

## To Obey or not to Obey: A Child's Dilemma

A secondary school student sits at her table, staring at the form in front of her. She is required to choose the electives she would like to study later on, and she selects the three her parents have told her to do so with a sigh: economics, chemistry and biology, regretfully crossing out the option of her favourite subject, English literature. It is the best choice for her. Her parents know best, and by following this, she would have the best future, since they told her that it is harder to obtain high marks in essay based subjects.

But would she? Shouldn't she just choose what makes her happy? Shouldn't that be the way to ensure that she can get the happiest and the best future possible? Why should she follow her parent's instructions?

In this essay, I will argue that by obeying their parents without question, young people can have peace of mind and more stability in the short term, but will have a higher chance of dissatisfaction with their own life in the long term. It shall be done by comparing and contrasting Chinese and Western cultures, as both have very different cultures and expectations, leading to very different parenting styles, and in also very different effects

Chinese culture and Western cultures have very different expectations of obedience, which is well-known and normalised by internet jokes and memes. It is well-known that young Chinese people believe that they should obey their parents without question, while young Western believe the contrary, or do not have such strong beliefs as the former. By comparing and contrasting influences and reasons on obedience in these two cultures, we can understand the long-term and short-term effects of obeying your parents without question.

First of all, obedience to parents is extremely ingrained in Chinese culture, as seen in stories. For example, the twenty-four filial exemplars are common childhood folktales told to children, normalising extreme obedience by utilising filial piety as a common motif. Wang Xiang, lies naked on ice to thaw the surface and catch fish for his mother, while Wu Meng allows mosquitos to feed on his blood so they wouldn't harm his parents. (二十四孝故事) It is clear that these stories praise the child for being obedient, and devotion to parents is expected, even at the cost of harming oneself. The motif of praising filial piety is also extremely prominent, in all of these stories. In the Ming Dynasty Tale, The Oil Vendor and the Queen of Flowers, Zhu Zhong is praised for his filial actions for burying and honouring his stepfather. (Teon) Such stories are still regarded as a part of children's education, and aren't dismissed as old fashioned, as Beijing has recently demonstrated by updating their education curriculum. Thus, obedience is painted as the morally right thing to do. (Century and Jacobs)

In contrast, obedience is not glorified in western literature, as evidenced by common fairy tales. Many stories involve the hero or heroine of the story defying an authority figure, usually their parental figure. In Cinderella, her stepmother is painted as abusive, while Cinderella's complete obedience to her is regarded as a situation that should be pitied. In Snow White, the titular protagonist runs away from her evil stepmother and overthrows her regime with the prince. Obedience is not highlighted, while virtues of bravery and intelligence are.

The structure of Chinese families and cultural beliefs also help normalise obedience, as evidenced by the reciprocal obligation to care for your parents. Love is presented through

materialistic items like food and care to children, in turn children must repay their parents with filial piety for raising them. This is called “care debt” or “feeding in return”, and is extremely prominent in Confucius values, creating a social expectation and obligation that young people must be obedient to their parents. (Chan and Tan #57-59)

A similar western belief to Chinese filial piety is the word of the Bible. The Bible stresses obedience to God the Father, as well as parents, as evidenced in Ephesians 6:1 “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” In order to join God’s communion, followers are expected to obey and worship him. (Van der Merwe) However, unlike filial piety in Chinese culture, there is no widespread social expectation of such worship and obedience. This is because Christianity is not the universal foundation of Western culture, while to be Chinese, filial piety is automatically a fundamental part of your belief to an extent. Hence, it further proves that obedience to parents is a core value of Chinese culture, and not in Western culture, and young Chinese people are more likely to choose to obey their parents without question when faced with such pressure.

Last but not least, the prominent style of authoritarian parenting In Chinese culture, as well as frequent praise of filial obedience, shapes the perception of obedience in young people.

(Teon) Chinese parents tend to favour an authoritarian parenting style, emphasising authority and hierarchy, like the infamous “tiger parenting style”. Meanwhile, as mentioned before, obedience and filial piety is glorified and praised prominently in Chinese culture. The extent of obedience becomes the metric measurement for responsibility and maturity, with those who are disobedient are shamed and regarded as dishonourable.

This, coupled with the signature tight control of an authoritarian parenting style, young people develop a Pavlovian response to their parents' praise, which they receive after obeying

them, since such acceptance from their parents becomes their main way to gain social worth. It thus centres their psychological and social identity around obedience, and instinctively, they believe they should obey their parents without question.

Meanwhile, authoritative parenting dominates in contemporary Western cultures. Parents utilise a more lenient and hands off approach, setting boundaries with their children and giving them more freedom. There is less control and bonds formed between parents and children are less strong. Young Western people tend to seek societal acceptance via their peers instead as a result. The distance, coupled with the low social obligation for filial piety, allows western young people to disobey their parents more.

As a result, as seen from studying these examples, obeying your parents allows you to have more security and peace of mind during the short term, mostly during the teenage and formative years. Chinese parents tend to choose the most stable path for their child, like telling them to pursue traditional career paths like engineering, medicine, or law, making sure to plan out the future of their child carefully. While this may be more restrictive for the child in question, it can help them attain more security, since they don't have to make too many important choices. Whereas for Western parents, young people have more autonomy over their choices. While this means they are free to pursue their own passions and can choose subjects like philosophy or sports to study, it also means they have a greater burden of responsibility placed upon their shoulders. With less guidance and supervision, more teenagers are prone to making ill-informed decisions, especially since their decision making skills are less developed, leading them to turn to drugs or neglecting their studies in the worst cases.

However, long term effects should also be taken into account. Obeying your parents without question could increase the risk of burnout and other mental health related issues as you progress. A study investigated the culture impacts on the burnout level of Hong Kong Chinese architecture students with cultural values of Confucian conformity. A seven-item conformity scale was used, and studies show that Confucian values were found to be positively correlated with burnout, suggesting that burnout is exacerbated by social values, rather than just an individual occurrence. (Jia., Rowlinson, Kvan, Lingard, Yip) Chinese culture is a highly collectivist society and students are pressured to conform and study what their parents want them to, despite their own wishes. When they are older, coupled with the academic stress of Gaokao, students may feel increasingly cynical and start to doubt if what they are studying is what they want to do or if they are just acting out their parent's wishes. Some could even drop out entirely and change career paths.

On the same note, obeying your parents without question can lead to a higher chance of dissatisfaction in life and strained relationships with parents during adulthood. Young people that obey parents without question could end with jobs that they are not satisfied with, making them bitter and regretful for being pressured and their lack of choice about their futures when they were young, putting strains on parent-daughter relationships. On the other hand, Western adults may have had a higher chance of failing too pursue their career of choice, they would be very satisfied if they managed to succeed, and even if they didn't, they are less likely to blame it on their parents, since it was their own choice and decisions that led them to this situation and not their parents'.

However, I believe that ultimately, there is no set should or shouldn't when it comes to obeying your parents without question, as both paths have a different proportion of risks and

benefits, which can mean differently in different cultural contexts, which have unique values and priorities. Young Chinese people may ultimately still choose to obey their parents without question, despite their own reservations, as they have been raised to highly value conformity and opinions of others in such a highly collectivist society. Shame and how one is perceived by others also play a significant role in building a Chinese person's self worth and their socialisations. This, coupled with the societal usage of filial piety as a measure of responsibility, as well as deep rooted Confucius beliefs in Chinese culture, and a prominence of authoritarian parenting, harsher expectations of obeying and respecting parents are created. Young Chinese people may find that choosing to obey and gain the approval of others, is a more suitable path, since they judge themselves based on the opinions of others.

On the other hand, Western students that live in a highly individualistic society may believe the contrary and find the system of not obeying their parents without question more in line with their values. Western society lacks the severe social shame, expectations and ingrained filial values that pressure young Chinese people, thus prizing personal achievements and freedom rather than how one is perceived in a society. With this, young people tend to value their own choice instead, or seek approval from like-minded peers rather than those that are senior to them, causing them to choose to not obey their parents without question. It, of course, also is a system that works for them, as evidenced by many highly successful western students that get into top universities and schools, and live happy fulfilling lives. While they may not attain the same amount of social conformity they'd get by obeying their parents like Chinese's people, they value other things more, like their personal satisfaction. Thus, in their eyes, not obeying their parents without question is something that works better for them.

Ultimately, to obey your parents without question or not is not a matter of should or shouldn't. Obeying your parents without question can lead to short term peace of mind and stability, but a higher chance of decreased satisfaction with your life when you grow up. Whether you choose to do so or not, or if it would work for you can wildly differ based on what values you prioritise, which is in turn determined by the culture you are in.

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