook definition—obedience to one’s parents—represents an inadequate conceptualization of this complex dynamic. Although *xiao* might seem to be reducible to such a simple and absolute denotation in this account alone, when contextualized within the fuller tradition of Confucian ethics alongside closely intertwined values of *ren* and *yi*, I will argue it assumes a much more nuanced, conditional meaning informed by multiple scholarly perspectives. I will first expound upon the philosophical nature of *xiao* as it is discussed in the *Analects* and will then challenge that narrative with a broad range of modern and premodern academic voices as well as contemporary personal observations.

In the *Analects*, *xiao* is indirectly defined through temporally nonlinear snapshot conversations distributed across several books. In this Zhou era, *xiao* was already generally widely understood as a societal virtue. However, teachers in the Confucian school of thought sought to further elucidate it through detailed qualification in a question-and-answer format. *Xiao* is first addressed in Book 1 of the *Analects,* when Confucius’ student, Master You, declares that “filiality and respect for elders, are these not the roots of *ren*?” (Confucius, *Analects*, p. 1). Here, Master You introduces *xiao* as a particular form of respect which a son should maintain toward his parents. It is unclear whether the latter refers specifically to biological parents in the original text, but it would seem reasonable to assume a non-essentialist view of this verse, where “parents” would be functionally defined as the nurturing caretakers responsible for raising the son. Moreover, metaphorically embedded in the calligraphic arrangement of the written character for *xiao* is the hierarchical relationship between the character *xiao*—meaning “small” or “young”—as it appears to support the superjacent character *lao*—which means “old” or “aged.” In Book 2, sections 2.6-2.8 are dedicated to Confucius’ explanation of the most fundamental and digestible elements of *xiao*. He first elaborates on his students’ limited understanding of *xiao* by claiming that “what is meant by filiality today is nothing but being able to take care of your parents” but that “even hounds and horses can require care. Without respectful vigilance, what is the difference?” (Confucius, p. 6). The key term here, “respectful vigilance,” is represented in the Chinese text by the character *jing*, which signifies an active alertness and sensitivity in a son to the needs of his parents. The comparison of this duty to that which is taken up by animals—especially dogs, which might represent a starkly insulting contrast—highlights the uniquely higher-order cognitive nature of this responsibility that stretches far beyond the purview of day-to-day caretaking. At the same time, Confucius explains to inquiring disciple Meng Wubo, “let your mother and father need be concerned only for your health”—a statement which characterizes filiality as a bidirectional dynamic involving two components (Confucius, p. 5-6). First, children should support the physical as well as transcendent mental and emotional dimensions of their parents’ well-being, and secondly, parents should not worry about anything in their children’s lives aside from the latter’s purely physical health, where the second situation is expressly enabled by the first. Furthermore, in 2.8, Confucius answers his student Zixia with the explanation that “it is the expression on the face that is difficult” (Confucius, p. 6). By underscoring the importance of outward appearance, Confucius suggests that behaviors are only as meaningful as the intentional emotions as well as underlying discipline, humility and respect of which they are a manifestation. Therefore, in these three passages, Confucius emphasizes the dynamic, mutual nature of this parent-son relationship which should not operate transactionally but rather develop with maturity out of an authentic, internalized love.

Controversially, the *Analects* addresses the central element of obedience inherent in *xiao* with a very rigid and unambiguous stance. In 2.5, when “Meng Yizi asked about filiality…the Master said, ‘Never disobey’” (Confucius, p. 6). In many similar verses in this book, the student’s response, if any, is not recorded to provide any further extension to the original issue. Fortunately, Confucius does elaborate on this stark answer in the same verse, albeit in a different interaction when informing another student, Fan Chi, that what he meant was that “While [the parents] are alive, serve them according to *li*. When they are dead, bury them according to *li*; sacrifice to them according to *li*” (Confucius, p. 6). Although admittedly cryptic, this quote at least frames the multifariously defined concept of *xiao* in terms of the more precisely denotated concept of *li*—that is, the wide range of ritual practices observed during the Zhou era. *Li* does not explicitly resurface in the *Analects* in relation to *xiao*, but in 4.18, Confucius does further substantiate that “When one has several times urged one’s parents, observe their intentions; if they are not inclined to follow your urgings, maintain respectfulness and do not disobey; labor on their behalf and bear no complaint” (Confucius, p. 16). Confucius herein seems to suggest that regardless of the perceived quality of their judgment, parents should always be obeyed if the son’s dissenting opinion cannot sway them from their original intentions, since Robert Eno’s popular translation is often, although not definitively, seen as “meaning ‘do not disobey your parents’ wishes” (Wong, “Jan 16, 2020: Chinese Philosophy”, p. 21). The second portion of section 2.5 would seem to potentially conflict in certain cases with this interpretation, since parental intentions may certainly be incompatible with *li* in exceptional circumstances. For instance, a problematic case could be where a parent demands their son to act in a way which would violate *li*. Nevertheless, I would argue that Confucius’ explicit acknowledgement of the possibility of the son’s repeated remonstration—presumably on behalf of maintaining *li—*in 4.18 as well as the lack of commentary on mutual exclusivity between *li* and *xiao* together representsufficiently concrete evidence that his philosophy is meant to be unconditional. A third quote which reinforces this view of “Never disobey” (Confucius, p. 6) in 2.5 is 1.11, in which Confucius states “When the father is alive, observe the son’s intent. When the father dies, observe the son’s conduct. One who does not alter his later father’s *dao* for three years may be called filial” (Confucius, p. 3). I believe the last sentence of this quote, individually restated verbatim in 4.20 (Confucius, p.16), reveals through *dao*, meaning one’s “way,”most lucidly how *xiao* as defined in the *Analects*. Based on these passages alone, regardless of whether the nebulous *dao* presupposes one’s adherence to *li,* I would argue that Confucius does endorse absolute obedience to one’s parents even after the latter have passed away for some time even in the cases where the sacred integrity of rituals, *li*, would stand to be compromised by such obedience. Finally, I would add that I believe this uncompromising philosophy would make sense given the political instability at the time when these recorded conversations occurred. As Confucius sought to bring unity to a disunified China engaged in constant civil war between illegitimate warlords, he established the “big family” (Wong, p. 17) analogy, a metaphorical illustration of how filial respect and familial respect for authority would translate to the level of the political state. Master You reveals this sentiment when he says in 1.2 of the *Analects* that “It is rare to find a person who is filial to his parents and respectful of his elders, yet who likes to oppose his ruling superior” (Confucius, p. 1). Therefore, the filial extent of obedience should mirror the model citizen’s unwavering loyalty to the state.

On the other hand, while the *Analects* seems to frame *xiao* as almost always a hardline philosophy of unwavering obedience to parents and rituals, the corpus of more recent Confucian scholarship has leaned in favor of more lenient interpretations. First, philosophers James Legge and Yong Huang illuminate the ambiguity inherent in the Chinese rendering of the phrase “Never disobey” (Confucius, p. 6): the former claims that the son is, in reality, being encouraged to “not abandon his purpose [in trying to persuade them]” while the latter similarly deflects the mention of disobedience to concern the “aim (*zhi*)of changing [the parents’] minds” (Wong, p. 22). Furthermore, Huang even claims that the aspect of service contained in filial obedience also depends in part on the son’s appraisal of what is objectively right. Another Chinese philosopher, Yang Bojun, maintains that the passages in 1.11 and 4.20 (Confucius, p. 3, 16) on following *dao* only concern following the “right intentions or conduct” (Wong, p. 24) of one’s parents. Thus, he understands one’s *dao* to be intrinsically normatively good, a notion supported by the following line from 1.2: “The *junzi* works on the root—once the root is planted, the *dao* is born” (Confucius, p. 1). Conversely, Xunzi, a Confucian in classical era China, avoids redefining these somewhat inscrutable terms altogether and instead advocates for a hierarchical organization of the various dimensions of *xiao.* He argues instead that the obedience component of *xiao* is “a small virtue” which must be subordinated under the ethical correctness component of *xiao* captured by the Confucian value of *yi* (Wong, p. 26). Closely intertwined with *yi* is the concept of *ren*, a humane righteousness as subtly distinct from moral appropriateness. Xunzi elevates these values by saying one should not follow orders when doing so would “make one’s parents safe,” “bring them honor” and prevent “doing something beastly” (Wong, p. 26). In obeying one’s parents, *yi* and *ren* together constitute the ultimate standard for the judgment of goodness.

Furthermore, I seek to present a separate argument: *xiao* must be redefined to fit the mold of a fundamentally rewritten landscape of values and beliefs. First, the historically patriarchal model of *xiao* no longer applies to modern society. As civilization has become exponentially more egalitarian and legalized since the Zhou era through the cumulative establishment of progressive social infrastructure worldwide, daughters have increasingly assumed a more similar standing to sons in the traditionally filial role of supporting their parents, especially in industrialized nations. Simultaneously, as governments have on average become more democratic, organized, and stable, children are no longer expected to tend to their parents because of the reliably outsourced care provided to them both directly via sources such as professional physicians as well as proxies such as social security benefits. In this view, the “big family” argument loses most of its relevance. Consequently, I would argue that filiality has shifted from being a duty to what is now often perceived as a supererogatory fulfilment. Overall, I believe that children should not unconditionally obey their parents but rather conduct a deontologically motivated moral cost-benefit analysis with their parents according to what together they conclude is in the best interest of *ren* and *yi*, where the division of agency in this decision-making process shifts from a 0-100% split at birth in favor of the parents to a 50-50% or even beyond in adulthood.

Ultimately, while I believe *xiao* seems to adopt an inflexible, unitary meaning in the *Analects*, I strongly believe that generations of scholarly contribution, translation, and semantic reanalysis since the publication of this original work concur in their conclusion of its malleability. Given the array of equally viable philosophical divergences in linguistic interpretation according to at least one of which children’s disobedience could be defended, I argue that *xiao* cannot be characterized by absolute obedience to one’s parents. Furthermore, I argue that the vast developments in historical and sociopolitical context between the time of publication of the *Analects* and the modern day have shaped the cultural evolution of social norms to radically transform the classically rigid definition of *xiao*.

Bibliography

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