

# **The Views on Filial Piety among the Malaysian Chinese Retired Parents and Children in Malaysia**

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## **Abstract**

Filial piety is defined as respect, care, and obedience accorded to parents by children. The concept traces its origins to Confucian teachings and has remained as a cultural practice that is deeply rooted in and preserved by the Chinese community in Malaysia. In the era of modernisation, the value of filial piety needs to be re-interpreted and there is now a substantial of works on the concept. One of these works is that of Schinkel's. Drawing on his model of Filial Obligations, this research attempts to identify the views of filial piety among Malaysian Chinese children and retired parents by means of semi-structured interviews. A total of 14 children and 14 retired parents was selected for interview through purposive sampling. The research findings show that, despite the fact that the practice of filial piety in its original form has changed in response to various external factors such as population movements and the process of modernisation, internal factors such as family teachings and cultural traditions have continued to maintain the significance and relevance of the value of filial piety. These findings, besides confirming the importance of filial piety studies, also supports Schinkel's arguments on the influence of societal and relational factors on this traditional cultural value.

**Keywords:** Filial piety, Malaysian Chinese, children, retired parents

## **Introduction**

Filial piety is a family virtue that may be portrayed as the respect, care, concern and obligations shown by children to their parents and the elderly (Liu et al., 2000). It has also viewed as a symbol of Chinese civilisation and an innate element of behaviour of the average Chinese (Chan & Tan, 2004; Yao, 2000; Yuan & Wang, 2011). As society becomes modernised, the value and practice of filial piety needs to be reinterpreted (Schinkel, 2012). In particular,

there is a need to look into the role of filial piety on which a substantial body of literature is based (Qi, 2015).

A scholarly debate has emerged in recent years on whether the moral value associated with filial piety in Chinese society has eroded or has been re-interpreted to suit changing conditions. One particular view is that filial piety has been eroded by the process of urbanisation and the transformation of daily life. It is argued that the more advanced the cities that the children live and work in, the less frequent would be their contact with the parents and hence the support for their parents (Cheung & Kwan, 2009). In contrast, it is also argued that filial piety has not eroded but its meaning has been reconstructed because of changes in the environment (Jackson & Liu, 2017). According to the pluralist model of filial obligations introduced by Schinkel (2012), societal or external factors will influence the observance of filial piety in the parent-child relationship. Research has found that the changes in filial piety could be ascribed to cultural differences (Vauclair et al., 2016), differences in perception (Chan & Tan, 2004; Rosemont & Ames, 2009), generational differences (Poskaite, 2014; Shi, 2017), and increased population mobility in search of employment and other opportunities (Huang & Gove, 2012; Shi, 2017). Given the limited discourse on the concept of filial piety, more research on the subject is needed to assess its current status and practice among the Malaysian Chinese community.

### Literature Review

Filial piety or *Xiao* is a key moral concept that traces its history to antiquity and immortalised by Confucius 2,500 years ago. The original text of the *Classic of Filial Piety* compiled by Confucius consists of 18 chapters to illustrate the philosophy of filial piety at the levels of the individual, family, society, and the ruler (Legge, 2001). The essence of filial piety is being good to parents and the elderly (Feng & Chou, 2016). The idea of filial piety is also adhered to by communities of different cultures and who harbour different views on the practice (Schinkel, 2012). Hence, this research will focus on filial piety at the family level among Malaysian Chinese parents and their children. Taking into consideration that different factors influence the observance of filial piety, discussion will be focused on four broad categories of circumstances, namely, cultural differences, underlying principles, generational differences, and geographical mobility to evaluate how they are correlated to the changes in filial behaviour over time.

Filial piety is a common cultural practice followed by peoples in the East and West. However, its influence has changed with the passage of time, especially in Western countries where its influence has declined over time with the adoption of the values of individual rights and freedom (Miao, 2015). On the other hand, in the Eastern culture that is built around Chinese civilisation, the value and practice of filial piety are deeply entrenched and faithfully adhered to by the Chinese until today (Chan & Tan, 2004; Yao, 2000; Yuan & Wang, 2011). In ancient China, the *Four Books and Five Classics* edited by Confucius were compulsory subjects in the imperial examination (Nylan, 2001). During the Tang dynasty, foreign students were also

encouraged to take the examination and who in turn disseminated Confucian values to neighbouring countries such as Japan, Korea, and Vietnam (Miao, 2015).

While filial piety is widely accepted, its practice varies according to different cultures. Different cultures have different views on the expectations of how children should take care of their parents (Schinkel, 2012; Vauclair et al., 2016). Eastern and Western views on filial piety are distinctively different. In Taiwan, for example, attitudes towards the elderly show evidence of unfair treatment and subtle ageism. This negative attitude is associated with the perception that the elderly are not able to contribute economically and are a burden to society whereas in the United Kingdom the tendency is to maintain friendship with the elderly who are not seen as authority figures or treated as superiors but as equals (Vauclair et al., 2016). Despite the fact that filial piety is deep-rooted in the Chinese culture, its practice has changed with the passage of time. It is thus pertinent to explore how filial piety is being viewed and observed by the Malaysian Chinese community.

The underlying principles of filial piety have also changed. Some disagreed with the value of filial piety on the basis that it does not reflect autonomy and individual differences (Rosemont & Ames, 2009). Others view filial piety as consisting of both positive and negative aspects, depending on individual interpretations (Chan & Tan, 2004). While filial piety is generally interpreted as the responsibility of the children to look after their parents, doubts are raised as to whether the filial expectations of the parents constitute a burden to the children. In actual fact, the practice of filial piety tends to vary according to prevalent situations. For instance, a study by Huang and Gove (2012) on the Chinese in the United States indicates that the longer the stay, the more individualistic they become and less beholden to considerations of family interests. The environment is cited as a possible influence on how an individual may view filial piety. It may be noted that the observance of filial piety is not merely about its positive and negative aspects, but also about its dynamic and changeable nature according to the environment (Huang & Gove, 2012).

Again, there are significant generational differences in viewing filial piety. The new generations have their own thoughts and ideas on the practice of filial piety. Some are at a loss about their role as sons or daughters in performing the act of filial piety (Poskaite, 2014). Shi (2017) is of the opinion that the intergenerational relationship is not static but has evolved into a more dynamic and individualised manner in the Chinese society in China.

It is obvious that different families experience intergenerational relationships that are peculiar to their background as well as evolving environmental circumstances. This study that focuses on retired parents and the young to share their views on filial piety may throw useful insights into the dynamics of generational perceptions on a cultural practice that has often been assumed to be ageless unchanging tradition.

Yet another factor that ought to be taken into account in the understanding of filial piety in the contemporary period is the increased tendency among the young to live away from their families in search of employment and other opportunities (Jackson & Liu, 2017; Shi, 2017).

There are indications that the practice of filial piety is weakening in Chinese societies, including those in China. It is found that both financial support and filial duties support have declined when the people begin to live in rapidly modernising cities. However, an alternative view suggests that the practice of filial piety is not eroding but it has been adapted to suit changing social and economic conditions. Large-scale migration to urban centres has rendered the traditional ideal of several generations living under one roof untenable (Jackson & Liu, 2017).

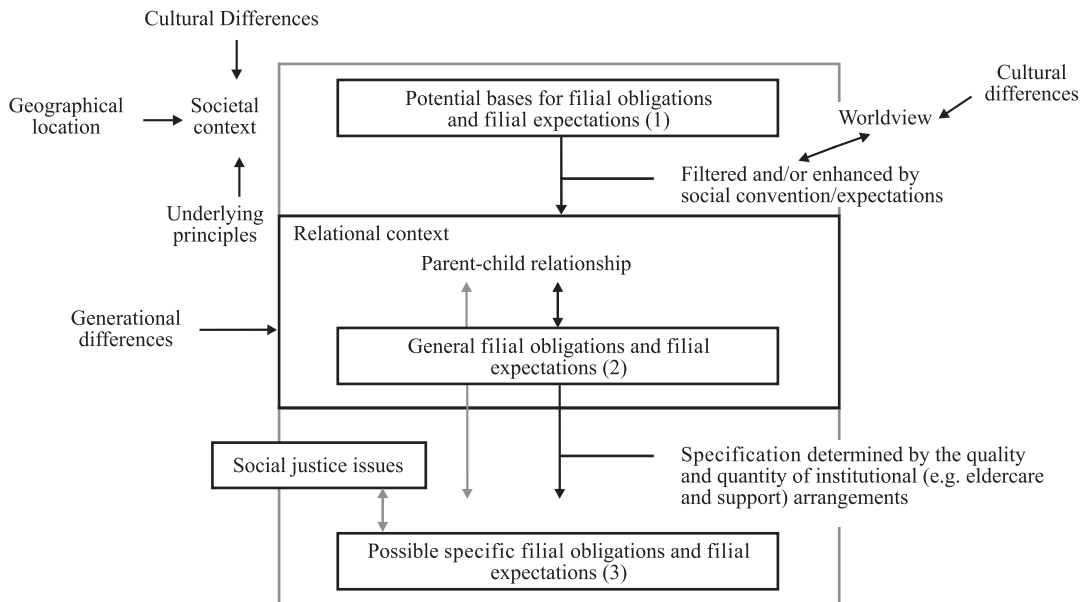
Schinkel's model of filial obligations is used as a guideline for the present study. This model places the filial obligations into a broader sociocultural context, instead of only focus on the moral dimensions, and from different perspectives. The integration of societal and relational context into a single model would contribute to a complete understanding of the concept of filial piety. The societal context refers to external factors that affect the behaviour of an individual in his or her understanding and practice of filial piety, while the relational context denotes family teachings or parental needs that may influence the filial obligations of the children (Schinkel, 2012). The purpose of this research is to apply this model on a sample of Malaysian Chinese to gauge the extent to which their views fit into the two contexts identified by Schinkel.

Despite living in a multicultural country, Malaysian Chinese are still striving to preserve their traditions via vernacular school education (Lee, 2009). Chinese education is looked upon as a medium to preserve Chinese cultural values and identity, ensuring that these values would be transmitted to the next generation (Ting, 2013). See (2015) pointed out that Chinese values are heavily influenced by Confucian ideals. For instance, the Chinese folklores that are illustrated in storybooks or textbooks often portray different moral values and positive characters, such as the traits of hard work, intelligence, innovation, creativity, and filial piety. These values and stories have been instilled in Chinese children and have helped shape the schema on how a Chinese person should conduct himself or herself (See, 2015).

The views on filial piety have changed over the years and is reflected in the literature. It is found that a majority of the Malaysian Chinese youth display individualistic preferences even though they live in a collectivist society (Chan et al., 2016). In other words, they prefer to have the flexibility to express their thoughts and preferences, which could explain the different views of the children and retired parents regarding filial piety. Some children opt to forego attending the Chinese New Year family reunion dinner but stay back to work in order to earn a higher income during the festive holidays, even though this behaviour may be in conflict with family relationships (Guntalib, 2012). However, more research has to be carried out to understand the actual views of filial piety among Malaysian Chinese retired parents and children. It is the intention of this research gather the views of retired parents and children of Chinese families to throw light on the practice of filial piety in the contemporary setting of Malaysia. The study will use a conceptual framework adapted from Schinkel's 2012 study for discussion (Figure 1).



Figure 1

*Conceptual Framework of Research*

Source: Adapted from Schinkel, 2012

**Methodology**

A qualitative approach by means of a semi-structured and one-to-one basis interview to identify the views of retired Chinese parents and children on the practice of filial piety in their daily life. The purposive sampling which is defined as a non-random technique was used to select participants based on such criteria as their personal experience and knowledge (Tongco, 2007). These two categories of participants were identified children (C) and retired parents (RP). The inclusion criteria for children were those aged above 18, Malaysian Chinese currently living away from home and were working adults. The criteria for parents were Malaysian Chinese who have retired from work and currently either living alone or with their spouse. The retired parents and children did not have a parent-child relationship due to research constraint. The retired parents were from both rural and urban areas and had worked in white collar jobs in urban centres. The retired parents were members of the middle class, had their own savings, and had received secondary or tertiary education. On the other hand, the children were living away from home and working in white-collar occupations. In terms of religion, all participants were either Buddhist or Christians. The interview questionnaire was devised based on the literature review and suggestions from the previous research. Open-ended questions such as "What do you think about filial piety?" and "What are the differences between filial piety now and then?" were posed.

Participants were recruited from rural and urban areas in three different states in Peninsular Malaysia, namely Pulau Pinang, Perak, and Kuala Lumpur which has sizable Chinese communities (Tey, 2014). The respondents Perak were drawn from urban and rural areas (Ang & Ang, 2018). The size of the sample was dependent on the point when data saturation was reached. After the tenth respondent for children as well as retired parents, almost similar answers were obtained. To ensure that the sample was sufficiently representative, up to 28 respondents, or 14 each from each category, were interviewed. The raw data was transcribed and analysed by means of a thematic analysis with the use NVivo 12 software for coding and the tabulation of the data.

## Findings

This research identifies four themes regarding the views of Chinese parents and children on filial piety. These themes are based on the concepts of Reciprocity, Respect, Inherited value, and Transformed cultural value. The findings revealed a general consensus between both parties of filial piety as a value that needs to be reciprocated and that it is a form of respect that is not only limited to the parents but also the parents-in-law and the elders. They support the idea that filial piety is a valuable family virtue that it should be passed down to members of the family. Both parties also viewed this traditional value has been transformed to adapt to modern and changing conditions. The parents accepted the fact that the young had to earn a living rather than to demand that they take care of them. Moreover, the parents were more independent and better prepared to keep themselves to be financially stable. On the other hand, the children saw the need to change the practice of filial piety and felt that some of the traditional ideas associated with this ancient value are no longer appropriate to the conditions of the twentieth-first century. Each of these themes will be further elaborated with reference to the views of the respondents.

### Theme 1: Reciprocity

The sample survey confirmed that the children (C) and retired parents (RP) viewed filial piety as an act of reciprocating the efforts of the parents who had raised them and children ought to repay parental love and care with feelings of gratitude. The idea of reciprocity was evident in the response to several issues from both parties.

Question (Q): Do you think filial piety is important?

RP2: The mother was pregnant for ten months and gave birth to her children. In return the children should reciprocate by performing filial duties. If her children did not want to be filial to her, it was their problem, but they would face retribution or, in Buddhist belief, bad *karma* when they have children in the future.

Another retired parent, RP8, a retired parent also thought of filial piety as a virtue and that children should repay their parents because the parents gave them life.

Q: What do you think about filial piety?

RP8: It is a virtue that every man must have. It is the way you repay your parents. They give your life, education, clothing, food, and everything. They brought you up and you should be filial to your parents.

Q: How do you teach your children filial piety?

RP8: We just teach them the Chinese saying of reminding one to “think of the source when one drinks water”. Hence, it is the children’s duty to take care of their aged parents. From the children’s perspectives, filial piety was viewed as something that had to be repaid to their parents while they were still alive and before it was too late.

Q: Personally, what do you think about filial piety?

C8: I think filial piety really hit me hard when he (father) passed away and he is no longer here. Even if you feel that you want to bring him back to show him that you are filial and you want to do something for him, he is not here anymore. He left us for almost 13 years. This incident has reminded me to talk more with my mother, my auntie, and my mother-in-law whenever I have the chance.

## Theme 2: Respect

Although this research focuses on children and retired parents, when asked about their views on filial piety, the participants naturally linked filial piety as a form of respect that is not only limited to the parents but also the parents-in-law and the elderly in general. Besides, the participants also explained that respecting parents or the elderly was one of the teachings that had been instilled in them since young. On this theme, C3 viewed filial piety as being respectful and polite to the elderly, such as not answering back even though you might disagree with was said.

Q: From where did you learn filial piety?

C3: Mainly from my family because they raised me to be a well-mannered person. My mother would punish me if I misbehaved or talked back to her. I was taught to be respectful to the elders and to address them properly even if they had said something that I did not like. In other words, I still have to be polite and not to answer back.

Q: How do you teach your children filial piety now?

C9: I would not teach them filial piety but would tell them to be themselves. I would prefer them to be able to look after themselves and be independent. I expect respect from them but would not tell them that they belong to me or to follow whatever I say.

Retired parent RP12 also viewed filial piety as not only about respecting one’s parents, but also one’s parents-in-law. He advised his married daughter to be respectful towards her parents-in-law and to take the initiative not just to care for her husband but also to love and

respect his family. He stressed the importance of the proper management of personal relations among family members.

Q: How do you teach your children filial piety?

RP12: Although my daughter is married and she is a manager, she still needs guidance, such as on how to take care of the in-law's family, how to manage her own family, her husband, and her in-laws. We have to constantly remind her that whether the in-laws are good or bad, she as a daughter-in-law still needs to show respect. She cannot just care about the husband and not his family; she has to accept this no matter what.

### **Theme 3: Inherited Practice**

Throughout the interviews, both children and retired parents viewed filial piety as an important value that has to be passed down through the family and religious teachings. First, the participants repeatedly emphasised learning from role models and examples from the family, highlighting the importance of family teaching in shaping the next generations' views and acts of filial piety.

Q: How do you view filial piety?

RP7: I think it naturally comes from the family background. The children have seen us or their uncles and aunties showing respect to our parents, so they will follow. When our family members do not quarrel or argue with each other, the children will not become quarrelsome. My parents stayed with us before they passed away. Every morning we (the grandparents, parents, and children) used to go out for breakfast and dine together. During festivals, they will try their best to come home.

RP13: Talking about filial piety, we need to lead by showing good examples. How you treat your parents, your children, and the people around you would be noticed. My Mom lived with my brother when I lived away from home. I used to give her an allowance until she passed away. If we can do this for our parents, the people around us would notice, but if you pretend to be filial, others would also take note. When your parents are alive and you do not fulfil your filial duties to them, it is no use to pray to them with ten roasted pigs after their death. You are just doing it for people around to see. I would say that the Chinese emphasise setting an example through practice. In this manner, others will respect you and your next generations will also follow your example.

From the children's perspective, C7, a 26-year-old male currently working in Kuala Lumpur while his parents are staying in Perak, has contributed a thoughtful insight. According to him, he viewed filial piety as how his father treats his mother, which he observed and adopted.

Q: How do you view filial piety?

C7: Like my father, he is very responsible and will fulfil what his mother's requests. My father, even when he was working, would take her to the hospital when his Mom was unwell. If he was busy, he would ask me to take my grandma to consult the doctor. When I observe how my father treated my grandmother, I realise that this was what I should do as part of my filial obligations. My father is still working hard to support the family, and my Mom, who is a housewife, has sacrificed much for the family and children. I am deeply touched so I will try to fulfil their needs just like how my father treated my grandma.

#### **Theme 4: A Transformed Cultural Value**

Both retired parents and children thought that the value associated with filial piety has been transformed in line with societal changes context. In this theme, the retired parents viewed filial piety as having changed over the years due to time and societal changes and generational differences. Unlike the traditional Confucian teachings of filial piety which obligate children to take care of their parents in return for their upbringing, the retired parents explained that they now had minimum filial expectations from their children and accepted the fact that they might be going to nursing homes when they are aged and sick. On the other hand, the children viewed that the teachings of filial piety cannot be followed blindly but has to be adapted to meet changing circumstances.

In a modernised society, both sons and daughters share equal responsibility in taking care of the parents. For instance, RP1, a retired mother living in Perak, made known her parents' preference to stay with the son rather than the daughter. However, she noticed it is now very common for parents to stay with their daughters. RP11 too shared her experience on how her mother practised preferential treatment for the sons rather than the daughters to receive an education. However, she would now encourage her daughter to pursue her education and career.

Q: What do you think of preferential treatment for sons?

RP1: My mother would only have a joint fixed deposit account with her son rather than with me. I felt unhappy then but I realised that this was the traditional value among women who had not received much education and who felt that the son was important to them. In the past, all parents would normally live with their son, and my father is still living with my brother. However, it is becoming increasingly more common for parents to live with daughters.

RP11: In the past when we were very poor then, my Mom would give priority to the sons rather than the daughters to receive an education. Now I encouraged my daughters to further her studies. If they are not able to, they should look for a job.

RP14, an 85-year-old grandmother, also thought that the elderly should not be too demanding and expect the children to take care of them all the time. She even stated that the



elderly themselves should have their savings and take good care of themselves, instead of relying too much on their children.

Q: How do you expect your children to take care of you?

RP14: For the elderly, if the money is enough for me to buy food and buy some stuff, I would not demand too much and to burden them for every little thing. We elderly have to be more understanding. We cannot simply ask for anything and everything, or else it would burden the children.

For the children, C13, who is currently a father of three children and speaking as a son, mentioned that it is unlikely for the children to provide financial support to parents as in the past. This is because the cost of living is high and the children might not have the ability to provide for their parents.

Q: What are the differences between filial piety now and then?

C13: Our parents used to tell us that we must provide financial support to the family no matter how we fared in life. You can hardly see anything like this now. Raising children is the parents' responsibility. The children may not necessarily want to give money to their parents in return. This is because nowadays the expenses are high. It is impossible to force the children to pay back to the family.

The younger generation believe that the adherence to the practice of filial piety is undergoing unavoidable changes under the pressure of changes in time and the social environment. There was general acceptance of filial piety as a positive moral value that has been passed down since the Confucian era, but its practice has to be conditioned by rational expectations rather than unreasonable devotion.

Q: What do you think about the relationship between Chinese society and filial piety?

C5: It is a moral value passed down from antiquity. Few would question why we have to follow whatever has been passed down.

C9: The practice is followed blindly. This means that the children have to take care of the parents until they pass away. Many parents ignore or overlook the fact that the children are independent, but many look upon their children as their belonging even after they have married. This is unlike Westerners who treat their children as friends.

## Discussion

Four themes reciprocity, respect, inherited value, and a transformed cultural practice have been identified regarding the views of Malaysian Chinese on filial piety in this study. The findings are in-lined with Schinkel's model on the relational and societal contexts whereby this research found out that filial piety among the participants incorporated into both contexts.

Malaysian Chinese children and the retired parents supported the idea that filial piety is an act of reciprocity. Filial piety is viewed as a way to show gratitude and to repay parents for their efforts in raising their children. This finding is in line with the research conducted by Zhang and Zhang (2012) which shows that the Chinese tend to reciprocate parental care or even this care had been wanting. This study also supports the Schinkel model specifically in the relational context, which states that the upbringing of the children, family teachings, and parent-child relationship will affect the children's behaviour in the performance of filial duties.

The findings also show that the participants viewed filial piety as a form of respect to the elderly. This result is parallel with the Confucian teachings on filial piety in which the core requirement is the respect towards parents and the elderly (Liu et.al., 2000). Kuang (2011) found that most Chinese youth tended to avoid any confrontations with and to maintain respect for the elderly or authoritative figures in the family. The findings of this study confirm that the participants have been taught by their parents not to confront or answer back the elderly and be respectful. The teachings of filial piety regarding respect are ingrained among Malaysian Chinese and may reflect both the positive and negative aspects of these teachings. Nevertheless, Chan and Tan (2004) suggest that the evaluation of the pros and cons of filial piety depends largely on individual interpretation, a point that accords with Schinkel's argument that culture and parental teaching shape the general ideas about filial piety.

The third theme of inherited value is similar to the relational context Schinkel's model. The environment in which children and parents found themselves provides the relational context by the transmission of cultural values is achieved. This theme may be defined as how children internalise the practice of filial piety through the role models and examples of their parents and elders who might also tie the practice to religious teachings. Sung (2010) found that the parents' beliefs and behaviour had an impact the children's behaviour in the future, while Hong and Howes (2014) commented that Confucian teachings have been embedded in Chinese life and the teachings and examples of filial piety have an influence on how parents transmit this value to their children and on the children's thoughts and behaviour in the future.

The final theme concerns filial piety as a cultural value that is "transformed" from the past generations to the current one. Societal changes arising from employment and other needs have made it increasingly difficult to maintain the tradition of the young living with their parents. It is rare to see several generations living under the same roof as was common in the past (Jackson & Liu, 2017). Parents too are beginning to self-adjust their filial expectations as they realise that it is unlikely to expect their children to fulfil their filial duties in strict accordance with traditional Confucian teachings (Wu et al., 2017). While many retired parents learn not to overly rely on their children so as not to become a burden to the children, they also accept the fact that living alone or with a spouse also inspires them to be autonomous and independent (Diwan et al., 2010; Mi, 2012; Li, 2013).

On the other hand, the children felt that the traditional teachings of filial piety need to be adjusted to suit independent thinking and reasoning to keep abreast of societal trends.

Poskaite (2014) explained the phenomenon where the new generations prefer to have individual thoughts and decision-making and were more prone to questioning rather than being told what to do. This is confirmed by Shi (2017) who stated that despite Asians placing more emphasis on the parent-child relationship, the young are becoming more individualistic and independent.

In conclusion, this research found that the value of filial piety has evolved from the traditional teachings to the extent that parents now realise that it is unlikely to expect the children adhere to the traditional Confucian teachings. Some are harbouring minimum expectations of their children and are even prepared to live in nursing homes. Similarly, the young also realise that to the passive fulfilment of filial obligations in the traditional manner is no longer feasible or practical. The practice of filial piety has to be followed by giving due allowance to the need for independent thinking and reasoning, as well as to fit into the current context.

### Conclusion

This research has provided theoretical and empirical implications on the practice of filial piety among Malaysian Chinese in the context of changes of societal and relational situations. Schinkel's model places filial piety into societal and relational contexts, the findings of this study with reference to the themes of reciprocity, inherited value, and respect may be considered under the relational context. This means that the parent-child relationship and the parental teachings will form the general filial obligations of the children. The theme of "a transformed cultural value" may be explained by the societal context or the external factor of the model. Increased population mobility and the tendency to live away from the family, together with changing habits arising from the influence of modern urban living have affected the thinking of both the elderly and their children on the practice of filial piety caused both parties viewed the value itself has changed. This research also provides empirical evidence to highlight that the value of filial piety among Chinese and that this practice has not eroded (Cheung & Kwan, 2009) as suggested in some previous works. Filial piety is still dear to the Chinese and is a key family value but has instead evolved from the traditional teachings to more modernised context. This research also illustrates the re-adjustment of expectations among retired parents and the children's struggle in maintaining a balance between career and parents. It is suggested that future research could broaden the focus to include religious and cultural considerations of the Chinese and various dialect groups, social classes and other ethnic communities or to compare this practice among different communities. Further research will provide a better understanding of filial piety and its practice from different perspectives to contribute to the body of knowledge on how best to adapt the practice this ancient cultural value to suit the needs of modern society.

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