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The Family Institution and Its Role in Education from the Perspective of the Confucius Religion

Chandra Setiawan *

Abstract

This paper examines the concept of family and its relationship with marriage and education from the perspective of the Confucius Religion. The author discusses the importance of love and benevolence (*Ren*), of glorifying *Tian* (Almighty God) and of ethics, as some of the elements in education that strengthen a family unit. In his research, the author applies a qualitative methodology that analyses related written materials critically and textually. Findings reveal that according to Confucius, the goal of education is to become fully human – one who learns and pursues the Confucian core values (*ren, yi, li, zhi, and xin*) – and cultivates and practices them in his day-to-day living. This education, imbued with benevolence, is the manifestation of the family institution.

Keywords: Marriage, family, values, Confucianism, religion.

Introduction

Family is the most important element in one's social life. One family can be compared as "a cell of one nation". When trillions of cells in our body are healthy, we will be in a good health.¹ On the other hand, if cells in our body become weak and wrecked, our whole body will be in trouble and will not work or might even stop. Therefore, marriage and the structure of family are important barometers which determine the health of one nation of state.

The increase of broken families in these several decades has already attracted the attention and concern of global communities. This is also happening in developing countries. Some young adults tend to ask about the relationship between husband and wife and their responsibilities to their parents. There are a lot of young adults who are trying to go against the tradition and creatively looking for personal pleasure. At the same time, elderly people from developed countries are also disappointed towards the younger generation because some of them have forgotten about the

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¹ Margaret Mead and Ken Heyman, *Family*, (New York: A Ridge Press Book Macmillan Co., 1965) pp.77-78.

traditions as well as their relationships and responsibilities to their parents. A lot of people in developed countries have already left the norms for the sake of their personal enjoyment. The world is rapidly becoming a global village. This change is swiftly affecting all aspects of life –particularly marriage and family.

A broken family relationship and parents, who put their personal interests before taking care of their children with sincere love, will make their children's life miserable and they would not have a clear direction where to go in order to get a bright future.

In response to these problems, traditional values need to be scientifically reviewed and integrated with more contemporary values such as individual autonomy and ambition. Solid empirical evidence supports the conclusion of long-established and traditional notions of marriage and children. The recognition of the important role of family and marriage in a global society is important because family and marriage is vital to maintaining world-wide social stability. The disintegration of the family unit is having a profoundly negative impact on social stability anywhere in the country.

Research in social science demonstrates two nearly incontestable conclusions:

- 1) Stable, traditional marital structures provide profound benefits for men, women and children;
- 2) The breakdown of stable, traditional marital structures imposes significant social costs upon individuals and society at large.

The descriptions in this paper try to offer the solution using the perspective of Confucius's teachings in family and its role in education with the hope of usefulness, so that it can contribute in harmonizing public relations and world peace.

The Concept of Marriage and Family

Marriage is more than the union of two people, it is a social institution "culturally patterned and integrated into basic social institutions, such as education, the economy, and politics". Marriage, in a real sense, underlies every social institution. It comes as no surprise, then, that marriage affects some of society's most consequential interests: Married people are generally healthier; they live longer, earn more, have better mental health and sex life, and are happier than unmarried people.

Furthermore, married individuals have lower rates of suicide, fatal accidents, acute and chronic illnesses, alcoholism, and depression.¹

“Marriage is a blessing of goodness/love between two different families. Upward to glorify Tian (Heaven) and to honour/serve the ancestors, downward to get offspring, therefore a Jun Zi (noble man) greatly honour the marriage”²

For Confucius, family is essential for becoming truly human. For him, family is a basic social unit that is vital to the formation of self, human relationships, and moral consciousness. Confucius stressed about the duties and obligations among family members, which can be interpreted as the hierarchical nature of human relationships in cooperation with reciprocal altruism. To be fully human is to have realized the fullness of parental love, reciprocating it in filial piety towards parents, and living out its implications in all human relationships.

The Role of Family as a School of Love

For a small child, the best place of education and training is at home provided by his/her family. The initial education and training must be commenced at home. During the formative years of a child, which are highly impressionable, not only it should be nurtured and taken care of properly, but the right type of impact needs to be made on its mind by the parents through love and affection.

Truly passionate parental love means letting the child become independent and separate from your lives as early as possible; the earlier this separation, the more successful you have been as parents. In addition, independence and a respectful distance are essential to an individual's personal dignity, and this respect should be maintained, even between the people we are closest to. Confucius shows us that we must respect every person equally and rationally, maintain a tactful distance, and give each other space to breath.³

Strong ties with the family prevent a child or a person from going astray. At the end of a day, a person with good and strong family, goes back to his or her family and shares the joy with his family and unburdens the sorrows, if any, before them and thereby is relieved of the pain. Such daily

¹ Oscar Schachter and Christopher C. Joyner, 1995 as quoted by Wilkins, Richard G, 2002.

² LIJI XLI: 1

³ Yu Dan, *Confucius from the Heart*, pp.71-73.

routine keeps oneself far from the various vices which one may acquire by being alone or in bad company. A person with good family ties tends to behave in a more responsible way. Having nobody at home to share good and bad moments together, he or she might go astray, indulge in acts which are morally corrupted and ethically wrong. Then, his/her life journey continues aimlessly by drifting away from the society.

The institution of traditional family is practically as old as human civilization. It has evolved based on the necessities of human life, right from the cave man who realized the necessities of human life, right from the cave man who realized the necessity and importance of staying together. Apart from affection, love and compassion, a family needs security, care and means of sustenance. Every member of the family must always look after the welfare of one another. At times, one would sacrifice one's own interest for the other members of the family.

A happy, contented and peace-loving family has tested human values of love, compassion, reverence and respect for each other with a sense of sacrifice has been the real strong fabric and hallmark for a well-knitted holistic family.

What is meant by love in the Confucian Religion terminology is an element of *Ren*. *Ren* involves willingness to interact and cooperate reciprocally for mutual benefit. And *Ren*, as an attitude embodied in one person, tends to elicit reciprocation of a *Ren* attitude in another person. Love of a mother for her child tends to generate love by a child for his/her mother.¹

Ren's range of meanings include, besides love, benevolence, perfect virtue, goodness, human-heartedness, and altruism". The Chinese character for *Ren* shows two people together, and as a virtue it is the ideal of "human-relatedness," *Ren* means establishing real loving relations with other people, a matter of acting in society. Parents naturally, biologically as it were, love their infants. Parental love is also, and more importantly, a process of growth in love. As children grow, parents learn the subtle art of providing care while slowly relinquishing control so that the profoundest lesson of boundary-setting and individuation are learned. The children will soon become parents themselves and will learn how to love fully as their parents do. For Confucius, benevolence (*Ren*) is the most important moral quality that a person may possess. It is the virtue of respecting others as one respects oneself.

Confucius described this reciprocal ethical dynamic as the model for human relationships. A person of *Ren* has such a large heart that he does

¹ Robert Cummings Neville, *Boston Confucianism*, pp. 97-98-98.

not discriminate between people on the basis of their nationality because for him, “within the four seas all are brothers and sisters.”

Zi Zhang asked Confucius the meaning of *Ren*, whereupon Confucius replied, “To be able wherever one goes to carry five things into practice constitutes *Ren*. On begging to know what they were, he was told. They are respect, magnanimity, sincerity, earnestness and kindness. With respect you will win over everyone; with sincerity men will trust you; with earnestness you will have achievement; and with kindness you will be well fitted to command others”¹

Zigong asked, “Is there a single word which can be a guide to conduct throughout one’s life?” Can you give me one word that I will be able to use until the end of my days and always derives benefit from it? Confucius replied to him in a conversational tone of voice: “If such a word exists, it is probably the word *shu*, or “forbearance”. But what do we mean by this? Confucius went on, “Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire”. That is, you must not force other people to do the things you do not want to do yourself. If a person does this throughout their life, it is enough.² Becoming a good person, says Tu Weiming, means learning how to love, which is the way of humanity and the *Dao* of Heaven: the paradigm curriculum for learning how to love is being a parent. Little children are turned on to love by receiving love and slowly learning those things necessary for being a responsible adult. The greatest responsibility is raising one’s own child. Of course, not all adults have or should have children, but there are many surrogate contexts of long-term caring that express the same meaning of love.

One may question whether the principle, which works so obviously in a mother-child relationship, also operates in other associations, such as those we find in business and politics and war. It does work, Confucius emphasized by summarizing five kinds of relationships which may then be taken as illustrative of all human relationships. The five: those between parent and child, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, ruler and subject, and between friends.

The Role of Family in Education

Confucius recognized that the problem in society was the loss of values that accompanied the breakdown of tradition. Confucius proposed to

¹ Lun Yu XVII: 6.

² Yu Dan, *Confucius from the Heart*, p.25.

inculcate moral values through education, so that individuals could cultivate their natural and normal state of goodness.

Children are responsible for their own educational success. Chinese parents believe that their children's educational achievement is greatly influenced by their parenting practices as well. They believe that they have the obligations and responsibilities to help build their children's success in education. When parents have a difficult time exerting influence over their children's academic success, they may regard themselves as a failure as parents.

Family or home is the first educating and training place where a child gets molded as regards of his/her mindset, in terms of moral and ethical values, habits and personality. Once these values get inculcated and imprinted, they remain life-long barring in a few exceptional cases where the external surroundings, may cause a strong influence during the adult stage and may lead to the changes in behavior and personality of an individual. Till maturity, the whole family has a powerful impact on a child. Absence of a happy family environment may cause mental disturbance and with no one to care and guide, the child might get misguided.

Parents play an important role in their children's education in all aspects. As an educator, it is important to note that working with a Chinese family is as critical as working with a child. Learning their essential family values will aid educators to be able to work effectively with the whole family. Additionally, it is important to examine an educator's own value system while working with these families. Sometimes, our value system may be a hindrance to being able to support Chinese children in their education.

For Confucius, the goal of education is to become fully human – human beings who learn and pursue the Confucian core values (*ren*, *yi*, *li*, *zhi*, and *xin*), cultivate them, and practice them in their day-to-day lives. Confucius always taught his students to live plainly and simply; do what is in front of you as well as you can; there's no need to worry about most things, so don't worry about them. According to Confucius, only through lifelong efforts in self-cultivation and learning, can one become a virtuous human being who takes care to elevate his sublime moral character by pursuing *ren*, *yi*, *li*, *zhi* and *xin*. Among them, *ren* is the highest virtue one can aspire to achieve. *Ren* refers to natural human-heartedness, goodness, benevolence, charity, and humanity towards oneself as well as humankind as a whole. *Ren*, thus, is like a seed that, when planted in one's heart, sprouts and grows with self-cultivation and learning, and gives “meaning to all other ethical norms that perform

integrative functions” in a society¹. As an externalization or outward form of *Ren*, Confucius paid special attention to *li*, the norm and standard of human behavior in a specific social context. According to Confucius, only when people cultivate themselves and return to *li* can they reach *Ren*. *Li*, therefore, is closely related to the concept of *Ren*. Propriety in the Confucian context must be derived from *Ren* as an inner morality. Hence, propriety without humanity is useless, and humanity without propriety is inoperative. In short, Confucian’s ethical values can provide a more holistic basis for the humanistic tradition of adult education. The underlying tradition of humanistic adult education has been based more on psychological aspects of the concept of a self, freedom and autonomy, human growth and development, and motivation and self-actualization. More attention needs to be paid to the moral and ethical dimensions of humanity in social contexts.

The Outcomes of Family as a School of Love and Good Character Education.

The outcome of the Great Way of benevolence implemented in Family (Family as a School of Love) is the people with good character, a *junzi*’s (a morally superior human being) character that soaks into every fiber of the social hierarchy, from government down to households, and provides rules of civility and behavior that governs social life and conversation.²

Junzi reflects the ideal moral character to which everyone should aspire. It is usually translated as “gentleman” or “morally superior man” or perhaps just “mature person”. The mature person blames himself; the immature person blames others. The gentleman understands what is right. The small man understands what will sell. The gentleman helps others to realize what is good in them; he does not help them to realize what is bad in them. The small man does the opposite.

The gentleman is ashamed of his words outstripping his deed. The mature person dislikes those who like to criticize people or reveal their weaknesses. He dislikes those who, in the position of inferiors, like to malign or spread rumors about those in authority. He dislikes those who are headstrong, but are not restrained by propriety. He dislikes those whose resoluteness is not tempered by understanding. True manhood consist in realizing your true self and restoring moral order and discipline. If a man can just for one day realizes his true self, and restore

¹ Tu, 1979, p. 6.

² Qian Ning, *Confucius The Sage*, p.13.

moral discipline completely, the world will follow him. To be a true man depends on you. What does it have to do with others?

Those who desire to set an example of good character for everyone must first establish moral order in their states.¹

- 1) In order to establish such order in their states, they first guided their families.
- 2) In order to guide their families, they first developed themselves.
- 3) In order to develop themselves, they first had to acquire a right attitude.
- 4) In order to acquire a right attitude, they first tried to become honest with themselves.
- 5) In order to become honest with themselves, they first had to learn as much as possible.
- 6) Learning as much as possible involved gaining insight into the nature of things.
- 7) By gaining insight into the nature of things, they came to know the highest good.
- 8) By apprehending the highest good, they became honest with themselves.
- 9) By becoming honest with themselves, they acquired the right attitude.
- 10) By acquiring the right attitude, they developed themselves.
- 11) By developing themselves, they guided their families.
- 12) By guiding their families, they established moral order in their states.
- 13) By establishing moral order in their states, they brought peace and prosperity to the whole country.
- 14) From the highest official to the ordinary people, everyone needs to recognize that self- development is fundamental.
- 15) When the fundamentals are neglected, what is developed from them cannot be sound. It is unreasonable to neglect what's important and to devote oneself to the trivial.

This is what is meant by saying that “the establishment of moral order in the state” depends upon properly guiding the family.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Confucius was in fact an innovator. He did not aim to restore the old tradition, which he realized was neither possible nor desirable. Instead he proposed a modified, renewed and modernized tradition. An ideal society is one in which there is freedom, but this freedom does not lead

¹ Archie J. Bahm, *The Heart of Confucius*, pp.130-131.

to conflict and injustice because everyone is moral and behaves appropriately in relationships with other people.

Confucius knew that people were not fulfilling their responsibilities. Governments, instead of serving the people, they were exploiting them, fathers were not behaving as fathers ought to and sons were not being good sons. If people learned how to be good sons, fathers and rulers, then a harmonious and moral social order would naturally arise. Parents would be good parents, children would be good children, governments would govern well and people would be good citizens. When the family values expand, the whole world becomes a human family providing a total human experience – unity with life beyond the confines of the villages. Thus, when liberated we shall have dreams of beauty and love.

Imagine a society which (considers) what is under Heaven is for all, one helps and is helped by others, and peace and harmony prevail.¹

All religious faiths, cultures and all countries must stand together to combat the erosion of morality and the family institution. Professionals who work with Chinese children and families have insights regarding Confucian influence on Chinese students' educational achievement, parental involvement in children's education, parent-child relationship, and factors involved in decision-making on a daily basis. It is also important to keep in mind about the diversity among Chinese cultures. Each Chinese student or family we work with should also be considered as an individual case. Each family may bring its own experience which will shape their practices in education while continue to be influenced by Confucius's teachings. Filial piety is a very significant virtue in Chinese families. It has existed for over 2000 years in Chinese history.

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¹ Qian Ning, *Confucius The Sage*, p.13

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