FILIAL PIETY

A Cross-Cultural Comparison and its Implications for the Well-Being of Older Parents

ABSTRACT
The purpose of this article is to compare and contrast the concept of filial piety in Chinese culture and American culture and to discuss the relationship between expectations of filial piety and the well-being of older adults. In both cultures, filial piety is a socially approved virtue and contains attributes of respecting, caring for, and loving the parents. The differences include: obedience versus confrontation of parents; limited versus unlimited responsibility to parents; and a difference in the concept of legitimate support. Based on previous literature, the relationship between the expectations of filial piety and parents' well-being was explored, and nursing implications were suggested. Nonetheless, there is no single intervention that could fit all clients from one culture. Nurses need to examine to what extent clients value their culture of origin.

YU-TZU DAI, RN, PhD, AND MARGARET F. DIMOND, RN, PhD

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The family is the major provider of care for older adults (Dai, 1995; Linsey, Dodd, & Chen, 1985). Culture specifies the roles and functions of each member in the family and decides who the family caregiver should be and how the care should be given. Filial piety is an important cultural concept that influences family caregiving to elderly parents (Sung, 1995). However, filial piety has been a relatively underexplored topic in gerontological literature. Based on a review of literature, the concepts of filial piety in traditional Chinese culture and American culture are compared and contrasted, and the implications of filial piety for the well-being of elderly individuals are discussed. This article offers valuable information regarding parental care in different cultural contexts for practitioners and researchers.

The concept of filial piety can be addressed from the child's or from the parents' perspectives. "Filial responsibility" refers to the children's perspective, and "expectation of filial piety" refers to the parents' perspective. Filial responsibility is a set of role concepts regarding how a child should treat a parent (Sung, 1992). Filial responsibility is learned through socialization and can be modified continuously throughout an individual's developmental or acculturation process (Yang, Yeh, & Huang, 1988). Expectation of filial piety is the parents' perception of how children should treat them and care for them. Both the children's and parents' perspectives of filial piety may affect the children's performance of filial care (Yang et al., 1988; Yu, 1983), intergenerational relationships (Huang, 1980), and parents' morale (Seelbach & Sauer, 1977).

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN AMERICAN AND CHINESE CULTURES

A review of the literature on filial piety and filial responsibility has revealed some similarities and differences in the concept between traditional Chinese culture and American culture. American culture primarily refers to the culture which originates from Western society. In terms of similarities, filial piety is a socially approved virtue. Most people in both cultures endorse the general notions of filial piety (Brody, Johnsen, & Fulcomer, 1984; Huang, 1980; Seelbach & Sauer, 1977).

A literature review by Selig, Tomlinson, and Hickey (1991) revealed that filial piety in Western society includes three aspects:

- Life-long parental reverence.
- Repaying parents a debt of gratitude for the care they provided earlier.
- Care for parents is an expression of friendship and love.

Seelbach and Sauer (1977) operationalized the American concept of filial responsibility into:

- Living arrangement, e.g., living close to parents.
- Caregiving, e.g., caring for elderly parents when they are sick.
- Financial support, e.g., providing financial help to parents when necessary.
- Visiting or corresponding with parents regularly.
- Retaining a feeling of responsibility for parents.

Therefore, filial piety in American culture mainly consists of emotional support to parents, substantial aid to parents, and a sense of gratitude and responsibility to parents.

In traditional Chinese culture, the concept of filial piety originates from Confucian teaching. The Book of Rites and The Book of Filial Piety (Confucius, 1982) are the two earliest and most fundamental pieces of literature regarding the concept of filial piety in Chinese culture. Three important elements of filial piety are specified in The Book of Rites: respecting and loving parents, bringing no dishonor to parents, and taking good care of parents (Sung, 1995). By using concept analysis, researchers (Yang et al., 1988) have identified four attributes of traditional filial piety in Chinese culture:

- Respect and care for parents.
- Obedience to parents.
- Protection and glorification of parents.
- Worship of deceased parents and ancestors.

Filial piety is a socially approved virtue and contains attributes of respecting, caring for, and loving parents in both traditional Chinese and American cultures. The basic motivation for filial care (i.e., care for parents according to filial piety) and the major attributes of filial piety in both cultures are similar. In comparing Eastern and Western cultures, earlier scholars tended to be more ethnocentric in their perspectives. They were more likely to stress the positive side and be unaware of the negative side of their own culture. Unlike Lin (1982) who claimed "in the matter of attitude toward age, the difference is absolute, and the East and the West take exactly opposite point of view" (p. 95), this article asserts that the foundation of filial piety in both cultures is children's affection and responsibility for their parents.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AMERICAN AND CHINESE CULTURES

The differences of filial piety...
### CONTRAST OF THE CONCEPT OF FILIAL PIETY BETWEEN AMERICAN AND CHINESE CULTURES

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between Chinese and American cultures are addressed here in terms of three aspects: parent-child interaction, filial responsibility, and the concept of legitimate support to parents (Table).

**Parent-Child Interaction**

**Obedience and Interdependence.**

The Confucian teachings (B.C. 551 to B.C. 479) are basically a secular social role theory. Confucius’s theory has dominated Chinese society for 2500 years (Wen, 1989). The foundation of this social role theory was based on five cardinal interpersonal relationships: sovereign-subject, father-son, older brother-younger brother, husband-wife, and friend-friend. Among these five relationships, three of them (father-son, older brother-younger brother, and husband-wife) are intrafamilial relationships. The other two relationships (sovereign-subject and friend-friend) are defined as the extension of intrafamilial relationships. The father-son relationship is specified primarily by regulating filial piety. Sons are expected to take major responsibility for filial care. A contemporary Chinese philosopher, Yutang Lin (1982), postulated the reason for the unique emphasis on filial piety in Chinese culture. He claims that parental love is an inborn, natural affection. Therefore, there is no need for special emphasis. However, filial piety may not automatically occur. Affection for parents and grandparents (or ancestors) is “something that stands more in need of being taught by culture” (Lin, 1982, p. 94). Obedience and loyalty were emphasized in these formalized rules, which remained in force until fairly recently (Huang, 1980).

The power of parents is managed in an authoritarian manner throughout life in the Chinese family. Thus, children reared in Chinese society become more socially oriented and tend to be more submissive to authority. Nonetheless, to avoid confrontation or conflict, adult children may conform to their parents’ ideas superficially but maintain their autonomy in decision making regarding certain critical events (King & Bond, 1985). A recent study by Yeh (in press) indicated that “obedience to parents” had been less valued by the 1995 adult cohort than by the 1988 adult cohort. However, “respect and care for parents” was still valued similarly by both cohorts. Yeh (in press) maintained that filial piety is a construct composed of two major concepts: an unchangeable core concept such as “respect and care for parents” and a modifiable concept such as “obedience to parents,” which could be loosened in the process of modernization. Researchers should treat filial piety as a construct with multiple dimensions.

**Confrontation and Autonomy.**

Cross-cultural study revealed that Americans are taught to be independent from their families, unlike the Chinese who are taught to be interdependent with their families (Szalay, Strohl, Fu, & Loa, 1994). Adult children of Americans are treated as fully independent and autonomous individuals by parents. Consequently, they prefer to rely on their own capacities when analyzing situations and reaching decisions. According to Gorer (1948), “The making of America demanded that the father should be rejected both as a model and a source of authority” (p. 30).

American children see their parents much more as friends than Chinese children do (Szalay et al., 1994). There is more of an egalitarian relationship between parents and adult children. Challenge and confrontation are socially acceptable in parent-child interaction (Hsu, 1985). Generational confrontation is considered an essential process for the formation of a child’s individual and social identity. Additionally, sons and daughters are expected to be equally responsible for filial care.

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Filial Responsibility

Unlimited Responsibility. In traditional Chinese culture, filial piety is a family-centered cultural construction. Filial children are expected to sacrifice their own interests in physical, financial, and social aspects for the well-being of their parents or family. This characteristic has been emphasized through classic and modern Chinese literature. As an example, consider the Chinese classic, The Twenty-Four Stories of Filial Piety (Wu & Wu, 1998) and a modern literary work which documents the stories of recent filial piety prize winners, The Portraits of Filial Behaviors (The Committee of Chinese Culture Renaissance, 1985). The authors found that the critical factors that bring filial children to social recognition were sacrifice and a strong sense of devotion which surpass the level of tolerance of ordinary people. With the modernization of society, people have started questioning the justifiable level of self-sacrifice. However, self-sacrifice to a certain extent for the well-being of parents or family is still acceptable and respectable in Chinese society.

Limited Responsibility. In American culture, filial piety requires adult children to bear a limited responsibility in caring for their parents. Findings in a qualitative study (Brody et al., 1984) indicate that the adult children endorsed the notion that filial care should be a limited responsibility. Subjects in the study believed that children should not be required to over-sacrifice for parents’ needs. They considered that adjusting family schedules and helping with costs of health care were appropriate; however, adjusting work schedules and sharing households were not. The ethical tradition did not support an absolute filial obligation (Selig et al., 1991). Callahan (1988) questioned how much demand parents could make on children to self-sacrifice for filial care. He maintained that Western moralities have been careful to distinguish between duty and supererogation. Individuals are not supposed to sacrifice their selfhood and their own future for the sake of another, even parents.

Concept of Legitimate Support to Parents

Expected Self-sacrifice and Devotion. In Chinese culture, all supports to parents are considered legitimate. The whole concept of life is based on mutual assistance and interdependence within the family (Lin, 1982). Despite the parents’ level of self-care, the offering of services or support to parents is appreciated. It is a way to express children’s gratitude and love to the parents. To be taken care of is considered a privilege of older parents (Dai, 1995). Many Chinese people remain reserved about expressing love or emotion verbally (Hsu, 1985). Therefore, Chinese children tend to demonstrate love and care by taking care of their parents’ bodily functions and needs. Parents are always proud of their dependable and serving children. Instead of believing that self-reliance is an indispensable necessity, Chinese elders consider self-reliance to be a significant indicator of health and well-being (Chen, 1991; Dai, 1995). The manner in which parents balance the needs for self-reliance and their children’s offering of support remains to be examined.

For Chinese people, filial piety is a life-long responsibility. Young children are inculcated with teachings of filial piety in everyday life through parents’ interactions with grandparents, parents’ teachings, lectures in school, newspapers, books, soap operas, theater, and contests for filial piety. This social stimulation becomes instilled in children’s minds and value systems.

Every child is expected to be actively involved in promoting parents’ well-being, thereby facilitating the harmony and functions of the family. Because filial piety is so deeply rooted in people’s lives, there is a strong power of social sanction for unfilial behaviors. If a person is criticized as not being supportive to parents or of being unfilial, such criticism elicits a strong feeling of shame and guilt.

Expected to Meet Basic Needs. Most American elders wish to remain independent in every aspect for as long as possible. Parents are reluctant to depend on anyone for financial assistance or help with daily activities. Too much support or aid is considered illegitimate. Respecting the parents’ need for independence is appreciated. It is generally accepted that a competent adult should be responsible for his own well-being. Seelbach and Sauer (1977) defined the concept of filial responsibility as the adult’s obligation to meet parents’ “basic needs.” American children are not expected to do as much filial care as Chinese children. Besides affection or information exchange, parents are not willing to receive help which exceeds their basic needs from their children while they are still capable.

The major differences in practice of filial piety mainly result from the individualism of American culture and the family-centered concept of Chinese culture. However, which practice of filial piety is more benefi-
cial to the well-being of parents and their adult children?

**RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FILIAL PIETY AND WELL-BEING**

Based on their concept of filial piety, parents have expectations on how they should be treated by their children. However, the literature has seldom explored elderly parents' expectations of filial piety and the effects of these expectations on elderly parents' health and adaptation. Western literature indicates that responding to higher parental needs may result in negative feelings in children and may eventually erode their emotional bond with parents (Quinn, 1983). In addition, a high expectation of filial piety may result in dependency, thereby impeding an older parent's drive to actively cope (Hesse, Campion, & Karamouz, 1984). Seelbach and Sauer (1977) found in their study that levels of expectation of filial piety are significantly and inversely associated with parents' morale, even when the variables of gender, age, and marital status are controlled in multivariate analysis. Higher parental demands may produce a strain on intergenerational relationships.

Huang (1980) examined the effects of intergenerational differences in concepts of filial piety on the level of harmony in the parent-child relationship. She found that the greater the difference in the parent-child concepts of filial piety, the less harmony in the parent-child relationship. Yang and Chandler (1992), investigating the intergenerational relationships of elderly Chinese people with their adult children in Zhejiang province in China, found the increased gap between expectations and performance of filial piety can result in intergenerational conflict, grievance, self-restraint, anger, and frustration, and subsequently can become detrimental to the well-being of elderly parents.

In a study to verify the relationship between the expectation of filial piety and the well-being of parents, Dai (1995) examined 150 Chinese elderly in Taiwan. The findings did not confirm that the expectation of filial piety is associated with the well-being of older adults as predicted. Further analysis of interview data revealed that some parents tended to lower their expectations to protect themselves against grievance or disappointment. The gap between parents' expectations and children's performance might be minimized through constant testing and adjustment. Two quotes from the statements of subjects shed light on the effects of lowering the expectation of filial piety.

Mr. Chin, a 60-year-old retired accountant, stated:

Children are different from before. In the old days, when children earned 10 cents, they would give 8 cents to their parents. Nowadays, you consider a child to be good if he gives you 2 cents. I don't expect much of them. Times are different.

Mr. Chen, a 58-year-old retired businessman said:

Don't demand too much. It's better to lower your expectation on your children or wife, then you won't feel unhappy or have any grievances. I lower my expectation of others, making my expectations easy to be achieved. I feel satisfied. Once I am satisfied, I feel happy. It's always easier to change myself than to demand others to change for me.

These are examples of parents who are able to adjust their expectations of filial piety. However, some parents who are reluctant or unable to make adjustments in their expectations will experience grievance and dissatisfaction toward their children. This, in turn, will damage their sense of well-being.

Although the literature did not conclusively confirm the relationship between the expectation of filial piety and the well-being of older parents, parental adjustment of expectation of filial piety is worthy of further research.

Names have been changed for anonymity purposes.

**NURSING IMPLICATIONS**

The knowledge and skills of transcultural nursing can advance nurses' competence in assessing, intervening, and evaluating health problems of their clients of different cultural origin (Sophier, 1981). Gaining more awareness of cultural differences is essential for all gerontological nurses. Nurses should not assume that differences in concepts of care or

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**KEYPOINTS**

**FILIAL PIETY**


1. Filial piety is an important cultural concept that influences family caregiving to elderly patients.

2. The different presentations of filial piety in American and Chinese cultures may exert both positive and negative impacts on elderly caregiving in the two societies.

3. Nurses need to be concerned with older clients' adjustment of expectations of filial piety while they are trying to promote well-being of older clients.
health behaviors are problems of the client. With an understanding of the concept of filial piety and its association with intergenerational relationships, nurses will gain a better foundation for dealing with clients' family issues.

In regard to obedience versus confrontation, nurses need to respect the need of autonomy for American clients and the need of parental authority for Chinese clients. In addition, the principle of obedience to parents in Chinese culture is often extended to authority figures, such as professionals. Chinese elders may be unable to verbalize their anxieties or doubts concerning treatments and procedures in an attempt to avoid confrontation with their nurses. Furthermore, sensitivity to the underlying meaning of intergenerational interactions between older clients and their family members is essential. A true opinion may not be publicly expressed by a family member in a Chinese family. Separate interviews with the parent and the child may be required to explore a better solution for a family dispute.

Minimizing the gap between the expectations of filial piety of elders and the performance of their children may be a way to reduce grievances and disappointment. Active listening and family consultation can be helpful to both parents and their children in promoting mutual understanding or in adjusting the gap between expectations and performance. Nevertheless, there is no single intervention which could fit all clients from one culture (O’Hara & Zhan, 1994). Nurses need to know to what extent clients value their culture of origin. An adult son of a Chinese elderly person is not necessarily more obedient or more supportive in physical care to his parents than his American counterpart. Sensitivity to cultural differences and better competence in professional practice can and should be developed by nursing professionals.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Yu-Tzu Dai, RN, PhD is Associate Professor, School of Nursing, National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan, and Margaret E. Dimond, RN, PhD is Professor, Department of Behavioral Nursing and Health Systems, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington.

Address correspondence to Yu-Tzu Dai, RN, PhD, Associate Professor, School of Nursing, College of Medicine, National Taiwan University, 1, Jen-Ai Road, Section 1, Taipei, Taiwan.