

The New York Times

July 2, 2013

# A Chinese Virtue Is Now the Law

By EDWARD WONG

BEIJING — They are exemplars from folklore who are familiar to Chinese schoolchildren. There is the Confucian disciple who subsisted on wild grass while traveling with sacks of rice to give to his parents. There is the man who worshiped wooden effigies of his parents.

But Chinese officials apparently think it is not enough these days to count on tales and parental admonitions to teach children the importance of filial piety, arguably the most treasured of traditional virtues in Chinese society.

The government enacted a law on Monday aimed at compelling adult children to visit their aging parents. The law, called “Protection of the Rights and Interests of Elderly People,” has nine clauses that lay out the duties of children and their obligation to tend to the “spiritual needs of the elderly.”

Children should go home “often” to visit their parents, the law said, and occasionally send them greetings. Companies and work units should give employees enough time off so they can make parental visits.

The law was passed in December by the standing committee of the National People’s Congress. It does not stipulate any punishments for people who neglect their parents. Nevertheless, that officials felt the need to make filial duty a legal matter is a reflection of the monumental changes taking place throughout Chinese society.

Many aging parents in China, as in other industrialized nations, complain these days about not seeing their children enough. And the children say the stresses of daily life, especially in **the rapidly expanding cities**, prevent them from carving out time for their parents.

“China’s economy is flourishing, and lots of young people have moved away to the cities and away from their aging parents in villages,” Dang Janwu, vice director of the China Research Center on Aging, said in a telephone interview on Tuesday. “This is one of the consequences of China’s urbanization. The social welfare system can answer to material needs of the elders, but when it comes to the spiritual needs, a law like this becomes very necessary.”

Mr. Dang said the law had already been successful in prompting significant discussion of the issue.

Others have been more skeptical. On Monday, Guo Cheng, a novelist, told the 1.3-million followers of his microblog: “Kinship is part of human nature; it is ridiculous to make it into a law. It is like requiring couples who have gotten married to have a harmonious sex life.”

Nevertheless, the issue of abandoned aging parents is a real one across China. In 2011, Xinhua, the state news agency, ran an article that said nearly half of the 185 million people age 60 and older live apart from their children. People residing in a different city from their parents, including legions of migrant workers, usually find time to go home only during the Lunar New Year holiday.

On the same day the new law went into effect, a court in the eastern city of Wuxi ruled that a young couple had to visit the wife’s 77-year-old mother — who had sued her daughter and son-in-law for neglect — at least once every two months to tend to her “spiritual needs,” as well as pay her compensation, Chinese news organizations reported.

“Mental support is an important aspect in the protection of old people’s rights and interests,” said the head of the court, Yuan Ting, according to Xinhua.

The classic text that has been used for six centuries to teach the importance of respecting and pampering one’s parents has been “The 24 Paragons of Filial Piety,” a collection of folk tales written by Guo Jujing. Last August, the Chinese government issued [a new version](#), supposedly updated for modern times, so today’s youth would find it relevant. The new text told children to buy health insurance for their parents and to teach them how to use the Internet.

Guangzhou Daily, an official newspaper, [ran an article](#) in October about a 26-year-old man who pushed his disabled mother for 93 days in a wheelchair to a popular tropical tourist destination in Yunnan Province. The article called it “by far the best example of filial piety” in years.

*Shi Da and Patrick Zuo contributed research.*