Understanding Filial Piety in the Zhuangzi

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I. Research Background

Traditionally, *xiao* (filial piety) has been understood as a core representative of Confucian values. However, the concept does not merely feature prominently in the so-called Confucian tradition. In fact, *xiao* is also an important concept in the *Zhuangzi*. Filial piety appears 33 times in total in the *Zhuangzi*, treating different aspects of the concept. Previous scholarship notwithstanding, some questions remain unanswered and need to be addressed. Two main features of previous research on filial piety in the *Zhuangzi* are worth re-evaluating.

Firstly, the Zhuangzian understanding on filial piety is often understood through Confucian eyes. This is perhaps because *xiao* is traditionally understood as a Confucian concept. When people believe that the so-called Confucian and Daoist theories are related to some extent, they tend to discuss filial piety in the *Zhuangzi* within the framework of Confucian ideas. For example, there are scholars who argue that Zhuangzian filial piety is a negation of the Confucian idea of filial piety.¹ There are also scholars who argue that the *Zhuangzi* argues

that Confucian virtues can be attained by denying Confucian ritual forms. However, owing in part to an increased awareness that Daoism did not exist as a school with a shared lineage of knowledge at the time when the texts and anthology were composed, it can be argued that the previous discussion of this topic was based on wrong assumptions. In other words, we know that the assumption that the Zhuangzian discussion of filial piety was arguing against the “shared” understanding of “Confucian” values is questionable. And therefore, as a central concept in early Chinese thought which was shared and renegotiated across a variety of knowledge communities, the better way to study the idea of xiao in the Zhuangzi is to first analyse how the concept is treated within specific texts before comparing its use to other texts, instead of constructing mutually incompatible philosophical schools. After conducting a careful analysis of the text itself, we have a better perspective to compare it with ideas that appear in other anthologies.

Another feature of the research on filial piety in the Zhuangzi is that it focuses on the question of whether the Zhuangzi holds a positive or a negative attitude towards filial piety. Ikeda Tomohisa argues that most of the expressions of filial piety are negative, and that the only positive one, which is found in chapter 31, expresses a flaccid positive view towards xiao. The seemingly ambiguous attitudes toward xiao in the Zhuangzi have also been noticed

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by Donald Holzman. He argues that chapters 14 and 29 contain negative attitude towards filial piety, while a different positive attitude towards it appears in chapters 4 and 31. Holzman, however, leaves this observation unexplained and does not provide any further analysis. 4

Instead of focusing on the abovementioned questions, I believe that in order to understand the idea of filial piety in the Zhuangzi on its own, a more productive question can be asked. Namely, what aspects and connotations are attributed to the concept of xiao in the Zhuangzi? Or, to put it another way, how can one be “filial” according to the Zhuangzi? In what follows, I will analyse different aspects and connotations of xiao in the Zhuangzi to show what filial piety meant in the Zhuangzi. More importantly, I will point out how the Zhuangzian idea of filial piety can contribute to our understanding of the larger discussion of this topic in early China.

To demonstrate the connotations of filial piety in the Zhuangzi, this paper examines the following three aspects. First, it presents how the Zhuangzi differentiates internal states from external social standards for understanding filial piety. Second, this paper focuses on how the idea of an 安 (contentment) and wang 忘 (forgetfulness) are associated with filial piety in the Zhuangzi. Through analysing these two key concepts, we can understand how Zhuangzian ideas of filial piety are associated with debates shared across early China. For example, how did the Zhuangzi understand the relationship between love and respect with filial piety? How

did the *Zhuangzi* argue against those who insisted that being filial was necessarily associated with constantly giving remonstrance to one’s parents?

These questions are worth considering for two reasons. Firstly, the understanding of filial piety in the *Zhuangzi* presents a unique and meaningful voice in debate. For example, it was the first to associate ideas of forgetting and acceptance with the understanding of filial piety. Secondly, the discussions of filial piety in the *Zhuangzi* can further enrich our understanding of this concept in early China. I argue that filial piety did not have a fixed meaning in early China. Questions whether a filial son can disobey the parents, or the conflicts between being filial and being loyal to the public, were heavily debated across early texts. Therefore, on the one hand, there is no need to assume that the position laid out in the *Zhuangzi* must have targeted Confucian ideas in specific. On the other hand, an understanding of Zhuangzian filial piety through a close reading of the *Zhuangzi* itself allows us to situate its thought more properly within early Chinese intellectual debates.

Before turning to the argument, I need to briefly clarify the scope of the texts and methodology I use in this paper. Regarding the *Zhuangzi*, the question of whether some of the texts were the product of a thinker called Zhuangzi is, I believe, irrelevant for my project. By the *Zhuangzi*, I refer to the whole anthology totaling 33 chapters edited by Guo Xiang (c. 252-312 C.E.). One may ask, why not just use Inner Seven Chapters which scholars believe to contain the core ideas of the *Zhuangzi*? Admittedly, the best choice of materials to reconstruct the core ideas of the *Zhuangzi* is still hotly debated. Many scholars accept the evidence presented by A. C. Graham and Liu Xiaogan and believe that the inner seven chapters are written by a person called Zhuangzi and thus are the core chapters containing the

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5 Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Chinese Ethics. 
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-chinese/
core ideas in this anthology. However, this argument is problematic since it prioritises certain layers of production of the *Zhuangzi* on the sole assumption of authorship, which recent studies have shown to be problematic.

In terms of understanding arguments and ideas of the *Zhuangzi*, I argue that the outer and miscellaneous chapters are no less important than the inner seven chapters. This can be justified by examining the *reception* of this anthology. In recent studies, Wang Shumin 王叔岷, Esther Klein, and Harold Roth have demonstrated close parallels between Han texts such as the *Shiji* and the *Huainanzi* with the outer and miscellaneous chapters of the *Zhuangzi*.

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Although some of their arguments are problematic,\(^9\) we can still conclude that in the Han dynasty at least, the so-called outer and miscellaneous chapters were crucial to certain knowledge communities. And thus, for a comprehensive study of the Zhuangzian idea of filial piety, I will take all 33 chapters seriously without prioritising any chapter.

Instead of the chapter, I take the *story* as the basic unit of the *Zhuangzi*. The reason why the story should be used as the basic unit to analyse this anthology is because, first of all, if we follow the chapter divisions as edited by Guo Xiang, it is impossible to detach our perspectives from Guo Xiang’s construction. That is to say, by using chapters as the basic unit of thought, we restrict our research to Guo Xiang’s understanding of the anthology. Second, using stories as the basic units of thought allows us to closely understand the concepts in terms of their immediate contexts, examine how different concepts function within different contexts, and how the argument is built from these concepts. This process

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\(^9\) Klein argues that since there is no mention or citation of the Inner Chapters in the *Shiji*, the existence of these inner chapters is questionable. See Esther Klein, “Were there ‘inner chapters’ in the Warring States? A new examination of evidence about the *Zhuangzi*,” p. 315. Klein’s argument is questionable since it is based on a problematic presupposition: if we cannot see A in other anthologies, we have grounds to suppose that it never existed. However, many unearthed texts have proved that this presupposition is groundless. Harold Roth points out that there are about three hundred terminological and conceptual parallels between the two anthologies, namely the *Huainanzi* and the *Zhuangzi*. But he further argues that, based on the large number of parallel terms and theoretical similarities, as well as on the titles of the inner chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, which frequently occur in the *Huainanzi*, one can conclude that the former text was compiled by the authors of the latter text. Such a deduction itself is a logical fallacy. We also see numerous parallels between the *Dao De Jing* and the *Huainanzi*, but can we therefore conclude that the authors of the *Huainanzi* were also the compilers of the *Dao De Jing*? See Roth, especially p. 122.
differs from that of only analysing the concepts as drawn from short phrases and sentences, which has the disadvantage of disregarding the contexts of the concepts, with the result that the contextual meaning of certain concepts may be overlooked or misunderstood. In short, using the story as the basic unit of thought will not only allow us to approach the concepts more properly without overlooking their various connections, but also help us to understand how those concepts function in the building of an argument, without restricting one’s interpretations to those put forward in Guo Xiang’s construction.

In terms of reconstructing the idea of filial piety in the *Zhuangzi*, I agree that it is impossible to reconstruct the voice of only one author, based on the fact that the received texts have probably been edited and compiled by different people and over many generations. However, we can still reconstruct a more or less consistent stream of philosophical thinking in the *Zhuangzi* that may be meaningful for our discussion. Also, from the perspective of this anthology as a whole, although the ideas in it are not always presented in a unified and connected manner, this does not preclude the possibility that these ideas are interconnected and have a reasonable degree of coherence.

I therefore employ a corpus-based analysis to study the *Zhuangzi*. This approach offers the following advantages: First, the concepts that are applied are those that have been drawn from the texts; thus, from the outset the aim of the research is to understand the concepts themselves in their surroundings. Second, such an approach will enable us to find connections between certain concepts that appear under different contexts. Third, it will help to avoid the problem of putting the *Zhuangzi* into existing categories or trying to fit the *Zhuangzi* into established frameworks.

Now let us turn to the first question of filial piety in the *Zhuangzi* on whether being filial should be decided by internal or external standards.
II. *Xiao* 孝 and External Standards

In gaining an understanding of *xiao* in general, the first issue is: Who decides whether an individual is filial? In chapter 26, *Wai Wu* 外物 (External Things), the *Zhuangzi* gives us an answer by negating the necessary connection between being filial and the love between parents and children. More importantly, we can see from this that the understanding of being filial in the *Zhuangzi* is closely related to one’s internal state rather than decided by the external evaluation of others.

外物不可必，故龍逢誅，比干戮，箕子狂，惡來死，桀、紂亡。人主不欲其臣之忠，而忠未必信，故伍員流於江，萇弘死於蜀，藏其血三年，化而為碧。人親莫不欲其子之孝，而孝未必愛，故孝己憂而曾參悲。

External things have no fixed standards. Therefore, Long Feng was executed, Bi Gan was sentenced to death, Prince Chi (feigned) madness, Er Lai was killed, and Jie and Zhou were dead. There is no ruler who does not want his ministers to be loyal. But loyal ministers are not always trusted. Hence Wu Yuan was thrown into the Yangtze river and Chang Hong died in Shu area where the people stored away his blood, and after three years it was transformed into green jade. There is no parent who does not want his son to
be filial. But filial sons are not always loved. Hence Xiao Ji grieved and Zeng Shen sorrowed.\textsuperscript{10}

This paragraph focuses on the observation that there are no fixed standards for external things. Therefore, a person’s miserable death is not necessarily related to his or her behaviour and character. To illustrate this argument, the text uses the deaths of Feng Long, Bi Gan, Er Lai and Jie, Zhou as examples. The text further elaborates this main argument by stating that, a loyal minister is not necessarily to be trusted by his subjects, like the situations of Wu Yuan and Chang Hong. Similarly, a filial son is not necessarily loved by his parents, as was the case for Xiao Ji and Zeng Shen.

Admittedly, the relationship between being filial and being loved is only a sub-argument in this paragraph. What we should pay attention to is the context which presents a contrast of being filial but not loved. To be more specific, we can see that even though the son was not loved by the parents, the text still acknowledges that Xiao Ji and Zeng Sheng were filial. That is to say, the criteria for being filial are not set by external standards or outer things. Rather, it is determined by one’s internal state. Here, the intention of being filial trumps the result of being regarded as filial by parents and others. Now the question becomes, what are the connotations of \textit{xiao}? What are the criteria for being filial?

III. Forgetting as Being Filial

With regard to the internal states that the *Zhuanzi* considers to be filial, the text directly argues that having a mind of “respecting”, “love” and “affection” to serve the parents cannot be seen as the real filial piety. Rather, it argues that *wang* 忘 (forgetfulness) is the ideal state of mind that one should adopt in order to be filial. In the chapter *Tian Yun* 天運 (The Turning of Heaven), the text states:

商太宰蕩問仁於莊子。莊子曰：「虎狼，仁也。」曰：「何謂也？」莊子曰：「父子相親，何為不仁？」曰：「請問至仁。」莊子曰：「至仁無親。」太宰曰：「蕩聞之：無親則不愛，不愛則不孝。謂至仁不孝，可乎？」莊子曰：「不然。夫至仁尚矣，孝固不足以言之。此非過孝之言也，不及孝之言也。夫南行者至於郢，北面而不見冥山，是何也？則去之遠也。故曰：以敬孝易，以愛孝難；以愛孝易，以忘親難；忘親易，使親忘我難；使親忘我易，兼忘天下難；兼忘天下易，使天下兼忘我難。夫德遺堯、舜而不為也，利澤施於萬世，天下莫知也，豈直太息而言仁孝乎哉！夫孝悌仁義，忠信貞廉，此皆自勉以役其德者也，不足多也。故曰：至貴，國爵並焉；至富，國財并焉；至顯，名譽并焉。是以道不渝。」

Dang, the prime minister of Shang, asked Zhuangzi about benevolence. Zhuangzi said, “Tigers and wolves — they’re benevolent.” “How can you say
that?” Zhuangzi said, “Sire and cubs warm and affectionate with one another - why do you say they’re not benevolent?” “What I am asking to hear about is perfect benevolence.” “Perfect benevolence knows no affection,” said Zhuangzi. The prime minister said, “I have heard that where affection is lacking, there will be no love, and if there is no love, there will be no filial piety. Can you possibly say that perfect benevolence is unfilial?” “No, no,” said Zhuangzi. “Perfect benevolence is a lofty thing — words like filial piety would never do to describe it. And what you are talking about is not something that surpasses filial piety, but something that doesn’t even measure up to it. If a traveller to the south turns to look north again when he reaches the city of Ying, he will no longer see the dark northern mountains. Why? Because they are too far away. Thus it is said, to be filial out of respect is easy; to be filial out of love is hard. To be filial out of love is easy; to forget parents is hard. To forget parents is easy; to make parents forget you is hard. To make parents forget you is easy; to forget the whole world is hard. To forget the whole world is easy; to make the whole world forget you is hard. Virtue discards Yao and Shun and rests in inaction. Its bounty enriches ten thousand ages, and yet no one in the world knows this. Why all these deep sighs, this talk of benevolence and filial piety? Filial piety, brotherliness, benevolence, righteousness, loyalty, trust, honour, integrity — for all of these you must drive yourself and make a slave of Virtue. They are not worth prizing. So it is said, highest eminence scorns the titles of the kingdom; greatest wealth rejects the riches of the kingdom; loftiest desire ignores fame and reputation. It is the Way alone that never varies.”
While the main focus of this story is the concept of perfect benevolence *zhi ren* 至仁, the discussion of *xiao* 孝 obviously cannot be dismissed. Through Zhuangzi’s words, we can see three levels of *xiao* 孝 delineated by different states of mind, namely, respecting (*jing 敬*), loving (*ai 愛*), and forgetting (*wang 忘*). According to Dang 蕩, the prime minister of Shang, loving is the necessary condition for being filial, “無親則不愛，不愛則不孝” (where affection is lacking, there will be no love, and if there is no love, there will be no filial piety).

In contrast with seeing respecting and loving as necessary conditions for being filial, which was proposed by Dang, the text continues to demonstrate the Zhuangzian understanding of filial piety as being closely related to the concept of *wang 忘*. The text emphasizes *xiao* in saying that “to be filial out of respect is easy; to be filial out of love is hard. To be filial out of love is easy; to forget parents is hard. To forget parents is easy; to make parents forget you is hard. To make parents forget you is easy; to forget the whole world is hard. To forget the whole world is easy; to make the whole world forget you is hard.” (“故曰：以敬孝易，以愛孝難；以愛孝易，以忘親難；忘親易，使親忘我難；使親忘我易，兼忘天下難；兼忘天下易，使天下兼忘我難。”) From this we can see that *jing* 敬 (respecting) is the easiest way to be filial, followed by *ai* 愛 (loving). The most difficult way to be filial is by forgetting.

In terms of the level of forgetfulness, not only is forgetting about one’s parents required, but making one’s parents forget about oneself is also necessary. Furthermore, the text argues that such forgetfulness can allow one to forget the whole world and possibly make the world forget about oneself. Admittedly, the text does not give any clear definition of the idea of
forgetting. Nor does it give any direct explanation for why forgetting is the highest level of being filial. However, from the context, which refers to the ideal behaviour exhibited by Yao and Shun, we can indirectly speculate what the text means by forgetfulness and why it is the highest level of being a filial son. The following are characteristics of forgetfulness which can be summarized from the context:

(1) The Zhuangzian idea of forgetfulness is that it is an active choice and requires self-cultivation. It differs from a passive state of mind which results from ignorance or inertia, such as forgetting one’s keys when leaving the house. Such an active and deliberative and indeed difficult cultivation to achieve forgetfulness is seen in the expression "忘…難 (forgetting … is difficult). It also requires that one make others reach this level of state of mind (“使….忘我難” making … forget[ting] about me is difficult).

(2) This forgetfulness is not the result of being careless or having no regard for the parents and the world. On the contrary, the practical dimension is crucial to reach forgetfulness. Practically, in order to reach the filial level of forgetfulness, the corresponding behaviour is: firstly, serving the parents just as the great sages benefitted the world, “利澤施於萬世”, and secondly, not letting the parents be consciously aware of one’s filial behaviour just as the sage did not make the world aware of their great deeds “天下莫知也”.

(3) Apart from practical behaviour, being forgetful also requires one not to be attached to them while serving the parents, such as overtly and overly expressing filial behaviour or making a big deal of one’s behaviour of serving. As the text suggest,
they are not worth praising “不直多也”, and thus not one should not heave deep sighs and talk a lot about the filial piety. “豈直太息而言仁孝乎哉”. The opposite case of overly expressing one’s dedication for serving the parents as well as making them aware of such behaviour is criticized by the Zhuangzi. In the chapter Tian Di 天地 (Heaven and Earth), the Zhuangzi argues against this by stating “to prepare medicine like a filial son and present it to the loving father, [while] wearing a grim and haggard look, this the true sage would be ashamed to do” (孝子操藥以修慈父，其色燋然，聖人羞之"). The text explains that the reason that a sage would be ashamed to do so is because a true sage moves without leaving any trail behind and acts without leaving any memory of his deeds (“故行而無跡，事而無傳”) The seemingly “filial” son is not truly filial because he/she overly expresses his/her own feelings and thus overly demonstrates his/her own behaviours.

In a word, through the above analysis, we can deduce that the highest level of being filial is being able to forget and let other people forget. Such forgetfulness is different from either being passively ignorant or being careless of the parents. Rather, it is an active choice of state of mind. It is also a hard process of cultivation. Practically and mentally, it includes serving and benefiting the parents without being emotionally attached to the filial behaviour and its objects. Only through this, one is able to forget about the parents. To be specific, it requires one’s behaviour not to result in any trace of effort or memories, so that the parents would not be clearly aware of the dedication from their children. This in turn, frees them from worry and other emotional burden. It also requires one not overly expresses or demonstrates one’s filial behaviour, so that both oneself and the parents will not be harmed by the strong
emotions. For example, when a sick parent realizes that a child has sacrificed his or herself and given up a lot so as to take care of the parent, that parent will almost certainly feel uncomfortable and guilty, and therefore have an emotional burden. The best way, according to the Zhuangzi, is to physically take care of the ill parent but not to worry too much and not to make a big deal of such a behaviour by treating it as a sacrifice or frequently expressing one’s worry. Only by doing this, the ill parent can accept the child’s care without having emotional burdens and distress. More importantly, one will not harm one’s own body by worrying too much of the ill parent.

This story, in addition to presenting forgetting as the highest way of being filial, also compares forgetting with respecting and loving. Accordingly, two questions arise.

First, does the text count loving and respecting parents as being filial? My answer is: it does so only partially and not absolute, and therefore in the end, it does not constitute being filial. On the one hand, the text states that respecting parents is easier than loving, and loving is again easier than forgetting one’s parents. That is to say, it is not ungrounded to argue that both respecting and loving can be seen as parts of filial piety, albeit having a lower status than forgetting. On the other hand, we can see that when Dang refers to a saying that affection and love are the necessary conditions for being filial, Zhuangzi replies that these do “not even reach of level of being filial “不及孝之言也.”” How can we understand this? My answer is that love and respect are necessary but not sufficient parts of filial piety. In order to reach the highest level of filial piety, and therefore, true filial piety one requires forgetfulness.

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To Zhuangzi then, forgetfulness is also a necessary condition, and just loving and respecting one’s parents are not enough to meet the conditions of filial piety.

The second question we can ask is, for what reasons does the Zhuangzi have to deal with the ideas of love and respect when discussing filial piety in the first place? Since the Zhuangzi does not provide a clear definition or discussion of these terms, we have to look to the debate at large so that we can understand the connotations of these terms and understand why to the Zhuangzi they are not sufficient. The lack of detail in the Zhuangzi does not allow for a definitive answer to these questions, what we can know is that seeing love and respect as ways of being filial was not uncommon in early China. The prime minister Dang himself pointed out that he only heard about (wen zhi 閔之) a saying on filial piety. In other words, Dang did not conceptualize it himself. Rather it was likely an idea on filial piety shared by certain knowledge communities. If the Zhuangzi was communicating and debating with some common ideas shared by society at that time, these ideas thus need to be sought in other texts.

First, when some texts associate love and respect with filial piety, they argue that a filial child should serve the parents by loving and respecting what they love and respect. The Zhuangzi would disagree with this. Compare this example from the Liji 禮記:

曾子曰：「孝子之養老也，樂其心不違其志，樂其耳目，安其寢處，以其
飲食忠養之孝子之身終，終身也者，非終父母之身，終其身也；是故父母
之所愛亦愛之，父母之所敬亦敬之，至於犬馬盡然，而況於人乎！

Zengzi said, “A filial son, in serving his aged parents, should make their hearts glad, and not to go against their wishes; to promote their comfort in their eyes
and ears, and make their living comfortable. One should supply them with their food and drink—such is the filial son to the end of life. By ‘the end of life’, I mean not the end of parents’ lives, but the end of his own life. Thus what his parents loved he will love, and what they respected he will respect. He will do so even in regard to all their dogs and horses, and how much more in regard to the men (whom they valued).” ¹²

Another example can be found in the Zhong Yong 中庸 (The State of Equilibrium and Harmony):

…敬其所尊，愛其所親，事死如事生，事亡如事存，孝之至也.

They respected those whom they honoured, and loved those whom they regarded with affection. Thus they served the dead as they would have served them alive; they served the departed as they would have served them had they been continued among them - the height of filial piety.

These two examples argue to unconditionally love and respect the things your parents love and respect, even after they have died. This is presented as the highest level of being filial.

Based on the concept of forgetfulness, we can argue that the Zhuangzi would not agree with this definition of filial piety. To the Zhuangzi, it is enough for children to serve their parents in life, without requiring them to share their feelings and value judgements, let alone, continue doing this after their death. While the Zhuangzian filial child would certainly help parents to fulfil their wishes, on a personal level that child might necessarily agree with those

¹² The Li Ji translations in this paper are adapted from that of James Legge. See the Chinese Text Project.
choices or desires themselves as Huang Yong has pointed out. For example, when a parent decides to continue smoking while having serious lung problems, a Zhuangzian filial child, would help the parent buy cigarettes, but need not necessarily agree with their choice, let alone start smoking himself.

Second, giving admonishments to parents and following the parents’ wishes when the admonishments are not accepted, these two elements are also associated with loving and respecting parents so as to be filial. For example, in the *Li Ji* 禮記, the text states the importance of not only admonishing one’s parents, but of making them accept those admonishments as well:

罩居離問於曾子曰：「事父母有道乎？」曾子曰：「有。愛而敬。父母之行若中道，則從；若不中道，則諫；諫而不用，行之如由己。從而不諫，非孝也；諫而不從，亦非孝也。

Shan Juli asked Zengzi, “is there a way to serving one’s parents?” Zengzi says, “Yes, love and respect them. If the behaviour of one’s parents is in accordance with the right way, then follow them; if it is not in accordance with the right way, then admonish them. If they do not take up your admonitions. do their will as if it were your own way If you follow parents without giving admonishments, it is not being filial. If you admonish them but do not follow them, it is also not being filial.)

According to Zengzi, there are two points which are important. First, one needs to give admonishments based on whether their behaviour is in accordance with the right way. Second, when the admonishments are not followed, one needs to follow the parents and then act as if it were one’s own way. Both of them are considered as necessary requirements for
being filial, according to Zengzi. Regarding Zengzi’s opinion, the Zhuangzi may be able to give a reply through the following passage.

孝子不諛其親，忠臣不諂其君，臣子之盛也。親之所言而然，所行而善，則世俗謂之不肖子；君之所言而然，所行而善，則世俗謂之不肖臣。而未知此其必然邪！世俗之所謂然而然之，所謂善而善之，則不謂之道諛之人也。然則俗固嚴於親而尊於君邪！

A filial son does not fawn on his parents, and a loyal minister does not flatter his lord. Those sons and ministers are the finest. He who agrees with everything his parents say and approves of everything they do is regarded by popular opinion as an unworthy son; he who agrees with everything his lord says and approves of everything his lord does is regarded by popular opinion as an unworthy minister. But in other cases men do not realize that the same principle should apply. If a man agrees with everything that popular opinion says and regards as good everything that popular opinion regards as good, he is not, as you might expect, called a sycophant and a flatterer. Are we to assume, then, that popular opinion commands more authority than one's parents, or is more to be honoured than one’s lord?

The Zhuangzi probably would not think it is necessary to give admonishments so as to be filial. But it is clear that a filial son does not flatter (bu yu 不諛) parents. This means that there would not be a problem for the Zhuangzi to allow a filial child to provides its honest thinking when one does not agree with the parents. The crucial part for a Zhuangzian child is
that one also should not give admonishments based on certain social and ethical standards, since by doing so, one instead of flattering parents, is in fact flattering popular opinion. If the Dao according to the Zengzi is a fixed social rule, the Zhuangzi would certainly disagree with that.

When parents do not listen to the admonishments, Zengzi requires a filial child to follow the parents as if it came from oneself. This is contradictory to the Zhuangzi’s ideas. According to the Zhuangzi, this is exactly a type of flattery, namely to agree and support whatever the parents do and say instead of just serving them. When one disagrees with parent’s behaviour, a Zhuangzian child, I believe, would give admonishments and when the remonstrance is not accepted, as stated before, one will still serve the parents without agreeing with them. One certainly should not treats such behaviour as from one’s own decision. Just like the case of the smoking parent, a filial child would give suggestions, but the son would also respect the parents’ wishes and help them to fulfil it. However, one does not need to agree with it as if it were from oneself. By doing so, one’s social role as a son can be fulfilled. In the meanwhile, one would not be harmed by one’s emotional fluctuations. More importantly, one is able to respect the parents’ own decisions without giving them emotional burden and hurting oneself. These elements are also expressed through the concept of an 安（contentment）in Renjian shi 人間世 (In the world of men)

IV. Being Content as Being Filial

From the previous discussion, we can know that when people see affection and love as being filial, the Zhuangzi argues that being filial out of emotional attachment is not enough and only by reaching forgetfulness, one is able to be truly filial. In the chapter Renjian shi 人間世 (In the world of men), the Zhuangzi also proposes a transformation from pure natural love to
the level of *an* 安（contentment）for being filial. The chapter incorporates a story about Duke Xie 葉 receiving a mission to travel to the state of Qi 齊. Once he accepted this mission, the Duke began to worry about suffering from the judgment of men if he was not able to successfully fulfil his duty, and also from the imbalance of *yin* and *yang*, which might lead to sickness due to the excitement and worry about success. When Duke Xie asked Confucius about his opinion on how to resolve his problems, Confucius said:

仲尼曰：「天下有大戒二：其一，命也；其一，義也。子之愛親，命也，不可解於心；臣之事君，義也，無適而非君也，無所逃於天地之間。是之謂大戒。是以夫事其親者，不擇地而安之，孝之至也；夫事其君者，不擇事而安之，忠之盛也；自事其心者，哀樂不易施乎前，知其不可奈何而安之若命，德之至也。為人臣子者，固有所不得已，行事之情而忘其身，何暇至於悅生而惡死！夫子其行可矣！」

In the world, there are two great limits: one is *ming* and the other is duty (*yi*). A son’s love for his parents is *ming*. You cannot untie this from the heart-mind. A subject’s service to his ruler is duty. There is no place where a subject can go and be without his ruler; there is no place where he can escape between heaven and earth. These are what I mean by the great limits. Such being the case, to serve your parents, to be content to follow anywhere they are; this is the perfection of filial piety. To serve your ruler, to be content to serve him in everything that could be; this is the peak of loyalty. Those who serve their own heart-mind are not swayed in the face of sadness and joy. To

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Different interpretations of this term will be discussed later in this paper.
understand what you can do nothing about and to be content with it as if it were ming—this is the perfection of virtue. As a subject and a son, although there are things you cannot avoid, if you act in accordance with the state of affairs and forget about yourself, then how will you have time to be concerned about loving life and hating death? Act in this way and you will be all right.

In this paragraph, we can see the importance of an (contentment) as a necessary way of behaviour for one to be filial and thus a necessary condition for one to be filial. In the beginning, a child’s natural and unavoidable love is a kind of feeling from which one could never escape. From the context, we can see that if only relying on one’s natural love to serve the parents, it is seen as one’s unchangeable ming (situations beyond control). Starting from this natural love, the text continues to argue that when one is able to be content to follow anywhere the parents are, this can be seen as the perfection of filial piety, “是以夫事其親者，不擇地而安之, 孝之至也”. That is to say, the crucial transitional point from being limited by the inevitable love to reaching the highest level of filial piety lies in the attitude of contentment “an zhi 安之”.

Now the question becomes: how can we understand the attitude of an zhi? Chen Guying understands an zhi as merely referring to making one’s ruler and one’s father feel contentment, and thus the object of an merely refers to the parents.14 This translation is grammatically problematic, since the object of an should refer to the phrased structured

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between fu and zhe, namely shi qi qin. In other words, an zhi not only refers to one’s contentment towards wherever the parents might be, but also refers to one’s contentment towards following the parents. My understanding accords with that of Burton Watson and A. C. Graham.15

Such an understanding of an zhi focuses on two parts. It not only refers to the contentment of the heart-mind, but also emphasizes the practical guidelines of one’s actions toward one’s parents. And after demonstrating that one should serve one’s father, the text goes on to discuss in detail how to serve one’s own heart-mind: “And to serve your own mind so that sadness or joy do not sway or move it; to understand what you can do nothing about and to be content with it as if it were ming”.16 That is to say, on the one hand, one should do that which makes parents happy and follow them wherever they go, but in the meanwhile, one should transform natural love to a kind of equanimity that frees oneself from emotional fluctuations and therefore from disturbance of one’s mental state. By being able to an zhi, then one is able to reach the highest state of filial piety.

Through analysing two important concepts, namely wang and an, we can see that both of them share some characteristics which can be seen as the special connotations of filial piety in the Zhuangzi.


(1) The criteria of being filial is purely decided by one’s internal states rather than external standards. This can not only be seen through the argument that a filial son may not necessarily be loved back by the parents, there are also cases that a real filial child might be regarded by popular opinion as someone who is merely engaging in flattery. Therefore, we can see that the concept of wang and an focus on one’s different internal states of mind and not on judgement from the outside.

(2) Through the emphasis on the concepts of an and wang in the Zhuangzi, we can see that practically, being a filial son requires one to constantly serve and benefit the parents wherever they are and whatever they want. This does not mean however, that one cannot provide parents remonstrance, nor does it mean that one should admonish parents according to fixed social or ritual standards. When parents do not agree with one’s admonishments, one still serves and follows parents so as to fulfil their wishes, but at the same time does not change oneself according to what they believe to be good and true.

(3) While serving the parents, the Zhuangzi requires one to keep a detached attitude. This is expressed by forgetfulness (wang) and contentment (an), each emphasizing different aspects. The idea of an expresses that one should preserve emotional equanimity while trying the best to serve and follow one’s parents. This means, one should not stop at the level of one’s inborn love in serving one’s parents. Rather, one should transform natural love to the level of contentment, through which, one is able to serve the parents without having emotional fluctuations. Therefore, one will neither hurt oneself nor burden the parents. The concept of wang suggests that one should not make too much a point about the effort of serving. In this way, one does not impart the parent with too much emotional burdens and hurt oneself.
In a word, the Zhuangzian filial piety requires one to, on the one hand, serve parents whatever they want and wherever they go. On the other hand, it also requires one to be free from emotional fluctuations when serving the parents, so that care and love won’t generate worry and anxiety. Based on the previous discussion, we can see not only a unique argument within the Zhuangzi, but also speculate on a potential dialogue between different thinkers. That is to say, apart from the Confucianized dominant understanding of filial piety, we can also use other sources to reflect on different perspectives towards the way of treating parents. For example, whether or not one should admonish parents according to a certain norm, or to what extent one ought to emulate one’s parents behaviour.