

Filial Piety

ENCOURAGEMENT OF A FILIAL SON AND PUNISHMENT OF AN UNFILIAL SON¹⁷

author: Chen Hsi-shan

Confucius himself articulated a vision of the political order that was to become gospel for most members of the traditional Chinese political elite, that young people were socialized into an appropriate attitudes toward figures in authority by learning within the family how to behave toward their superiors, most importantly their parents. The habits of obedience, deference, and sacrifice were to be learned at home and extended to representatives of the state. If not learned at home, they would perhaps never be internalized, laying the groundwork for resistance

and rebellion. For this reason representatives of the state went out of their way to reward filial behavior and could be brutal toward the unfilial. Chen Hsi-shan's notice is a classic example of the use of example to propagandize the people.

In the recent past I instructed the people on three matters, the chief of which was filial piety, including brotherhood. In the last several months repeated reports came from the eastern borough concerning Chou Tsung-ch'iang 周宗强, a gentleman of trust. His mother, Court Lady Ch'en, became dangerously ill. Chou Tsung-ch'iang cut a piece of flesh from this thigh [to use as a medication]. His mother subsequently recovered. Although this is not the sort of thing that the classics of the sages advocate, still his filial piety was so sincere and eager that it was indeed commendable.

Now suddenly a commoner named Wu Shih 吳拾 and his wife, the woman Lin, have accused their son Wu Liang-ts'ung 吳良聰 of being unfilial. After repeated interrogations, their testimony has narrated all the details. I do not deserve to be prefect. I have not been capable of instructing the people in rites and righteousness and so have caused this sort of perversion to occur among the people. Day and night I can find no sanctuary from my shame and fear.

In addition to the reward money which shall be given according to the regulations, Chou, the gentleman of trust, shall be especially invited to the prefectural offices to have three [ritual] drinks, in the manner of honoring a respected guest. Then he shall be sent home [in a parade] with banners, music including drums, and a riding horse with a decorated saddle under a colorful parasol.

Wu Liang-ts'ung, though guilty of crimes deserving the death penalty, shall through our leniency be punished rather lightly. He shall be beaten twenty stokes on the back, have his head shaved, and be put to supervised labor for a year. His punishment is to be made known to the public at the marketplace so that people will know that the officials will show respect to those who are filially devoted to their parents and that the law will punish those who are unfilial. Furthermore, the people in this region are basically easily amenable to transformation. It is simply because the officials have not been wise enough to train them and to encourage them that some of the ignorant have casually committed offenses. To you, the people I am briefly stating [the principle of] great righteousness.