

**XIAO JING –
THE CLASSIC OF XIAO**
With English Translation & Commentary

孝經

英語譯解

By Zeng Zi (505 - 436 B.C.E)
曾子 著 (前 505 - 436 年)

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English Translation and Commentary by Feng Xin-ming
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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Xiao 孝 is a fundamental concept in Chinese culture, and it is not possible to understand Chinese history and Chinese tradition without understanding the concept of *xiao*. What is *xiao*? The word has been translated since the Jesuits in the 1500's as "filial piety," but I do not use the term here because it denotes a subjective state, i.e. a state of mind, a state of worshipful piety, rather than an objective state, i.e. a way of conduct, indeed a whole way of living one's life, as prescribed by the sages. Instead of "filial piety", I think the phrase "being good to parents" captures more the essence of *xiao*. There remains, however, the problem that *xiao*, as set forth in this definitive work, is not confined to being good to one's parents but also includes being good to one's ancestors. Thus the phrase "being good to parents and ancestors" may be more appropriate. Since that is a bit long-winded and clumsy, I have decided to just use the transliteration, "*xiao*".

This text presents *xiao* as not only a way of life for individuals, but also a way of ordering the entire society. *Xiao*, as prescribed by Confucius and Zeng Zi, is the very foundation of civil society itself. While most traditional civilizations base their civil orders upon divine, religious commandments, traditional Chinese civilization has been unique in remaining throughout its long history basically secular and not dominated by religion. Yet there has been no lack of idealistic, fearless and self-sacrificing heroes and heroines in traditional China. As we will see in this text, the imperative underlying traditional Chinese civilization has been the secular yet idealistic concept of *xiao*.

It is thus only natural that, during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E. – 220 C.E.), when the Imperial Chinese state first officially subscribes to Confucianism as the state supported ideology, *Xiao Jing* is the text upon which candidates to Imperial officialdom are examined. From that time until the overthrow of the Imperial system itself in 1911, *Xiao Jing* has been one of the most basic, must-read classic texts that every Chinese who considers himself educated has studied. Throughout most of Imperial China's history the government has conferred the academic degrees, the ranks of which are based on the level of periodic government examination passed: district, county, province, and nationwide, and passing the examinations for even the most elementary academic degree, the *xiu cai* 秀才, requires a good knowledge and understanding of *Xiao Jing*.

Thus the precepts set forth in this text are not just verbiage; traditional Chinese have held them dear for two thousand years. Studying this text then, gives us an understanding of the basic traditional Chinese worldview.

In this translation I've used as basic reference the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 C.E.) annotations of *Xiao Jing* by the scholar Xing Bing 邢昺. Where I've departed significantly from Xing Bing in meaning I have noted in the footnotes.

開宗明義章第一

CHAPTER ONE: OPENING EXPLANATION

仲尼居，曾子侍。子曰：「先王有至德要道，以順天下，民用和睦，上下無怨，汝知之乎？」

Zhong Ni (Confucius) was at home, and Zheng Zi was in attendance. The Teacher said, “The Former Kings have a most important virtue and way of conduct, to make the world harmonious, the people practice peace and cordiality, and neither above nor below have resentment. Do you know what it is?”

曾子避席曰：「參不敏，何足以知之？」

Zheng Zi got off his mat and said, “I, Shen, am not clever; how would I know it?”

子曰：「夫孝，德之本也，教之所由生也。復坐，吾語汝。」

The Teacher said, “*Xiao* is the foundation of virtue, and is what all teaching grows out of. Sit down; I will tell you.

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: Confucius’ above statement may seem a bit of an exaggeration at first sight, but he’s totally serious. We will see how *xiao* is the foundation of nature and how it is what all teaching grows out of in the rest of this text.

「身體髮膚，受之父母，不敢毀傷，孝之始也。」

“The body, hair and skin, all have been received from the parents, and so one doesn’t dare damage them—that is the beginning of *xiao*.”

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: This is a very famous sentence. It is what generations of Chinese parents have taught their children with, in order that they understand the importance of taking good care of their bodies and their health. Being good to oneself is actually a key and integral part of being good to parents.

立身行道，揚名於后世，以顯父母，孝之終也。

“Establishing oneself, practicing The Way, spreading the fame of one’s name to posterity, so that one’s parents become renowned—that is the end of *xiao*.”

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: *This is a critically important concept, key to the development of Confucius’ argument that xiao is the foundation of virtue and what all teaching grows out of: xiao is not only confined to being good to parents in the narrow sense, where one is just serving their immediate or bodily needs, but also includes being good to parents in the broadest sense, where one is bringing one’s parents a good name by practice good conduct (The Way) and making a good name for oneself. Attaining high achievements is xiao, i.e. is being good to parents. Again, being good to oneself, in the sense of ensuring good conduct and a good name to oneself, is a key and integral part of being good to parents. This concept is key in Confucius’ earlier assertion that xiao is the foundation of virtue and what all teaching grows out of.*

「夫孝，始於事親，中於事君，終於立身。」

“Thus *xiao* starts with serving one’s parents, progresses with serving one’s lord, and ends with establishing oneself.”

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: *This shows how xiao starts in the narrow sense and progresses to the broad sense, to encompass all of one’s endeavors.*

大雅云：『無念爾祖，聿修厥德。』」

“The ‘Great Refined Odes’ say, ‘Do not just commemorate your ancestors; cultivate your virtue¹.’”

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: *This is of the utmost importance: to be xiao, to be good to one’s parents in the broadest sense, one must cultivate one’s virtue. That*

¹ According to the Tang Dynasty (618—907 A.D.) annotations of *Xiao Jing* by Xing Bing 邢昺, the word “*wu* 無” in the phrase “*wu nian er zu* 無念爾祖” means “always” rather than the usual “not”. See *Xiao Jing* 孝經, “*The Thirteen Classics* 十三經”, published by Zhonghua Shudian 中華書店, Beijing, 1980, Vol. II, p. 2,545. I, however, beg to differ. Nowhere else in *Xiao Jing* is “*wu*” used as anything other than its regular meaning: “none” or “no”. I think that “*wu*” here really does mean “do not” the way “*wu*” usually does. Thus the sentence means, “Do not just commemorate your ancestors; cultivate your virtue.”

means to learn right from wrong, to always carefully ensure that one is engaging in righteous and good conduct, to develop a good and upright character, and so forth. Merely commemorating and paying respects to one's ancestors is not enough to complete one's xiao; one must also be virtuous and good.

天子章第二

CHAPTER TWO: THE SON OF HEAVEN

子曰：「愛親者不敢惡於人，敬親者不敢慢於人。愛敬盡於事親，而德教加於百姓，刑於四海。蓋天子之孝也。」

The Teacher said, “He who loves his parents does not dare to do evil unto others; he who respects his parents does not dare to be arrogant to others. Love and respect are exerted to the utmost in serving the parents, and this virtue and teaching is extended to the people; the example is shown to the whole world beyond China. That is the *xiao* of the Son of Heaven.

Translator's Explanatory Comment: *The Son of Heaven is the Chinese emperor. Confucius is saying here that when the Son of Heaven (the Chinese emperor) practices xiao, he is automatically loving and respectful to both his parents and his subjects. Xiao somehow, and Confucius doesn't say how here, perhaps by conditioning the practitioner to be loving, considerate, respectful, and not self-centered, makes a person kind and humble, even when in high positions such as a Son of Heaven is.*

《甫刑》云：『一人有慶，兆民賴之。』

“The book *Fu on Law* says, ‘One person has cause to celebrate; the multitudes rely on that.’

Translator's Explanatory Comment: *When the Son of Heaven, who is one single person, practices xiao, then he has cause to celebrate, because being xiao is something to celebrate. Also, when the Son of Heaven is xiao, he rules the multitudes, i.e. his subjects, well. Thus, to be well governed, the multitudes rely on the Son of Heaven being xiao, i.e. the Son of Heaven having cause to celebrate. By the way, the posthumous honorific titles (honorific titles conferred after death) of Chinese emperors*

usually include the word *xiao*². This shows that traditional China truly believed that being *xiao* was an essential virtue for emperors and made them good rulers.

諸侯章第三

CHAPTER THREE: THE DUKES

「在上不驕，高而不危。制節謹度，滿而不溢。高而不危，所以長守貴也。滿而不溢，所以長守富也。富貴不離其身，然後能保其社稷，而和其民人。蓋諸侯之孝也。」

“Above others but not arrogant, then one can dwell on high but not be in danger. To economize and calculate carefully, then one can be full and not spill. (*Translator’s note: being full without spilling means having lots of wealth but not wasting it – X.F.*) To dwell on high without danger, then noble rank can long be maintained. To be full without spilling, then wealth can long be maintained. With noble rank and wealth not leaving his person, then one can protect one’s state³ and make one’s people harmonious. That is the *xiao* of the feudal dukes.

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: Back in Confucius’ day, China was divided into many autonomous feudal states, each under a duke. The dukes were hereditary, had their own independent armies and governments, and ruled their own independent states. The Son of Heaven was supposed to rule over these feudal dukes, but during Confucius’ time the Son of Heaven had become quite weak, had only nominal moral authority, and the dukes were attacking each other and trying to swallow up each other’s states. Against that background, Confucius is saying here that for a feudal

² For example, the Tang Dynasty’s famous second emperor, Tai Zhong or Li Shi-min (reign 627 – 649 C.E.), has this for posthumous honorific title: 文武大聖大廣**孝**皇帝 (the Chinese word *xiao* bolded and in bigger font), and the Ming Dynasty’s famous third emperor, Cheng Zu or Zhu Da (reign 1403 – 1424 C.E.), has this for posthumous honorific title: 后天弘道高明肇運聖武神功純仁至**孝**文皇帝 (the Chinese word *xiao* bolded and in bigger font).

³ 社稷 *she ji*, literally “God of Land and God of Grain of a Country,” the ritual sacrifices to which are the duties of the head of state in traditional China, is a term normally used to mean “a country” or “a state.”

duke to be xiao, he needs to be not arrogant and to economize – that way he can keep his high nobility position, his wealth, his state, and his people, all of which he has inherited from his father and his ancestors. Surely to be xiao one must not throw away such precious things that the previous generations have bequeathed to one; instead, one must maintain one’s inheritance well, or, better yet, improve them. In a word then, to be xiao, the feudal duke needs to be a good, capable ruler who has humility and who economizes. He needs to be apprehensive and prudent in his conduct, just as the quote from the Book of Poetry below describes.

《詩》云：『戰戰兢兢，如臨深淵，如履薄冰。』

“The *Book of Poetry* says, ‘Apprehensive and cautious, as if approaching a deep abyss, as if walking on thin ice.’

卿大夫章第四

CHAPTER FOUR: THE MINISTERS

「非先王之法服不敢服，非先王之法言不敢道，非先王之德行不敢行。是故非法不言，非道不行。口無擇言，身無擇行。言滿天下無口過，行滿天下無怨惡。三者備矣，然後能守其宗廟。蓋卿大夫之孝也。」

“They dare not wear what is not of the Former Kings’ Method of clothing, or speak what is not of the Former Kings’ Method of speech, or practice what is not of the Former Kings’ virtuous conduct. Therefore if not of the Method it is not spoken; if not of the Way it is not practiced. In speaking there is no choice in what to say; in conduct there is no choice in what to practice. One’s speech fills the world yet there are no wrong words; one’s acts fill the world yet there are no complaints of vice. When one is qualified in those three things, then one can maintain one’s ancestral temples. That is the *xiao* of the Ministers.

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: Confucius is saying here that, basically, to be xiao, a minister has to be a good minister, that is, he practices good conduct and good morals, and he’s prepared day or night to serve his lord. That way, he can

maintain his ancestral temples, which is an essential part of xiao, because xiao includes being good to one's ancestors.

So here's another key concept: xiao is not just being good to one's parents only, but also being good to one's ancestors. So good conduct is important in maintaining the means to conduct sacrificial memorial services to one's ancestors, i.e. to the practice of xiao. In a word, good conduct is an integral and critical part of xiao. This concept of xiao including one's ancestors adds to the reason why xiao is the foundation of virtue and what all teaching grows out of, as Confucius has said earlier in Chapter One.

《詩》云：『夙夜匪懈，以事一人。』

“The Book of Poetry says, ‘Never unprepared day or night, to serve one person.’

Translator's Explanatory Comment: *The “one person” is the ministers' Lord, usually the Duke who governs the state.*

士章第五

CHAPTER FIVE: THE OFFICERS

「資於事父以事母而愛同，資於事父以事君而敬同。故母取其愛，而君取其敬，兼之者父也。故以孝事君則忠，以敬事長則順。忠順不失，以事其上，然後能保其祿位，而守其祭祀。蓋士之孝也。」

“Take from how one serves his father to serve one's mother and the love is the same. Take from how one serves his father to serve one's Lord and the respect is the same. Thus the mother takes the love while the lord takes the respect; the one who takes both is the father. Thus when serving the lord in accordance with *xiao* one is loyal; when serving elders in accordance with respect one is compliant. Not losing loyalty and compliance when serving one's superiors, one can preserve one's position and maintain one's sacrifices. That is the *xiao* of the Officers.

Translator's Explanatory Comment: *Here Confucius asserts that xiao teaches one how to serve others: one's lord, one's elders, and one's superiors. Then it follows that when an officer serves his superiors with respect, loyalty, and compliance, he can*

maintain his sacrifices, which are understood to be to his ancestors and which constitute an essential part of xiao. So the respect and love in being xiao to one's father also brings forth loyalty and compliance in serving one's superiors, which further facilitates xiao in ensuring the continuation of one's sacrifices to one's ancestors.

《詩》云：『夙興夜寐，無忝爾所生。』

“The *Book of Poetry* says, ‘Rise early and sleep late; don’t bring shame to those who have given you birth.’

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: *This quote from the Book of Poetry is to exhort one to work hard as a part of xiao – so that one doesn’t bring shame to one’s parents. This is the converse of the exhortation in Chapter One to bring a good name to one’s parents.*

庶人章第六

CHAPTER SIX: THE COMMON PEOPLE

「用天之道，分地之利，謹身節用，以養父母，此庶人之孝也。」

“Using Heaven’s Way, sharing in Earth’s bounties, being prudent with their persons and thrifty in their expenditure, in order to support their parents—this is the *xiao* of the common people.

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: *So the commoners are also conducting and exerting themselves well in order to support their parents.*

「故自天子至於庶人，孝無終始而患不及者，未之有也。」

“So from the Son of Heaven to the common person, there is none who has been constant in his *xiao* yet has the problem of not doing what he should.”

Translator's Explanatory Comment: Confucius concludes this section with the assertion that if one really is xiao, then one will conduct oneself strictly according to what is correct, will exert oneself in one's station, and thus will not have the problem of not doing what he should. In the preceding chapters, ancestors figure prominently in xiao. Confucius emphasizes sacrifices to one's ancestors as the essential part of xiao that can be maintained only if one practice good conduct and perform well in one's station. Therefore, for all classes of people, xiao means they must practice good conduct and exert themselves at their stations. Therefore, in Confucius' master plan for society, adherence to being xiao, to being good to both parents and ancestors, guarantees adherence to high standards of conduct and work performance.

三才章第七

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE THREE MATERIALS⁴

曾子曰：「甚哉，孝之大也！」

Zheng Zi said, "Extreme indeed is the greatness of *xiao*!"

Translator's Explanatory Comment: Zheng Zi now sees the extremely great function of xiao: when every class of persons, that is, everyone, in a society practices xiao, the result is that they practice kindness and goodness towards each other and that the entire society thus becomes harmonious and wonderful.

子曰：「夫孝，天之經也，地之義也，民之行也。」

The Teacher said, "Now, *xiao* is the principle of Heaven, the righteousness of Earth, and the (proper) conduct of the people.

Translator's Explanatory Comment: The Chinese phrase "the principle of Heaven and the righteousness of Earth (天經地義)" means "natural justice" or "the natural, just order of things". The reason this chapter is entitled the three materials is that

⁴ The Three Materials are: Heaven, Earth, and people. See *Ci Hai*, (辭海), 1989 ed., Shanghai, p. 15, under the entry "三才". According to *Ci Hai*, the term is from the *Book of Change* (易經): "There is the Way of Heaven, the Way of Man, and the Way of the Earth—take the three materials and make them into two. (有天道焉，有人道焉，有地道焉，兼三材而兩之。)"

Confucius talks about the three: Heaven, Earth, and people. The way the three are interrelated is that the principles of Heaven and Earth, that is, the natural order of things, are to be followed by people.

「天地之經而民是則之。則天之明，因地之利，以順天下，是以其教不肅而成，其政不嚴而治。

“The principle of Heaven and Earth—people’s affairs should follow that principle. We should study Heaven’s brilliance and take advantage of Earth’s bounties in order to bring harmony to the world; that way the teaching is not stern and yet it is successful, the governing is not severe and yet good order reigns.

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: *Confucius is saying that we should follow nature and take advantage of the natural order of things to bring harmony to the world. He is saying that xiao is part of nature and is the natural order of things, (since offspring are naturally inclined to love and respect parents) and that when we emphasize xiao, we can bring harmony to the world. Because the principle of xiao follows the natural order of things, the teaching need not be stern to be successful, and the governing need not be severe to render good order in the society. Confucius is indeed a genius and a kind one too: xiao, being good to parents, is part of nature, comes naturally, can be taught without being stern and strict, and using xiao to govern brings law and order easily, without resorting to force and severe punishments.*

「先王見教之可以化民也，是故先之以博愛而民莫遺其親，陳之以德義而民興行，先之以敬讓而民不爭，導之以禮樂而民和睦，示之以好惡而民知禁。

“The Former Kings see that, if the people are taught thus, they can be converted. Therefore when the Kings set an example of universal love the people do not abandon their parents. When the Kings explain morals and righteousness, such conduct becomes popular among the people. When the Kings set an example of respect and letting others go first the people do not quarrel. When the Kings use courtesy and music to guide the people they become harmonious and cordial. When the Kings clarify good and evil the people know what is forbidden.

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: *Confucius is asserting here that the Former Kings taught the people good morals and conduct with self-setting of examples, explanations, courtesy and music, and that the people followed and became harmonious.*

「《詩》云：『赫赫師尹，民具⁵爾瞻。』」

“The *Book of Poetry* says, ‘Awe-inspiring high government official⁶ teachers, the people all⁷ look up to you.’”

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: Confucius uses this quote to reinforce his message in the previous passage that the Kings should teach the people morals and good conduct. The high government official teachers are put here because they are the transmitters of the Kings’ teachings to the people.

孝治章第八

CHAPTER EIGHT: GOVERNING THROUGH XIAO

子曰：「昔者明王之以孝治天下也，不敢遺小國之

⁵ The word “具” (pronounced *ju*) here is used as the word “俱” (also pronounced *ju*) meaning “all”, as in 史記：項羽紀：“良（張良）乃入，具告沛公。” See *Ci Hai* (辭海), Shanghai, 1989, p.326, under the entry “具”.

⁶ Instead of “high government official teachers”, the words 師尹 can also be taken to mean “Teacher Yin”, as James Legge has done. See *The Hsiao King*, translated by James Legge, 2nd ed., Oxford, 1899, pp. 465-488, on the web at <http://www.chinapage.com/confucius/xiaojing-be.html>. Teacher Yin refers to Yi Yin (伊尹), prime minister to the first emperor of the Shang (商) Dynasty (1600 B.C.E. to 1046 B.C.E.), Emperor Tang (湯). After Tang died his son ascended the throne but was licentious, so Yi Yin exiled the young emperor. Three years later, when the young emperor had learned his lesson, he was brought back to the capital and resumed his rule. Therefore Yi Yin had been considered a great teacher, because he had taught a licentious emperor how to be virtuous. I think, however, that the words 師尹 should instead be taken to mean high government officials who are teachers, taking the word “yin” (尹) to mean “high government official”, because this interpretation correlates with the preceding passage where Confucius describes how the people follow the Kings’ teachings, and not how the Kings (emperors) are taught by some outstanding teacher. When the Kings teach the people, the high government officials would be the intermediaries transmitting the teachings to the people.

⁷ The word “具” here is used as the word “俱” meaning “all”. See footnote 5.

臣，而況於公、侯、伯、子、男乎？故得萬國之謹心，以事其先王。

The Teacher said, “Back when the Enlightened Kings use *xiao* to govern the world, they do not dare neglect even the subjects of small states; how much more so when it comes to the dukes and the nobles of various ranks? Thus the Kings obtain all the states’ affection, with which the Kings serve their ancestral kings.

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: *In expounding on governing through xiao, Confucius is using the following logic: the Enlightened Kings (including King Wen and King Wu of Zhou, before Zhou kings become Sons of Heaven) follow xiao, therefore must be kind and respectful to others (see the reasoning in Chapters 2 – 6), therefore don’t neglect even the (non-noble) subjects of small states, therefore even more so don’t neglect the dukes and the various nobles, and therefore win the affection of all the states. With that affection then, the Kings have ample means to serve their ancestors in terms of sacrifices, rituals, temples, etc. And serving their ancestors is part of the Kings’ xiao. Therefore, governing through xiao by the Kings gives rise to good government, and good government leads to the affection of the states, which in turn furthers the practice of xiao by the Kings.*

「治國者不敢侮於鰥寡，而況於士民乎？故得百姓之謹心，以事其先君。

“The ruler of the state does not dare to bully the wifeless and the widowed, so how can he bully the officers and the people? Thus he gets the affection of all the families, with which he serves his ancestral lords.

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: *Thanks to his practice of xiao, a duke, who is the ruler of the state, treats his subjects with respect. This wins him their affection, and thus, like the Kings (Sons of Heaven) above, he has ample means to serve his ancestral lords. And serving one’s ancestors is, again, part of xiao. Thus once again the practice of xiao leads to good government, good government leads to the affection of the people and the abundance of means, and in turn the abundance of means furthers the practice of xiao. A note about the context in which Confucius advocates this respect for subjects: during Confucius’ time there is a lot of expansionism by states and the constant warfare means, among other things, heavy taxation on the people. Confucius denounces this state of affairs as “harsh rule” or ke zheng (苛政). In its place Confucius advocates that the Dukes, who rule the states, stop expansionism, return to the gentlemanly code of conduct among states as set down by the ancient sages, maintain peace, and economize, as seen in Chapter 3, where he talks about the xiao of the Dukes. With that the Dukes can lower taxes greatly. The respect that*

Confucius talks about here, on the part of the Dukes for their subjects, involves implementing this political program of “kind rule” or ren zheng (仁政).

「治家者不敢失於臣妾，而況於妻子乎？故得人之
謹心，以事其親。」

“The ruler of the family does not dare to offend his servants and concubines, so how can he offend his wife and sons? Thus he gets people’s affection, with which he serves his parents.

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: *With xiao, the head of the family is good to his people and wins the affection of the family members, and thus has the means to serve his parents, which is in turn also xiao. Again, practicing xiao leads to good governance, good governance leads to an abundance of resources, and an abundance of resources in turn furthers the practice of xiao.*

「夫然，故生則親安之，祭則鬼享之，是以天下和
平，災害不生，禍亂不作。故明王之以孝治天下也
如此。」

“This way, when alive one’s parents can relax; when deceased their spirits can enjoy the offerings. Thus the world comes to be at peace, natural disasters don’t happen, and rebellions and disorders don’t arise. That is how the Enlightened Kings use *xiao* to rule the world.

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: *According to Confucius then, the practice of xiao by the rulers leads to good government, and this good government leads to peace and relaxation for the rulers’ parents both when alive and when dead. In turn, bringing peace and relaxation for the rulers’ parents is part of being xiao. Confucius suggests here that the dead spirits of the rulers’ parents and ancestors then protect the rulers’ realm such that there’s peace and no natural disasters. Thus good government is thanks to xiao on the part of the rulers. Governing with xiao results in peace, prosperity, and good order, and that’s how the Enlightened Kings use xiao to rule the world.*

「《詩》云：『有覺德行，四國順之。』」

“The *Book of Poetry* says, ‘When there is great virtue⁸, states from all four directions comply.’”

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: Confucius uses this quote from the *Book of Poetry* to assert that when the great virtue of xiao prevails in the land, states from all over the world comply with that virtue. Alternatively, this passage can also be interpreted to say that when the great virtue of xiao prevails in the land, all the states comply with and obey the Son of Heaven.

聖治章第九

CHAPTER NINE: SAGE GOVERNING

曾子曰：「敢問聖人之德，無以加於孝乎？」

Zeng Zi said, “May I ask whether, of the Sages’ virtues, there is any greater than *xiao*?”

子曰：「天地之性，人為貴。人之行，莫大於孝。」

The Teacher said, “Of all the species in the world, humans are the most precious. Of all human conduct, nothing is greater than *xiao*.”

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: So Confucius is answering Zeng Zi’s question whether there is any virtue of the Sages greater than *xiao* with a “no”.

「孝莫大於嚴父。」

“In *xiao* nothing is greater than revering⁹ the father.

⁸ “覺” is used for the word “梏”, meaning tall and big (高大) or upright (正直) in this quotation for the *Book of Poetry*. See *Ci Hai*, (辭海), 1989 ed., Shanghai, p. 1,627, under the entry “覺”.

⁹ The 嚴 in 嚴父 is a verb here.

Translator's Explanatory Comment: "In xiao nothing is greater than revering the father": Confucius is prescribing conduct for a patrilineal society¹⁰. A patrilineal society is one where marriage is permanent, husbands work to provide for the support of the children, and children take their father's surname. Historically, all societies advanced enough to have settled as opposed to nomadic (e.g. slash-and-burn) agriculture and to have iron tools are patrilineal ones with permanent marriage and paternal support for the raising of children. Matrilineal societies, where children take their mother's surname, are typically primitive ones where there is no marriage but women have transient boyfriends, and children do not know who their father is but only who their mother is. Although boyfriends will bring gifts on the occasions when they want to please the women, men do not support their children, not knowing even who they are. In matrilineal societies women typically support themselves and simultaneously raise their children without much help from the men. The men typically spend their days hunting birds for war feathers, congregating for their war songs and dances, and conducting raids on and carrying on feuds with, neighboring tribes. With a patrilineal society, men give up a carefree life for a life of toil and responsibility, but in return gain not only the permanent faithfulness of their wives, but also being revered by their children and a sort of immortality in being revered by their descendants. Since the successful yoking of the energies of once carefree but unproductive men to the productive labor and toil with which to support their wives and children is the fundamental precondition to the building of civilization, and this successful yoking is achieved only with the revering of the men by their wives, children and descendants, then it can be said that revering the father is one of the most important things for society. Thus Confucius is absolutely right: in xiao certainly nothing is greater than revering the father.

「嚴父莫大於配天。」

“In revering the father nothing is greater than associating him with Heaven.

Translator's Explanatory Comment: Confucius is talking about associating the deceased father's spirit with Heaven during sacrificial memorial ceremonies to ancestors, Heaven being the almighty power or deity above. Of course, commoners cannot associate their deceased parents with Heaven; Confucius is talking here about the ruling class of nobles that existed during his time, specifically, about the Son of Heaven.

¹⁰ A patrilineal society is not to be confused with a patriarchal society, as patrilineal only describes the ancestral lineage as being traced through the father, whereas patriarchal describes the authority as being vested in the father. While patrilineal societies in the past have also been patriarchal ones, the modern patrilineal societies in developed countries aren't patriarchal.

「則周公其人也。」

“Let us study the Duke of Zhou.

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: Duke Zhou is the fourth son of King Wen. King Wen is the King of the State of Zhou who almost overthrows the Shang Dynasty to establish the Zhou Dynasty, but dies just before doing so. When King Wen’s son King Wu, who is also Duke Zhou’s older brother, ascends the throne, the younger brother Duke Zhou becomes the prime minister. King Wu then completes the overthrow of the Shang Dynasty and establishes the Zhou Dynasty. The younger brother and prime minister, the Duke of Zhou, then formulated a whole new set of rules of conducts, ideological precepts including a stress on xiao, and ceremonies and rituals for the nobles under the new dynasty. Confucius considers the Duke of Zhou, his older brother King Wu, and their father King Wen, model sages. Duke Zhou is responsible for having established the etiquette, sacrificial ceremonies, and rules of gentlemanly conduct that Confucius so admires and a return to which he so ardently advocates.

「昔者周公郊祀后稷以配天，宗祀文王於明堂以配上帝，是以四海之內各以其職來助祭。夫聖人之德，又何以加於孝乎？」

“Formerly the Duke of Zhou makes Countryside Sacrifices¹¹ to Hou Ji (*the Ancestor Of All Zhou People*¹²—X.F.) in order to associate him with Heaven, and makes Ancestral Sacrifices to King Wen (*the Son of Heaven’s and the Duke’s deceased father*—X.F.) in the Great Palace Hall in order to associate him with God on High. Therefore all (*nobles*—X.F.) within the country come, each in his post, to help with the sacrifices. So, of the Sages’ virtues, what is greater than *xiao*?

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: Confucius is saying here that by associating his ancestor Hou Ji and his deceased father King Wen with Heaven in the sacrificial

¹¹ An ancient rite, making sacrifices in the countryside to Heaven or Earth. See *Ci Hai*, (辭海), 1989 ed., Shanghai, p. 512, under the entry “郊祀”.

¹² The ancestor of the Zhou people, born from the daughter of You Tai-shi (有邰氏) who became pregnant with Hou Ji (后稷) when she stepped into the footprint left by a giant. Hou Ji became an expert at agriculture and taught people how to plant. The Zhou people considered him the originator of agriculture. See *Ci Hai*, (辭海), 1989 ed., Shanghai, p. 304, under the entry “后稷 (Hou Ji)”.

ceremonies, the Duke of Zhou elevates the ceremonies to the level of Heaven and God on High. By elevating these ceremonies to such a high level, the Duke of Zhou can ask all the nobles in the empire to come to each take his station in the ceremonies. Thus all the nobles from the entire land come together to pay homage and affirm loyalty to a common ancestor in solemn sacrificial ceremonies. And at the head of these ceremonies is the Son of Heaven. Thus these ceremonies reinforce the common bond of loyalty of all the nobles to common ancestors, to a common belief in a certain order of things, and to a common head, the Son of Heaven. Thus, voluntarily and without compulsion we get unity among all the nobles, obedience and submission to the Son of Heaven, and shared belief in a common set of values and principles. The nobles then go back to their lands and administer the desired kind of rule. This rule then brings peace and order to the entire realm. And this is all thanks to the associating of the father with Heaven, and associating the father with Heaven is because of the xiao of the Son of Heaven. Thus the virtue of xiao can cause the entire world to be orderly and at peace in a voluntary and self-initiated way, an order and peace attained not by violence and force but by the ideology and moral suasion of xiao, and by solemn ceremonies rooted in xiao. Therefore, which virtue of the Sages can be greater than that of xiao?

「故親生之，膝下以養，其父母日嚴¹³。聖人因嚴以教敬，因親以教愛。」

“Thus parents give birth to the child and raise him at their knees, then become stricter as the days pass¹⁴. The Sages follow this strictness to teach respect, and follow the closeness¹⁵ to teach love.

¹³ In the version of Xiao Jing as annotated by the Tang Dynasty Xing Bing 邢昺, this passage is punctuated differently: 「故親生之膝下，以養其父母日嚴。」 See *Xiao Jing* 孝經, “*The Thirteen Classics* 十三經”, Beijing, 1980, p. 2,553. That way of punctuating would change the meaning to this: “Thus the parents give birth to him at their knees, in order to support his parents more strictly day by day.” I, however, don’t think that makes much sense, nor do I think that is consistent in meaning with the subsequent sentence, “The sages follow the strictness to teach respect, and follow the closeness to teach love.” It is obvious to me that the strictness following which the sages teach respect refers to the strictness of the parents toward their offspring, and not the strictness of the offspring in supporting the parents.

¹⁴ See footnote 7.

¹⁵ I’ve translated the word *qin* 親 in the phrase 因親以教愛 to mean “closeness” instead of “parents.” This way of using the word *qin* 親 does exist more or less contemporaneously as in the chapter “Loving Ministers” in *Han Fei Zi* (韓非子·愛臣) circa 280 B.C.E.: “Loving one’s ministers too closely always endangers one’s person (愛臣太親，必危其身).” See

Translator's Explanatory Comment: *It is a very important point that Confucius makes again here, as he has once already in Chapter 7: the Sages' doctrines of xiao are based on nature, the natural relationship between parents and offspring, and thus need not resort to force to gain acceptance. Thus the Sages follow the natural closeness between parents and offspring to teach love, and follow the natural progressive strictness as the days pass between parents and offspring to teach respect.*

「聖人之教，不肅而成，其政不嚴而治，其所因者本也。」

“The teachings of the Sages succeed without being stern; their governing brings good order without being severe. That’s because they follow what is natural.

Translator's Explanatory Comment: *Xiao is the natural order of things: offspring naturally love and respect their parents. The sages take advantage of this natural inclination in teaching xiao and in basing all virtue and right conduct, both personal and social, on xiao; thus their teaching succeeds without being stern and their governing brings good order without being severe.*

「父子之道，天性也，君臣之義也。」

“The Way between the father and the son is Providence-given (*i.e.* God-given – F.X.) nature and is the relationship between the Lord and his Ministers.

Translator's Explanatory Comment: *Again, the proper Way between father and son, i.e. xiao, is merely natural, God-given nature. This Way is also the proper Way between a Lord and his ministers. Thus, from natural, God-given nature we derive the proper relationships in government; we derive the proper Way between the Lord and his ministers.*

「父母生之，續莫大焉；君親臨之，厚莫重焉。」

“One’s parents give birth to one—there is no continuity greater than this. One’s Lord personally¹⁶ assumes the role of being the superior over one¹⁷—there is no generosity

《古漢語常用字字典》(*Dictionary of Commonly Used Words in Ancient Chinese*), Shangwu Publishing (商務印書館), Beijing, 2007, p. 311.

¹⁶ Xing Bing 邢昺 interprets this passage differently from me: “The father, who is the Lord, assumes lordship over one.” See *Xiao Jing* 孝經, “*The Thirteen Classics* 十三經”, Beijing,

greater than this.

Translator's Explanatory Comment: *The greatest and most important continuity is the continuity of the parents' line by their offspring. For one to be granted the ability to continue one's parents' line is a great generosity indeed. Likewise, for one to be granted the ability to have one's Lord personally be one's superior is also a great generosity indeed.*

「故不愛其親而愛他人者，謂之悖德。不敬其親而敬他人者，謂之悖禮。」

“Thus for he who does not love his parents but loves others, we call that perverse virtue. For he who does not respect his parents but respects others, we call that perverse courtesy.

Translator's Explanatory Comment: *Enjoying a generosity from one's parents as great as what is mentioned in the preceding paragraph, to not love or respect one's parents would be perverse indeed. Thus love and courtesy extended by someone who does not extend love and courtesy to his own parents can only be perverse love and courtesy.*

「以順則逆，民無則焉。不在於善而皆在於兇德。雖得之，君子不貴也。」

“If one makes right follow wrong, then the people will have no principle to follow. They will not come to good but will come to a vile virtue. Even if a Noble Person gets it, he will not value it.

Translator's Explanatory Comment: *The right that follows wrong Confucius is*

1980, p. 2,554. Xing Bing and I differ in translating the word *Qin* 親: while Xing Bing considers it to mean “parents”, I consider it to mean “personally” as in the poem “*Han Yi*” in the “Great Refined Odes” in *The Book of Poetry* (《詩經·大雅·韓奕》): “The King personally ordered it (王親命之).” See *Dictionary of Commonly Used Words in Ancient Chinese* (《古漢語常用字字典》), Shangwu Publishing (商務印書館), Beijing, 2007, p. 311.

¹⁷ The word “臨 (*lin*)” I translate as “to assume the role of being the superior over”—see *Ci Hai*, (辭海), 1989 ed., Shanghai, p. 68, under the entry “臨”: “It’s extended to mean the superior dealing with the inferior: ‘Assume being the superior with dignity, then people will be respectful.’” (“引申為上對下之稱。「論語·曲禮上」:‘臨之以莊則敬。’”)

talking about here is the right of love and respect; the wrong is the wrong of not loving or respecting one's own parents. Here Confucius seems to be criticizing those thinkers, like the Legalists, who advocate that the subjects must love and respect rulers but not necessarily parents. Subjects who have been taught to love and respect their ruler but not their parents won't have any principles to follow. They will practice a "vile virtue" of loving and respecting others without loving and respecting parents. A ruler who is a Noble Person will not value such perverse love and respect from his subjects. A note of explanation: the "Noble Person" is a Confucian concept that denotes a person of high conduct and integrity. At the time of Xiao Jing's writing, the Noble Person seems to also be a person of noble birth. Later, however, with the replacement of hereditary nobles by appointed government officers in Chinese society, the Confucian Noble Person is no longer necessarily a person of high birth but anyone, no matter how lowly his station, who has high morals and is noble-minded.

「君子則不然。言思可道，行思可樂；德義可尊，作事可法，容止可觀，進退可度，以臨其民。是以其民畏而愛之，則而象之。故能成其德教，而行其政令。」

“The Noble Person is not like that. When speaking he thinks whether the words can be spoken; when acting he thinks whether the action brings happiness. His virtue and righteousness can be revered; his handling of matters can be emulated; his manner can impress; his interactions with people can be held up to what is right. With that he assumes the role of being the superior over^{18,19} his people. Thus his people fear and love him, study and emulate him. Therefore he can succeed in his teaching of morals and execution of governance.

Translator's Explanatory Comment: *The Noble Person does not encourage perverse virtue. Instead, he sticks to principle and integrity in everything. With that he succeeds in making his people good and in governing his people well.*

《詩》云：『淑人君子，其儀不忒。』」

¹⁸ *Op. cit.* 9.

¹⁹ The way the term *jun zi* or “Noble Person” is used here assumes that he is of noble birth: he rules his subjects. Of course, as pointed out in the preceding translator's comment, later in Chinese history the Noble Person can be a person of no matter how lowly a birth, as long as he has high morals.

“The *Book of Poetry* says, ‘The virtuous Noble Person, his demeanor has no faults.’”

紀孝行章第十

CHAPTER TEN: CONDUCT THAT CONSTITUTES *XIAO*

子曰：「孝子之事親也，居則致其敬，養則致其樂，病則致其憂，喪則致其哀，祭則致其嚴。五者備矣，然後能事親。」

The Teacher said, “This is how the *xiao* son serves his parents: during daily living he presents respect, when providing for them he presents happiness, during their illnesses he presents worry, during mourning he presents grief, when making offerings (*to his deceased parents and ancestors—F.X.*) he presents reverence. When he is prepared in these five things, then he is able to serve his parents.

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: *The son who is xiao treats his parents well in the ways enumerated.*

「事親者，居上不驕，為下不亂，在醜不爭。居上而驕則亡，為下而亂則刑，在醜而爭則兵。」

“He who serves his parents is not arrogant when above, not rebellious when a subordinate, and not quarrelsome when with peers. Being arrogant when above leads to perishment; being rebellious as a subordinate leads to being sentenced; being quarrelsome when with peers leads to dueling.

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: *Note: “when above” means both when one is in a high position and when one is a superior. Arrogance leads to perishment because arrogance leads to both errors in judgment and causing resentment among others. Being rebellious when a subordinate leads to punishment by one’s superiors. Being quarrelsome when with peers leads to fights and dueling, which are harmful to the parties involved. All three are examples of bad conduct.*

Thus the son who is xiao does not treat his parents well; he also practices good conduct. Bad conduct by the offspring in the three ways enumerated above leads to

harm to himself also in three ways enumerated above: perishment, being sentenced, and dueling.

「三者不除，雖日用三牲之養，猶為不孝也。」

“If these three things are not rejected, then even though one provides for one’s parents so sumptuously as to serve the Three Animals (*beef, pork, mutton—F.X.*) daily, one is still un-*xiao*.”

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: *Bad conduct leads to harm to oneself, and doing things that harm oneself is against xiao. Therefore, without practicing good conduct, one cannot be said to be xiao, no matter how well one treats one’s parents.*

五刑章第十一

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE FIVE PUNISHMENTS

子曰：「五刑之屬三千，而罪莫大於不孝。」

The Teacher said, “The Five Punishments²⁰ are applied to three thousand offenses²¹, but none of them is greater than that of being un-*xiao*²².”

²⁰ In Confucius’ day, the Five Punishments, extant since the Xia Dynasty or from 2,070 B.C.E. onward, consists of: tattooing the face (*mo`墨*), cutting off the nose (*yi`劓*), castration (*gong- 宮*), cutting off the feet (*yue`刖*), and death (*sha- 殺*). Later, from the Sui Dynasty or 581 C.E. onward, the Five Punishments are changed to: beating with a whip or a bamboo strip (*chi- 笞*), beating with a rod (*zhang`杖*), imprisonment (*tu`徒*), exile (*liu`流*), and death (*si`死*).

²¹ According to Xing Bing’s annotations of *Xiao Jing* 孝經, “*The Thirteen Classics* 十三經”, Beijing, 1980, p. 2,556, originally, early in the Zhou Dynasty (1,122 B.C.E. – 256 B.C.E.) there has been only five hundred offenses for each of the Five Punishments, making a total of only 2,500 offenses. Later in the Zhou Dynasty, however, the list of offenses is expanded to six hundred for each of the Five Punishment, making a total of 3,000.

²² In *Xiao Jing* 孝經, “*The Thirteen Classics* 十三經”, Beijing, 1980, p. 2,556, Xing Bing describes two different interpretations of this passage. The first interpretation, advanced by the old annotators prior to Xing Bing’s time, is that being un-*xiao* is not included as one of the

Translator's Explanatory Comment: *Of course, Confucius is not literally calling for the death penalty for people who do not practice xiao. Killing someone hurts his parents extremely; no government would, in the name of punishing someone for not being good to his parents (not being xiao), hurt them even more, in fact, far more than him being not good to them could ever hurt them. What Confucius is saying is that the harm to a society if it turns its back on xiao is greater than the harm to society of any of the three thousand crimes covered by the Five Punishments.*

「要君者無上；非聖人者無法；非孝者無親，此大亂之道也。」

“Those who coerce their lords have no regard for superiors; those who reject the Sages have no regard for law; those who reject *xiao* have no regard for parents. That is the road to great chaos.”

three thousand offenses punishable by the Five Punishments and that Confucius is just saying rhetorically that being un-*xiao* is morally even more serious than any of those offenses. The second interpretation is that being un-*xiao* is indeed included among the three thousand ancient offenses punishable by the Five Punishments and that Confucius is calling it the worst offense, deserving of the most severe punishment. Xing Bing dismisses the first interpretation and advocates the second one.

I, however, consider the first interpretation much more reasonable and present it as my translation. First, Xing Bing in his commentary seem to have had no access to the list of the three thousand ancient offenses, it probably having been long lost, whereas the old annotators before Xing Bing probably still had access to the list. More important, to legislate being un-*xiao* as the greatest of all crimes, i.e. instituting the death penalty for the offense, would not only fail to remedy the injury done to the parents by their offspring being un-*xiao* but would also, perversely, add greatly to the injury. Depriving the parents forever of their offspring is a much greater injury and loss than any possible injury or loss caused by their offspring being un-*xiao*. Is it not cruel and perverse for the state to inflict, in the name of justice, a much greater injury upon the very victims of a much smaller injury? Why is the state choosing to punish the very victims themselves? And so severely?

I hold that it is definitely against Confucius' nature to advocate such a cruel and perverse “justice”—remember, he considers looking after one's body part of being *xiao*, part of being good to one's parents. Confucius totally understands the great love and cherishment by parents for their offspring. Reading the classics, Confucius clearly comes across as a kind, reasonable and insightful man. I firmly believe that, by saying that being un-*xiao* is worse than any of the criminal offenses, even those punishable by death, Confucius is merely emphasizing that being un-*xiao* is the road to great chaos and anarchy for the entire society. He is only pointing out the importance of *xiao* and the moral repugnancy of being un-*xiao*; he is not calling for the most severe judicial punishment of the death penalty.

Translator's Explanatory Comment: Coercing one's superiors means forcing one's superior to do things. According to Confucius, one should not force one's superiors; one should only reason with and ask one's superiors to do things. Confucius is explaining how not having xiao is one of the three things that can cause great chaos and breakdown of order in a society.

廣要道章第十二

CHAPTER TWELVE: BROAD AND CRUCIAL DOCTRINE

子曰：「教民親愛，莫善於孝；教民禮順，莫善於悌；移風易俗，莫善於樂；安上治民，莫善於禮。」

The Teacher said, “For teaching the people to love one another there is nothing better than *xiao*; for teaching the people to be courteous and harmonious there is nothing better than *ti* (*being respectful to elders—F.X.*); for changing the customs and traditions there is nothing better than music; for making the rulers at ease and the people orderly there is nothing better than etiquette.

Translator's Explanatory Comment: Confucius is showing how xiao is a very important pillar in maintaining a good social order based on kindness, love, courtesy and harmony. Xiao teaches the people to love each other. As he has said in earlier chapters about following nature, teaching the doctrine of xiao is just teaching what comes naturally: love for parents. When people practice xiao, then they will naturally extend this love to others.

Here Confucius also talks about his advocacy of respect for elders (ti) to ensure courtesy and social harmony, of using music and ceremonies to ensure good customs and traditions (like the Duke of Zhou has done), and of emphasis on etiquette to ensure the security of the social order.

「禮者，敬而已矣。故敬其父則子悅，敬其兄則弟悅，敬其君則臣悅。敬一人而千萬人悅。所敬者寡而悅者眾，此之謂要道也。」

“Etiquette is nothing more than respect. Therefore respect the father and the sons are

happy; respect the older brother and the younger brothers are happy; respect the lord and the subjects are happy. Respect one person and thousands of people are happy. Respect the few and the many are happy—that is why it is called a crucial doctrine.”

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: When people are xiao, by respecting their father one makes them happy. Thus xiao is part of the crucial doctrine of etiquette, which is nothing but respect, and in which respecting one person makes many people happy. Thus in this passage Confucius links xiao to an important principle of his, li or etiquette.

廣至德章第十三

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: BROAD AND HIGHEST VIRTUE

子曰：「君子之教以孝也，非家至而日見之也。教以孝，所以敬天下之為人父者也。」

The Teacher said, “The teaching of *xiao* by Noble Persons is not (*just – F.X.*) for what one sees daily on arriving home²³. *Xiao* is taught so that all who are fathers will be respected.

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: Confucius is using “Noble Persons” here to mean noble-minded people who follow the Zhou Dynasty precepts on *xiao*. So Confucius is saying that from the standpoint of the society as a whole, the teaching of *xiao* is not just for use inside the family. Rather, the ramifications of teaching *xiao* are much more far-reaching, and involves the entire social order. When the people are taught *xiao*, they will respect all those who are fathers; the people will respect the elders among them as well as each other. This will lead to a happy, harmonious society where people respect each other.

²³ *Xiao Jing* 孝經, “The Thirteen Classics 十三經”, Beijing, 1980, p. 2,557: in the Tang Dynasty (618—907 A.D.) annotations by Xing Bing 邢昺, this passage is taken to mean differently, as follows: “The teaching of *xiao* by Noble Persons is not necessarily taught by going to every family, every house, and speaking every day.” I present a different interpretation because I think Xing Bing’s interpretation does not lead logically to the sentences that follow about extending the respect universally.

「教以悌，所以敬天下之為人兄者也；教以臣，所以敬天下之為人君者也。」

“*Ti* or being respectful to elders is taught so that all who are elder brothers will be respected. Being a good subject is taught so that all who are lords will be respected.

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: *With xiao or being good the parents as the base and the foundation, the Noble Persons teach ti or being respectful to elders, first and foremost one’s elder brothers, which is a precept that is naturally compatible with the precept of xiao. The two concepts feed off each other: when one is xiao, one is naturally inclined to be respectful to one’s elders (ti), and vice versa. When the people respect all who are their elders, moral and ethical conduct and law and order are assured. Also on the basis and foundation of xiao, the Noble Persons teach how to be a good subject, again a precept that is naturally compatible with and feeds off the precept of xiao. Of course, when the people respect their lords, rebellions and civil wars, which are rampant during Confucius’ day, will not happen. So xiao is much more far-reaching than what one sees daily on arriving home; xiao actually extends to the entire social order.*

「《詩》云：『愷悌君子，民之父母。』非至德，其孰能順民如此其大者乎？」

The *Book of Poetry* says, ‘The happy and kind²⁴ Noble Person is the parent of the people.’ If it is not the highest virtue, how can it make the people compliant in such a big way?”

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: *So the noble-minded persons, who are happy and kind, not grim and mean as today’s detractors of Confucius would have us believe, teach the people how to be good. The people then love the Noble Persons as the parents of the people. Confucius considers this love by the people for the Noble Persons to mean that the people are compliant “in ... a big way”. This ability to make the people so compliant, “in such a big way”, is considered by Confucius as proof that the doctrine of xiao, along with the doctrines of being respectful to elders (ti) and being a good subject, are “of the highest virtue”.*

²⁴ See *Ci Hai*, (辭海), 1989 ed., Shanghai, p. 304, under the entry “*Kai Ti* (愷悌)”.

廣揚名章第十四

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: WIDELY SPREADING ONE'S NAME

子曰：「君子之事親孝，故忠可移於君；事兄悌，故順可移於長；居家理，故治可移於官。」

The Teacher said, “The Noble Person is *xiao* in serving his parents, and so his loyalty can be transferred to his lord. He is *ti* (*respectful to elders—X.F.*) in serving his big brothers, and so his compliance can be transferred to his superiors. He effects order when at home, and so his governing ability can be transferred to his position as an official.

Translator's Explanatory Comment: This is a key point in Confucius' theory of *xiao*: good conduct inside the family leads to good conduct in society at large. We have seen this point expounded on throughout this work, especially Chapters 2 – 6 (the *xiao* of the various classes of people), Chapter 8 (Governing through *xiao*), and Chapter 9 (Sage Governing). The good conduct inside the family of being *xiao* or good to the parents, *ti* or respectful to elders, and effecting order at home can all be transferred to public life. So he who is *xiao* in serving his parents will also be loyal to his lord; he who is respectful to his elders will also be compliant with his superiors, and he who effects order at home will also be good as an official.

「是以行成於內，而名立於后世矣。」

“Yes, that is why, one's conduct succeeds inside the home and one's name comes to be established among posterity.”

Translator's Explanatory Comment: To be successful in society at large, one must practice good conduct inside one's home. The correct upbringing then, is most important not just for home life, but also for career and public life. Thus for generations Chinese parents have exerted their utmost not merely to have their children study books diligently, but even more so, to be *xiao*, to be *ti* (respectful to elders), and to diligently attend to and help with the affairs of home and family. How mistaken it is for Chinese parents nowadays to have forgotten this tradition of bringing up children, and to instead pander to their “little emperor's” every whim!

諫諍章第十五

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: DISSUADING AND DISPUTING

曾子曰：「若夫慈愛、恭敬、安親、揚名，則聞命矣。敢問：子從父之令，可謂孝乎？」

Zheng Zi said, “if it’s about being kind and loving, being respectful, bringing peace to the minds of parents, and spreading one’s name—those instructions have already been heard. May I ask: if the son obeys²⁵ the orders of the father, can that be called *xiao*?”

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: When Zheng Zi asks about the son obeying the orders of the father, the meaning is “blindly obeying”.

子曰：「是何言與？是何言與？」

The Teacher said, “What kind of talk is that? What kind of talk is that?”

Translator’s Explanatory Comment: Confucius is quite emphatic in his disagreement that the son (blindly) obeying the father can be considered *xiao*.

昔者天子有爭臣七人，雖無道不失天下。諸侯有爭臣五人，雖無道不失其國。大夫有爭臣三人，雖無道不失其家。士有爭友則身不離於令名。

“Formerly when a Son of Heaven has seven subordinates who will dispute him, even though he has no virtue he will not lose All Under Heaven (the Empire). When a Duke has five subordinates who will dispute him, even though he has no virtue he will not lose his state. When a Minister has three subordinates who will dispute him, even though he has no virtue he will not lose his clan. With a friend who will dispute him, an Officer will not lose his good name.

Explanatory Comment: Confucius enumerates here the critical importance of having subordinates who will dispute their superiors: Even when they have no virtue and are totally in error, if they have enough subordinates who will dispute them the Son of

²⁵ I think the implied meaning is “blindly obeying”.

Heaven will not lose his Empire; the Duke won't lose his state, the Minister won't lose his clan, the Officer won't lose his good name. That is, even without any virtue, they will not lose their position, their office, and what sustains their station in life. Having subordinates who will dispute their superiors is very beneficial indeed.

父有爭子則身不陷於不義。故當不義，則子不可以不爭於父，臣不可以不爭於君。

“With a son who will dispute him, a father will not fall into unrighteousness. So when there is unrighteousness, then the son must not refrain from disputing his father and the subordinate must not refrain from disputing his lord.

***Explanatory Comment:** Thus it is not merely desirable, but an unshirkable duty that, when there is unrighteousness the son disputes his father and the subordinate disputes his lord. Indeed Chinese history has always lauded and glorified the courageous ministers and generals who have been unafraid to stand up for righteousness, disputed the emperor, and got executed for it. It is not merely desirable to dispute when there is unrighteousness; it is an unshirkable duty.*

故當不義則爭之。從父之令，又焉得為孝乎？」

“So when there is unrighteousness one must dispute it. How can obeying²⁶ the father's orders be considered *xiao*?”

***Explanatory Comment:** Thus xiao demands and requires that the son not blindly obey the father but dispute him when there is unrighteousness.*

感應章第十六

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: FEELING AND RESPONDING (BY THE SPIRITS)

子曰：「昔者明王事父孝，故事天明；事母孝，故事地察。

²⁶ See the previous footnote.

The Teacher said, “Formerly the Enlightened Kings serve their fathers with *xiao*, and therefore serve Heaven with clarity. The Kings serve their mothers with *xiao*, and therefore serve Earth with perceptiveness²⁷.”

Explanatory Comment: *To modern people it isn't readily obvious why serving fathers with xiao would lead to serving Heaven with clarity. I think that Xing Bing's understanding of this section of Xiao Jing is correct in saying that somehow, mystically, because Heaven's sign corresponds to father and Earth's sign corresponds to mother, when the Kings and Sons of Heaven serve their fathers with xiao it helps in serving Heaven, and when they serve their mothers with xiao it helps in serving Earth²⁸. Somehow, because of their position as Sons of Heaven, they possess this kind of connection with Heaven and Earth. With respect to the Earth, Xing Bing also quotes Zeng Zi as having said that when one is xiao, one treats the land with great care, and does not cut down even one tree branch in error²⁹. Of course, here Zeng Zi is no longer talking about proper behavior for only the Sons of Heaven, but also for everyone.*

「長幼順，故上下治。」

“The elders and the juniors are harmonious with each other, and therefore both people above and people below are orderly and well governed.

Explanatory Comment: *This phrase seems out of place in the logical progression between the preceding section and the section that follows. Perhaps it's one of those instances where due to the passage of time, the order of sentences in the original ancient text has been mixed up.*

「天地明察，神明彰矣。」

“When the Kings are clear and perceptive with regard to Heaven and Earth, the gods³⁰ will make evident their blessings.

Explanatory Comment: *So the argument is that being xiao to father and mother on the part of the Kings and the Sons of Heaven leads to being clear and perceptive with*

²⁷ I take this passage to mean that the Enlightened Kings learn enlightenment from their fathers and perceptiveness from their mothers.

²⁸ See *Xiao Jing* 孝經, “The Thirteen Classics 十三經”, Beijing, 1980, p. 2,559.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 2,559.

³⁰ The Chinese text is ambiguous as to whether this is the plural case or the singular case, but in view of the fact that both Heaven and Earth are mentioned as being worshipped, it should be inferred that the plural case is meant.

regard to Heaven and Earth, and that in turn leads to blessings from the gods. So the Kings' xiao leads to blessings from the gods. This is another aspect of the personal intermediary role of the Chinese emperor between Heaven (and the gods) and humans: when he practices good conduct, as in being xiao to his parents, then blessings from Heaven and the gods befall the Empire. Small wonder that, after Confucianism becomes the official creed in China around 150 B.C.E., the Sons of Heaven usually take xiao as part of their posthumous honorific titles³¹.

「故雖天子，必有尊也，言有父也。必有先也，言有兄也。」

“Thus even the Son of Heaven must revere someone, that is to say there is a father; and must defer to someone, that is to say there are older brothers.

Explanatory Comment: According to Confucius then, the Chinese Son of Heaven, as prescribed by the Zhou Dynasty's rules, is a reverent and respectful person. Not only does he defer to Heaven and Earth, but also to his parents and his older brothers. Now in view of the fact that historically the Chinese emperor has usually been the oldest born son, the question arises in the readers' minds how he would come to have older brothers. According to Xing Bing again, and I agree with him, the older brothers referred to here means all the paternal line cousins who are older than the Son of Heaven³². In fact, traditionally in China all the paternal line cousins refer to each other as brothers. Thus, though the highest of human beings, according to Confucius the Sons of Heavens are bound by the code of xiao (and ti) to be virtuous, kind, deferential and respectful. This in turn is fundamental to their success in their intermediary role between Heaven and Earth on the one hand and all the subjects in the Empire on the other hand.

「宗廟致敬，不忘親也。修身慎行，恐辱先也。」

“One pays respects in the Ancestral Temple because one does not forget one's parents. One cultivates one's character and is careful in one's conduct because one fears bringing shame to one's ancestors.

Explanatory Comment: Again the Sons of Heaven are bound by xiao to their forebears to be cultivated (gentlemanly) and careful in conduct. This is the complete opposite of the tyrannical despot. Indeed throughout Chinese history, if one looks at the imperial edicts and imperial pronouncements, one can see that the Chinese

³¹ See paragraph 2 on page 5 and footnote 2 on page 5.

³² See *Xiao Jing* 孝經, “The Thirteen Classics 十三經”, Beijing, 1980, p. 2,559.

emperors do try to portray themselves to their subjects as being gentlemanly and virtuous persons who are careful in their conduct and fearful of trespass.

「宗廟致敬，鬼神著矣。孝悌之至，通於神明，光于四海，無所不通。」

“Paying respects in the Ancestral Temple causes the spirits and gods to manifest themselves. When *xiao* and *ti* (being respectful to elders) arrives, one connects with the divine. This leads to illumination of the whole world, with no place not opening up.

Explanatory Comment: *So the worship of ancestors and the personal practice of virtue (xiao and ti) by the Son of Heaven cause the gods to bestow their blessings. Indeed, according to Confucius, this personal practice of virtue by the Son of Heaven brings light to the whole world.*

「《詩》云：『自西自東，自南自北，無思不服。」

』」

“The *Book of Poetry* says, ‘From west to east, from south to north, no one thinks of insubordination.’”

Explanatory Comment: *So, according to Confucius, the entire world submits to a virtuous Son of Heaven who practices xiao and ti. The Son of Heaven’s virtue is a cornerstone of his legitimacy.*

事君章第十七

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: SERVING ONE’S LORD

子曰：「君子之事上也，進思盡忠，退思補過，將順其美，匡救其惡。故上下能相親也。」

The Teacher said, “When a Noble Person serves his superiors, in advancing he thinks of fulfilling duty to the utmost, in retreating he thinks of remedying errors. He supports and helps along the good, and corrects and lessens the consequences of the

bad. Therefore the superior and the inferior can be close with each other.

Explanatory Comment: *This chapter on serving one's Lord is part of Confucius' exposition on xiao because Confucius has asserted in Chapter Fourteen that being xiao leads to serving one's Lord well, with all one's heart and soul.*

「《詩》云：『心乎愛矣，遐不謂矣；中心藏之，何日忘之。』」

“The *Book of Poetry* says, ‘The heart is engaged in love; why not say it?’^{33,34} Store it in the middle of the heart, and never forget it.”

Explanatory Comment: *The love expressed in this love poem is used by Confucius to portray the love that the Noble Person feels for his Lord.*

喪親章第十八

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: THE PASSING OF A PARENT

子曰：「孝子之喪親也，哭不偯，禮無容，言不文，服美不安，聞樂不樂，食旨不甘，此哀戚之情也。」

The Teacher said, “When a *xiao* son loses his parent, he cries without trying to stop himself³⁵, his politeness is without pleasantry, his words are without adornment, when

³³ *Ci Hai*, (辭海), 1989 ed., Shanghai, p. 1,197, under the entry “遐 (*xia*)”: here *Ci Hai* takes the word 遐 to mean “why”, and quotes this passage from *Xiao Jing* as the example. On the other hand, in Xing Bing's Tang Dynasty annotations to *Xiao Jing* 孝經 (“*The Thirteen Classics* 十三經”, Beijing, 1980, p. 2,560), he takes the same word to mean “far away” and generates this interpretation, completely different from that of *Ci Hai*: “Though far away, the Noble Person does not speak of (i.e. consider important) his distance from his lord...”

³⁵ 偯 (*yi*) means “the type of whimpering that occurs as crying stops.” Thus in a strict word-for-word translation, this passage would be rendered as: “...he cries without the type of

he dresses in fine clothes he feels uncomfortable, when he hears music he does not feel joy, and when he eats delicious food it is not tasty. This is sadness and grief.

Explanatory Comment: When a parent dies, the xiao son is to express his grief.

「三日而食，教民無以死傷生，毀不滅性。此聖人之政也。喪不過三年，示民有終也。」

“Eating after three days is to teach the people not to let dying injure the living, such that the damage (from the death) does not destroy people’s nature. Such is the policy of the Sages. Mourning is not to exceed three years; this is to show the people that it has an end.

Explanatory Comment: Excessive expressions of grief, such as not eating for over three days and mourning for over three years are discouraged by the conscious policy of Confucius’ Sages, i.e. the leaders of the early Zhou Dynasty, such as the Duke of Zhou whom Confucius admires. Before the Zhou Dynasty came to power in 1122 B.C.E., there were burials of wives, attendants, guards, servants, even ministers and generals along with the Sons of Heaven. Such following of one’s Lord to the underworld was probably considered voluntary, though expected, expressions of grief and loyalty, the way the Indian practice of suttee or self immolation of a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre was considered voluntary though expected. That practice for the Sons of Heaven disappeared with the advent of the Zhou Dynasty, and from these words of Confucius, it appears that it was the conscious policy of the Zhou Dynasty to stop all such practices of excessive expressions of grief.

While Confucius set the period of mourning at a maximum of three years, subsequently in traditional China many took it to be set at three years. Of course, a lot of people, maybe even most, did not follow this, and resumed their work posts shortly. Ordinary farmers and workmen certainly could not mourn for three years without working.

「為之棺槨衣衾而舉之。陳其簠簋而哀戚之。」「擗踊哭泣，哀以送之。卜其宅兆而安措之。」

whimpering that occurs as crying stops.” Therefore I take the whole passage to mean: “...he cries without trying to stop himself.”

“Prepare for the deceased parent inner and outer coffins,³⁶ burial clothes and burial blankets, and raise the coffin. Set out the offering vessels³⁷ and mourn him. Beat the breast, jump up and down, and cry. With grief see him off to the burial ground. Divine a good gravesite and place him there to rest in peace.

Explanatory Comment: The funeral is to be a grieving, sad event.

「為之宗廟以鬼享之，春秋祭祀以時思之。」

“Make a shrine temple to make offerings to his spirit. Conduct sacrificial ceremonies in the spring and autumn to regularly think of him.

Explanatory Comment: While only people of great wealth can afford to build a special shrine temple for one ancestor, traditionally ordinary Chinese people have a common shrine temple, the village ancestral hall for a certain surname, for quite a number of generations of ancestors. As each person dies, as long as he has married he is enshrined in the village ancestral hall by placing an ancestral tablet with his name on the common altar. Every spring on April 5 of the common Western Gregorian calendar, or April 4 during leap years, is Qing Ming (清明節) Day, the day for memorial services at the ancestral hall as well as at the graves of the ancestors. Every autumn on the ninth day of the ninth month of the Chinese Lunar Calendar is Chong Yang Day (重陽節), again a day for memorial services at the ancestral hall as well as at the graves.

「生事愛敬，死事哀戚，生民之本盡矣，死生之義備矣，孝子之事親終矣。」

“When alive, serve him with love and respect; when dead, serve him with grief and

³⁶ The two words in the text here, *guan guo* 棺槨, normally means today inner coffin (*guan*-棺) and outer coffin (*guo*^ 槨). According to the Tang Dynasty annotator Xing Bing, however, during Confucius' time the word *guan* 棺 means not coffin but body, and the word *guo* 槨 means not outer coffin but coffin in general. Thus the two words in the text here, *guan guo* 棺槨, according to Xing Bing, actually means body and coffin. See *Xiao Jing* 孝經, “The Thirteen Classics 十三經”, Beijing, 1980, p. 2,561.

³⁷ The *fu*^ 簠 is the bronze rectangular offering vessel, and the *gui*` 簋 is the bronze round offering vessel. See *Ci Hai*, (辭海), 1989 ed., Shanghai, p. 2,128, under the entries “簠 (*fu*^)” and “簋 (*gui*^)”.

sorrow. The people's³⁸ duty is fulfilled, the obligations both during life and after death are fulfilled, and the *xiao* son's service to his parents is at an end.

Explanatory Comment: *Through each person's life cycle then, xiao, or being good to parents, starts in infancy as part of the personal relationship with one's parents, blossoms as one matures into being part of all social relationships, and ends up again at the time of death as being a personal relationship. When each and every person of all classes and positions in the society adheres to the doctrine and principles of xiao, a moral, ethical, kind, orderly, and peaceful society naturally results. Thus xiao is, as Confucius states in Chapter One, the foundation of virtue and what all teaching grows out of. This is the genius of Confucius and the Chinese tradition: by using and expanding on the natural love and respect between parent and child, the entire social order is kept moral and harmonious. It is not necessary to rely on the coercion of law or some kind of religious devotion and submission to a god or gods.*

- END XIAO JING TEXT -

³⁸ According to Ci Hai, the term *sheng min* 生民 simply means “the people” and not some construction like “live people” or “people, when alive”. See *Ci Hai*, (辭海), 1989 ed., Shanghai, p. 1,944, under the entry “生民 (*sheng min*)”.

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