Filial piety tales are stories in which children go to extremes to care for their parents. Because the stories spice plain and stodgy Confucianism with fantastic elements and manifest the extreme implications of Confucian logic, modern Chinese intellectuals and Western Sinologists alike have had difficulty in accepting, much less understanding, them. The famous master of modern prose Lu Xun (1881–1936) mocked the narratives for rarefying filial piety to the extent that ordinary people had no hope of realizing it and for encouraging inhumane behavior. He reserved his harshest judgment for the filial exemplar Guo Ju, who was willing to bury alive his own child to ensure his elderly mother’s survival. Lu tells us that upon reading this story,

At first I broke into a real cold sweat for that child, not breathing freely again until the crock of gold had been dug up. But by then not only did I no longer aspire to be a filial son myself, I dreaded the thought of my father acting as one. At that time our family fortunes were declining, I often heard my parents worrying as to where our next meal was to come from, and my grandmother was old. Suppose my father followed Kuo Chu’s example, wasn’t I the obvious person to be buried? If things worked out exactly as before and he too dug up a crock of gold, naturally that would be happiness great as Heaven; but small as I was at the time I seem to have grasped that, in this world, such a coincidence couldn’t be counted on.

Consequently, from that day forth, Lu always viewed his elderly grandmother with a certain amount of loathing and suspicion. Indeed, even many late imperial Confucians found it difficult to countenance Guo’s act as filial. Nevertheless, even though the tales discouraged Lu from
aspiring to be a filial child, one should note that *The Twenty-four Filial Exemplars (Ershisi xiao)* was the first book Lu owned and that its stories made an indelible impression upon him.

These fantastic Confucian tales have equally dismayed turn-of-the-century Christian missionaries and Western scholars who have been no more kind in their criticism than early twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals. A number of missionaries found the tales to be weird and alarming to the extent that they omitted translating those they deemed repugnant. Western academics have not been much kinder. A great French sociologist regarded them as little more than children’s fairy tales: “All these labored and puerile anecdotes savor of the schoolmaster.” One historian calls illustrations of the filial tales “proto-comic strips” and views the acts reported in the accounts as “absurd,” “grotesque,” “cruel,” “shocking,” “repulsive,” and “peculiar”; indeed, he devotes more energy to underscoring why the tales are strange than to explaining why Chinese found them so compelling. Another historian has called these accounts the “carnival side-shows of the historic Chinese spectacle” and suggested that Chinese found them interesting “primarily because they are bizarre.” The similarity of these criticisms to those of the Christian missionaries should alert us to their cultural bias. Other Western scholars have merely chosen to ignore the stories. Even though *The Twenty-four Filial Exemplars* was probably one of the best known and most readily available books in late imperial China, it has rarely been translated into Western languages.

At the same time, both Western and Japanese scholars have used the stories as raw data for information on Chinese daily life, without taking into account their contrived and didactic nature. If one believes that “the bizarre tales of self-sacrifice and strange antics to satisfy egocentric parents and in-laws are . . . true accounts of life in the Latter Han dynasty,” then one risks seeing an imaginary event as a historical reality. For instance, one scholar takes the story of the filial grandson Yuan Gu, whose father abandons his elderly grandfather in the mountains, as evidence that euthanasia was practiced in early China. Since a preponderance of evidence suggests that, in historical times at least, Chinese venerated the elderly, the creator of this story was probably not reporting historical fact, but instead was trying to shock his readers to underscore filial piety’s reciprocal nature. The tale might have even originated in India. In short, since the purpose of filial piety tales was to promote their authors’ vision of how things should be, they distorted as much as they described social reality. That is to say, the “facts” reported in them are subordinated to their message. As a prominent European medievalist warns in regard to didactic texts, “The histo-
rian who uses it runs the risk of mistaking imaginary realities for material ones and of distorting the meaning of the text that was not intended to provide evidence of the kind the scholar is after.12

By exiling the stories to the realm of children’s literature, well-meaning Asian scholars have also misconstrued them. Due to the tales’ simplicity, child protagonists, and miraculous content, many East Asian historians believe that collections of filial piety tales were compiled as teaching aids for the uneducated and young.13 This was indeed true for some of the late imperial-period collections, but it certainly was not the case for early imperial-period ones. Consequently, these historians wrongly assume that the goals of the texts were unchanging and that the nature of later works was the same as earlier ones. In other words, they fail to take into account how the varying context of the tales changed their uses and meanings.

In short, up until now, scholars have dismissed the tales as nonsense, naively used them as transparent windows into the past, or narrowly viewed them as children’s literature. Some analysts have even managed to concurrently hold all three of these views.

**The Tales’ Significance**

Not taking the filial piety stories seriously is a mistake because from AD 100 straight to the 1949 Communist takeover of China, they were immensely popular among all social classes. Their enduring popularity was due to the effectiveness with which they illustrated the paramount cultural value of *xiao* (filial piety), which has shaped nearly every aspect of Chinese social life: attitudes toward authority, patterns of residence, conceptions of self, marriage practices, gender preferences, emotional life, religious worship, and social relations. In fact, during the imperial age, Chinese largely defined good behavior in terms of whether or not one was a good son or daughter.14 *Xiao* has had such an extraordinary impact on Chinese social life that Chinese and Japanese scholars have claimed that it is the basis of Chinese culture.15 One student of Confucianism has even claimed that *xiao* was and still is the basis of East Asian religiosity.16

Beginning from at least the Warring States period (481–221 BC), narratives about historical personages who embodied this virtue have circulated throughout China. To make this abstract value comprehensible, the stories translated it into concrete behavior that others could imitate. Moreover, being both simple and striking, one could easily remember and retell such stories. As a result of their ubiquity and simplicity, the narratives became a primary means of teaching filial piety and the standard by
which people defined how an ideal son or daughter should act. Thus rather than a “carnival sideshow," these tales were a “main attraction” that allows us to plumb the depths of the premodern Chinese social and moral universe.

Although Warring States authors were already transmitting filial anecdotes, the early medieval era (AD 100–600) was the “Golden Age” of the narratives. It was at this time that the filial piety stories evolved into their mature form, exploded in number, and flourished more than ever before or since. During this period, literati created a new genre of collections of filial piety narratives, which more often than not were called Accounts of Filial Offspring (Xiaozi zhuan). Building on these stories, historians added special chapters to the dynastic histories dedicated to the lives of filial children. The best poets of the age, such as Cao Zhi (192–232) and Xie Lingyun (385–433), rhapsodically evoked these anecdotes in their verse. Even royalty such as the Liang dynasty’s Emperor Yuan (r. 552–555), as well as Wu Zitian (r. 684–704), China’s first and only female emperor, compiled an Accounts of Filial Offspring. Scenes from these narratives adorned lacquered goods, coffins, sarcophagi, funerary shrines, government buildings, and even palaces. The stories thereby enjoyed a prestige among China’s cultural elite that they would never again have. Thus, owing to the respect the anecdotes commanded at that time, understanding their functions and messages will shed light on many aspects of early medieval China, such as how the educated elite defined merit and worth, how they envisioned ideal social relations both inside and outside the family, how they talked about and justified social class, how they understood the world as an interdependent moral cosmos, how they attached great importance to Confucian values and rituals, and how they gendered virtue.

After the early medieval era, even though the tales no longer enjoyed the same acclaim they once had among the elite, they were still widely circulated. A new genre of popular works called The Twenty-four Filial Exemplars, which first appeared in the late Tang or Five Dynasties period, propagated these tales among a less elevated clientele. That filial piety stories frequently adorned the tombs and coffins of the Liao (907–1125), Jin (1115–1234), and Song (960–1279) dynasties testify to the esteem in which these works were held. By the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Guo Jujing’s (fl. 1295–1321) Poems on the Twenty-four Filial Exemplars (Ershixiao shi), a text dedicated to teaching children, became the most popular example of The Twenty-four Filial Exemplars genre. Due to this illustrated primer’s ubiquity, by late imperial times almost everyone, literate or illiterate, knew these stories. Furthermore, many of these narratives became
subject matter for popular literature. Yet one should note that many of this collection’s tales date to the early medieval period. Since most contemporary Chinese are still familiar with at least a couple of accounts from *The Twenty-four Filial Exemplars*, a great number of these early medieval creations still have currency today.

The filial piety tales were so appealing that they even found audiences abroad. Collections of these narratives were transmitted throughout medieval East Asia. The tales were so well known that they gradually became part of Northeast Asia’s folk culture. While conducting fieldwork in Korea, an elderly, illiterate woman told two anthropologists a story about a son who wanted to abandon his elderly mother in the mountains. He avoided committing this unfilial act only because his own son pointed out that the same fate would await him when he became old and infirm. Unbeknownst to the anthropologists, this oral “folktale” is actually the early medieval story of Yuan Gu. The conservative appeal of these stories was so great that even nineteenth-century American missionaries, in an attempt to instill a sense of filial obligation in the hearts of unruly American youth, propagated these tales in the United States. In short, these anecdotes’ formulation of filial piety was so compelling that it transcended both time and space. Study of the tales, then, will not only tell us much about the early medieval period in which many of them originated, but will also reveal why hierarchically organized, agrarian cultures found these tales so irresistibly attractive.

**Methodology and Goals**

One of the narratives’ most interesting aspects is that their heyday occurred during China’s tumultuous early medieval era, more descriptively known as the “Period of Disunity.” From AD 100 to 600, China was often subject to civil wars, “barbarian” revolts, coups d’état, and peasant rebellions. Beginning in the fourth century, Inner Eurasians governed North China, the mythical cradle of Chinese civilization, while weak native regimes set up shop in the underpopulated, backward and despised, malarial South. Intellectually, Taoism and Buddhism, rather than Confucianism, dominated the thoughts and conversations of China’s best minds. Is it not odd, then, that these tales came to the fore precisely when both the imperial state and Confucianism were at their nadir? Hence the primary question that this study answers is, Why did these accounts flourish in this particular period? In other words, why did early medieval people find reading and transmitting these stories so compelling?
My approach borrows from the methods and insights of recent studies of European hagiographies and exempla. Rather than dismissing the tales as trite or silly, one must understand why early medieval people took them seriously. In the words of the prominent medievalist Caroline Walker Bynum, one must “put the behavior, the symbols, and the convictions of women and men in the distant past into their full context. Only by considering all the meanings and functions of medieval practice and belief can we explain medieval experience without removing its creativity and dignity.”

In a similar fashion, my study makes a thorough examination of the context in which the filial piety tales were created—the aims of their creators, the circumstances under which they were written, the identity of their readers, the ideology that informed them, and the historical trends that shaped their contents. Moreover, unlike previous studies that looked only at a small number of filial children’s tales, this volume looks at more than 330 accounts as well as contemporary texts that have similar aims and format, such as other collective biographies of exemplars, family instructions, primers, unofficial biographies, Confucian apocrypha, and apocryphal Buddhist scriptures. Furthermore, since these tales were often depicted pictorially, this volume also uses archaeological and iconographical evidence to examine the tales’ audiences and meanings. Only by looking at the filial piety narratives through early medieval eyes, rather than postmodern Western ones, can we begin to assimilate their significance.

One of the important points that these recent studies have driven home is that texts such as hagiographies and exempla are not transparent historical records; instead, they are propaganda that their transmitters circulated to realize specific ends. Recent studies have shown that the true value of such texts lies in their disclosure of the cultural values of the society that produced them. That is, they divulge the types of behavior and values that the texts’ creators desired to promote or discourage. At the same time, since the stories’ transmitters also had to tailor their message to the audience’s tastes, these texts reveal their consumers’ interests. As Peter Brown, the noted historian of late antiquity, has so eloquently put it,

In studying both the most admired and the most detested figures in any society, we can see, as seldom through other evidence, the nature of the average man’s expectations and hopes for himself. It is for the historian, therefore, to analyze this image as a product of the society around the holy man. Instead of retailing the image of the holy man as sufficient in itself to explain his appeal to the average late Roman, we should use the image like a mirror, to catch, from a surprising angle, another glimpse of the average late Roman.
In sum, even if hagiographies and exempla do not tell us exactly “how it really was,” they contain precious testimony concerning the attitudes and assumptions of their authors and audiences.32

Using this same logic, filial piety stories were tools of persuasion through which a Confucian view of the ideal parent-child relationship was propagated. That being the case, historical accuracy takes a backseat to the tale’s didactic message. Hence this study focuses on how the authors thought filial piety should be practiced. To forcefully convey their message, the tales’ creators radically altered the context of old motifs and introduced many new ones as well. Since variations of common plots may significantly alter their meaning, different versions of the same tale can reveal much about the values of the society that created them.33 Thus by looking at variants in the filial piety stories and analyzing the ideology that informs them, this volume will show that these tales were popular because they answered the concerns of both their authors and their audience. Although these motifs do not tell us much about the actual behavior of early medieval children, they disclose a tremendous amount of information about how the narratives’ transmitters wanted children to act and their fears of how they were acting.

Not only are filial piety tales propagandist in nature, like European hagiographies and exempla, but Confucian filial children are in many ways analogous to Christian saints: they practice an asceticism in which they deny themselves ordinary pleasures, such as savory food, warm clothing, government posts, and legitimately earned wealth; they live an active life dedicated to serving their parents and transforming the behavior of people around them through their example; and the divine world confirms their sanctity by favoring them with miracles.34 What separates Christian saints and Chinese filial children is the object of their piety: the former serve a transcendent god, the latter their immanent parents.35 Nevertheless, I think the similarities are striking enough that we can plausibly view filial children as Confucian saints. Doing so illuminates the role exemplary filial children played in the Chinese imagination and also helps us discern the religious qualities of early Confucianism.

Looking at the filial piety stories as propaganda and the filial children as saints also enables us to view early medieval Confucianism in an entirely different light. The tales’ popularity during the early medieval period indicates that although Confucianism might have lost its appeal for the philosophically inclined, it still had a great deal of relevance for elite men who were striving to maintain or enhance the welfare of their families. This helps explain how Confucianism could lose its philosophical
vigor, yet still infiltrate and take over the literati's values and ritual practice. Moreover, the Confucianism that accomplished this was not the philosophical Ru (Confucian) teachings of the Warring States, but the religiously laden teachings of Han Confucianism.36

My argument unfolds in the following manner: chapter 1 sets the stage by describing the two related historical trends that help account for the narratives' popularity—the growth of extended families and the increasing penetration of Confucianism into the values and ritual practice of China's learned elite. The chapter will show that extended families were increasingly popular among the early medieval upper class because this type of kinship structure was important for maintaining a family's local status and power. At the same time, though, to keep these fragile, large families from fragmenting, patriarchs found it expedient to embrace Confucianism. Chapter 2, which focuses on the filial piety stories themselves, examines their structure, historicity, origins, functions, and transmission. It argues that though a few of the most famous narratives started as folktales, the majority stemmed from the oral culture of elite families. To honor a living or dead kin member and boost one's family's fortune and legitimacy, relatives, patrons, and retainers told stories about his/her filial exploits. Private biographies and geographical works then transmitted these tales that the family cult created to the larger community. Chapter 3 moves from the tales themselves to the collections in which they were gathered, the Accounts of Filial Offspring. This chapter indicates that although these texts probably already existed in the Eastern Han, it was only in the Southern Dynasties (317–589) that they became widespread among the educated elite. The collections' authors were middle to high officials from prominent families who were writing for juveniles and adult men of a similar background. The explicit purpose of compiling these collections was to provide members of the elite with models of good behavior to emulate; the implicit purpose was to indicate that the compiler himself was a filial child.

Chapter 4 shifts from the texts to their motifs. It argues that the stories' miracles derive from the Han Confucian ideology of humanity's unity with heaven and earth. Consequently, many of the miracles found in the stories also appear in the Confucian apocrypha, the textual embodiments of Correlative Confucianism. Early medieval patriarchs admired these tales because of the important messages they bore: familial hierarchy is sanctioned by heaven; the spirit world richly rewards those who serve their parents well; virtuous local men share in the emperor's legitimacy to rule, and virtue is what secures high office and wealth. The popularity of the miracle
tales indicates that long after the Eastern Han disappeared, its ideology as embodied in the tales continued to remain important to the learned elite.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore the meanings of the most common motifs in the early medieval tales—that of nurturing one’s parents and mourning them in an exemplary fashion. Even though early Confucians dismissed caring for parents as so basic that it was hardly worth mentioning, early medieval tales celebrated how exemplary offspring went to extremes to take care of their parents. Indeed, they did not merely care for their parents, but did so in a manner that exalted their parents’ status while degrading their own, a behavior that was known as “reverent caring.” Early medieval narratives probably defined filial piety as nurturing because in a time of weak governmental authority, it was precisely this concrete aspect of filial piety that best displayed familial solidarity and cohesiveness. As for mourning, Warring States and Western Han narratives merely urged observation of the three-year mourning ritual and sternly rebuked people who exceeded it. Early medieval accounts, on the other hand, lavished praise on people who went beyond the rites. The reason for this difference is that before the Eastern Han, practice of the three years’ mourning rites was rare, but by its second half such rites had become the elite’s normal practice. Hence the tales emphasize exceeding the rites—not to urge people to perform them, but to do so with sincerity. In other words, these narratives are fighting the apathy that attended the Confucian mourning rites’ institutionalization.

The final chapter of this volume shows that women largely performed the same filial acts as men—but they usually did so because they lacked brothers to perform them. The only major difference between male and female filial piety, then, is that women had to go to greater extremes to prove their filial sincerity. Consequently, their exemplary actions usually involved violence—filial daughters and daughters-in-law often committed suicide or infanticide. Even in stories that do not feature violence, filial daughters and daughters-in-law had to suffer greater deprivation than their male counterparts. Overall, though, filial daughter narratives are few, whereas stories of chaste wives are plentiful. The prevalence of remarriage and the novelty of extended families likely produced this situation.

**Sources**

My argument rests upon an examination of over 330 distinct filial offspring accounts. These narratives stem from three sources: private collections of filial piety stories, the dynastic histories’ collective biographies of
extraordinary filial children, and sections on filial piety from Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) encyclopedias.

Early medieval literati transmitted filial piety tales through privately compiled collections that were usually titled Accounts of Filial Offspring, which ranged in length from one to thirty chapters. Unfortunately, none of these works that are recorded in the dynastic histories’ bibliographic chapters has survived, but one can find fragments of them in Tang and Song encyclopedias. The treasure trove of texts recovered at Dunhuang has also supplied us with fragments of what might have been Accounts of Filial Offspring, but they are more likely to be encyclopedia sections on filiality. Nonetheless, the problems with using these texts are legion: first, encyclopedias preserve only a fraction of the accounts that were in these texts. Second, their compilers routinely abbreviated the narratives and undoubtedly pruned narrative elements that did not match the category under which they were placing the story. Third, the compilers might have also misattributed stories to Accounts of Filial Offspring, especially since they often copied the passages from other encyclopedias rather than the original work.

Fortunately, three fully intact Accounts of Filial Offspring have managed to survive until today. One of these, Accounts of Filiality (Xiao zhuan), is an indubitable Six Dynasties (AD 220–589) text attributed to the famous poet Tao Yuanming (365–427). Two manuscripts titled Accounts of Filial Offspring have survived in Japan, one of which is called the Yômei Xiaozi zhuan, the other the Funabashi Xiaozi zhuan. Recent Japanese scholarship has indicated that the former dates to the Six Dynasties, the latter to the Tang. These two texts are doubtlessly related: each has the same forty-five accounts in the exact same order and with the exact same plots. The primary difference between the two is that the Funabashi version commits many errors in regard to personal and place names, is more colloquial in language, and uses Buddhist terminology. All three texts are invaluable because they provide us with a much clearer sense of the content and form of Accounts of Filial Offspring than do the encyclopedia fragments. For example, the many lengthy tales in the two Japanese manuscripts underscore the extent to which compilers of the encyclopedias abbreviated the stories.

Although this volume is primarily based on tales from Accounts of Filial Offspring, it also draws upon the dynastic histories’ special chapters on filial offspring, which went by a variety of names and oftentimes included the lives of those who embodied virtues that were closely associated with filiality, such as yi (righteousness) or you (brotherly friendliness). I will
generically call these chapters in the dynastic histories “Biographies of the Filial.” During the Six Dynasties period, compilers of dynastic histories usually gave “Biographies of the Filial” pride of place among their collective biographies, indicating the esteem in which they held filial children. The narratives in the “Biographies of the Filial” are for the most part similar to those found in *Accounts of Filial Offspring;* indeed, many of the former repeat anecdotes from the latter almost word for word. The ways in which the “Biographies of the Filial” differ are as follows: 1) They include more anecdotes, many of which concern how filial children displayed exemplary behavior towards non-kinsmen. 2) They give an extensive resume of the posts or the rewards that the government offered filial children and information about their deaths. 3) They give greater prominence to the rewards that the government bestowed upon the exemplars than the miracles their behavior occasioned. By emphasizing the governmental recognition that filial children enjoyed, these biographies encouraged other people to practice filiality so that they, too, could receive government largesse; perhaps more importantly, they underlined that the emperor strove to recognize and reward the virtuous, an act that confirmed the ruler’s own virtue.

In addition to private and public collections of filial piety tales, this volume also makes use of sections on filial piety in Tang and Song encyclopedias, which contain narratives largely culled from early medieval works. Although we cannot positively conclude that all of the early medieval anecdotes found in the Tang/Song encyclopedias’ filial piety sections were included in *Accounts of Filial Offspring,* since the encyclopedia narratives have the same format and content as other filial piety stories, there is the strong possibility that they might have been. For example, the story of Lu Ji (187–219), who during an interview with the warlord Yuan Shu stole three oranges for his mother, appears in neither the remaining fragments of *Accounts of Filial Offspring* nor in the three extant ones. Nevertheless, its inclusion in both the section on filiality in the encyclopedia called *Records for Beginning Learners* (*Chuxue ji*) and in *The Inquiries of the Unenlightened* (*Mengqiu*), an eighth-century history primer, testifies that by the early Tang it was already recognized as a well-known filial piety narrative. In fact, Lu Ji’s story was so famous that it became canonized as one of the stories in *The Twenty-four Filial Exemplars.* Thus it is fair to assume that early medieval people would have viewed it like any story found in an *Accounts of Filial Offspring.*

In sum, by looking closely at the audience and motifs of the filial piety stories, this volume provides a view of early medieval China that
challenges deeply held assumptions. In a period in which Confucianism was supposedly in decline, the cultural elite was embracing its rituals and values on an unprecedented level. In an era when aristocratic families dominated the government for generations on end, the tales advocate that public office should be distributed based on virtue rather than birth. In a time when patriarchs supposedly ruled over their family members with an iron fist, the stories reveal that their authority was quite fragile and limited. This volume thereby presents a picture of a China very much in flux—Confucianism is just becoming the ritual practice of the elite, families tend to be small and easily fragmented, and loyal wives are more important than filial daughters. In short, it shows that tales Sinologists have long sneered at for their banality still have much to teach us.