

“Beat Him till the Blood Flows”: How Confucianism and Traditional East Asian Culture can Enable Child Abuse

Former child actress Jeanette McCurdy made headlines in August 2022 with her harshly titled memoir *I’m Glad My Mom Died*, in which she chronicles her relationship with her abusive mother. While McCurdy worked as a teenage actress for Nickelodeon, her mother would forcefully restrict her food intake, leading to severe eating disorders early and later on in McCurdy’s life. McCurdy’s mother would invade her privacy, demanding McCurdy’s diary entries as well as the need for physical “checkups” in the shower, not too shy of sexual abuse. McCurdy’s mother, however, saw nothing wrong with this, believing that everything she was doing was right, lacking any empathy for McCurdy’s suffering. But once her mother died from cancer in 2013, McCurdy claims that as upsetting as it was, her mother’s death also aided McCurdy in reconciling with her tragic past. With commitment to therapy, McCurdy developed healthier eating habits and chose a happier lifestyle for herself. It may have been difficult for her to accept that her mother was abusive, but McCurdy claims to have attained inner peace while bluntly refusing to forgive her mother (Ryu).

Unfortunately, McCurdy’s case is but one widely-covered instance of a much larger, expansive pandemic. According to the World Health Organization, about 1 billion children around the world experience some form of physical, sexual, and emotional violence. While physical violence may be much easier to witness and define, sexual and emotional violence like what McCurdy survived can be more insidious but just as damaging. To the WHO, sexual violence can look like forcing a child to have sexual activity without their consent. Emotional violence involves denying a child basic love and

emotional affection, and instead belittling, threatening, or controlling them. Regardless of what form it takes, violence against children has profound negative consequences. It can stunt children's normal cognitive and physical development, increasing the chances of problems like depression, anxiety, unemployment, and drug abuse. What is more, survivors of child abuse themselves are more likely to perpetuate acts of abuse and violence, leading to profound ripple effects for communities and societies ("Violence Against Children").

While it may be a worldwide crisis, child abuse is especially grave for East Asia, one of the world's most populous regions and, along with the Pacific Islands, boasting a child population of around 600 million. In a meta-analysis of 364 peer-reviewed studies, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) found that physical abuse rates vary between 10% and 30.3%, with a lifetime prevalence rate between 39.5% and 66.3%. Emotional abuse was even more widespread, with North Korea having a lifetime prevalence rate of about 31.3%, and China having a rate as high as about 68.5%. What is more, studies in the report estimate that between 19.2% and 27.5% of adults in China have witnessed some form of physical or psychological violence between their parents (xi-xii). Meanwhile, in Japan, medical experts Takeo Fujiwara and Norito Kawakami discovered that in one 2002-2004 survey, about 10.1% of respondents reported to have experienced family violence, and 7.5% reported to have experienced physical abuse (483). A similar 2011 survey of young university students in South Korea yielded similar sobering statistics. Shockingly, psychologists Yanghee Lee and Sangwon Kim revealed that 42.2% reported experiencing physical abuse, 36.3% emotional abuse, and 24.3% sexual abuse (1039). Ultimately, looking at East Asia and the Pacific from a broad

angle, economist Xiangming Fang and his colleagues estimated that child abuse costs the region about \$194 billion per year (146). While East Asia may be just one world region, its massive population makes child abuse a colossal epidemic in that region.

What could possibly be the reasons for such a widespread scourge? On one hand, family poverty is most likely to blame, but the relationship between poverty and abuse is not entirely clear-cut. In one 2009 study of Guangzhou high school students, medical expert William Chi Wai Wong and his colleagues found that low socioeconomic status correlated with an increased risk of physical abuse, although high status was also associated with an increased risk too (1821). Sociologist Yunjiao Gao and her team further attest to these findings. In a study of rural-to-urban migrant, relatively poorer families to the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen, the researchers found that family poverty strongly correlated with physical and emotional abuse. Even then, migrant families experienced the same high rates of child maltreatment as local, relatively wealthier families. 42.43% of migrant teenagers and 34.88% of local teenagers reported experiencing severe physical abuse in the 12 months prior to the study (176). While economic hardship may indeed correspond with a greater risk of child abuse occurring, abuse is not confined to any single economic class.

Parental problems like poor mental or relationship health also have a potential influence on the risk of child abuse. For example, one study of young Chinese mothers in Hong Kong found that those who neglected or physically assaulted their children were more likely to experience mental health problems (e.g, depression, anxiety), low social support, drug use, and binge drinking (Lo et al. 199). Family violence researcher April Chiung-Tao Shen extends these findings to her own country of Taiwan, yet another

region deeply influenced by traditional East Asian or Chinese culture. In a nationally representative sample of college students, Shen found that 11.3% had both experienced child physical abuse and witnessed their parents physically abuse each other. Perhaps not too surprisingly, these two factors had a significant association with each other (154). When daily life stressors become out of control for parents, it is quite easy for them to slip up and abuse their children out of impulse, cultivating a household environment destructive to child well-being.

Taken all together, poverty and parental problems contribute immensely to East Asia's child abuse epidemic. One pivotal factor, however, has a pivotal influence on this crisis, but does not receive enough proper reckoning in everyday East Asian society: culture. As diverse as East Asian nations – China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, North Korea, South Korea – are in their cultural beliefs and practices, they have all fallen greatly under the influence of Confucianism, a social and cultural system ultimately based on the 6th century BCE philosopher Confucius' teachings. As a firm believer in social harmony beginning with the family, Confucius championed the notion of filial piety, or a child's faithful love and obedience to their parents. To Confucius, filial piety looked like not deviating from a parent's behavior for three years,¹ sacrificing to ancestral spirits,² staying close to parents,³ not injuring one's own body received from one's parents,⁴ and mourning a parent's death for three years.⁵ Confucius and his followers argued that children ought to perform all these duties with the utmost devotion and sincerity.⁶ Confucius succinctly but loosely summarized filial piety as "not being disobedient," meaning "that parents, when alive, be served according to propriety; that, when dead, they should be buried according to propriety; and that they should be

sacrificed to according to propriety.”⁷ One of his disciples, Zengzi, further summarized the meaning of filial piety, dividing it into “three degrees”: the “honoring of our parents,” “not disgracing them,” and “being able to support them.”⁸

Of all values, Confucius and his followers immensely praised this ideal, with disciple Ran You boldly proclaiming that by reducing the risk of subjects rebelling and causing disorder, filial piety was “the root of all benevolence.”⁹ Since he believed family acted as the model for the state, Confucius also advised rulers that in order to win over their subjects’ loyalty, rulers ought to model such deference by themselves deferring to their own parents¹⁰. Seeing filial piety as the key to societal stability, Confucius proclaims in the *Classic of Filial Piety* that the principle could bring “peace and harmony” and “no ill-will between superiors and inferiors.”¹¹ He even goes so far as to call it the “constant [method] of Heaven.”¹² Zengzi echoed such beliefs, believing that it would become a unifying moral for the entire world and future generations to come.¹³

Sadly, as well-intentioned as Confucius’ ideal may have been, filial piety has its issues that can be exploited to justify child abuse. For one thing, its undue emphasis on strict obedience from children sets a precedent that can provide some leeway for abusive parents. To his credit, Confucius does advise that a filial child ought to “gently” admonish their parents and hold them accountable. In line with his belief of family being the model of the state, Confucius reasons that emperors and rulers avoided evil by employing ministers who would critique them for “unrighteous” deeds. Correspondingly, a child ought to critique their parents too.¹⁴

But these suggestions do not do much to soften Confucius’ insistence on obedience. In the *Analects*, a collection of Confucius’ sayings and beliefs, he plainly

declares that if a child gets punished for reproving their parents, the child should still be reverent and show no displeasure.¹⁵ In a similar vein, the *Classic of Rites* (a Confucian classic on the ancient Zhou dynasty's rituals, ceremonies, etiquette, and norms) reiterates this with rather harsher language. One chapter plainly declares that when a son is confronting his parents, should a parent ever become enraged "and beat him till the blood flows, he should not presume to be angry and resentful, but be [still] more reverential and more filial."¹⁶ Confucius may have indeed encouraged children to hold their parents responsible – and for parents to love their children¹⁷ – but his repeated emphasis on deference on the child's part practically inhibits this ideal¹⁸. How might parents take note of such teachings that advise parental responsibility when such teachings are overwhelmed by other teachings that emphasize parental superiority? By this logic, one might as well constantly argue that different ethnicities are inferior, while also rarely promoting love for all humanity. Is it realistic to place greater weight on one ideal and expect people to practice another opposing, marginally important ideal?

Other aspects of the Confucian ideal of filial piety can also become easily manipulated to rationalize child abuse. For one thing, teachings on showing reserve over reporting a parent's wrongdoings can cultivate a culture of silence that discourages abuse victims from reaching out. For instance, departing from the typical notion of family as the model of the state, the *Classic of Rites* advises that a son "should conceal [his father's faults], and not openly or strongly remonstrate with him about them." Even so, the same classic also advises that a minister "should remonstrate with him [minister's ruler] openly and strongly [about his faults], and make no concealment [of them]."¹⁹ In his dialogue with the Duke of She, Confucius reiterates this lesson on secrecy by

asserting that it is the “upright” thing for a son and father to “conceal” each other’s crimes or wrongdoings, rather than reporting to the authorities.²⁰ A century or so later after Confucius’ death, the 4th century BCE philosopher Mencius would take this to another level, contending that one should consider the example of the ancient 23rd century BCE sage-king Shun. As the paragon of Confucian morality, Shun was so renowned for his filial piety that Mencius casually remarks that the sage-king would go so far as to flee with his father from justice, should his father ever get convicted of murder.²¹ By condoning nondisclosure, Confucianism can ferment an abusive household by expecting children to remain silent about incidents. The threat of incurring disgrace for publicly disclosing private abuse also obstructs opportunities for abuse victims to receive proper support and attention.

Apart from filial piety’s insistence of children’s obedience and silence, the ideal also utilizes what psychotherapist Susan Forward calls “emotional blackmail,” where a person in a relationship uses degrading or threatening remarks to control another. When weaponizing emotional blackmail, an abuser attempts to instill unwarranted guilt in the target, making the target feel they must obey their abuser to avoid appearing self-centered or ungrateful. Forward also notes that abusers may even intimidate or frighten their targets, such as by threatening abandonment or physical harm, in order to secure submission. Alternatively, abusers can obtain the target’s undeserved sympathy by playing the victim, such as by threatening to hurt themselves or unfairly accusing the target of being cruel or disrespectful for not complying. Overall, Forward identifies three negative feelings that abusers attempt to instill in their targets: fear, sense of obligation, and guilt (Doll).

In the Confucian classics, Confucius is rather guilty of deploying emotional blackmail in order to promote filial piety. In an abnormal fit of rage, Confucius accuses Yuan Rang of allegedly being disobedient and insolent to his elders by sitting improperly, calling Yuan Rang a worthless “pest.” Confucius then violently strikes him on his shins.²² In another charged moment, the disciple Zai Wo questions the need for a three year-long mourning period for the death of one’s parents. He departs, only for Confucius to later disparage Zai Wo as being immoral. Supposedly, parents care for a child three years after its birth before the child becomes independent, and since the three year-mourning period is observed throughout China, the lengthy mourning is an obligation. Confucius proceeds to ask, in a loaded question, “Did Yu [Zai Wo] enjoy the three years’ love of his parents?”²³ Still utilizing forceful appeals to fear and guilt, Confucius commands his disciples to remain faithful to their parents, lest they “dare [to incur the risk of] being hated by any man” or “dare [to incur the risk of] being contemned by any man.”²⁴ On top of that, Confucius ventures to proclaim that rejecting filial piety, in addition to the authority of rulers and sages, will “pave the way to anarchy.”²⁵ As much as Confucius claims that filial piety is an embodiment of “affection,”²⁶ his repeated appeals to his disciples’ feelings of fear, obligation, and guilt are not too dissimilar from the tactics that abusive parents use to compel their children’s submission in the name of “love.”

Concerns about filial piety are not confined to the mere realm of abstract philosophical speculation, however. Indeed, in reality, researchers have found that adherence to filial piety acts as a major risk factor in encouraging child abuse. For example, South Korean social welfare expert Sonam Yang interviewed several families,

finding that parents thought they knew what was best for their children and should not be questioned. Correspondingly, interviewed parents believed that they had the right to use corporal punishment like caning to discipline their children (1544-1546). According to the parents' perspective, corporal punishment is done out of love and concern. One parent purported, "The parents only mean to do him [the child] good, there are no parents in the world that would want to harm their own children. If they don't care about them, they won't bother to govern them. It makes them stay on the right path" (qtd. in Yang 1547). On the whole, a majority of parents in the study practiced authoritarian styles, characterized by harsh punishments like scolding, shouting, threatening, or hitting (Yang 1548). A similar 2008 survey of about 6,592 high school students in Guangzhou, China, illuminated the relationship between filial piety and child maltreatment. Although the study itself never explicitly mentioned the concept of filial piety, the study did find that alleged "disobedience to parents" was one of the most commonly cited rationales for physical and psychological maltreatment. Considering the utmost importance of deference to parents in East Asian cultures, perceived disobedience can grant parents an easy license to inflict retribution upon their children in the name of discipline, providing some breeding ground for child maltreatment (Leung et al.). Finally, another observational study by developmental psychologist Xinyin Chen and his colleagues yielded similar findings yet again. In a survey of mothers from Beijing and Shanghai, it was discovered that those with more authoritarian attitudes were more likely to endorse harsher child-rearing strategies like discouraging questioning or using corporal punishment, strategies that are often involved in child maltreatment. But as much as such strategies are supposed to help make children more obedient and

strengthen the parent-child bond, this study produced counterintuitive results. If anything, when they observed mothers interacting with their children in a controlled laboratory environment, the researchers found that authoritarian styles correlated with greater child resistance and anger, as well as lower emotional attachment between child and mother (120-123). If the Confucian ideal of filial piety did not already have issues in theory, in practice, it surely contributes a significant deal to child maltreatment in East Asia.

But as widespread as child maltreatment may be throughout East Asia, the epidemic does not have to be accepted as an inevitable norm. On the contrary, this reality can be overcome by promoting positive parenting practices, such as giving out praise or rewards, offering gentle suggestions for proper behavior, and encouraging children to express their opinions. Indeed, Chen and his team revealed rather encouraging results, demonstrating that mothers' use of such positive strategies correlated with greater child compliance, stronger emotional bonds between mother and child, and lower resistance (122-123). Granted, the study sample consisted entirely of urban mothers from the Chinese cities of Beijing and Shanghai, making it difficult to extrapolate the findings to the entirety of East Asia. But such noteworthy findings are rather promising for a brighter future in preventing child maltreatment in East Asia. Admittedly, the colossal region still remains under the radical influence of filial piety, an originally well-intentioned ideal that unfortunately is a significant contributor to East Asia's present-day child abuse epidemic. As further scholarly and public awareness of child maltreatment and effective parenting strategies grow, however, East Asian society can better free itself from the harmful aspects of filial piety that can ferment child abuse.

More specifically, this will require challenging some of the ideal's harmful dogmas like strict obedience, silence, and emotional blackmail. Meanwhile, promoting more positive parenting styles can be a great step forward in preventing further child abuse. Together, these measures can allow more East Asian children to enjoy secure, loving families that promote physical and psychological welfare. And maybe by sparing its youth the burden of childhood trauma, East Asian society can make sure the next generation won't have to be glad about their parents' deaths to begin with.

Notes

1. [Analects 1.11, 4.20](#)
2. [Analects 1.9, 3.12, 8.21](#)
3. [Analects 4.19](#)
4. ["The Scope and Meaning of the Treatise." *Classic of Filial Piety*](#)
5. [Analects 1.9, 3.4, 3.26](#)
6. [Analects 1.6, 1.7, 2.7, 2.8](#)
7. [Analects 2.5](#)
8. [*Classic of Rites* 21.25](#)
9. [Analects 1.2](#)
10. [Analects 2.20](#)
11. ["The Scope and Meaning of the Treatise." *Classic of Filial Piety*](#)
12. ["Filial Piety in Relation to the Three Powers." *Classic of Filial Piety*](#)
13. [*Classic of Rites* 21.27](#)
14. ["Filial Piety in Relation to Reproof and Remonstrance." *Classic of Filial Piety*](#)
15. [Analects 4.18](#)
16. [*Classic of Rites* 10.18](#)
17. [*Classic of Rites* 7.1, 7.18, 10.17, 17.11, 17.48, 21.12, 23.6, 24.5, 24.8, 29.26, 29.31, 39.7, 39.12, 40.1, 41.3, 45.11](#)
18. [*Classic of Rites* 1A.14, 1A.16, 1A.17, 1A.19, 1A.49, 1A.50, 1A.55, 1A.64, 1A.70, 2A.19, 2B.172, 3.14, 10.2, 10.4, 10.9, 10.10, 10.11, 10.12, 10.13, 10.16, 10.21, 10.48, 10.58, 10.77, 17.42, 21.4, 21.5, 21.8, 21.9, 21.10, 21.11, 21.13,](#)

[21.14](#), [21.21](#), [21.22](#), [21.25](#), [21.26](#), [21.27](#), [21.28](#), [21.29](#), [21.32](#), [21.41](#), [22.2](#), [22.3](#),
[22.13](#), [22.14](#), [22.29](#), [24.1](#), [24.13](#), [27.16](#), [27.18](#), [27.19](#), [27.21](#), [27.22](#), [27.23](#), [27.24](#),
[27.25](#), [27.31](#), [28.17](#), [28.19](#), [28.20](#), [28.22](#), [32.4](#), [32.5](#), [32.9](#), [39.11](#), [42.8](#)

19. [*Classic of Rites 2A.2*](#)

20. [*Analects 13.18*](#)

21. [*Mencius 7A.35*](#)

22. [*Analects 14.43*](#)

23. [*Analects 17.21*](#)

24. [*“Filial Piety in the Son of Heaven.” Classic of Filial Piety*](#)

25. [*“Filial Piety in Relation to the Five Punishments.” Classic of Filial Piety*](#)

26. [*“Amplification of ‘The All-Embracing Rule of Conduct’ in Chapter I.”*](#)

[*Classic of Filial Piety*](#)

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