

But the foundations of ancestral worship are not laid on any shadowy, visionary soil of myths and legends, but on substantial, solid, historical ground. Ancestral worship has its origin both in the family and nation, and is both a family and a national custom. It is as old as the empire itself, having been instituted in the days of Emperor Shun, the last sovereign of the second dynasty, B.C. 2255-2205. Contemporary with the birth of the nation, it has become so interwoven in the warp and woof of its history, that to attempt to disengage the strands would be to destroy the whole fabric. And, moreover, it is considered to be of more than historical significance—viz., the keystone by which this empire is cemented together, yea, the very stronghold of its life. No other one thing in its entire history has tended more to bind this people together or to perpetuate the nation than this universal respect (whether sincere or a sham) for the living and devotion for the dead; and no other one thing has so bound them to the dead past or so diverted their attention from the living future. And so it has been said, "Had it not been for this system of 'filial piety' (filial piety is the comprehensive term, and includes 'ancestral worship') and 'ancestral worship' there would be no China now, only a medley of contending tribes and opposing nations." Another writer adds, "It was supposed to be the glory of the early statesmen and sages to have correctly apprehended the natural feeling of filial duty, so as to make it an engine for perfect government of the family, the State, and the empire."

Whatever good some may perchance be led to affirm of such a system, that, perhaps, has been the cementing power of preserving the nation through all these centuries, the evil it has wrought offsets all the good—if there be good. 1. It has fixed the attention on the past so that it has ever prevented any aspirations or progress for the future; hence for the past eighteen centuries all advancement has been prevented. Once originators and inventors, the Chinese have long years ago buried all their genius in the dead past. Such a system has created an intense thirst for male offspring (and a hatred of female offspring) to perform the rites due to them, as parents, after death; hence the custom of child marriage and polygamy. 2. It tends to localization and overcrowding of population; hence, the family of Confucius has continued through sixty generations to the present day in the same locality.

Confucius, who claimed for himself nothing more than to be a transmitter, was only giving expression to the traditions of fifteen generations when he said, "Of all actions of men, there is none greater than filial piety, and in filial piety there is nothing greater than reverential awe of one's father." Again he says, "The worship of parents is part of the duty of filial piety." When the sage says that it is a "part of the duty," we do not understand him to mean a fractional part, but that the essential, if not the all-important part, is ancestral worship in filial piety.

For while the duty of filial piety may demand the strengthening of "the bonds of family union" and the stimulating "to active charity."