The Role of Filial Piety in Chinese Buddhism:
A Reassessment

Jan Yün-hua

In its long history and encounters with different cultures, Buddhism underwent many changes and modifications to accommodate itself to new situations. Although these changes may not be apparent when the religion remains in the same cultural area, they become more visible when it encounters a different civilization. To meet the demands of new situations, especially new ethical standards, Buddhism often shifted its emphasis as it spread to new lands. The integration of the Chinese esteem for filial piety by Chinese Buddhist leaders is one of the best illustrations of this flexibility.

The emphasis on filial piety in Chinese Buddhism is well-known and has been studied by many scholars, especially Kenneth K. S. Ch'en and Ryōshū Michibata.1 Thereafter, scholars took it for granted that filial piety occupied a special place in Chinese Buddhism. This conclusion remained unchallenged over many decades, as the aforementioned studies convinced readers with powerful arguments and persuasive evidence. The situation remained so until recent years, when scholars such as Gregory Schopen and John Strong pointed out that filial piety was important to Indian Buddhists as well, and therefore could not be regarded as a unique feature of Chinese Buddhism.2 No subsequent research has been done on this subject. Was the role of filial piety in Indian Buddhism identical to its role in China? Or is it indeed a unique feature of Chinese Buddhism? This chapter will reassess these questions. Viewed from a broad perspective, I will argue that Hajime Nakamura's position is more realistic, namely that filial piety was a minor virtue in Buddhist ethics of India, but became a supreme virtue in China.3 Since Nakamura addressed this matter merely en passant, a more in-depth study is called for.

In the following pages I will attempt to demonstrate how and why filial piety played a more important role in Chinese Buddhism than it did in
India. Speaking from a political perspective, the value placed on filial piety by the Chinese was closely related to the Chinese imperial government, which was much more powerful than its Indian counterpart. In the context of social behavior, filial piety was very highly esteemed by Chinese clans as well as by the society at large. The importance accorded filial piety also was reflected in social institutions, educational practices, and expressions of popular culture. This emphasis on filial piety not only persisted throughout China's long history, but even occasionally manifested itself in extreme forms.

Since our focus here is on Buddhist ethics and the modern world, the topic of this discussion may not seem appropriate. Yet, a connection does exist. Buddhism views the phenomenal world as the endless manifestation of Samsāra, so no essential difference exists between the past and present. An old Chinese saying testifies to this truth: "None should forget that the old is the teacher of future" (ch’ien-shih pu-wang, hou-shih chih shih). Thus, a re-assessment of filial piety in Chinese Buddhism should be relevant to modern society.

FILIAL PIETY IN CHINESE TRADITION

Students of the comparative study of political systems recognize the differences between centralized government in India and in China. In China, the central government controlled the land and people effectively throughout most of Chinese history, while in India hundreds of rajas ruled different localities such that the central government remained nominal throughout most of Indian history. As Buddhism spread into China, Buddhists immediately realized this difference. Consequently, the conflict between political power and religious autonomy, between the economic interests of the state and those of the Buddhist community, along with ethical differences and a host of other conflicts, became persistent problems for Chinese Buddhism. The pressures resulting from these social, political, ethical, and ideological differences for the Chinese Buddhists far surpassed the experiences of their Indian counterparts.

When Buddhism spread to East Asia, China was under the control of the Han Dynasty. One of the core concepts of the Han imperial ideology that the imperial government undertook measures to enforce was filial piety (hsiao). Ethically speaking, the Han government regarded filial piety as the highest principle of social behavior. Thus, the Classic of Filial Piety (Hsiao Ching) was promoted, and a doctor was appointed to teach it at the Imperial University. Simultaneously, filial piety was enforced by legal and moral regulations: those who violated it were punished severely, while those who exemplified its practice were rewarded. In addition to these official measures, filial piety was honored by the population at large, and highly praised in popular folk literature. The well-known twenty-four stories of filial sons even associated supernatural powers with filial practices.

The promotion of filial piety as the supreme virtue was deeply entrenched in the Han dynasty. The official histories of the dynasty, the Ch’ien Han-shu and Hou Han-shu, note that most of the Han emperors included the character for "filial piety" in their posthumous titles. This tradition was carefully and continuously maintained throughout the dynasty, from Emperor Hsiao-hui (r. 195-188 B.C.E.) until the last emperor, Hsiao-hsien (r. 189-220 C.E.). Although the proclamation of the posthumous title of a ruler may seem a routine event of no great significance, the consistent use of the word hsiao in these titles indicates how important this virtue was to the Han emperors. Not only did the rulers highly value filial piety, but their officials were expected to observe the principle in their public and private lives. For example, according to the rules of ting-yu, when an officer's parent died, he was obliged to take a leave of absence from his government post in order to fulfill his filial duties and express his grief. Violation of this custom led to dismissal from one's government position.

The theoretical underpinning of filial piety is found in the Classic of Filial Piety. Although Confucian tradition claims that this was expounded by Confucius himself in response to a request from his disciple, Tseng Sen, the claim has been challenged by many scholars. During the Han period the text came to be revered as one of the Confucian Classics and has been among the most influential works in Chinese history. The assumption that it constituted Confucius' instructions on human conduct raised its status above all the other Classics. Philosophically speaking, the book is largely practical in its orientation and the system of thought it contains is not well-organized. It even asserts certain points which conflict with the other Confucian Classics. However, in terms of providing practical guidelines and expounding the doctrine of filial piety, it deserves to be ranked above the other Classics. It has been loved and studied by many scholars, and various rulers have written royal commentaries on it, expressing their appreciation. Since the rulers promoted it, their officials joined in the chorus of praise, either due to their own enthusiasm or simply to please the emperor. Hence, the virtue of filial piety became the focal point of Chinese ethics and culture.

The imperial government's promotion of filial piety was not limited to education alone; it further enforced the ethical principle by legal means. If one violated this norm, the punishment was severe. If the offense was judged to be serious, the offender was banished, as Ryōshū Michibata has noted numerous examples of how unfilial children were dealt with by imperial law in traditional China. Others were beheaded, hanged, or even skinned alive.

In contrast with the severe and sometimes cruel punishment meted out to the unfilial, the imperial government rewarded filial individuals with the
highest honors. Special chapters were included in official histories to praise those who exemplified filial behavior. The section headings included "Biographies of Those Who are Filial and Loving to Their Brothers" (Hsiao-yu Chuan), "Biographies of Practitioners of Filial Piety" (Hsiao-hsing Chuan), and "Biographies of Those Who Excelled in Filial Piety and Righteousness" (Hsiao-yi Chuan). This Chinese love of filial piety is broad in scope and persisted over time, involving large numbers of people. Perhaps no other civilization has ever emphasized this moral principle so enthusiastically.

In addition to being promoted by the government, filial piety also enjoyed high regard on a popular level. The saying "Filial piety is prior to all good practices" reflects this popular sentiment. One must remember that Chinese society is based on a rural economy. Blood relationships held preeminent importance in the social structure. Most of the large clans in China had their own family temples for the purpose of ancestral worship. These temples also functioned as centers for observing the behavior of family members. Needless to say, filial piety was one of the most important factors at work here. The existence of the family temple insured the observance of filial piety, meaning that even in the remotest corners of China, where civil law was not effective, filial piety was maintained by means of these temples. In traditional Chinese society, the family is the basic social unit.

FILIAL PIETY AND CHINESE BUDDHISM

Soon after Buddhism spread throughout China, followers of this newly imported religion began to feel the pressures of the Chinese value of filial piety, as set forth both in Taoist and Buddhist literature. T'ang Yung-tung has pointed out that the T'ai-p'ing Ching contains a statement accusing the Buddhists of four destructive practices, such that they were "unfit to be instructors of people, or teachers of the laws." The first two of these four practices are directly related to filial piety: "First, they are unfaithful as they reject their parents. Second, they have abandoned their wives, and thus disdain propagation and are without descendants."

The pressures exerted by filial piety also are evident in Buddhist sources, the earliest being the Mou-tzu Il-huo lun. When ethical problems are discussed, the first question that arose concerned filial piety. Opponents of Buddhism pointed out that in order to become a monk one had to shave one's head, thus violating the injunction found in the Classic of Filial Piety that, since "body, skin, and hair are gifts received from one's father and mother, one dare not damage them." Similarly, the renunciation of marriage and family life was a serious matter, for being "without a descendant is the most serious offense to filial piety." The opponent of Buddhism further demanded, "Now the monks have abandoned wife, given up money and property, and some of them refuse to marry in their lifetime.

How could they act in such an unfortunate and unfilial manners?" Mou-tzu, the Buddhist apologist, concedes that "filial piety is the most important means to highest virtue," however this defense is not based on Buddhist scripture, but rather on the Confucian Classic of Filial Piety. Apart from ethical questions, other topics, such as life and death, spirits and deities, and methods for attaining immortality are discussed, also based on the Confucian Classics. All the evidence indicates that Buddhists were heavily pressured by the Chinese orientation toward filial piety from the beginning of its history in China.

The pressure to conform to cultural standards of filial piety continued for Chinese Buddhists in the later period of Buddhist history. Kenneth Ch'en has pointed out that, in order respond to this pressure, the Buddhists translated several Indian Buddhist scriptures related to filial piety, attempting to show the Chinese people that Buddhism also valued this virtue. However, these texts failed to impress the critics, and the Buddhist had to find other ways to counter their criticism.

As a result, certain "counterfeit scriptures" on filial piety were "translated." The Fu-mu en-chung ching is a good example. In this scripture the hardships and labor experienced by parents in bringing up their children are described in detail. The efforts of a mother are depicted with special vividness. In a male-dominated society, such as traditional China, such a positive acknowledgement of female resources was welcomed by the people. The story in which the character Mu-lian rescues his Mother from hell became a popular subject for artists, taking many forms.

As time passed, the Chinese Buddhists continued to pay attention to the virtue of filial piety, producing more works and rituals related to the subject. The popularity of filial piety increased in the later period of the religion. Some influential Buddhist scholars even emphasized the significance of filial piety. In their opinion, filial piety was no longer simply an ethical principle, but a cosmological virtue. Tsung-mi (780-841 c.e.), for example, stated:

Starting with the primal beginning a great virtue that fills the space between Heaven and Earth, common both to humans and gods, nobles and humbles, what is respected is the [fundamental] principle both by Confucians and Buddhists, is the Way of Filial Piety alone."

This statement describes the virtue of filial piety as existing prior to the formation of the world, transcending both social status and religious faith. Filial piety is no longer merely an ethical virtue but a metaphysical force, that is, not an empty theory but a concept deeply rooted in Buddhist monastic discipline. Tsung-mi states that "the scriptures explain the principle of the wisdom, the monastic rules explain the rules of conduct. Although there are thousands of practices, all of them regard filial piety as
choice. It was never intended that they be allowed to occupy a temple that is registered [by the government].

As this document reveals, in Sung China, some ministers and officials were allowed to have family temples in their respective cemeteries in recognition of their worthiness to worship their ancestors with dignity.

This action is closely related to the value assigned to filial piety. Once the temple received a Name-board, signifying official recognition of the establishment, it enjoyed tax-exempt status. The bestowal of a Name-board on temples was an accepted practice in imperial China, qualifying the temple to display a plaque inscribed with the characters "constructed by royal ordinance." Although this practice has a long history in Chinese Buddhism, the point at which the temples began to be built in private cemeteries for the purpose of ancestral worship is unclear. The event recorded in the Fo-tsu t'ung-chi seems to be the earliest known case of its kind, indicating that the practice existed before the time of Ta-kuan and combined filial piety, bureaucratic power, royal ordinances, and Buddhist interests.

Since the imperial government in China was essentially bureaucratic, the connection between the Buddhist establishment and the state bureaucracy may have benefited the religion. This would mean that the Buddhist establishment could enjoy the protection of related families, as well as a tax exemption. These potential benefits, however, were never realized, as the report in the Fo-tsu t'ung-chi points out. Once a Buddhist establishment came under the control of these families, the monks could be enslaved and the monastic properties would be controlled by the families. The record states:

In recent years, when scholars passed the examinations and became qualified for government service, they at once wished to reap the benefits of the system: to occupy a well-known and registered temple for family sacrifices to ancestors and regard it as a private estate they had purchased. Most of the younger members of these families behaved badly: they received bribes from mediocre monks to appoint them abbots, accepting rice, salt, firewood, and charcoal from the temple, and used the temple's income to cover family expenses.

This usurpation of temple properties in the name of filial duty is recorded in Buddhist sources. According to the Fo-tsu t'ung-chi, a certain monk named Ssu-lien wrote a letter to Duke Tu Ch'ing-hsien with a similar complaint:

The fools of today are . . . unable to purchase cemetery land to worship their ancestors, but instead occupy monastic lands as family estates. Some of them even intend to take not one, but several temples for their families, thus usurping all the property of the occupied temples. They demand rice today, and vegetables
tomorrow, charcoal, firewood, building materials, and even luxuries thereafter. Whenever a monk [in the temples] dies, they confiscate all his possessions as part of their family treasure. I have often heard the members of such a high placed family say: "Once a family temple is granted, all the properties, even a single needle or a thread, belong to my family."

From the aforementioned statement, it is clear that the occupation of monastic property by powerful families in the name of filial piety continued into the Southern Sung period; indeed the situation had worsened by that time. This process follows a distinct pattern: first a temple was taken over and changed into a family property for the purpose of worshipping the ancestors at a family cemetery; a Name-board was applied for from the government; then other Buddhist temples were occupied in the same way. Once this was accomplished, all the temples that had been claimed were under the control of the family, which then demanded that the temple supply all its resources to them, so that even the property of dead monks was automatically claimed by the family.

If this were an isolated incident, it would not have been a cause for concern among the Buddhist monks. Unfortunately that was not the case. Official as well as monastic records included in the Fo-ts'ou t'ung-chi bear this out:

[Officials in high positions often possess more than one or two family establishments. If each of them is permitted to occupy several temples, then most of the reputed temples will disappear. If the state requires more taxes, the burden has to be shouldered by others. Is not this a burden to the people?]"18

This tendency not only worried Buddhists, but also concerned the people at large, because once the Buddhist temples were transferred to private hands and became tax exempt, the burden of providing state revenues was passed on to others.

The worsening situation also is reflected in Buddhist records. A monk from the T'ien-T'ai school writes:

Now, most of the well-known monasteries and religious places in all provinces are following this trend. Once the monasteries become private temples for family merit, the abbotships are occupied by mediocre individuals, preoccupied with supplying the goods demanded by the families. How then can they attend to the life and needs of the monks in the temple? Those who earnestly are searching for masters and the Way throughout the south and the north are disappointed and saddened by the current situation.19

Several conclusions can be drawn from the cases cited:

---In the name of filial piety, many powerful families took Buddhist temples as part of their private estates, such that both Buddhist communities and the common people were seriously affected.

---The cases recorded in official and monastic sources refer not to isolated events, but were commonplace in "all provinces," thus posing a critical problem for monks and common people alike. Due to this crisis, a monk from the T'ien-T'ai school requested the minister to order that the department concerned instruct the provincial authority to "make a report on actual situation and return the properties"20 to the original owners.

---In the process of transferring the monastic properties to the powerful families, some Buddhist monks became accomplices and played a perfidious role. They cooperated with the families to acquire the temples in exchange for personal gain. This proves that in terms of Buddhist ethics and society, past or present, the quality of the members of the order is of the utmost importance. If they are well-trained and upright, Buddhist doctrines, including Buddhist ethics, can be adapted successfully and beneficially to new situations.

On the other hand, if the monks are mediocre, not only do Buddhist ethics fail to transform people, but the religion itself degenerates.

CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions can be derived from our discussion. First, recent research by scholars has pointed out that filial piety is not a new virtue unique to Chinese Buddhism, but in fact existed in India from early times. This corrects the previous false impression, which was unbalanced and partial. Nonetheless, as we have seen, filial piety played a much more significant role in Chinese Buddhism than it had in India, due to both external and internal conditions.

The relevant external conditions include the strong emphasis placed on filial piety by Confucian ethics, which constitutes the main stream of Chinese civilization. Imperial patronage, official promotion, legal enforcement, clan support, and education all worked to make filial piety the supreme virtue in China. These factors were lacking in India. By way of example, we can consider differences between royal patronage of filial piety in India as compared to China. The rulers in ancient India usually adopted "Mahārāja" or "Cakravartin-rāja" as part of their official titles. To my knowledge, none of them adopted titles equivalent to "filial" in their royal titles. This differs greatly from the practice of the Han rulers in China, most of whom used the character "hsiao" in their posthumous titles throughout the four hundred
years of the dynasty's history. This single fact distinguishes the respective socio-cultural situations and their effects on Buddhist ethics in the two cultures.

As the term "Chinese Buddhism" denotes, all Chinese Buddhists are Chinese, meaning they were influenced by both Buddhist and Chinese traditions. Apart from these dual influences, Chinese Buddhists lived in the midst of Chinese society and culture. Regardless of their thoughts or actions, they could not remain entirely aloof from their cultural context. Throughout the long history of Buddhism, its followers abandoned their family names and referred to themselves as "shih" (a derivative of Śākyamuni Buddha). Nonetheless, they were unable to free themselves completely from Chinese tradition. In order to counter the pressures posed by traditional values, Chinese Buddhists translated relevant counterfeit "scriptures" on the subject, thus hoping to make their views more acceptable to Chinese society at large.

Due to differing socio-cultural contexts, the treatment of filial piety also differs in the Buddhist writings of China and India. In the scriptures translated from Indian sources, the role of filial piety is usually depicted as follows:

The four heavenly kings gathered the members of their respective domains, and spoke to them thusly: "All of you should go and inspect all places in the world. You should watch whether or not the people are looking after their parents filially, worshiping Śāmaṇa-Brahman reverently, and obeying their superiors respectfully."

Thus, in Indian Buddhist ethics, filial piety was one among many worldly virtues, but certainly not the supreme virtue. In fact, it is only a first step in Buddhist ethics, to be followed by reverence for Śāmaṇa-Brahman, obedience to one's superiors, making religious donations, observing religious rules, and performing religious rites. There is no evidence that filial piety played a role comparable to that asserted by Chinese Buddhist writers. The Chinese monks regard filial piety as a universal and cosmological virtue, the principle of Heaven and Earth, capable of moving spirits and deities. Although inscriptions found in the ruins of Nāgārjuna record that some Indian monks or nuns sought blessings for their parents or relatives, this was not a universal practice in India. Hence, this single case cannot be compared with the epigraphical subjects found in China, as attested to by inscriptions found in the Tun-huang caves, the Buddhist images of the Northern Dynasties, colophons of printed scriptures, and stone inscriptions unearthed at Fang-shan near Beijing.

Pressed by Chinese tradition, Buddhist leaders modified their attitude toward filial piety and elevated it from a secondary into a supreme virtue. Thus Buddhism was made more palatable to Chinese tradition, and was provided with a new foundation for prosperity. At the same time, this move toward filial piety created some unfortunate consequences. During the Sung period, some powerful families usurped Buddhist properties in the name of filial piety, clearly indicating how deeply Buddhists were committed to ethical principles. This was unheard of in Indian Buddhism.

The Buddhist Sangha is respected as one of the Three Treasures. The quality of monks and nuns determines the future of Buddhism, including its ethics. The cases discussed here demonstrate how crucial the quality of monks and nuns is as they apply Buddhist ethics in new and different social contexts. If Sangha members are sincere in their faith, disciplined in their behavior, and cognizant of the limitations inherent in adopting Buddhism to a new situation, they will be successful in their mission. Then Buddhism will prosper and be useful to the new society. However, if they are mediocre and fail to provide proper models for their followers, Buddhism may even be engulfed by the society they had sought to transform.

This discussion of the Buddhist past in China, while not directly focused on modern life, nonetheless does have contemporary relevance. If one looks more deeply, one realizes that filial piety remains one of the central questions confronting Buddhism in the context of Chinese society. A 1987 publication, entitled Filial Piety and Buddhism (Fo-fa yu Hsiao-tao), testifies to this fact. It contains the texts of Yu-lan-p'eng ching, Hsiao-tzu ching, Fu-mu-en Nan-pao ching, and others. The only materials contributed by modern scholarship are a monk's discourses on the Yu-lan-p'eng ching and an academic lecture on the topic. This clearly demonstrates that the past is more closely related to the present in Chinese Buddhism than has been the case in other countries.

NOTES


8. TP, Vol. LI, 3a.

9. TP, Vol. LII, 3a, 3c; 6c.


15. Quoted and translated from TP, Vol. LVIX, 431b-c.

16. TP, Vol. LVIX, 431c.16.

17. TP, Vol. LXIX, 431c.

18. TP, Vol. LXIX, 431c.


21. Quoted and translated from the *Chi-shih ching* in TP, 347a; see similar passages TP, 402a.


SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


