

**Document 18.11: Excerpts from “Should a Lack of Filial Piety Be Penalized?” a Forum article in *Beijing Review*, February 23, 2006**

*“Forum” is a column in Beijing Review that provides a space for varying perspectives on contemporary Chinese society. In each weekly issue, “Forum” announces the topic for an upcoming issue and invites readers to submit personal viewpoints (in either English or Chinese).*

Chinese traditionally have viewed the extended family model as an admirable living pattern worthy of acclamation. With the rapid development of a market economy, however, values have been changing in China.

Most young people want to lead an independent life, and thanks to the immensely improved living conditions, they are moving out of their parents’ homes to pursue their own lives. Family size is shrinking, while the number of older people who are “empty nesters” is mounting.

At the end of January, as the Chinese traditional lunar New Year was drawing near, the local community office of Nanjingdonglu in Shanghai issued new rules requiring children to pay regular visits to their parents living in the community.

According to the provisions, children must visit their parents or bring them to their own homes to spend a weekend every one or two weeks, and visit them on state stipulated holidays. If they do not have the time, they can send their spouse or children to visit instead.

Under these rules, if children fail to fulfill the requirements for one or two months, they will be given a friendly reminder. If they refuse to visit their parents after three months, however, they will be “blacklisted” by having their name posted on the community bulletin board. The community office also would send a letter to their workplace, detailing and criticizing their unfilial behavior.

The community has an estimated 54,000 residents, including nearly 12,000 people over 60 years old, 667 of whom live alone. A community investigation found that almost 100 of those living alone were ignored by their children, who cited their busy schedules. As a result, the community had to arrange for volunteers to help with their daily care.

It was also reported that during the lunar New Year holidays, more than half of the 72 elderly residents of a nursing home in the Pinglianglu community in Shanghai were neglected or abandoned by their children.

In an effort to reverse this lack of filial piety and ease the financial burden, the nursing home made a rule, effective with this year's Spring Festival, stipulating that children must take their parents home during official holidays or they will be charged an additional 50 yuan each holiday.

The intention of these rules is to urge children to pay more attention to their elderly parents living alone, but the local communities' self-imposed regulations have aroused wide controversy, with some people believing that a "blacklist" may infringe on their personal rights and harm their reputation.

As the debate heated up, there was strong opposition from the children of the Nanjingdonglu residents, and even some of the elderly residents themselves, and the community office softened its stance on bulletin board notices, making them "friendly reminders," but insisted on exploring humane measures to encourage children to offer more care and love for their parents.

### **Filial piety should not be regulated**

**Chen Kejian (writer with the *Xinmin Evening News*):**

I do not think it is quite right to publicize the names of children who do not pay regular visits to their parents. Our society is aging, with more elderly "empty nesters" emerging.

They are undoubtedly plagued by reduced care and loneliness, thus attracting widespread attention from society.

It will surely be boundless beneficence if our government can cushion the problem at the turning point of social change. However, a public notice is too severe for the children and might discourage them from doing their filial duty in turn.

Our Confucianism advocates the doctrine of filial piety. Meanwhile, it also respects the inherent goodness of people. Confucianism holds that piety is deeply rooted in a kind heart, which everyone has at birth. The key is enlightenment.

The aging problem is increasingly obvious in China. Though the doctrine of filial piety in our culture is preserved, its content and manner are changing with the times.

It seems improper to say that filial standards have been lowered at present. The core of modern filial piety should be heartfelt feelings.

I have a friend who often talks about the care of his parents living far away. His anxiety is revealed with true love, which is the impetus and guarantee of his performance of his filial duty at every possible chance. I believe it is needless to force such persons to see their parents every week.

The focus of the doctrine of filial piety is self-discipline, not surveillance by others. For most Chinese people, the doctrine is a life principle, therefore it is not necessary for us to make such inflexible rules. How can we establish a harmonious society if we have no confidence in the traditional ethics of our culture?

**Yu Hai (professor in the Sociology School of Fudan University):**

The blacklist issue is triggering heated debates on a new standard of our filial piety doctrine. To visit and to take care of one's parents should be included in the scope of social morality.

In the meantime, we should be well aware that ways of showing care and love for the aged vary. It doesn't mean that children who do not have enough time to accompany their parents do not miss them or care about them. Thus, we should justify the conclusion before probing into different situations, always remembering that the more haste, the less speed!

**Sheng Leiming (lawyer at Shanghai Zhongmao Law Office):**

The bulletin board rule set by the community office was not very practical and, as they learned, could have the opposite effect. Visits to parents belong to the category of private matters in a legal sense, though there are no clear prescriptions. In this regard, the implementation of such a rule could violate people's legitimate rights of reputation and personality.

As a matter of fact, the public might be given the wrong impression of the blacklisted people, which is the component of the right of reputation. Their assessment by the community would very likely be lowered, thus causing damage to their right of personality.

**Rules are necessary**

**Xu Mang (reporter at the *Shanghai Morning Post*):**

We should realize that with the growing aging population, the filial piety doctrine is increasingly important as our nation's morality. Meanwhile, we can make better use to maintain a sound relationship in modern society with traditional Chinese values.

Currently, the most fitting role for filial piety is providing a strong base for establishing a harmonious society.

In this sense, the Shanghai local community's initiative is a positive trend. Though lack of piety is relatively difficult to define and involves legal issues, such as family and

individual privacy, the good will and intention of the local community office are worthy of praise.

The virtue of filial piety won't collapse at once, even if its content changes over time. At present, more and more parents are adjusting to maintaining a reasonable living space with the younger generations. Nevertheless, that cannot be an excuse for those who are inclined to escape from the liability of taking care of their parents. Instead they should start setting up a new system step by step.

**Sun Pengbiao (Deputy Director of the Shanghai Research Center on Aging):**

If the names of those who do not visit their parents for a long time were publicized, they might be scorned by others. Some people are surprised and annoyed by this, since they are getting used to showing excessive care for their children without sparing any time for their parents.

**Yun Na (freelance writer):**

With the growing economy, the social atmosphere spurs ambitious young people. Maintaining independence and preserving the ancient filial doctrine are increasingly contradictory.

The bulletin board notice was a breakthrough to tighten social morality, lifting it to a set level. Even though some opponents complain about the roughness of the rule, it still represents a social inclination, curbing corrupt customs. The “iron hand” measures make some people panic when thinking about whether they are listed or not.

**Li Zhuoying (a resident of Shanghai Municipality):**

Our society is aging, while more and more young people are leaving home in search of independence.

In recent years, the service, entertainment, nurturing and care-giving functions provided by the community have eased the tensions created by this social problem, but it still

reflects helplessness and regret. The senior citizens are less capable of taking risks for fear of solitude and because of emotional fragility, and more psychological support is expected from their children to make their later life more comfortable and easier.

Source: "Should a Lack of Filial Piety Be Penalized?" *Beijing Review*, February 23, 2006.