

# Filial Piety (*xiao* 孝) in the Contemporary and Global World: A View from the Western and Chinese Perspectives

Loreta POŠKAITĖ\*

## Abstract

The relationships between children and parents seem to be one of the most urgent issues in the contemporary world, spanning from the United States and European countries to East Asian societies, as a consequence of the transformation of traditional family ethics, values and institutions brought about by the processes of modernization and globalization. The present paper aims to reveal the ways and problems of the application of *xiao* 孝 (filial piety) ethics in the contemporary Western and Chinese societies, as reflected in the works by a number of famous Western Protestant missionaries, religious philosophers, sinologists and present-day Lithuanian Sinology students, and counterbalance their views with the insights of contemporary Chinese sociologists. The place of *xiao* in the contemporary inter-cultural dialogue will be discussed from the point of view of dialogue between religions, theory and practice, Western and Chinese culture, traditional and modern societies and values.

**Keywords:** filial piety (*xiao*), Confucianism, care, duty, rights

## Izveček

Zdi se, da so odnosi med otrokom in starši eden izmed najbolj perečih vprašanj v sodobnem svetu, ki sega od ZDA in evropskih držav, do vzhodnoazijskih družb, kot posledice preoblikovanja tradicionalne družinske etike, vrednot in institucij, ki jih prinašajo procesi modernizacije in globalizacije. Namen tega prispevka je razkriti načine in probleme uporabe etike *xiao* 孝 (spoštovanja staršev) v sodobnih zahodnih in kitajski družbah, kar se odraža v delih številnih znanih zahodnih protestantskih misijonarjev, verskih filozofov, sinologov in današnjih litvanskih študentov sinologije, in jih primerja s spoznanji sodobnih kitajskih sociologov. O vlogi etike *xiao* v sodobnem medkulturnem dialogu se razpravlja z vidika dialoga med religijami, med teorijo in prakso, med zahodno in kitajsko kulturo, med tradicionalnimi in sodobnimi družbami in vrednotami.

**Ključne besede:** spoštovanje staršev (*xiao*), konfucianizem, skrb, dolžnost, pravice

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\* Loreta POŠKAITĖ, Associate Professor, Centre of Oriental Studies, Vilnius University, Lithuania. [lposkaite@yahoo.com](mailto:lposkaite@yahoo.com)

## Introduction

There exists an almost unanimous agreement among sinologists that *xiao* 孝 (filial piety), which consists of reverent, sincere, self-sacrificing, and unconditional care for one's parents while they are alive and after their death, is one of the basic values of Chinese traditional culture in general and the basis for the development of the moral person in Confucian ethics in particular. At the same time however, it seems to be one of the most complicated and contradictory virtues in its practical application not only for the Chinese themselves, but also for the Westerners, who have treated the notion with both, criticism and approval. This could be one of the reasons why such a core virtue of traditional Chinese (Confucian and, more generally, East Asian) ethics and the whole context of the "morality of duty" implied by it is almost excluded from any public discussion centered around the contemporary crisis of the family (parents vs. children) relations and their legal regulations in contemporary Western countries. Such discussions have recently become a very hot topic in the Lithuanian public media, as a reaction to the intentions of a few members of the Parliament to introduce some corrective measures in the Law for protecting the rights of children against the violence of their parents<sup>1</sup>. The initiators of such correctives refer to the Scandinavian countries as an illustrative example of such practice, while their critics express an apprehension that these correctives will prompt children to exercise their rights in a improper manner. According to them, children will be free to treat their parents as the potential violators of their rights when the latter refuse to tolerate, approve and fulfill every wish of their child, or force to fulfill their family duties<sup>2</sup>.

Such a prioritization of children's rights over their duties seems to have little in common with Chinese traditional ethics of *xiao*, which emphasizes children's obligations towards their parents and the reverence to their authority until their death. However, there are some sinologists and comparative philosophers, who come out in favour of the relevance of *xiao* ethics for the contemporary Western and global world. Their supportive ideas are in accordance with the recent rebirth of studies of Confucianism and its reinterpretation as a teaching with a universal appeal. Moreover, such approaches may find further support in the facts pointed

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<sup>1</sup> In sum, its corrections should give more freedom to the police and social institutions in taking the child from the family (parents) after registering any act of psychological or physical violence, committed by a parent towards his or her child.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Vidmantė Jasukaitytė (2013).

out by H. Rosemont and R. T. Ames in the introduction to their translation of *Xiaojing* 孝经:

the great majority of the rest of the world’s peoples in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East—certainly more than two-thirds of the human race—do not seem to define themselves fundamentally as free, autonomous (and rights-bearing) individuals. [...] Except of the Westernized urban elites in these areas, most of the peoples who live in these places would define themselves much more in a relational, “Confucian” language than in Enlightenment and modern liberal terms. (Rosemont and Ames 2009, 34)

The two authors thus question the possibility of resolving the many issues concerning the contemporary society and family by discussing the latter exclusively in terms of rights-bearing individuals. They suggest that one should consider such alternative ideas and practices as Confucian ethics of *xiao*, even if classical ideals of the latter were grounded in the society far “remote from contemporary Western technology-driven capitalist democracies”, or even if classical Confucian texts and language do not have any close analogues to all key terms like “freedom”, “liberty”, “rights”, “individual” etc., which are employed in the contemporary Western moral discourse (Rosemont and Ames 2009, 32, 34)<sup>3</sup>.

However, I am inclined to argue that, in order to avoid “ahistoricity” in one’s approach, it would be more reasonable to discuss the relevance of *xiao* for the contemporary Western or global world, by relying on present-day examples and practices from modern China. And here we are confronted with the problem, which will be discussed in greater detail below, that the understanding and practice of *xiao* in post-Maoist China is far more complicated and contradictory than it could be imagined from classical texts or their Western interpretations. For any recognition, approval or disapproval of this virtue, practice or ideal, as a phenomenon of a different culture, it is “filtered” through the prism of one’s religious, cultural, social, historical or even ideological and national identity, or rather a sum of all those identities as well as existential conditions. Thus, any attempt to put *xiao* into the context of contemporary ethical ideas and social practices should involve a number of approaches, such as a dialogue between

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<sup>3</sup> I need to point out here, that H. Rosemont and R. Ames choose to translate Chinese term of *xiao* into English as “family reverence”, thus resisting the most common English translation “filial piety”. By this they seek to emphasize the centrality of family ethics in Chinese culture in general, and the particularity of Confucian ethics, which they call “role ethics”, since it “takes as its starting point and as its inspiration the perceived necessity of family feeling as ground in the development of the moral life” (Rosemont and Ames 2009, xii).

Confucian and Christian religions, the relationships between contemporary Chinese and Western social institutions and their cultural backgrounds, as well as the possibility of interpenetration of or conflict between Chinese traditional and modern (primarily Western) values in modern (post-Maoist) China. The paper aims to put together all these perspectives in order to reveal the complexity of the notion from the inter-cultural and global perspectives. In the pages that follow I will also examine the reflection on *xiao* and their relevance to Western culture as seen by some famous Western Protestant missionaries, religious philosophers, sinologists as well as present-day Lithuanian Sinology students. The final part of the article will be concerned with the results of a sociological researches conducted by a few Chinese Sinologists and their insights on the condition and problems of *xiao* practice in post-Maoist China.

### The Treatment of *xiao* Ethics in Western Sinology

One of the earliest extensive approaches to *xiao*, formulated from the perspective of a different (Western) culture, was presented in the book *Chinese Characteristics* by the famous expert in Chinese culture, Protestant missionary Arthur H. Smith (2002). Although the book was published more than a century ago and became arguably the most widely read book about China in the West at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it also gained great popularity in post-Maoist China at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>4</sup>. His observations seem important mainly because they were based not only on the readings of Classical Confucian texts, but also on his long-term “fieldwork”. Smith starts a separate chapter entitled “Filial piety” with the paradoxical observation of the contradictory place and manifestations of filial piety in Chinese culture and behavior. On the one hand, he confirms the fact attested by him and other Christian missionaries in China regarding the evident lack of proper discipline, filiality and even any idea of prompt obedience in Chinese children, although upon achieving adulthood, they become filial, as if it was natural to their behavior. On the other hand, he repeats a popular Chinese view that “a defect of any virtue, when traced to its root, is a lack of filial piety”, thus recognizing the all-embracing nature and place of *xiao* in the moral and social life of Chinese, which is hardly describable and understandable in Western terms and reasoning (Smith 2002, 173).

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<sup>4</sup> This could be proved by the fact that, as Lydia H. Liu informs us in her introduction to the recent English re-edition of the book, there were as many as three new Chinese translations of the book which have emerged in different cities, namely, in Beijing (1998), Šanghaj (1999) and Hong Kong (2000), “and all three editions have enjoyed wide distribution and readership” (Smith 2002, i).

Smith concludes the chapter listing the features which could be attractive and beneficial to Christians and Western people, such as the respect for age or maintaining the connections with one's parents even when the child (the son) becomes of age and has his separate life. However, far more extensive is his list of the “fatal defects” of *xiao*, which make it hardly attractive to a good Christian. He criticizes *xiao* for such “radical faults” as concentration on the duty of children towards their parents, while ignoring the duty of parents to their children; for speaking mainly on behalf of sons, but not on behalf of daughters; for putting the wife on an inferior plane, which is contrary to Christian practice<sup>5</sup>, thus encouraging the cultivation of love towards one's parents to an extreme degree, while suppressing natural instincts of the heart; for developing “the almost entire subordination of the younger during the whole life of those who are older”; for encouraging some improper social practices, such as adoption of children, early marriages, polygamy and concubinage; for encouraging such fallacious religious practices as the worship of ancestors, which “is one of the heaviest yokes which ever a people was compelled to bear”; and finally—and maybe most importantly—for ignoring and failing to recognize the existence of a Supreme being as well as the lack of the conception of Heavenly Father (Smith 2002, 182–85). The last “fault” of *xiao* reminds us about the author's true missionary intentions, his religious background and identity, which all prevent him from looking at Chinese practice of filial piety from a wider or universal perspective.

But here, one paradox should be mentioned or a very opposite fact in the history of Western receptions of *xiao*, which was observed by Keith Nathan Knapp in his insightful book on *xiao*, based on the histories from *Twenty-four Filial examples (Er shi si xiao 二十四孝)*. As Knapp remarks, most English translations of this book were made by 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>- century Western missionaries, for whom its tales seemed so appealing, that they started to disseminate them in the United States. Through tales they sought “to instill a sense of filial obligation in the hearts of unruly American youth”—even if at the same time the tales were dismayed by those same missionaries, and largely ignored or belittled by Western sociologists and historians at the turn of the century as rather absurd, grotesque or cruel (Knapp 2005, 5, 2).

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<sup>5</sup> According to him, “Christianity requires a man to leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife” (Smith 2002, 183).

Another Western scholar who wrote extensively on the possibilities of the transplantation of Confucianism into the urban Western cultures and modern Western social context is Robert Cummings Neville. In his book on Boston Confucianism he discusses four aspects of Confucianism which complicate such transplantation, filial piety being one of them<sup>6</sup>. In a separate chapter entitled “Filial Piety as Holy Duty” (Neville 2000, 194–201), he names four traits of *xiao*, which could allow or prevent the engagement of Confucianism with Christianity: 1) *xiao* concentrates on honoring one’s biological source of life, that is, one’s parents, grandparents and so forth, thus deferring to the family processes of nature and equating honouring of parents and family with honouring life itself; 2) its institutions contribute to the social services that care for the elderly, but the latter could even replace children’s care of elderly parents, if extensively developed and modernized, as in the case in most modern Western countries; 3) *xiao* is the background for all human relationships, mutual care and manifestation of love and humanity (*ren* 仁, benevolence), thus making one’s parents love the model of all kinds of love, and one’s parents the only real and authoritative parents and source of family connections. Neville contrasts such understanding of *xiao* with Christian ideas about the God as the Father of all humankind, and his love as the only model for any other love, which helps to transform personal identity and family relationships from the kinship family to a universal community with the church as the main institution for social relationships and the way of learning love; 4) *xiao* is concerned with the succession of the virtues of the ancestors, learning them from one’s parents, whose main duty is to make their children into good people or persons “of full humanity”, and after this to have a “freedom from the obligation to make you more virtuous” (Neville 2000, 199). This trait of filial piety, according to Neville, is analogous to the Christian doctrine of taking over the mind of Christ in one’s path to sagehood and universal love, although there are some minor differences and nuances. Neville concludes his exploration of the four traits of filial piety by bringing to light some extraordinary parallels between Confucianism and Christianity “so long as filial piety does not necessarily means one’s particular parents, and so long as the model of heavenly established virtues is not necessarily Jesus” (Neville 2000, 201). However, filial piety ceases to be a Confucian (Chinese) *xiao*, if it is not necessarily based on the reverent care of

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<sup>6</sup> Here he describes them as “four difficult cases”, namely, “filial piety as a holy duty”, “ritual propriety” in its relation to Christian morality, “the kinds of objections a Confucian might have to a community constituted around elaborating the ministry and character of Jesus” and the intention to acquire a mixed (Confucian Christian or Christian Confucian) identity (Neville 2000, 194).

one's parents. Thus, the filter of religious identity and the perspective of dialogue between Confucianism and Christianity for the transplantation of *xiao* into the sphere of global or Western culture seem far more complicated than are implied by the similarity between commandments to honour one's parents, as presented in the Christian Bible and Confucian Classics.

This may be one of the reasons why the reflections upon and discussions about the relevance of filial piety for the solutions of the contemporary social and family problems since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were shifted predominantly to the sphere of philosophical, ideological or political ideas and their possible dialogues. Some of the “faults” of *xiao*, as mentioned above, are still mentioned in the contemporary criticisms of filial piety, although they are reformulated in more precise, modern Western terms, such as sexism, liberalism, individual autonomy, human (children) rights, equality, authoritarianism, etc<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, a number of sinologists and comparative philosophers, especially those working within the framework of family studies, tend to reread filial piety in the light of more universal values. For example, professor A. T. Nuyen from the National University of Singapore argues that filial piety has a relevance in the contemporary discourse on global ethics and culture if it is understood as respect for tradition. According to him, in this sense it can even be used “to correct the ‘traditional’ Chinese family structure that has been the subject of social critics” (Nueyn 2004, 213), to help harmonize all the seemingly conflicting statements found in Confucian classics, and even to eliminate the charges of the idea of filial piety with conservatism, too common in the Western literature (Nuyen 2004, 210)<sup>8</sup>.

The most far-reaching philosophical arguments about the relevance of *xiao* ethics for the contemporary global world and ethics were presented by H. Rosemont and R. T. Ames in their translation of *Xiaojing*. In their “Introduction” to the translation, the authors give an extensive answer to the question they formulate themselves: What can this book teach a person from the contemporary Western world if it is located too far from him/her in terms of time, worldview, social conditions and philosophical terminology? According to them, reading this text can help appreciate anew the importance of intergenerational relations

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<sup>7</sup> Some voices of such criticism are discussed in Nuyen 2004, 204.

<sup>8</sup> In his interpretation, Nuyen uses Gadamerian hermeneutics: “to interpret something, in turn, is to stand within a tradition and to bring to bear what one has already understood in it to the new situation”. Thus, according to Nuyen, “to question this family structure and to correct its defects is not to do away with filial piety”. (Nuyen 2004, 208, 213)

between people, to envisage a different way of defining one's personality and self, to broaden the concept of social justice, to approach differently the issues of death and dying, and to "provide insight into the question of what makes human beings human" (Rosemont and Ames 2002, xv). But perhaps most importantly, it would be helpful in learning to do big things, starting from doing little or trivial things on a day-in day-out basis, and to "face the world on the basis of our family" (Rosemont and Ames 2002, 51)<sup>9</sup>. Interestingly, through their examination of the filial role ethics, the authors find the answer to the question as to what would prevent or combat the physical or psychological abuse of children by their parents in other families—though this answer does not seem to be conforming to the contemporary values of liberal societies, such as individual rights or privacy<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, the present translators of *Xiaojing* hope that this classical text can even help Westerners to realize the cost of prioritization of values of modern Western ethics such as individual freedom and independence, equality, privacy, rights and entitlements, and personal integrity<sup>11</sup>.

However attractive and persuasive they look, such views and arguments by authoritative scholars, motivated by their scholarly interests and the need to substantiate the topicality of their object of research, are not enough elucidate a more nuanced and broad opinion about *xiao* by the contemporary representatives of the Western culture (-s). Moreover, as the famous expert in Chinese psychology Michael Harris Bond pointed out in one of his books, the most cross-cultural comparisons of Chinese and Western cultures (or their particular aspects) in the past have involved only one uneven group of the representatives of each culture, namely, the Americans representing the Westerners on one hand, and other, the

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<sup>9</sup> To substantiate their view, the authors provide several insights regarding the logic of Confucian role ethics and relational understanding of oneself, which can make one's life more meaningful even in its trivial things. See: Rosemont and Ames 2002, 51–52, 54.

<sup>10</sup> According to them, the Confucian, or the person with the developed sense of relationality, should feel responsible not only for the good relationships in his family, but also for the neighbours' families, thus being responsible to prevent any violent or unrightful behaviour of the parents toward their children and not turning his eyes „away from the bruises we see on our neighbour's children—or spouse“ (Rosemont and Ames 2002, 54). It may be this sense of communal solidarity, that obliges us to rethink the supposed sanctity of our neighbor's home, and could help to settle the matter better than the application of laws or interruption of social and legal institutions, which, as I wrote earlier in this article, become increasingly active in some European countries today.

<sup>11</sup> In other words, it can help to avoid or realize the extremes of individualism, such as feelings of alienation, depression and selfishness since "too much freedom becomes license; too much independence becomes loneliness; too much autonomy becomes moral autism; and too much sacrilization of human beings comes at the cost of massive species extinction" (Rosemont and Ames 2002, 63).



abstract denomination “Chinese” on the other, whether or not those Chinese are born in mainland China, Singapore or Chinatown of San Francisco (Bond 1991, 4). His question “Are the Chinese in various political, social, and economic settings similar?” could be readdressed and reformulated with respect to Westerners, and this research, by asking “whether all Western people from United States and various European countries will approach *xiao* in the similar way”. Will the family feeling and honoring parent’s authority, implied by filial piety, be appreciated in the same way by the people from the North and South European countries with their different emphasis and traditions of the family and intergenerational relations or emphasis on individual freedoms and rights? What about judgments about *xiao* in Russia and Post-Soviet countries with their particular histories of honoring authorities and autocracy?

Bearing these questions and tentative answers in mind, I have decided to include in this research the reflections on *xiao* by my present Sinology students—that is, young people who are still more dependent on their parents and family relations, but are interested in Chinese culture. Thus making it possible of some cross-cultural comparisons with those who have already learned something about Chinese ethics of filial piety and “filial mentality” from Classical Chinese texts (such as *Lunyu*, *Xiaojing*, *Ershisi xiao*, *Nixiao jing*).

### The View on *xiao* by Lithuanian Sinology Students

The students were asked to answer three questions concerning filial piety:

- 1) How do you conceive *xiao* in relation to other aspects of Chinese culture and from the comparative perspective?
- 2) Which aspects of *xiao* seem to you the most unattractive or unacceptable, as viewed from the perspective of your culture?
- 3) Does (and in which ways) *xiao* seem relevant and needful for modern Western (or global) culture?

As to the first question, the students responded almost unanimously that ethics of filial piety seems to them neither exotic, nor strange, nor too unique a feature of Chinese culture, if comprehended from the comparative perspective. Even if not discussing it in the sense of respect and honouring one’s obligations towards the ruler and the state, it is something that could be easily understood by most people around the world, since its concept in its basic sense, reverence for parents, is present in all cultures, albeit in different extent and forms of expression. On the

other hand, some of the students consider it as one of the best means to explain a specific behaviour of Chinese people, for example, avoid to oppose or confront an older person. Students view such behaviour as standing in sharp contrast with the Western cult of “individualism”.

However, most students have admitted that one of the most difficult things in understanding the Chinese virtue and practice of filial piety is the exaggerated, overwhelming obsession with the demonstration and extreme forms of expression of filial feelings, such as the tradition of 3-year-long mourning rites, as well as some extreme forms of unconditional obedience and self-sacrifice, which are illustrated in the tales from *Twenty-four Filial Examples* (such as “Burying his son to save his mother”). According to one student, though the child in this story was not harmed, from the standpoint of someone from the Western society, in which protecting children has become a kind of *idée fixe*, the notion of killing one’s own offspring for the sake of the wellbeing of your parents is quite possibly one of the most monstrous and bizarre acts that could be committed, and is certainly incomprehensible to most Westerners. Among other non-acceptable aspects of *xiao*, the students also named less extreme forms of self-sacrifice, such as compliance with the wishes of parents, obeying all their orders and unspoken wishes, furnishing them with what they need and want, having the pressure to bear an offspring; refusing high office in order to take personal care of one’s parents if they are old or sick. For them, such behaviour deprives children of all personal freedom and possibility to arrange his/her life by himself.

Most of such acts of filiality are viewed by the students as contradictory and rather confusing in their demands. Too often the obligation of filial piety places one into the filial dilemma of having to choose between two simultaneous ways of filial piety. For example, what should be more filial in the same situation—giving up one’s job and career in order to take care of a sick old mother, or aspiring to a higher post in order to gain more money for the same care of the mother, especially having in mind that making one’s career is considered as acting in compliance with the parents’ wishes and making them proud for one’s success? What should be more filial—to steal the fruits from the neighbors’ house in order to give them to hungry parents, or not to steal and thus avoid their disgrace for their child’s bad behaviour? What students found particularly problematic was the treatment of a suicide committed by a child, as the way to save the face of her parents, or to remonstrate against their bad behavior. In this case, students see a conflict between two ways of filial piety, namely, the child’s duty not to comply

with the father's bad behaviour, and the preservation of one's life and body as they are co-owned by one's parents. Such contradictions, as some students point out, seriously complicate the understanding and logical reasoning of all rules of filial behaviour, since the same act could be treated very differently by the society and even by one's parents. This makes it difficult to understand which act is approved and glorified as filial, and which are considered as punishable, thus making the practical application of filial piety too problematic. In other words, students see a contradiction between filial actions, intentions and feelings of filiality, which form its complexity and over-comprehensiveness, and make it stand out from the ethics of filiality cherished in other cultures and traditions.

Some students have also questioned the application of the principle of reciprocity (*bao* 報) in promoting a special sense of children's gratitude towards their parents simply because they brought them into life. Students found it evidently disproportional or unjust especially in the case of feeling obliged to ensure reverent care for one's parents, if they did not take care of or treated the child badly in his young years. For them, such demand does not seem to be conforming to the general Confucian principle of exemplary behaviour, namely, teaching by one's example, or the Golden rule of putting oneself in the place of the other; treating others in such a way as you would like to be treated. The students raise a question: How can I be reverent to my parents, if they do not respect me? They evidently fail to understand the intergenerational "transitivity" of filial behaviour, which means that bad treatment of one's parents in response to their previous bad behaviour will show an example of such behaviour to one's children or the next generation.

In response to the third question, one student, like a true Confucian, admitted, that the principles of *xiao* are grounded on the most fundamental value, which, if realized, can bring all other values into harmony. The very idea of respecting one's parents as the source of one's life forms the "essence" of the harmonious society, since if one shows reverence to his/her parents, then he/she will do the same with regard to other people and himself/herself. He/she will naturally develop the habit to consider the consequences and impact of his/her deeds and words on other people, first of all, family members. Another student expressed the belief that ethics of family reverence could be helpful in overcoming such vices as over-indulging in alcohol and laziness, which are very urgent problems in present Lithuanian society. As he says, this could be achieved only by realizing not only one's rights, but also duties, first of all the duties to one's family and parents,

simply by understanding that one's bad behaviour primarily harms the reputation and feelings of one's family members. Also, almost all students admitted that, since parents are the first form of authority we come to know, the lack of respect and obedience towards them could ultimately result in the negation of authority figures in general.

All of my students repeat the remark by Smith mentioned above, namely, that the very Confucian idea of filial reverence for one's parents and taking care of them in their old age is very relevant for contemporary Western societies, since in most of them this virtue has almost disappeared because of the crisis of the responsibility and duty, as well as of the traditional family institution. Most people prefer to live by themselves, fulfilling only their own individual needs, isolating themselves from the society and from the family, abandoning or ignoring their parents, and even resisting normal communication with them. Thus, what Lithuanians (as Westerners) can learn from *xiao* ethics is how to respect not only one's parents, but old people and old age in general. According to one student, discussing filial piety through the examples of model behaviour may work as a mirror, which can improve the relations between children and parents in Lithuania.

However, this remark leads me to the final question of this research, namely, which examples of filial piety are relevant for us today? My students, like many Western Sinology students, usually discover this Chinese virtue mainly from classical sources, as did the Chinese themselves in Imperial China. Those sources were helpful not only in forming ethical ideals of filial behaviour, but also in putting the background for a number of its supportive institutions, such as the legal system, public opinion, patrilineal kinship organizations, the religious system, and family ownership of property. All those institutions were transformed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century China, and this fact helps to validate the statement, so common in post-Maoist China, about the disappearance of *xiao*. Accordingly, the authority of the classical books has been questioned since then. Some Chinese professors suggest that their Western colleagues whom they met at international conferences should not take "Twenty-four filial examples" seriously, since, according to them, none in China today take those stories as real, nor do they seem an inspiring for Chinese children. Therefore, in the third part of the article, I would like to briefly discuss the studies and insights on the changes of Chinese society and family ethics in post-Maoist China, as presented by Chinese scholars, since their opinion can not be ignored in this kind of research.

## The Transformation of Family Ethics in Post-Maoist China

One of the most “productive” Chinese scholars in this field is Yunxiang Yan, who presented the results of his fieldwork in a few books and many articles published in English. In one of those books he declares that “unconditional filial piety, which was based on the sacredness of parenthood, no longer exists. For younger villagers, intergenerational reciprocity [...] has to be balanced and maintained through consistent exchange. If the parents do not treat their children well or are otherwise not good parents, then the children have reason to reduce the scope and amount of generosity to their parents.” (Yan 2003, 177–78) In other words, the traditional Confucian obligation to unconditionally fulfill one’s role of a filial son, despite the parents failing to fulfill their roles and obligations, seems unreasonable today not only for Western students, but for young Chinese as well. The author illustrates the current state of family relations, and the son-father relations in particular, referring to a story he was told in one village as a common example of the current state of family relations: “When a father could not silence his son during a family discord, he yelled: “Don’t forget I’m still your father”. Without thinking, the son yelled back: “Nowadays it’s hard to tell who’s whose father”. And the dispute ended quickly”. (Yan 2009, 113) Such a tendency in questioning the validity of parental authority, so common in the behaviour of the young Chinese, helps to explain, why the main complaint from the elders is the unfiliality, or rather, the disappearance of filiality. Yunxiang Yan goes even further by concluding that “without the traditional forms of support, the notion of filial piety lost cultural legitimacy and social power”, especially due to the individualization of society, growth of market economy, intergenerational reciprocity and the rise of conjugality, as well as the tendency of grounding the intergenerational relationships on rationality, self-interestedness, autonomy and free-will (Yan 2003, 189).

But the problem lies not only in the loss of the authority of classical books and parental authority, and not even in the disappearance of *xiao* in post-Maoist China, but rather in the confusion or disagreement over the understanding of the duty of filial piety between older and younger generations. This problem was also pointed out clearly by Yunxiang Yan. After studying some village communities, he found that elderly parents very often blamed their children and daughters-in-law for the “lack of respect and concern” (*buxiaoshun* 不孝顺), the disregard of their wishes. Some of them could not stand to see their married son display affection or

intimacy towards his wife outside the bedroom (Yan 2003, 171). However, the married children felt unfairly accused, and saw the real problem not in the disappearance of *xiao*, but rather in the feudal thoughts of the older generation and their obsolete understanding of what it should be. Some young Chinese not only reject the traditional ideas that giving life to a child is the parents' great and totally non-repayable favour. They not only deny the sacredness of parenthood, but even tend to interpret filial piety in terms of individualism and one's own happiness. For example, they ask their parents to pay for their comfortable life (such as new cell phones, travels, drinks in Starbuck's coffeedhop every day), and still consider themselves as filial. The children tend to think that their parents' best hopes and happiness come from their child's happiness, thus "their pursuit of pleasure and comfort in life should be viewed as their way of fulfilling the duty of filial piety" (Yan 2011, 37).

The same opinion regarding the existence of the disagreement over the meaning of filial piety among two generations is held by another Chinese sociologist, Wu Fei, who concentrates his research on the issue of suicide in contemporary China. Through the analysis of the specific cases and suicide stories he shows how often such disagreement or misunderstanding leads to the suicide of the parents, revealing the change of power in family relationships. As he remarks, many children today think that filial piety only requires economic support, while what their parents expect from them is proper respect and something more than material assistance, that is, emotional and moral care. If they do not receive it, the most extreme way of their resistance is committing suicide. In his survey and conclusions he almost repeats the words of Yan, mentioned above: "most elders agree that filial piety is a big problem in contemporary China. However, young people do not agree. They still consider filial piety important and don't think of themselves as unfilial, however, their conception of filial piety is different from that of their elders" (Wu 2011, 221). Young Chinese feel confused too often, failing to know how to treat their old parents in order to make them feel comfortable and satisfied. On the other hand, another part of suicides in post-Maoist China is the suicide committed by the children because of failing to fulfill their duty of filial piety. Such kind of suicides is traditional, but the fact that they still exist in modern society prevents one from any one-sided conclusions about the disappearance of the ethics of filial piety in contemporary China. Perhaps the best term to describe the current state and treatment of filial piety in contemporary China would be "confusion".

## Conclusions

The understanding of *xiao* and its relevance in the contemporary Western or global world, as well as its application in social and family practices and ideals, is complicated due to a number of factors, such as irreconcilable differences between Confucian and Christian religious ideas, the adjustment of authoritative texts to the changing historical circumstances. The most important factor is the confusion of its treatment in contemporary China itself, which stems from the diffusion and confrontation between traditional Chinese and modern (mostly Western) social values and ideas. However, in no ways does such complexity of the viewpoints on *xiao* hinder the possibility to emulate or practice this virtue in one's relations with parents in whichever culture. For this, one has simply remember that for Chinese, filial conduct must be judged by the intentions, not by acts; for “judged by acts, there would not be a filial son in the world.” (Smith 2002, 173)

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