



Session 8

Confucian Family Ethics



8-1 the important role of family in Confucian Tradition

- Family plays an very important role in Confucianism:
- 1. Its social and political order are all based on family structure
- 2. Family moral ethics is the foundation and core of Confucian moral value system
- 3. Family education is essential and key for traditional Confucian system

Why family is so important?

- 杨氏为我，是无君也；墨氏兼爱，是无父也。无父无君，是禽兽也。
- Mencius: If you listen to people's discourses throughout it, you will find that they have adopted the views either of Yang or of Mo. Now, Yang's principle is 'each one for himself', which does not acknowledge the claims of the sovereign. Mo's principle is 'to love equally', which does not acknowledge the peculiar affection due to a father. But to acknowledge neither king nor father is to be in the state of a beast.(3B:9:9)

The meaning of family in Chinese

Jia (家) in Chinese Writing Systems

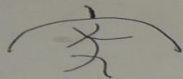
Oracle bone Inscription



豕 = pig

宀 = House

Bronze Inscriptions



Seal Characters



2008/1/5 A Type of housing in ancient China in which people themselves lived upstairs and kept domestic animals downstairs

Structure of family

- 夫妻关系(husband-wife relationship):
- 丈夫husband: 夫君(gentleman/ruler), 先生 (a person to be born earlier)
- 妻子: 娘子(娘 mother+子son), 太太 (double great ultimate harmony)
- 亲子关系(parent-Child): 父子 (**father-son**);
- father-daughter;
- mother-son;
- mother-daughter
- 长幼关系(elder-younger): 长兄如父**elderly brother-father**, 长姐如母 (elderly sister-mother)

The meaning of husband

- 丈夫husband: 夫君(gentleman/ruler),
- 先生 : original meaning is: born before me; it is a name traditionally to call doctor and teacher
- Doctor (先生, 大夫) is the person who can deal with illness and save lives, with similar function of a minister. (if not able to be a good minister then try to be a good doctor)

The meaning of wife



- 妻子：娘子(娘 mother+子 son/respect title) to mean a young girl who is respectable as same as mother
- 太太 (double great ultimate harmony): three 太s in Chinese history (太姒taisi, 太任tairen, 太姜taijiang) all best examples of being a wife: supporting husband; education children
- Embryo/ fetus education: antenatal training



Confucian Ideal of Women

- As a traditional doctrine that came into being in a patriarchal society.
- Under the guidance of such a code, a **wife was confined to housework and family services**, and was considered less worthy of respect than her husband.
- The discrimination against women was further developed in the name of Confucianism.
- It became an established norm in traditional Confucian societies that a virtuous woman was the one who had no political ambition and even had no exceptional ability.
- A WIFE would always follow her husband, no matter who and where he was, which means if married to a rooster a woman should follow the rooster, and if married to a dog she should follow the dog.



The Status of a Mother

- In a Confucian society, mother/grandmother enjoyed respect and admiration.
- The achievement of many great men were said to come, directly or indirectly from the virtues of their mothers.
- The story that the mother of Menzi moved her home three times for the sake of a better educational environment for her child was known to every family and every schoolchild.

Confucian ideal husband 大丈夫

- To be able to stand Still; to have strong will to hold justice and benevolence, nothing can swerve his away from moral deed.
- 居天下之广居，立天下之正位，行天下之大道。得志，与民由之；不得志，独行其道。富贵不能淫，贫贱不能移，威武不能屈，此之谓大丈夫。（The book of Mencius 3B:3）
- To dwell in the wide house of the world, to stand in the correct seat of the world, and to walk in the great path of the world; when he obtains his desire for office, to practice his principle for the good of the people; and when that desire is disappointed, to practice them alone; to be above the power of riches and honours to make dissipated, of poverty and mean condition to make swerve from principle and of power and force to make bend– these characteristics constitute the great man.



Confucian Ideal Wife

- 必敬，必戒，无违夫子，以顺为正者，妾妇之道也（the *Book of Mencius* 3B:3）
- To be respectful, to be careful, do not disobey husband
- 相夫教子：supporting your husband and teaching your children



Confucian threefold family relationships

- Family relationships in the Confucian classics are **threefold**, that is,
 - **between father and son,**
 - **between a husband and his wife,** and
 - **between elder and younger brothers.**
- Of these three relations the first and the foremost is that between father and son, in which the primary responsibility for family harmony is laid on the son.



8-2: Why family moral code should be essential for social and political relationships?

- 1. the Love between parent and child is a natural intuitional love without any needs of effort
- 2. the love between parent and child is an unconditional love
- 3. love from family to neighbour and people in the same community and society, and then to people in the same country, and finally the strangers on the road are natural order that cannot be avoided.



Why family ethics is needed?

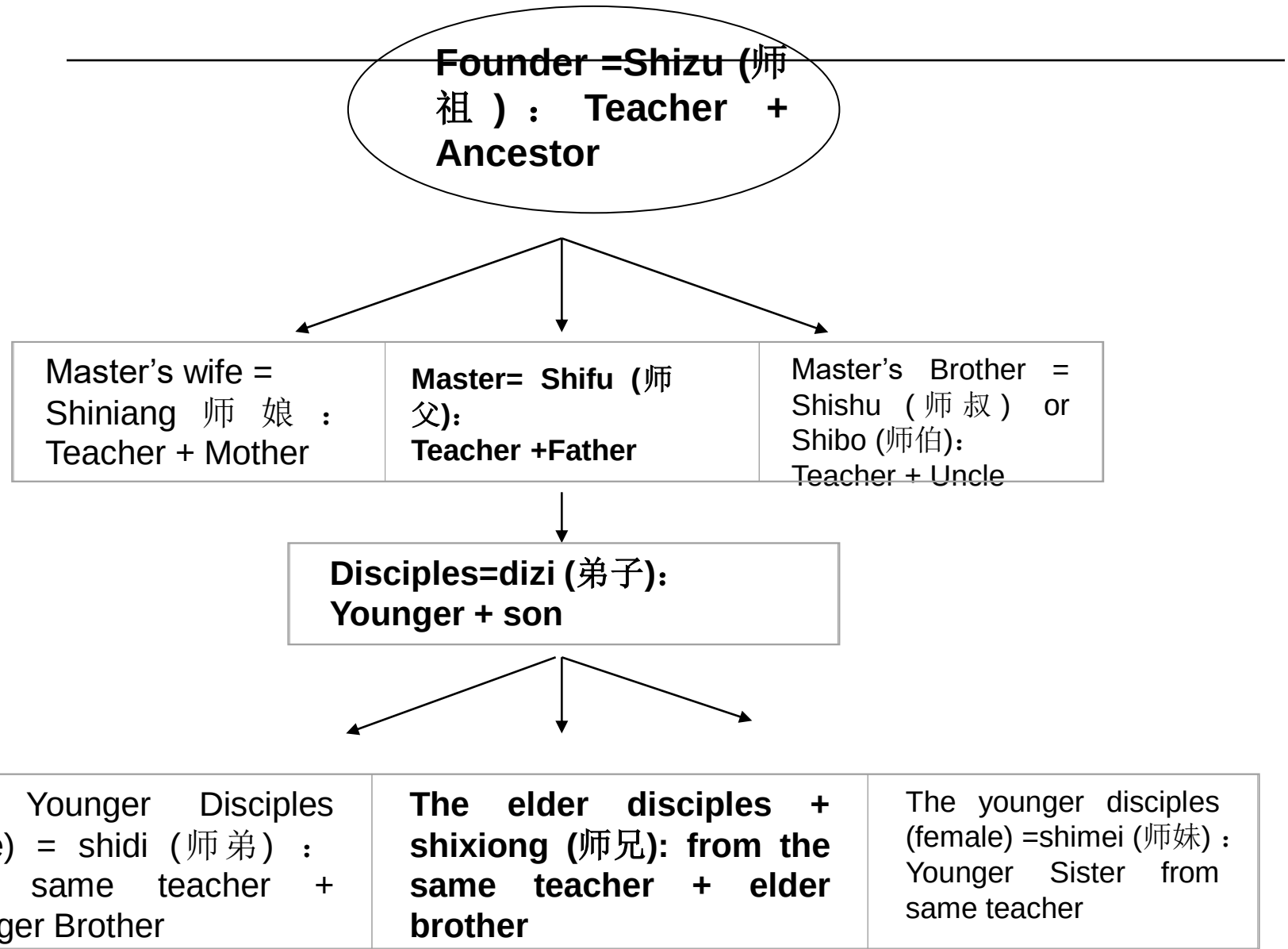
- 逸居而不教，则近于禽兽。
- Mencius: Now men possess a moral nature, but if they are well fed, warmly clad and comfortably lodged, without being taught at the same time, they become almost like the beasts. (the book of Mencius, 3A:8)

Family structure as the base of Confucian society

- **Society is a bigger family:**
- 长幼关系 (Elder-young) : father- son/mother-daughter;
- 朋友关系 (friendship) : elder brother and younger brother

- **State is a bigger society based on family:**
- 君臣: ruler-minister (君父ruler father-臣子 minister son)
- 君民; ruler- ruled (君父-臣民)
- 官民: officers- people (父母官 parental officials)

Family Structure of a Religious and Philosophical Organization



Confucian business in modern China

家长 (elder of the family) for business leader

家人 (member of family) for colleagues within the business organization/ company

家教 (family education) : moral education



Confucian Family moral code

Mencius: the Sage Shun appointed his minister Qi to teach the relations of humanity: how, **between father and son, there should be affection;** **between sovereign and minister, righteousness;** **between husband and wife, attention to their separate functions;** **between old and young , a proper order;** and **between friends, fidelity** . (The Book of Mencius: 3A:8)

The Extension of Confucian Solution of Personal Conflicts

- The Confucian solution of personal conflicts are first tested and applied in the **family**, which, according to Confucianism, is the **cornerstone of order and peace** in the world.
- As the **family** is the basic unit of human community, **harmonious family relationships** are believed to be crucial for a harmonious **society** and a peaceful **state**:
- 'if only everyone loved his parents and treated his elders with deference, the whole world would be at peace' (Mengzi, 4A:11).

The Importance of Family Harmony

- It was in this sense that Confucius put **family harmony** above all **other considerations**, and **family responsibilities** above all **other social duties**.
- In some extreme cases, Confucius was even prepared to **consolidate family relations at the price of social regulations**, because in his view social justice was nothing other than an extension of family affection and could not be realised unless affectionate family relationships were sustained.
- His disciples highlighted the importance of family harmony for the stability of the whole society, and made use of family virtues to correct disorder (lunyu, 1:2).



Harmony between Husband and Wife

- Confucianism favoured the labour division between male and female in the household:
- a husband was in charge of external responsibilities while a wife was responsible for internal matters, and considered this to be the principle of the universe:
- 'The correct place of the women is within; the correct place of a man is without. That man and woman have their proper places is the greatest concept in nature' (Wilhelm, 1967: 570).
- This division gave senior female members in a family a clear range of responsibilities so that they could exercise their wisdom and manifest their feminine virtues.
- In a sense these understanding and measures contributed to a stable family structure in a traditional society, although they are far from the modern concept of equality between men and women.



The Role of Respect

- The tension between different generations is reduced through the respect, reverence and service that **the younger pays to the elder.**
- It is believed that the **cause of any conflict** between parents and children is in the latter's **inappropriate attitude and behaviour**, and whenever a conflict arises, it is the children's responsibility to seek **reconciliation** by apology and self-criticism.
- For a long period in history, **this solution contributed to a stable family structure at the price of children**, and its prejudice against children was open to extreme applications.

Society as the Enlarged Family

- Its logic is that the family is the basic unit of the human community and that harmonious family relationships will inevitably lead to a harmonious society and peaceful state:
- if only everyone loved his parents and treated his elders with deference, the Empire would be at peace' (Mengzi, 4A:11).
- For those who are members of the ruling class, their virtues in family affairs are even more significant for the whole country: 'when a ruler feels profound affection for his parents, the common people will naturally become humane' (Lunyu, 8:2) (Junzi: wind; common people: grass).

Confucian extremely politicised practice of filial piety

To some extent, Confucianism was responsible for such an absurd extremely politicised practice of filial piety:

- The meaning and value of a son's life could be found only in his absolute obedience to his father: even if a father ordered his son to die, the son would not be deemed filial if he was unwilling to die.
- It was not without reason that Confucianism was attacked at the beginning of the twentieth century as a 'ritual religion' (lijiao) and was accused of 'murdering people' by means of ritual/propriety.
- However, as Julia Ching argues that the ritualism that maintains hierarchically rigid family and social relationships was based on the Confucian vision of social life, but historically speaking, it 'was less the product of Confucianism, and more the combined product of Confucian philosophy developed under the influence of Legalism and its theory of power, and yin-yang philosophy with its arbitrary correlation of cosmic forces and human relations' (Ching, 1997:267).

Balance in Confucian Way of Harmony

- It would not do justice to the Confucian Way of Harmony if we conclude that the Confucian masters did not leave behind them a balanced view of the parent-child relationship.
- Many other early Confucian thinkers insist that both a father and his son are equally responsible for a harmonious family. While the son must show filial piety towards his parents, the father is required to be kind and affectionate to their children 父慈子孝。
- In the parent-child relationship, children's education, especially their moral training and cultivation of character, is the first duty of their parents. If the son was not educated well, it was his father who should be blamed. 子不教父之过
- Further, Confucians believe that a harmonious family needs a contribution from both parents and children, and that their contributions must not be conditional upon each other. Parents' love or children's respect must be given for its own sake, and the fault of a parent should not be used as an excuse for his/her children not to fulfil their own duties, nor should a disobedient child justify the parents giving up their parental responsibilities.



Comparison between Confucianism and Christianity

- Confucianism: starts from natural father-son relationship, extends it to social elder-young and political ruler-minister relationships and finishes at divine father-son relationship between heaven and the son of heaven (ruler)
- Christianity: starts from divine father-son relationship, down to the ruler- people relationship/ Christ church and believer relationship, and ends at natural father-son relationship.
- (Yanxia Zhao: *Father-son in Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study of Xunzi and Paul*)



Why family education is essential ?

- Moral education is necessary for organizing a harmonious society and a peaceful nation
- Education: individual self education
 - family education
 - social education
- Family education is the start point of the education and it is also the practice place to ensure the best performance of morality



Confucian Way of Humans and Education

- Confucians are not interested in the opposition between this world and the next, or between salvation and damnation, but **how to differentiate** the human (with proper behaviour) and the non-human (beast and birds)
- People have potentiality which enables them to be finally differentiated from birds and beasts through self moral cultivation, but need self cultivation from within and family and social education from without.



Social education must be based on family education

- Confucian maintains that **politics is an extension of family** and personal ethics,
- Political conflicts must be dealt with according to the same principles used in a family context.
- Therefore, the role of family education is the foundation of social education.
- Ancestor temple 祠堂祖庙 as school of one surname family
- private education 私塾 for family

Chen family temple at Guangzhou





Importance of Family in Chinese religious Education

- 师父 Father Master– Son Disciple
- 老师 Father Teacher– Son Student
- 一日为师，终身为父： **to be a teacher of someone for one Day, that one will need to treat the teacher as father for his/her whole life**
- Religious ritual education was practiced more at family:
 1. Family based ancestor and household gods worship
 - 2. the role of elder son in ancestor worship ceremony and other family religious activities
 - 3. The Role of a wife in praying for blessing of the whole family in daily or monthly, yearly religious activities.