
What, exactly, is wrong with Confucian filial morality?

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ABSTRACT

Confucianism's emphasis on filial piety is both a hallmark of its approach to ethics and a source of concern. Critics charge that filial piety's extreme partialism corrupts Chinese society and should therefore be expunged from the tradition. Are the critics correct? In this paper, we outline the criticism and note its persistence over the last century. We then evaluate data from the empirical study of corruption to see whether they support the claim that partialism corrupts. Finally, we report some recent experimental work done with colleagues testing the claim that filial piety is associated with tolerance of corruption in Chinese societies. The results suggest that the critics are on to something. However, partialism (or kin affection) is not a cause of concern. Instead, authoritarianism (another aspect of filial piety) is associated with tolerance of corruption. We conclude that critics should reformulate their criticisms if they seek to combat corruption effectively.

Introduction

Confucianism elevates *xiao* 孝 (pronounced 'sheeow' in a single syllable) as a central feature of moral life. To be *xiao*, one must revere and be devoted to one's parents—to defer to them, honor them, and repay them for their efforts in supporting one through life. A commitment to *xiao* is part of a network of ethical norms demanding partiality to family more generally. The closer the relation, the more stringent the demand.¹

Without further elaboration this might seem unobjectionable. (Blood runs thicker, after all.) Yet classical Confucian texts endorse duties, attitudes, and behaviors toward kin that are striking in their severity. Readers are told to accede to parental demands even if they are disagreeable (*Analects* 4.18), to bear them children (*Mengzi* 4A26), to cleave to the father's ways for a minimum of 3 years after they pass (1.11), and to live an austere and socially isolated life during that span of time (17.21). Additionally, concealing a family members' member crimes from the authorities is deemed morally right in some instances (*Analects* 13.18). Indeed, these texts present, as paragons of moral excellence, individuals engaging in various forms of questionable or unjust behavior all in the name of honoring or esteeming blood relations (*Mengzi* 5A3).

Famously, over a century ago, Bertrand Russell claimed that it was here—in its stringent duties to kin—that Confucian ethics faltered.

Filial piety, and the strength of the family generally, are perhaps the weakest point in Confucian ethics, the only point where the system departs seriously from common sense. (Russell & Linsky, 2020, p. 25)

Russell was far from alone in this critique, and was influenced in turn by contemporary Chinese intellectuals who had launched strenuous and strident attacks against partialism to kin as a source of corruption in Chinese society, harming the public good. More recently, this debate has been rekindled, with a particular focus on partialistic affection as a source of corruption. But are these critics correct?

In the first section of this paper, we outline the criticism and note its persistence over the last century. We then evaluate some existing data from the empirical study of corruption to see whether they support the claim that partialism corrupts. In short, they do not. Finally, we report some recent experimental work done with colleagues testing the claim that filial piety is associated with tolerance of corruption in Chinese societies more directly. The results suggest that the critics are on to something. However, in attacking partialistic affection as the cause of corruption, they have misidentified the real issue. Partialism or kin affection does not render one more susceptible to corruption—in fact, it makes one less likely to engage in it. Instead, *power distance* or *authoritarianism* (one aspect of filial piety) emerges as its chief driver. We conclude that critics should reformulate their criticisms if they seek to combat corruption effectively.

¹ Throughout this paper we will be focusing on the comparatively narrow virtue of *xiao* as one instance of this more general orientation of kin devotion, kin affection, and family duties. It is commonplace to consider these together, as they reflect the importance and centrality of family in Confucian ethics.

The Criticism

Russell claims throughout *The Problem of China* (1922) that there is much to learn from Confucianism, and he displays an admiration for many aspects of the Chinese tradition. Alas, its commitment to filial piety “departs seriously from common sense”. How does Russell support his claim?

In explaining the downsides of filial piety, Russell puts forth a number of assertions that read like stereotypes about Chinese culture. For example, he claims that “family feeling has militated against public spirit, and the authority of the old has increased the tyranny of ancient custom” (Russell & Linsky, 2020, p. 25). Russell qualifies this by saying that China is hardly unique in having a cultural orientation that favors family, a phenomenon both widespread and old. What’s peculiar about China, Russell claims, is that unlike so many other great civilizations, China has not *progressed*.

Filial piety is, of course, in no way peculiar to China, but has been universal *at a certain stage of culture*...what is peculiar to China is the preservation of the old custom after a very high level of civilization had been attained. The early Greeks and Romans did not differ from the Chinese in this respect, but as their civilization advanced the family became less and less important. In China, this did not begin to happen until our own day. (25-26, emphasis added)

Over time, civilizations tend to move beyond primitive, retrogressive values to embrace enlightened, progressive ones. Yet China remains mired in the past. Progress is at hand; the people of China simply refuse to grasp it.

...the Chinese have brought these troubles upon themselves, by their inability to produce capable and honest officials. This inability has its roots in Chinese ethics, which lay stress upon a man’s duty to his family rather than to the public. (42)

Here, Russell speaks of duty as a source of corruption; when duties to family clash with duties to the public, the former is given precedence. And yet, Russell saw signs of hope that common sense would soon prevail, that change would soon come. And the change would be from within.

All Young China realizes this, and one may hope that twenty years hence the level of honesty among officials may be not lower in China than in Europe—no very extravagant hope. (42)

In sum, Russell claims that filial piety’s extreme partialism opposes common sense, hampers the growth of a public spirit, and hinders progress.

The first of these criticisms—that filial piety opposes common sense—is not an empirical claim. It is an assertion stemming from a confrontation with a foreign culture, the kind of thing that Russell says cannot be demonstrated by argument but simply pronounced in the hope that

others will agree in turn.² It signals that there is something peculiar about kin duties in China that does not exist elsewhere in advanced civilizations. The other claims—that filial piety opposes public spirit and progress—are both versions of the more basic claim that filial piety corrupts Chinese society. And this latter claim is manifestly empirical; it is a claim about causal relations in the observable world.

Russell thought seriously about these issues, spending nearly a year in Beijing ahead of publishing *The Problem of China*. Nonetheless, Russell's critique was that of an outsider, and he might be suspected of highlighting an aspect of Chinese culture that is not so much objectionable or problematic as simply foreign. One might wonder whether Russell is a reliable judge of filial devotion's overall effect in actual Chinese society. Yet his critique was in line with (and inspired by) those put forward by a number of prominent Chinese intellectuals of the time.

Consider, for example, the following claim made by Wu Yu (1872-1949), a vocal critic of the time, in a text published just one year before *The Problem of China* saw print.

The effect of the idea of filial piety has been to turn China into a big factory for the manufacturing of obedient subjects. (Chow, 1960b, p. 304)

Here, we see echoes of Russell's claims that filial piety has deleterious effects on lay Chinese populations, rendering them docile and incapable of becoming the kind of "capable and honest officials" that Russell sees as necessary for progress and growth of a public spirit. So once again we have a link between filial values on the one hand, and corruption on the other. Similar claims were made by other prominent intellectuals, including Chen Duxiu, Lu Xun, and Hu Shi.³ These intellectuals were members of Chinese society—indeed, they were cultural leaders in their own right. Their claims cannot be dismissed as *mere* stereotype. They need to be taken seriously.

In the 2000s, this debate was revived, spilling over the pages of several publications in China and the West, as Confucianism's commitment to filial morality was (once again) singled out by intellectuals in China as a source of corruption. The chief protagonist of this critique, Liu Qingping, wrote a series of strident attacks, highlighting a number of passages in classical Confucian texts (some of which are discussed below) that seemingly endorse corruption for the sake of honoring family, and tying the influence of these practices to various underhanded behaviors in Chinese society.⁴

² "In comparing an alien culture with one's own, one is forced to ask oneself questions more fundamental than any that usually arise in regard to home affairs. One is forced to ask: What are the things that I ultimately value? What would make me judge one sort of society more desirable than another sort? What sort of ends should I most wish to see realized in the world? Different people will answer these questions differently, and I do not know of any argument by which I could persuade a man who gave an answer different from my own. I must therefore be content merely to state the answer which appeals to me, in the hope that the reader may feel likewise." (Russell & Linsky, 2020, pp. 2–3)

³ See Chow (1960a) for related discussion.

⁴ See Sarkissian (2010, 2020) for critical discussion.

Summary of the Critiques

The historical and contemporary critiques are focused on the *consequences* of practicing filial piety. The critics do not maintain that filial piety (or kin devotion more generally) is a bad thing in and of itself. Rather, they maintain a number of premises which, taken together, suggest that filial piety has pernicious effects and should be excised from Confucian ethics moving forward. Here is a simple reconstruction of the core argument:

1. corruption exists in Chinese society (empirical claim)
2. filial piety causes corruption (empirical claim)
3. the foundational texts of Confucianism, studied and memorized over centuries by the elite of Chinese society, *endorse* such corruption when it honors filial piety (interpretive claim)
4. therefore, Confucianism corrupts Chinese society (substantive conclusion)

Are these premises true? Should we accept them?

In what follows, we will examine these premises, focusing on premise 2.⁵ First, we look at existing studies of the causes of corruption. These studies use reputational surveys as measures of corruption, and then see how such corruption relates to various measures of cultural values in the relevant societies. Next, we report the results of a recent study of the relationship between filial piety and attitudes toward corruption in contemporary Chinese society. Together, these data paint a complicated picture that prevents any straightforward inference from an embrace of partialism to corrupt behavior. Instead, *one* aspect of filial piety—namely, its authoritarian dimension (focused on glorifying one's parents) seems problematic.

Corruption as Abuse of Entrusted Power

Premise 1 (corruption exists in Chinese society) is trickier to evaluate than might seem at first glance. The existence of corruption (or the abuse of entrusted power for private gain) is something that can only be *verified* through appropriate investigation and policing. And yet, whether or not a country *has* appropriate investigation and policing mechanisms can itself be a *consequence* of corruption. (Take, for example, a country that has a crony judiciary with appointments made by autocrats. Such a country would be suspected of having a corrupt legal system, but the evidence of such corruption would not be verified by the judiciary itself.) Even in countries with appropriate policing mechanisms, factors such as total government expenditures and broader economic health may lead to underfunded and inadequate oversight, allowing corruption to flourish without being held to account. These factors make it difficult to rely on confirmed cases of corruption as a means of measuring its prevalence.

Thus, when social scientists research corruption, they often rely on reputational surveys from individuals and corporations who are engaged in business and other official arrangements with the country in question (Lambsdorff, 1999). Such individuals will know (either first-hand or

⁵ The philosophical literature has focused on the justification for Premise 3. See, for example, the special issues of the journal *Dao* that were devoted to the interpretive debate—namely, Volume 7, Issue 1 and Volume 8, Issue 2.

through second-hand reports) whether corrupt practices such as bribery are prevalent. Transparency International presents a useful summary of existing research, and ranks 180 countries and territories worldwide on *public sector corruption*, including such things as diversion of public funds, officials abusing their office for private gain while avoiding consequences, the prevalence of bribery and nepotistic appointments, etc. These studies therefore focus on corruption by social or political elites who are entrusted with power (the kinds of officials that Russell and other Chinese critics focused on). While showing some improvement in recent years, China is saddled with a low score of 44 out of 100 on the Corruption Perceptions Index as of 2021, far behind countries such as Denmark, New Zealand, and Singapore, which have scores in the mid to high 80s.⁶ Hence it is fair to assume that Premise 1 is justified.

What about Premise 3? Does Confucianism *endorse* corruption by political elites? One might pause. After all, a hallmark of Confucian ethics and political philosophy is to emphasize that positions of power should be occupied by persons of moral merit, sometimes labeled ‘virtue politics’ by interpreters (Angle, 2012; Kim, 2019). Rulers, ministers, and officials must have integrity and hold themselves to exacting standards of behavior, as their example sets the tone for all those within their purview. And yet, according to critics, some of the tradition’s most exalted moral heroes act in corrupt ways owing to filial piety.

Consider, for example, a passage where the Confucian thinker Mengzi (also known as Mencius, fl. ca. 4th century BCE), whose influence looms large over later tradition, seems to endorse such corruption straightforwardly. The passage is *Mengzi* 5A3, which begins as follows:⁷

Wan Zhang asked, “Xiang took as his daily occupation the cause of murdering [his brother] Shun. Why, then, was it that Shun, upon becoming the Son of Heaven [i.e. king], banished him?”

Mencius said, “He enfeoffed him. Some referred to this as banishing him.”

Wan Zhang said, “Shun exiled his minister of works to Youzhou and banished Huan Dou to Mount Chung. He put the Three Miao to death in Sanwei and imprisoned Kun on Mount Yu. The way he dealt with these four crimes—everyone in the world submitted to him, for he punished the inhumane. Yet Xiang, who was the most inhumane among them, was enfeoffed at Youbi. What crime had the people of Youbi committed!? How could a humane person have done this? When it came to other people he punished them, but when it came to his brother he enfeoffed him.”

Wan Zhang’s initial question is best understood as follows: Why did Shun *merely* banish his brother instead of *executing* him (e.g. Nivison, 2002)? Here, Wan Zhang contrasts the integrity with which Shun dealt with criminals on the one hand, with the way he treated his brother on the other. The question is brought into sharper relief when the banishment turns out to be

⁶ The Corruption Perceptions Index (2021) is hosted by Transparency International at: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021>. Singapore and China are both strongly collectivistic, emphasizing family and in-group values. The gulf between them in perceived corruption can be attributed to other factors (e.g. effective policing and oversight).

⁷ Translations are the first author’s, following Bloom and Ivanhoe (2009) with slight modification.

something of a euphemism: Xiang was not cast outside the realm to struggle on his own, but was instead given rule of his own fiefdom! The passage continues with Mengzi's response:

“A humane man does not store up anger against his brother, nor harbor grievances against him. He simply loves him; that is all. Loving him, he desires him to be honored; loving him, he desires him to be wealthy. His enfeoffment at Youbi was to make Xiang wealthy and honored. If, while Shun himself was sovereign his brother had been a common man, could he be said to have loved him?”

“May I venture to ask what you meant when you said, ‘Some referred to this as banishing him?’”

“Xiang could take no action in his state. The Son of Heaven [i.e. Shun, the sage king] appointed officials to administer the state and to collect the tribute and taxes from it, which is why it was called ‘banishment.’ How could he have been allowed to oppress the people? However, Shun frequently wanted to see him, and so there was a constant flow of people coming to court. This is what was meant by the saying, ‘He did not wait for the time of tribute or for affairs of government to receive the lord of Youbi.’”

Let us remember the context of this second half of the passage: Mengzi must explain why a venerated moral exemplar—a sagacious ruler and paragon of virtue—*honored, ennobled and enriched* his depraved brother (‘the most inhumane of all’). In response, Mengzi does not beg an excuse for Shun (not a live option, admittedly, given Shun’s exalted status in history). Instead, Mengzi claims that this is precisely what a humane person who loves his brother would do *even if that brother is morally depraved*. Moreover, this is not a bitter, begrudging act of duty against inclination (e.g. “I know he does not deserve any honor or wealth. He is depraved. And yet, despite all he’s done, he’s still my brother...”). Instead, Shun *loves* his brother Xiang and, crucially, there is no way to demonstrate this love other than doing what is in his power to give his brother high status and power (otherwise, “could he be said to have loved him?”). That’s precisely why he enfeoffed him.

Of course, Mengzi qualifies all this by saying Shun would not allow Xiang to *oppress* his newly bequeathed subjects. He would not give his brother free reign of Youbi’s affairs. Nevertheless, Mengzi’s reply has troubled commentators. Put bluntly, Mengzi is saying that to be morally good (humane), a person must not only love their own family they must also seek to benefit, enrich, and ennoble them whenever possible, and regardless of the kinds of people that they are, else they cannot be said to really love them.

Is this *corruption*? It certainly seems to be a case of abusing entrusted power for private gain. Some might object and say that Shun himself gained nothing from this exercise of his power. He did not seek personal benefit, and indeed acted to limit the harm of the appointment by excluding his brother from steering Youbi’s affairs. And yet, Shun used his power to benefit his *family*, and this is precisely the form of corruption that critics have found problematic.

Existing evidence from reputational surveys

What about Premise 2? Does filial piety cause this kind of corruption? As may be expected, researchers in the social sciences have explored how cultural values and orientations correlate

with corruption. Most of these studies are done at the national level, using economic and political variables (such as GDP, scope of government, etc.) together with measures of cultural orientation to see which of these are associated with corruption. Such studies can be instructive precisely because they look at various variables together and then use statistics to measure the impact of each.

Many of these studies make use of Gert Hofstede’s measures of national culture. Going back to the 1960s, the Hofstede database now includes scores for 76 nations along six distinct cultural dimensions (Hofstede et al., 2010). Of these six cultural dimensions, there are three that represent aspects of filial piety. The first is power distance, which measures power imbalances among individuals within a given society. A marker of high power distance would, for example, be reluctance by inferiors to disagree with their superiors, or for decision-making to follow an autocratic style. These align with demands that one defer to one’s parents and accede to their wishes even if one finds them disagreeable (e.g. *Analects* 4.18). The second is collectivism, which measures the degree to which people form strong ingroups of family, kin, and friends. For example, such groups may demand loyalty from their members in exchange for protection, partiality, and favors. This aligns with filial piety’s demands of reciprocity and for family members to look after one another (as seen above, and in passages to be discussed below). A final dimension that will prove important in what follows is assertive materialism (Sarkissian 2020), or the degree to which a society thinks of assertiveness, exaggerated machismo, and (most importantly) personal wealth as markers of a successful life (as opposed to well being, quality of life, or familial intimacy).⁸ This reflects those passages that call for one to be concerned with the wealth and prestige of one’s family as an expression of filial piety. Consider *Mengzi* 5A3, above. It is noteworthy that this passage singles out *prestige*, *honor*, and *wealth* as the indicators of familial love—as the objects one pursues on behalf of one’s family. This is further emphasized in *Mengzi*’s statement that his brother would not only be taken of materially, but also given high station and frequently invited to court. This concern with power and wealth is reflective of assertive materialism.

What does existing research say about the relationship between these cultural dimensions and perceived levels of corruption? There is a consistent pattern in the data: within such countries, *power distance* and *assertive materialism* best predict corruption.

	# of Countries	Collectivism	Power distance	Assertive materialism
(Park, 2003)	37	NO	YES	YES
(Richardson, 2006)	47	NO	YES	NO
(Getz & Volkema, 2001)	50	NO	YES	NO
(Davis & Ruhe, 2003)	42	YES	YES	YES

⁸ Hofstede’s original label for this dimension is ‘masculinity’, but Hofstede and collaborators have encouraged others to come up with more appropriate labels (Hofstede et al., 144).

(Husted & de Estudios, 1999)	44	NO	YES	YES
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Table 1. Empirical data looking at the predictive value of three cultural dimensions for perceived levels of national corruption.

The study in the final row of the table is particularly informative. There, Husted et al looked at the data in finer detail, dividing their sample between countries high on collectivism and power distance on the one hand, and those low on along these two dimensions on the other. They analyzed each group separately. In the former group (which characterizes China), the single cultural factor predicting corruption was, in fact, *assertive materialism*. Collectivism, which comes closest to measuring the kind of kin affection and loyalty that is also central to filial piety, rarely emerges as a significant variable. But being affectionate and loving to one’s kin is one thing; wanting to see them enjoy high status, wealth, and prestige is quite another. Indeed, family love may be thought more consistent with concerns for a person’s well-being, quality of life, and comfort (as opposed to their wealth and prestige)—all of which are negatively associated with assertive materialism (Sarkissian, 2020).

These data paint a clear picture: If one is concerned with how cultural values might foster public-sector corruption, it is authoritarianism and assertive materialism that should be the focus of one’s critiques. By contrast, consanguineous affection, kin partialism, and other kinds of in-group bonds have no stable relationship with it. Yet these latter kinds of values are often the singular focus of critics.

Corruption and Moral Ambiguity

Some of the passages in the Confucian corpus that have troubled critics most do not involve ‘the abuse of entrusted power for private gain’. Instead, they describe behavior that is problematic in its own way.

Consider *Mengzi* 7A35, where Mengzi is presented with a hypothetical case for consideration: Suppose the ancient sage king Shun (the focus of 5A3, above) learned that his own father had killed someone. What would Shun do? The implicit conflict here is between doing what is demanded of Shun in his role as a *ruler* (meting out justice) and what is demanded of him in his role as a *son* (protecting his father). Here is the passage in full.

Tao Ying asked, “If, while Shun was Son of Heaven [i.e. king] and while Gao Yao was minister of justice, [Shun’s father] had murdered someone—what would have happened?”

Mencius said, “Gao Yao would have apprehended him; that is all.”

“But wouldn’t Shun have forbidden this?”

“How could Shun have forbidden it? Gao Yao had proper authority for this.”

“Then what would Shun have done?”

“Shun would have regarded abandoning the realm as he would abandoning an old shoe.

Secretly, he would have taken his father on his back and fled, dwelling somewhere along the seacoast. There he would have happily remained to the end of his life, forgetting, in his delight, about the realm.”

Mengzi's proposal avoids the charge of outright corruption; he does not suggest that Shun would use his power to shield his father from prosecution. Indeed, Mengzi's proposed solution might lead one to conclude, not unreasonably, that it shows an imaginative harmonization of multiple values—maintaining the integrity of the throne and honoring filial piety while removing a potentially dangerous person from society all at once (e.g. Angle, 2008).

Yet the language Mengzi uses suggests something stronger—that filial values trump others (even obligations to the entire realm). Paralleling 5A3 above, Mengzi does not say that Shun would abandon his subjects begrudgingly or with great difficulty. Instead, Shun “would have regarded abandoning the realm as he would abandoning an old shoe”. This evocative language has worried critics, who fail to see any significant psychological weight given to other considerations when filial ones loom large.⁹ Stephen Angle asks us, for example, to think about what is left out of this account.

Shun's father is imagined to have killed someone, and since we are told that [his father] would be [otherwise] appropriately apprehended, there is no reason to think that the murder was in self-defense or in some other way mitigated. Should not one feel badly if a loved one commits such a crime? Furthermore, how is Shun able to cast aside his responsibilities to the people of the Empire so easily? What of his compassion for the people he had served so ably: how can it disappear so completely and immediately? Indeed, if it did so, should not we wonder whether Shun's commitments and feelings were genuine in the first place? (Angle, 2012, p. 101)

These rhetorical questions bring into sharp relief the pride of place given to filial affection and obligation compared to other values. Philip J Ivanhoe (2007) makes similar criticisms about *Mengzi* 7A35, failing to see “any way to or good reason for preserving this kind of absolute and overriding obligation in its traditional form” (198).

Finally, consider a related passage from the *Analects*, where Kongzi (Confucius) deems rightness as consisting in sons and fathers concealing one another's crimes from authorities. *Analects* 13.18 reads as follows:

The Duke of She said to Kongzi, “Among my people there is one we call ‘Upright Gong.’ When his father stole a sheep, he reported him to the authorities.”
Kongzi replied, “Among my people, those who we deem ‘upright’ are different from this: fathers cover up for sons, and sons cover up for fathers. ‘Uprightness’ is to be found in this.”

Is this *corrupt* behavior that Kongzi is deeming ‘upright’? There is no abuse of entrusted power for private gain. And while sons and fathers refusing to turn one another in may seem wrong

⁹ Of course, Shun might have stayed in power and corrupted the throne by shielding his father from prosecution. The fact that he acted in a way that preserved the integrity of the throne shows that political and public values still mattered to him. Our thanks to Justin Tiwald for pressing us on this point, something that Angle also mentions in the relevant essay cited below.

from the perspective of justice and the public good, other considerations complicate matters. When we consider, for example, that the punishment for stealing a sheep would have been being tattooed (literally) as a criminal or having one's hands cut off, it may not be so obvious that a son shielding his father from such consequences is straightforwardly wrong. We might imagine a son being chastised and deemed a moral monster for exposing his father to such debilitating and permanent punishment for having stolen a sheep (perhaps for some justifiable reason, and with the possibility of other forms of private restitution).¹⁰

Indeed, some would push back on reading any of the passages discussed so far as endorsing morally objectionable behavior. In 5A3, Shun made sure no one would be made to needlessly suffer as a result of giving his brother wealth and honor as nominal ruler of Youbi. Similarly, in 7A35, Mengzi claims Shun would not bring dishonor to the throne by undermining his own minister of justice. Instead, he exposed himself to danger by renouncing the throne and removing his father from the realm and absconding with him to the coast. Put differently, when there is no abuse of publically entrusted power and merely the renunciation of it when facing competing values and obligations, there is the possibility of moral ambiguity that would allow for preferential treatment of kin to be seen as acceptable.

Moreover, Confucian heritage societies are not alone in thinking that siding with kin in morally ambiguous contexts to be virtuous in many if not most regards. For example, McManus and colleagues have recently examined attitudes toward partialism in US contexts (McManus et al., 2020), and participants showed a preference for individuals who were partial to kin in a range of contexts. While participants judged helping others as morally better than helping kin, the pattern was reversed when faced with a choice of helping strangers *or* helping kin. In the latter case, helping kin was judged morally preferable. Similarly, while neglecting strangers in need was considered bad, it was not considered as bad as neglecting family in need. These results show a preference for kin partialism even in an extremely individualistic society.¹¹ Other experiments showed similar results, revealing that participants believe obligations to vary by closeness of kin relation, not unlike the 'graded love' Confucianism endorses (McManus et al., 2021).

Thus, the brute fact that an action serves to favor kin cannot, in and of itself, tell us whether the action is obviously wrong or morally impermissible.

A Direct Test of Filial Piety's Relation to Corruption

To further understand these issues, and explore the relationship between filial piety on the one hand and corruption on the other, one needs more well targeted empirical work. First, one needs to use direct measures of filial piety instead of relying on something as broad as collectivism or power imbalance. Fortunately, filial piety has been studied empirically for some time. In particular, Yeh and colleagues have uncovered two distinct types of filial piety in Chinese lay populations (Yeh, 2003).

¹⁰ For a summary of such push back, see Sarkissian (2020). For a probing discussion of the *Analects* passage, see Cline (2013, Chapter 3).

¹¹ However, in these same studies, a person was considered more virtuous if they chose to help a stranger over helping kin if their role demanded that they do so for reasons of impartiality.

Reciprocal Filial Piety. This aspect of filial piety has two underlying factors. The first consists of respecting and loving one's parents, the second of providing them material support, and memorializing them. These attitudes are driven out of a sense of gratitude for the care provided by one's parents, and the energy and effort they spent in raising one since birth. This same sense of gratitude drives one to feel empathetic concern for their well-being as they age, to provide for them, and to memorialize them after they have passed on.

Authoritarian Filial Piety. This aspect of filial piety also has two underlying factors. The first consists of oppressing oneself and setting aside one's personal wishes and desires so as to comply with parental demands, regardless of how one feels about them. The second consists of a felt duty to continue the family line and to maintain one's parent's status and prestige within one's community.

As it happens, both aspects find textual support in the classical corpus, and so both might be thought to represent the Confucian tradition on filial piety (Ivanhoe, 2007). Yet each has its own emotional and behavioral consequences in lay populations (Bedford & Yeh, 2019). Given their psychological distinctiveness, it is important to measure both.

Second, rather than rely on broad reputational surveys of public sector corruption, one needs to target those forms of corruption that are motivated by a desire to help kin *in particular*, something that the CPI does not focus on. If corruption includes items such as accepting bribes in order to move a stranger's case forward as part of a visa application, then those cases are not central to critics' concerns. Instead, critics focus on using *kin relationships* to get preferential treatment. Both activities can be called corrupt, of course, but only the latter is relevant to the charge that filial piety causes corruption. Hence, both types of corruption should be tested.

Third, and relatedly, one needs to cleanly distinguish partialism toward kin motivated by possibly virtuous considerations from an inclination toward corruption motivated by self-interest. Among laypeople, it is likely that those who would be willing to accept bribes would also be willing to bend rules for friends and family, as both can be motivated by selfish expectations of a later payoff. By measuring both, we can test if there are unique traits associated with being tempted to help kin distinct from being tempted to accept bribes from strangers.

Fourth, one needs to use examples of corruption that would resonate with lay populations. While the classical texts are replete with passages that have raised discussion, some of them are about powerful rulers while others are highly anachronistic. To make the temptation of filial demands psychologically real, one needs to probe participants using examples from daily life.

Finally, if one is really concerned about corruption, one would want to know what other factors might be driving participants' attitudes toward corruption. Thus, one would want to test for a number of different variables beyond filial piety itself, and see whether they enable or inhibit it.

New Empirical Studies

In recent research, the current authors and colleagues devised studies to meet these desiderata (Buchtel, Ye, et al., 2022).¹²

In the first phase, young adults from Hong Kong and China were asked to provide examples of situations they encountered or heard about where people used personal relationships (or *guanxi*, pronounced 'gwon-shee') to bypass generally applicable procedures or rules. From the total number of participant submissions, a representative subset was chosen. This subset was then used in a second study, where a different set of participants from the same populations rated each of the situations on the *severity* of the rule violation as well as the *believability* of the incident. This allowed for the selection of believable examples that were matched to one another on perceived severity. Finally, for each of the violations based on *guanxi* (or partialism), a paired scenario was written by the experimenters, where the generally applicable procedure or rule was bypassed not because of a pre-existing relationship with a relevant party but because of a bribe from a complete stranger. For example:

Partialist violation	"Because she felt she ought to help her sister, Mary helped her sister check-out first so that her sister did not need to line up."
Bribery violation	"Because of receiving money from the woman, Chloe let the woman enter immediately without lining up."

This process yielded 8 paired scenarios matched for severity, each with a partialist and bribery variant. Our main dependent variable (what we were interested in measuring) was participants' tolerance of such violations.

Several measures in addition to filial piety were included as predictor variables, to see whether they correlated with such tolerance. For example, past studies show that certain people are high in *rule orientation*, which measures a person's attitudes toward following rules. Strong rule followers might be predicted to be less likely to tolerate such violations. Thus, we included items meant to measure this, e.g. "It is acceptable to break a workplace rule if the rule is clearly against your moral principles" (adapted from Fine et al., 2016). Relatedly, *moral disengagement*, which measures a person's tendency to come up with excuses for unethical behavior (Moore et al., 2012), might be thought to predict the opposite—namely, greater tolerance of such violations. Finally, if people value having a moral identity, this might also predict lesser tolerance of both types of violations. Thus, measures for how much individuals desired to be identified with certain virtues, both warm (caring for others, being considerate) and cold (disciplined, principled) were also included, adapted from prior work (Buchtel, Guan et al., 2022; Hardy et al., 2014).

¹² The studies are outlined below, though details are left out owing to space considerations. For the full manuscript, please contact the current authors.

Results

The results were informative. First, in a simple correlation analysis, attitudes towards bribery-type and partialist-type violations were highly related to one another. As expected, people who thought it was acceptable to violate impartiality for a bribe were also happy to do it to benefit friends and family. But because we had matched stories on severity and type of rule violation, we were able to include both measures simultaneously in a predictive model, allowing us to also measure their distinctive aspects. This gives us a clean measure of motivations that underlie partialism but are dissimilar from the amoral or selfish motivations that motivate accepting bribes.

Most surprisingly, after controlling for attitudes towards bribery violations, there was no straightforward link between endorsing filial piety on the hand, and tolerating *guanxi*-based violations on the other; neither reciprocal nor authoritarian filial piety (nor any of the other virtues tested) had a clear relationship with being tolerant of partialistic favoritism. This likely reflects the fact that partialistic favoritism presents a moral dilemma with both virtuous and unvirtuous aspects. In fact, the only variables to show a clear relationship with partialistic favoritism were *rule orientation* and *moral disengagement*; scoring low on the former or high on the latter both predicted an inclination to find partialistic favoritism acceptable. These results suggest that if critics want to combat favoritism based on relationships, they would do better promoting the importance of rules and of not making exceptions of oneself rather than attacking filial piety.

When it came to bribery type violations, though, results were different. First, the more participants endorsed virtues (either warm or cold) the more they found bribery type corruption unacceptable. This suggests that people who identify with (and seek to cultivate) a range of moral traits can be expected to resist appeals to accept bribes in exchange for favors.

Second, and more relevant to the current paper, the higher participants scored in reciprocal filial piety, the *less* likely they were to find bribery acceptable. That is, the more filial duties were motivated by feelings of love toward one's parents, a desire to provide them material support, and to memorialize them, the less likely they were to find bribery acceptable. This suggests, contra the critics, that this form of filial piety should be *promoted* (and not eliminated) if the desired result is to combat corruption of this kind.

Finally, the opposite result was found with authoritarian filial piety; participants scoring high in this dimension were *more* likely to find bribery acceptable. That is, the more filial duties were thought to require oppressing oneself in favor of parental wishes, wishing to maintain their status and prestige, and continuing the family line, the more likely that person was to find monetary bribes in exchange for favors permissible. Thus, if one is concerned with bribery type corruption, attacking filial piety in a ham-fisted manner would be counter-productive. Instead, more targeted interventions meant to undermine its authoritarian aspects and promote its reciprocal aspects would both be helpful in bringing about the critics' desired result.

Conclusion

At times throughout Chinese history, filial piety has been identified as a cultural orientation that engenders corrupt behavior. Confucianism has, by association, been depicted as advocating a retrograde way of life incompatible with a healthy body politic. But the empirical data above help

to bring to light both how this accusation has a kernel of truth to it, and how it is false and counterproductive.

The kernel of truth is this: classical Confucian sources endorse an attitude of deference toward one's parents. At times, this deference is justified because of reciprocal considerations: one ought to defer to one's parents (put their interests first, be concerned with their welfare, care for them as they age) because of all their efforts to raise one initially and to requite all their love. At other times, though, the injunction to obey one's parents appears more as an absolute rule, to be followed without any mention of prior parental treatment, and to be aimed at glorifying them and promoting and perpetuating the family's status. Each aspect has its own distinct set of attitudinal and behavioral consequences.

In our studies, this latter kind of authoritarian filial piety was predictive of a tendency to tolerate bribery-type corrupt behavior. (Indeed, the criticisms by Russell and his contemporaries seem to focus on authoritarianism of this kind.) Reciprocal filial piety was, by contrast, associated with *resistance* to such corruption. This result is in line with the findings from the studies looking at perceived levels of corruption and their relationship to broad cultural values, where a mix of power distance and assertive materialism—both associated with authoritarian filial piety—was found to predict the perceived existence of corruption.

These data should also inform future philosophical discussions of filial piety. While it is a single term, *xiao* refers to both kinds of orientation, and each has distinct psychological effects. Moreover, whether in their focus on filial piety's authoritarian or partialistic aspects, critics may have lost sight of the love and gratitude toward one's parents that filial piety also promotes, which in our studies seems to have achieved its goals of cultivating humaneness and spreading care to the world (and not constricting it to one's family). Thus, care should be taken to avoid naked or bald references to filial piety—as though it is a singular orientation that exists only in degrees. This might yield more nuanced interpretations. Future philosophical and interpretive work on the Confucian classics can help by noting the relative prevalence of each type and evaluating the tradition in its true complexity thereby.

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