Landas 33:2 (2019) 37–56

WHAT IS THE *DIZIGUI*?

Umberto Bresciani

As its title indicates, the *Dizigui* (弟子規, *Rules for the Disciple* or *Standards for Students*) is a Confucian book of rules of behavior for a disciple (a young person or child) instructing him or her on how to behave toward his or her own teacher and others. It is a very short text—1080 Chinese characters altogether—written in poetic lines (360 lines) of three characters each, thereby imitating another celebrated Chinese educational primer, the *Sanzijing* (*Three Character Classic*). The lines are enriched by rhymes (every two make up a rhyme), making the text quite easy for children to memorize and recite.

Data about the author and time of writing of the *Dizigui* are rather vague. Everyone agrees that it came into existence during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), with the most common tradition being that its author was a certain Li Yuxiu (ar. 1647–1729), a scholar who did not succeed in achieving the *jinshi* (the highest degree) in the government civil service examination and subsequently made a living by teaching and writing educational materials. He wrote the *Dizigui* around the time of the Kangxi Emperor (reigned 1661–1722), although with the title *Xunmengwen* (訓蒙文, "Elementary Text on Compliance"). It was published in book form toward the end of the eighteenth century, after a revision by a scholar named Jia Youren (賈仁, 1724–1784) who renamed it *Dizigui*.

https://publications.lst.edu/

Another theory supported by some scholars is that the work saw the light only after the Opium War (1840–1842) and became widely popular during the last half-century of the Qing Empire. In 1893, the scholar Zhou Baozhang (周保璋) noted in one of his books that the ancient classic *Sanzijing* could be forgotten after the publication of the *Dizigui*.

The *Dizigui* was a primer for learning how to read and write as well as the basics of human ethical behavior. It was similar in nature to other primers of the Confucian tradition—the *Sanzijing* (*Three Character Classic*), the *Qianziwen* (*Thousand Character Classic*), and the *Baijiaxing* (*Hundred Family Surnames*)—and was compiled based on an essay on children's education written by the Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi (1130–1200) entitled *Tongmeng xu zhi* (童蒙须知, "What Small Kids Should Know"). The essay described how children should learn good behavior in different social contexts: how to dress, speak, and walk; how to clean their rooms and keep their things in order; and how to learn to read and write. It was divided into four sections, closely following a saying from the *Analects* of Confucius:

> At home, a young man must respect his parents; abroad, he must respect his elders. He should talk little, but with good faith; love all people, but associate with the virtuous. Having done this, if he still has energy to spare, let him study literature.[1]

The wording of the *Dizigui* appears in several places to have been drawn from the *Book of Rites* (*Liji*), especially the chapter called *Quli*, while a large part of the material comes from the aforementioned essay by Zhu Xi.

The *Dizigui* has a very brief general preamble or outline, almost identical in wording to the passage from the *Analects* just mentioned. Seven chapters then follow:

[1]Confucius, *The Analects*, ed. M. Nylan, trans. S. Leys (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), I, 6 (hereafter referred to as *Analects*). Although the translator mentions "literature" in the last sentence, the original word (*wen*文) has a broader meaning, referring to any cultural activity.

https://publications.lst.edu/

- Chapter 1: Filial piety toward parents
- Chapter 2: Respect toward one's elder brothers
- Chapter 3: Be cautious in my daily life
- Chapter 4: Learning to be trustworthy
- Chapter 5: Love all living beings
- Chapter 6: Be close to and learn from people of virtue and compassion
- Chapter 7: How to study and learn to improve one's cultural and spiritual life.

Each of these chapters is a development of the content of the short sentences contained in the outline, words that come from the mouth of Confucius himself. Of the 113 rules altogether listed in the work, 24 are concerned with filial piety, 13 with brotherly love/respect, 24 with caution in one's daily life routine, 15 with trustworthiness in dealing with people, 21 with love toward all people, 4 with staying close to virtuous and benevolent persons, and 12 with guidelines for learning.

It is a fact that the *Dizigui* was quite popular in China during the second half of the nineteenth century, even though just at the level of the countryside. Toward the end of that century, the local government in numerous areas of China made the *Dizigui* a mandatory textbook in public and private elementary schools, and it was widely read. The literati did not appreciate it, however, considering its style too elementary, its content too low, and its ethical rules too simplistic. According to some scholars, the book had been written not for children but for illiterate country people; it was first read in places like temples and tea houses.

When the Chinese soon realized, however, that their country was "the sick man of Asia," unable to stand up against any foreign power, a growing wave of anti-Confucianism began to spread, reaching a climax in the May 4th Movement of 1919. They figured that their weakness and backwardness was all the fault of their Confucian cultural tradition. Everything Confucian, including the *Dizigui*, was gradually discarded.

After the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, the situation became even more serious for all kinds of Confucian reading

https://publications.lst.edu/

materials; only outside of China were there people still reading and studying Confucian books. There were several earnest scholars in particular in Hong Kong and Taiwan—the so-called New Confucian philosophers—who worked hard at fathoming Confucian doctrines, and who in time developed a rediscovery and revival of the ancient philosophy-religion. Their efforts gave birth to the so-called New Confucian Movement.

Around 1990, Taiwanese scholar Wang Caigui (1949–), a disciple of Mou Zongsan (one of the leading New Confucians [1909–1996]), launched a movement in Taiwan for teaching children to memorize the Confucian classics, just as was customary in all respected families in previous centuries. The movement started from scratch by organizing voluntary classes outside the school schedule, usually on Saturday afternoons, when the interested parents would bring their children to a borrowed classroom and have them memorize passages from the classics, together with some poetry and other sayings, while playing games.

Having never been considered as a classic in the past, the *Dizigui* was not among the original materials meant for memorization, although it was soon included under the encouragement of enthusiastic supporters of the movement, including Buddhists and the followers of the Yiguandao and Tiandijiao religions. The activity of *dujing* ("classics memorization") described above was quite successful in Taiwan and was soon extended to China where it became a large movement, embraced enthusiastically by many volunteer teachers and involving tens of millions of children. The teaching materials of the movement, which included the *Dizigui*, were also better organized in China, enjoying the contribution of well-prepared anthologies such as the one compiled by the scholar Jiang Qing (1953–).[2]

[2]A well-known figure in Chinese intellectual circles, Jiang Qing is the leader of "political Confucianism." He advocates a return to a Confucian China modeled after the ancient classic, the *Gongyang Commentary* to the Chunqiu (the Spring and Autumn Annals compiled by Confucius). In 2004, Jiang Qing compiled an eight-volume anthology of classical texts deemed worthy of memorization for Wang Caigui's memorization movement.

https://publications.lst.edu/

Nowadays, the miniscule booklet known by the name *Dizigui* is back to topical in contemporary China a century after its disappearance; indeed, we are observant, after the year 2000, to a "*Dizigui* fever." According to recent research on the renaissance of popular Confucianism, a Buddhist monk by the name of Master Jingkong brought about the revival of the *Dizigui* in China.[3] Born in Lujiang County in Anhui Province in 1927, Master Jingkong was exiled to Taiwan in 1949, ordained a Buddhist master in 1959, and worked hard for decades as a talented preacher to spread a modernized version of Buddhism in Taiwan before extending his activities to Chinese communities in foreign countries including the United States, Malaysia, and Australia. He finally started to work in China in the 1990s through preaching and the free distribution of books and icons, wisely exploiting the most advanced communication technologies available at the time.

Among the materials Master Jingkong promoted was the *Dizigui*. He was convinced that such a book was extremely precious as a concrete realization of the highest ideals of Buddhism, even though its content was Confucian. He argued that Chinese culture had a unifying thread which was concentrated in three books, one for each of the three doctrines (Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism), and that in his view, the *Dizigui* was the book representative of Confucianism, more worthwhile than all the traditional classics and entire libraries because it concerned practice in actual daily life. In fact, he considered this little tract as more worthy than any Buddhist book because it dealt with filial piety, which for him is the most basic condition for genuine Buddhist practice. He regarded the rules contained in the *Dizigui* as the fundamental commandments of Buddhism and deemed education in religion to be far more important than rituals and prayers.

Numerous other people in China continued Jingkong's propagandizing efforts, printing countless copies of the *Dizigui* and

[3]See the book edited by S. Billioud, *The Varieties of Confucian Experience: Documenting a Grassroots Revival of Tradition*, Religion in Christian Societies Series Vol. 14 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2018). The research in it about the *Dizigui* is by distinguished sociologist Ji Zhe, who teaches at the Sorbonne in Paris.

https://publications.lst.edu/

distributing them everywhere the way *shanshu* have been traditionally distributed.[4] Master Jingkong was a big fan of the *dujing* movement in Taiwan, and even in China he not only supported it but was also instrumental in including the *Dizigui* among the memorization materials for children.

The spread of the *Dizigui* throughout China gained momentum beginning in 2004, when the movement for memorizing the classics started to take firm hold. Master Jingkong's Buddhist educational activities were also successful in his native town of Lujiang, Jiangxi, and were imitated in numerous other places. In 2006, a public welfare network was established for the purpose of teaching, promoting, and spreading the *Dizigui* (see www.dizigui.cn) as well as for supplying all kinds of teaching materials. In 2008, and again in 2010, a special serial program on CCTV was teaching and explaining the *Dizigui*, reaching virtually all corners of the country. By 2009, Xi Jinping, then the president of the Central Party School and expected to be China's next president, specifically named the text as recommended reading for party cadres. A professor at the Central Communist Party School, which trains Chinese officials, wrote a book called *Everybody Should Study Dizigui*, and party organizations in far-flung corners of the country convened study sessions on the text.[5]

In China today, therefore, the *Dizigui* has become a kind of basic universal handbook of correct behavior not just for children and students but for every person. It is often quoted in schools as well as in offices or factories, and "has been used by enterprises for training and selecting employees, by local governments as a text included in 'socialist spiritual civilization' propaganda, and massively within the prison system as a tool for correcting criminals' attitudes."[6] When

[4]The *shanshu* are books handed out free of charge at the entrances of temples or of other public places for the edification of the people. This is done in the belief that whoever prints and gives out such books acquires merit for oneself.

[5]See R. Lu, "China's Neo-Confucianism," *Tea Leaf Nation* (January 7, 2014).

[6]Z. Ji, "Making a Virtue of Piety: *Dizigui* and the Discursive Practice of Jingkong's Network," in Billioud, ed., *The Varieties of Confucian Experience*, 61–89.

https://publications.lst.edu/

passing by a school, one would not be surprised to hear a class of pupils reciting the *Dizigui* or even the whole student body, sometimes in the thousands, chanting aloud its lines on the school lawn. As a matter of fact, when China's State Council issued guidelines in 2017 covering achievements in research, education, protection, inheritance, innovation, and exchanges related to traditional culture for the next few years, one of the items therein indicated that the Qing Dynasty book *Dizigui* should be included in the curriculum of elementary schools.

I hereby enclose the text of the *Dizigui* in its entirety—one outline and seven chapters—and follow it with further comments and criticism.

The *Dizigui*[7]

Outline

Dizigui, or "Standards for Being a Good Student and Child," is a book that was taught by Chinese saints and sages of the ancient past.[8] The book first teaches us how to be dutiful to our parents and how to be respectful and loving to our siblings.[9] It then teaches us how to be

[7]While there are over a dozen different extant editions of the *Dizigui* from the nineteenth century, their content is substantially the same as they show only slight variations of a few single characters among them. Here this author adopts the fluent English translation kindly made available by the Pure Land Learning College Association Inc. (Australia) on their website (http://www.purelandcollege.org.au/). It is not stated, however, from which original edition the translation was made. In the translation used here, there is a subtitle "Guide to a Happy Life" after *Dizigui* which is not present in the original text. This author supposes that it was added by Master Jingkong to stress how observing the rules listed below leads one to live a happy life.

[8]The Chinese "saints and sages of the ancient past" include the sage kings of remote antiquity (Yao, Shun, Yu the Great, King Tang, Zhou Gong) as well as Confucius and Mencius.

[9]The word *ti* used here means fraternal love. In the Confucian tradition, older siblings are supposed to love and help younger siblings; younger siblings, in turn, are expected to love and respect older siblings. This attitude is supposed to be

https://publications.lst.edu/

cautious with all people, matters, and objects in our daily lives; how to be a trustworthy person; and to believe in the teachings of the ancient saints and sages. Furthermore, it teaches us to love all equally, and to be close to and learn from people of virtue and compassion. Only when we have accomplished all the above can we then study further and learn literature and art to improve the quality of our cultural and spiritual lives.

Chapter 1: At Home, Be Dutiful to My Parents[10]

When my parents call me, I will answer them right away. When they ask me to do something, I will do it quickly. When my parents instruct me, I will listen respectfully. When my parents reproach me, I will obey and accept their scolding. I will try hard to change and improve myself, to start anew.

In the winter, I will keep my parents warm; in the summer, I will keep my parents cool. I will always greet my parents in the morning to show them that I care. At night I will always make sure my parents rest well. Before going out, I must tell my parents where I am going, for parents are always concerned about their children. After returning home, I must go and see my parents to let them know I am back, so they do not worry about me. I will maintain a permanent place to stay and lead a routine life. I will persist in whatever I do and will not change my aspirations at will.

A matter might be trivial, but if it is wrong to do it or unfair to another person, I must not do it thinking it will bear little or no consequence. If I do [it], I am not being a dutiful child because my parents would not want to see me doing things that are irrational or

extended to all people of the same generation, since for Confucius "within the four seas all men are brothers" (*Analects* XII, 5).

[10]Filial piety has always been the foremost virtue in traditional Chinese ethics. There is the ancient saying that "among the many (a hundred) good deeds, filial piety is the first [Baishan xiao wei xian]."

https://publications.lst.edu/

illegal. Even though an object might be small, I will not keep it a secret from my parents. If I do, I will hurt my parents' feelings.[11]

If whatever pleases my parents is fair and reasonable, I will try my best to attain it for them.[12] If something displeases my parents, if within reason,[13] I will cautiously keep it away from them. When my body is hurt, my parents will be worried. If my virtues are compromised, my parents will feel ashamed.[14] When I have loving parents, it is not difficult to be dutiful to them. But if I can be dutiful to parents who hate me, only then will I meet the standards of the saints and sages for being a dutiful child.[15]

When my parents do wrong, I will urge them to change. I will do it with a kind facial expression and a warm gentle voice. If they do not accept my advice, I will wait until they are in a happier mood before I attempt to dissuade them again, followed by crying, if necessary, to make them understand. If they end up whipping me,[16] I will not hold a grudge against them. When my parents are ill, I will taste the medicine

---

[11]Parents will be saddened by the actions of a child who behaves secretively. If the child behaves in such a way while still young, they will probably twist the law, obtain bribes, and be a curse to country and people when they grow up.

[12]On the contrary, if what pleases my parents is illegitimate or unreasonable, I should tactfully dissuade them and provide reasons why they should not have it. The lack of this point is one of the criticisms most frequently brought forward by present-day Confucian scholars.

[13]The correct Confucian tradition is that I should lead my parents to the proper view and understanding of things.

[14]If a child is sick, his or her parents will feel worried; if a child behaves badly, his or her parents will feel ashamed.

[15]The model for this is the ancient emperor Shun, who was originally a commoner and extremely filial despite his father and stepbrother treating him badly, even to the point of trying to kill him.

[16]In ancient China, parents were allowed to discipline a child when he or she does something wrong. If a child refused to be disciplined, the parents had the right to ask the authorities to have the child executed.

https://publications.lst.edu/

first before giving it to them.[17] I will take care of them night and day and stay by their bedside. During the first three years of mourning after my parents have passed away, I will remember them with gratitude and feel sad often for not being able to repay them for their kindness in raising me. During this period I will arrange my home to reflect my grief and sorrow. I will also avoid festivities and indulgence in food and alcoholic drinks. I will observe proper etiquette[18] in arranging my parents' funerals. I will hold the memorial ceremony and commemorate my parents' anniversaries with utmost sincerity. I will serve my departed parents as if they were still alive.

Chapter 2: Standards for a Younger Brother When Away from Home[19]

If I am the older sibling, I will befriend the younger ones. If I am the younger sibling, I will respect and love the older ones. Only when I can maintain harmonious relationships with my siblings am I being dutiful to my parents.[20] When I value my familial ties more than property and belongings, no resentment will come between me and my siblings. When I am careful with words and hold back hurtful comments, my feelings of anger naturally die out.

---

[17]The ancient Chinese took herbal medicines boiled in water. The child would be required to check the medicine first—whether it was too hot, too cold, or too bitter—before giving it to his or her parents.

[18]The details of funeral rites are contained in the *Book of Rites* (*Liji*) and updated in later books on ritual, especially in the *Family Rituals of Master Zhu* (*Zhuzi jiali*) as compiled by Zhu Xi.

[19]In this context, "away from home" simply means "when the elder or younger [sibling] is outside the presence of his [or her] parents." Commentators explain how parents in ancient China would live in a different room from their children. Here the first chapter concerns "ru," i.e., entering in the presence of one's parents (it was translated above as "at home"). This present chapter says *chu*, meaning out of the presence of one's parents.

[20]Parents are happy when their children get along with each other. This is one way children can show that they are dutiful to their parents.

https://publications.lst.edu/

Whether I am drinking, eating, walking, or sitting, I will let the elders go first; the younger ones should follow. When an elder is asking for someone, I will get that person for [them] right away. If I cannot find that person, I will immediately report back, and put myself at the elder's service instead. When I address an elder, I should not call [them] by [their] given name.[21] This is in accord with ancient Chinese etiquette. In front of an elder, I will never show off. If I meet an elder I know on the street, I will promptly clasp my hands and greet [them] with a bow. If [they do] not speak to me, I will step back and respectfully stand aside. Should I be riding a horse and spot an elder I know walking, I will dismount and pay respect to the elder. If I am riding in a carriage,[22] I will stop, get out of the carriage, and ask if I can give the elder a ride. If I meet an elder passing by, I will stand aside and wait respectfully. I will not leave until the elder disappears from my sight. When an elder is standing, I will not sit. After an elder sits down, I sit only when I am told to do so. Before an elder, I will speak softly. But if my voice is too low and hard to hear, it is not appropriate. When meeting an elder, I will walk briskly towards [them]; when leaving, I will not exit in haste. When answering a question, I will look at the person who is asking me the question.

I will serve my uncles [and aunts] as if I am serving my parents. I will treat my cousins as if they are my own siblings.

---

[21]In ancient China, a male person had at least two names. The first was the "given name" which his parents provided when he was born. His friends would then give a second name when he reached the age of 20, at a "Ceremony of the Hat (or *Capping Ceremony*)" given in his honor to announce his coming-of-age. Only his parents called him by his "given name" after that; out of respect, everyone else, including the emperor, could only call him by his second name. The only exception was if he committed a crime, for he would be called by his "given name" during sentencing.

[22]In ancient China, most people used horses or carriages as their means of transportation.

https://publications.lst.edu/

Chapter 3: Be Cautious in My Daily Life

I will get up each morning before my parents [do]; at night, I will go to bed only after my parents have gone to sleep. When I realize that time is passing me by and cannot be turned back, and that I am getting older year by year, I will especially treasure the present moment.[23] When I get up in the morning, I will wash my face and brush my teeth. After using the toilet, I will always wash my hands.

I must wear my hat straight,[24] and make sure the hooks of my clothes are tied.[25] My socks and shoes should also be worn neatly and correctly. I will always place my hat and clothes away in their proper places. I will not carelessly throw my clothes around, for that will get them dirty. It is more important that my clothes are clean, rather than how extravagant they are. I will wear only what is suitable for my station. At home, I will wear clothes according to my family traditions and customs. When it comes to eating and drinking, I will not pick and choose my food. I will only eat the right amount; I will not over-eat. I am still young, I must not drink alcohol. When I am drunk, my behavior will turn ugly.

I will always walk composed, with light and even steps. I will always stand up straight and tall. My bows will always be deep, with hands held in front and arms rounded. I will always pay my respect with reverence.[26] I will not step on doorsills or stand leaning on one leg. I will not sit with my legs apart or sprawled out. I will not rock the lower part of my body while standing or sitting down.

---

[23]There is an old Chinese proverb: "A unit of time is as precious as a unit of gold, but you cannot buy back one unit of time with one unit of gold." It means that time is really very precious as no amount of money can buy time.

[24]When a male wore a hat in ancient China, it meant he had attained the age of an adult.

[25]In ancient China, people used hooks in place of buttons. These had to be tied when dressed.

[26]In ancient China, people showed respect to others by bowing, holding one hand open over the other closed in a fist, or prostrating themselves on the ground.

https://publications.lst.edu/

I will always lift the curtain slowly,[27] and quietly. I must leave myself ample space when I turn so I will not bump into a corner. I will hold empty containers carefully as if they were full.[28] I will enter empty rooms as if they were occupied.[29] I will avoid doing things in a hurry, as doing things in haste will lead to many mistakes. I should not be afraid of difficult tasks, and I will not become careless when a job is too easy. I will keep away from rowdy places. I will not ask about things that are abnormal or unusual.

When I am about to enter a main entrance, I must first ask if someone is inside. Before entering a room, I must first make myself heard, so that those inside know someone is approaching. If someone asks who I am, I must give my name. To answer "It is me" or "Me" is not sufficient. Before borrowing things from others, I must ask for permission. If I do not ask, it is stealing. When borrowing things from others, I will return them promptly. Later, if I have an urgent need, I will not have a problem borrowing from them again.

Chapter 4: Be Trustworthy

When I speak, honesty is important. Deceitful words and lies must not be tolerated. Rather than talking too much, it is better to speak less. I will speak only the truth; I will not twist the facts. Cunning words, foul language, and philistine habits must be avoided at all costs.

What I have not seen with my own eyes, I will not readily tell to others. What I do not know for sure, I will not easily pass on to others. If I am asked to do something that is inappropriate or bad, I must not agree to it. If I do, I will be doubly wrong. I must speak clearly and to the point. I must not talk too fast or mumble. Some like to talk about

[27]In ancient China, curtains were made of bamboo strips woven together. These were used to shelter a room from view.

[28]Even if a container is empty, one should treat it with respect and handle it with care out of reverence for both living and non-living things.

[29]In ancient China, a virtuous man always behaved properly, regardless of whether he was alone or with others.

https://publications.lst.edu/

the good points of others, while some like to talk about the faults of others. If it is none of my business, I will not get involved.

When I see others do good deeds, I must think about following their example. Even though my own achievements are still far behind those of others, I am getting closer. When I see others do wrong, I must immediately reflect upon myself. If I have made the same mistake, I will correct it. If not, I will take extra care to not make the same mistake.

When my morals, conduct, knowledge, and skills seem not as good as those of others, I will encourage myself to be better. If the clothes I wear, and the food I eat and drink, are not as good as those of others, I should not be concerned.

If criticism makes me angry and compliments make me happy, bad company will come my way and good friends will shy away. If I am uneasy about compliments and appreciative of criticism, then sincere, understanding, and virtuous people will gradually come close to me.

If any mistake I make is inadvertent, it is merely a mistake. If it is done on purpose, however, it is an evil act. If I correct my mistake and do not repeat it, I no longer own the mistake. If I try to cover it up, I will be doubly wrong.

Chapter 5: Love All Equally

Human beings, regardless of nationality, race, or religion—everyone—should be loved equally. We are all sheltered by the same sky and we all live on the same planet Earth.

A person of high ideals and morals is highly respected. What people value is not based on outside appearance. A person's outstanding abilities will naturally endow [them] with a good reputation. Admiration from others does not come from boasting or praising oneself.

If I am a very capable person, I should use my capabilities for the benefit of others. Other people's competence should never be slandered. I will not flatter the rich, or despise the poor. I will not ignore old friends, only taking delight in new ones. When a person is

https://publications.lst.edu/

busy, I will not bother [them] with matters. When a person's mind is not at ease, I will not bother [them] with words.

If a person has a shortcoming, I will not expose it. If a person has a secret, I will not tell others. When people are being praised and approved of, they will be encouraged to try even harder. Spreading rumors about the wrongdoings of others is a wrongdoing in itself. When the harm done has reached the extreme, misfortunes will surely follow. When I encourage another to do good, both of our virtues are built up. If I do not tell another of his faults, we are both wrong.

Whether I take or give, I need to know the difference between the two. It is better to give more and take less. What I ask others to do, I must first ask myself if I would be willing to do. If it is not something I would be willing to do, I will not ask others to do it. I must repay the kindness of others and let go of my resentments. I will spend less time holding grudges and more time paying back the kindness of others.

When I am directing maids and servants, I will act honorably and properly. I will also treat them kindly and generously. If I use my influence to make them submissive, their hearts will not be with me. If I can convince them with sound reasoning, they will have nothing to object to.

Chapter 6: Be Close to and Learn from People of Virtue and Compassion

We are all human, but we are not the same. Most of us are ordinary; only a very few have great virtues and high moral principles. A truly virtuous person is greatly respected by others. [They] will not be afraid to speak the truth and [they] will not fawn on others. If I can be close to and learn from people of great virtue and compassion, I will benefit immensely. My virtues will grow daily and my wrongdoings will lessen day by day. If I choose not to be close to and learn from people of great virtue, I will suffer a great loss. People without virtue will get close to me and nothing I attempt will succeed.

https://publications.lst.edu/

Chapter 7: After All the Above are Accomplished, I Should Study Further and Learn Literature and Art to Improve My Cultural and Spiritual Life

If I do not actively practice what I have learned but continue to study on the surface, even though my knowledge is increasing, it is only superficial. What kind of person will I be? If I do apply my knowledge diligently, but stop studying, I will only do things based on my own opinion, thinking it is correct. In fact, what I know is not the truth.

There are methods [for studying] correctly. [These] involve concentration in three areas: my mind, my eyes, and my mouth. To believe in what I read is equally important. When I begin to read a book, I will not think about another. If I have not completed the book, I will not start another. I will give myself lots of time to study, and I will study hard. If I devote enough time and effort, I will thoroughly understand.[30] If I have a question, I will make a note of it. I will ask the person who has the knowledge for the right answer. I will keep my room neat, my walls uncluttered and clean, my desk tidy, and my brush and ink stone properly placed.[31] If my ink block is ground unevenly, it shows I have a poor state of mind. When words are written carelessly, showing no respect, this shows [that] my state of mind has not been well. My books should be classified, placed on the bookshelves, and in their proper places. After I finish reading a book, I will put it back where it belongs. Even if I am in a hurry, I still must neatly roll up and bind the open bamboo scroll I have been reading. All missing or damaged pages ought to be immediately repaired. If it is not a book on the teachings of the saints and sages, it should be discarded and not even looked at. Such books can block my intelligence and wisdom, and will undermine my aspirations and sense of direction. Neither be harsh on myself, nor give up on myself. To be a person of high ideals, moral standards, and virtue is something we can all attain in time.

[30]If I do not understand part of a book that I am reading, I should read it again and again, even if for a thousand times. Its meaning will come to me in time.

[31]People in traditional China wrote with a brush and ink, which was made at that instant by grinding an ink stick on the ink stone and adding water.

https://publications.lst.edu/

Further Comments and Criticisms

Numerous scholars have written essays debating the *Dizigui* after it had become widely popular once again in recent decades. Many extol its educational value, especially in this world of ours, where "children are listened to, instead of the other way around."[32] According to the sociologist Ji Zhe, the *Dizigui* almost came to be sanctified nowadays, in the promotional activity of Jingkong and others, as a "classic" of the whole of "Chinese culture."[33] Yet while it is true that the pamphlet is an austere code of behavior, numerous Confucian scholars deem it overvalued. They have written in criticism of the book and affirm that it is not an epitome of Chinese culture, that it is just a popular pamphlet containing some traditional Confucian rules of basic behavior and nothing more, suitable only for children or illiterate peasants. It is not on par, therefore, with the *Sanzijing*, which is much more ancient (by several centuries) and loftier in content. The *Sanzijing*, however, has more of the aura of a classic, although it was never considered to be one, with many scholars already looking down on it in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Other Confucian scholars go further in their criticism, denouncing the *Dizigui*'s content as a betrayal of true Confucian doctrine and claiming that it offers a form of "bastardized Confucianism." Why is this so?

Many Chinese intellectuals in the twentieth century debated and wrote about traditional Confucian ethics, striving to point out its weaknesses and faults. They condemned Confucianism as it was lived out during the last centuries of the imperial age, mainly for imposing total subservience to the authority of parents and the state and "rendering the people dormant." They see the old Confucianism in facing the *Dizigui*, the one they dislike, as well as a return to the condemned past. Thus, after a century of reflection, these New Confucians had made an enormous effort at outlining the original Confucian ethical project, one that was free from any deformation and accretion.

---

[32]From the introduction to the English translation of the *Dizigui.*

[33]Ji, "Making a Virtue of Piety," 62.

https://publications.lst.edu/

An examination of numerous websites reveals that their criticism is constantly aimed at Chapter One, which discusses filial behavior toward parents. They object to the passive attitude of obedience and conformity that is depicted as standard Confucian behavior. Following are the points that they find most at odds with the actual teachings of Confucius:

1. Obeying the orders of one's parents immediately, without asking questions ("When your parents call you, you should answer without delay. When your parents ask you to do something, you should act immediately as your parents say.")

2. Accepting one's parents unconditionally ("When your parents instruct you, you must listen to them respectfully. When your parents reprimand you, you must take their rebukes obediently.")

3. Giving ownership of oneself to one's parents ("A matter might be trivial, but if it is wrong to do it or unfair to another person, I must not do it thinking it will bear little or no consequence. If I do, I am not being a dutiful child.…")

4. Indulging one's parents ("You should try your best to get fully prepared for what your parents like, and you should carefully get rid of what your parents dislike."). Critics observe that if one does as one's parents please, what is the point of giving them the right advice, something Confucius advocated for?

5. Accepting physical abuse from one's parents ("If your parents do not accept your remonstrations, remonstrate with them again in a happy way. We may follow up with wailing or sobbing, and we should not feel resentful towards them if we are whipped by them."). Critics argue that those who have read actual Confucian classics can immediately spot the distortions in the *Dizigui*. The teachings of Confucius clearly state

https://publications.lst.edu/

> that one should always react rationally and run away from parental abuse.

Regarding abuse in general, there is the Confucian saying that one should "recompense injury with justice, and recompense kindness with kindness" (*Analects* XIV, 34), i.e., one should let parents know plain and clear that they did wrong. As for parental abuse, there is a related story in the ancient book *Kongzi jiayu* ("Words from the School of Confucius") that tells of the disciple Zengzi.

While still in his youthful years, Zengzi was working in his vegetable garden one day when he accidentally cut the root of some melon plants. His father, Zeng Xi, was so angry that he hit his son on the back with a big rod, rendering him unconscious for a while. After Zengzi woke up, he approached his father with no ill feelings, saying, "I offended you, father, and you disciplined me hard. Did you injure yourself?" When he returned to his own room, he took out his lute and sang so that his father could be assured that he was fine.

Upon hearing this story, Confucius was furious. He told his other disciples: "If Zengzi comes, do not let him in!" Zengzi was puzzled and sent someone else to ask the Master what he did wrong. The Master said,

> Didn't you know that when Shun [an ancient sage king] was serving his father, he would always be available when the father needed his help, but he could not be found when his father wanted to kill him? A mild spank is fine for misconduct, but one should run away when facing a big rod. In this way Shun's father could not find a chance to commit the crime of becoming a cruel father and Shun did not become an un-filial son. The way Zengzi served his father today was to wait there for his father to burst his anger, as if he would not run away even when facing death! Had he really died, he would have led his father into a terrible crime. What could be more un-filial than this?[34]

A few words can be said in defense of the *Dizigui*. First of all, the style it is written in is a serious limitation; it is, after all, a list of rules

[34]P. Ni, *Confucius: The Man and the Way of Gongfu* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 71.

https://publications.lst.edu/

meant for children or illiterate individuals. Its three-character verses enriched by rhymes make it easy to memorize on the one hand but present a serious constraint to the expression of thought on the other, allowing only for a succession of lapidary sentences. The possibility of having alternative readings is quite high given such a configuration of the text, although this is tempered, fortunately, by the fact that in traditional China most rules come from passages of the *Analects* or from other places that everybody knew by heart. Nevertheless, such a skeletal expression of thoughts needs to be enriched by the flesh of explanations. This is why all websites dealing with the *Dizigui* mention "teaching" it to students, which involves two simultaneous activities, namely, line-by-line memorization by the students and detailed explanations by their teacher.

There is obviously little to no room for explanations, clarifications, and distinctions in the *Dizigui*, written as it is in lapidary lines and meant for children or the illiterate. The blame should therefore be discounted. Moreover, it is even possible to find similar cases in other religions. Take the Catholic catechism in use before the Second Vatican Council, for instance—the *Catechism of Saint Pius the Tenth* was actually a summary of Catholic doctrine made by the same pope (Pius X), who drafted it when he was bishop of Mantua, Italy to meet the catechetical need of a diocese of poor children coming from illiterate peasant families. He presented Catholic doctrine by means of a list of extremely simple questions and answers, and yet his booklet was eventually made the standard of doctrine for the entire Catholic Church when he later happened to become pope. It remained so for half a century until everyone by the time of Vatican II was decrying its oversimplified content. It was eventually discarded.

A century of historical vicissitudes had almost totally eradicated Confucian values from the minds of the Chinese. In a short span of only a few years, however, and despite its shortcomings, the *Dizigui* had become an effective means of restoring awareness of these values—filial piety, respect for others, trustworthiness, diligence in learning, etc.—among the Chinese masses. There is no doubt that its spread has accomplished a great feat indeed.

https://publications.lst.edu/