

# The Life Wisdom in "Liao Fan's Four Lessons"\*

Hongli Zhu

School of Marxism  
Zaozhuang University  
Zaozhuang, China 277160

**Abstract**—"Liao Fan's Four Lessons", also called "the Book of Life Wisdom", has been widely spread and has far-reaching influence since its publication. The aggressive spirit of effort changing life fate, the life wisdom of doing the good based on distinguishing the good, and the life attitude of constant reflection and correcting one's mistake after recognition in the book manifest the basic thought of the Confucian: three great virtues including "wise, kind and brave", and still have referential value for the contemporary human life practice.

**Keywords**—*traditional culture; life wisdom; three great virtues*

## I. INTRODUCTION

"Liao Fan's Four Lessons" is a family instruction recorded by Yuan Huang in the Ming Dynasty. This family instruction is divided into four parts, namely, "the study of life", "methods for correction", "the way of accumulating merits" and "the effect of modesty". The four parts are from different works of Yuan Huang in different periods. In the early Qing Dynasty, "Dan Gui Section" collectively referred to these four articles as "Fourth Lessons of Mr. Yuan Liaofan", and later it was called "Liao Fan's Four Lessons" for short.

Before the book was written, "Liao Fan's Four Lessons" was widely spread in the society and was highly praised by the world. In the late Qing Dynasty, "Liao Fan's Four Lessons" and "Zeng Guofan's Family Instruction" were known as "one book and one instruction". Zeng Guofan once named "Liao Fan's Four Lessons" as the "Book of Life Wisdom", and he even changed his name to "Disheng" influenced by this book. "Liao Fan's Four Lessons" was used as a governing bible in the Meiji Restoration in Japan, and today's "Liao Fan's Four Lessons" is also the management book of Mr. Inamori Kazuo, a master of Japanese company management. In the current era, the texts and videos about "Liao Fan's Four Lessons" are also widely appeared in books, newspapers, internet and other media, which shows the far-reaching influence of this book. The aggressive spirit of effort changing life fate, the life wisdom of doing the good based on distinguishing the good, and the life attitude of constant reflection and correcting one's mistake after

recognition in the book manifest the basic thought of the Confucian: three great virtues including "wise, kind and brave", and still have referential value for the contemporary human life practice.

## II. THE AGGRESSIVE SPIRIT OF EFFORT CHANGING LIFE FATE

Chinese tradition often speaks of "fate". How human beings treat fate is an important topic for Chinese traditional philosophy. There are both positive and negative claims. The Analects — Yan Yuan has a saying: "Your life and fortune are both designed already by the God"; "Hu Family Instructions" has "holding the duty of being a man, accepting the destiny, and obeying the God's will". In "Zeng Guofan's family instruction", there is "fame and fortune are decided by fate, which can't be changed by individuals". These thoughts represent the negative side who think that people are unable to change the arrangement of the "god", so they can only listen to their arrangement. This is fatalism. However, the positive side also have clear viewpoint. Mozi advocates "denying the fate", and said "the fate is fabricated by violent king and performed by the poor, but not the saying of wise people." ("The second part of "denying the fate") Therefore, "we should strive to oppose it". Mencius said: "Those who make full use of their minds are people who know the nature of human beings. Knowing the nature of man refers to knowing the destiny. Keeping thinking by oneself and conserving the nature is the way to treat the destiny. Whether you are short-lived or long-lived, you should focus on self-cultivation to wait for destiny. This is the way to living in peace." (The first part of Mencius Jinxin) Xuncius said: "Instead of respecting the god and admiring it, it is better to raise and control it like an object. Instead of obeying the sky and praising it, it is better to control the laws of nature and use it." (Xuncius · Theory of the god) In the thoughts of "denying the fate", "living in peace", and "controlling fate", human in the relationship between man and nature becomes the active party, and believes that people can dominate their own destiny to a certain extent.

"Liao Fan's Four Lessons" elaborates on the study of life that advocates people to control their fate and be positive to life. Is there fate on earth? Is it reliable to change your life fate? In the article "the study of life", Yuan Huang mentioned that in the early years, he met an old man with the surname Kong in Ciyun Temple, and the old man predicted his rank for examination and his life fate. Since then, "his rank in each examination is accordance with that predicted

\*[Fund Project] This article is the phased achievement of the "Study on Chinese Traditional Family Training Based on Socialist Core Values" (J17ZC55) of the 2017 Shandong University Humanities and Social Sciences Research Program (Ideological and Political Education Research).  
CLC number: B21.1 Document code: A

by Mr. Kong." Later, he visited the Yungu Chan master in Qixia Mountain, the Chan master also said: "if people have vain hope, they will be bound by yin and yang, so there will be destiny." In the "Methods of correction" section, Yuan Huang also mentioned that the scholars in the Spring and Autumn Period, can speculate people's fortune based on their words and deeds. "There is no case that is failed, which can be seen in the books like Zuo Zhuan and Guoyu" "Because auspicious and sinister signs are all rooted in the heart and is reflected in the appearance." So how should we understand the theory of fate in ancient China?"

The theory of fate belongs to the Chinese divination culture, and the anthroposcopy is an important part of the "divination". In ancient society, people believed that the fate of people can be calculated. The influence of divination cultures, especially anthroposcopy or prediction art on the general public should not be underestimated. Professor Ru Qihe of Beijing Normal University summed up the four major categories of ancient Chinese anthroposcopy: first is physiognomy; second is based on the sound; third is based on the figure; fourth is based on the hands and feet. Among them, physiognomy also includes observing the shape, complexion, and fortune of the year. An important part of physiognomy is observing the fortune of the year, which means judging the fortune of the person for a certain year according to the character of a certain part of the face. In "The Theory of life", Mr. Kong predicted that Yuan Huang "will become a Lin in a certain year, become a Gong in a certain year and become Dayi of Sichuan in a certain year", which is predicting the fortune of one certain year. The anthroposcopy or the fate of people is not so much mysticism as it is empiricism. It is based on the practice of thousands of years in ancient society. There are many kinds of books related to Chinese ancient anthroposcopy or prediction art, but even though various books are mostly based on the theory of fatalism, from the books circulated later, the number of people who believe that the fate can be changed is still more than that of those who believe that fate cannot be changed. For example, Wang Fu's "The book of anonymity Xianglie" thinks that fate can be changed. "When ancients created a wide variety of prediction arts, their original intention is not to give in to fate, but it is exactly to avoid the evil, which is a stubborn struggle against fate and a strong desire to change the fate." Regarding changing the fate, the prediction art of ancient China is consistent with the spiritual essence of the view on fate in "Liao Fan's Four Lessons". It believes that it is only a misunderstanding of theory on fate by ordinary people that the fate cannot be changed.

The first part of "Liao Fan's Four Lessons" is "the study of life." Yuan Huang tells his legendary life experience. His understanding of fate has undergone a profound transformation from the fatalism of "submitting to the fate of life" to the life theory of "controlling life by oneself." Yuan Huang lost his father in childhood and obeyed his mother's willing to abandon imperial examinations and study medicine. Later, he met the old man named Kong in the Ciyun Temple. Mr. Kong taught him Shao Yong's study of anthroposcopy "The Emperor's Book", and made the

divination for his future. Therefore, Yuan Huang believes the fatalism theory of "fate determining one's fortune and the time for luck is fixed" and become indifferent to anything. Later, he came to Qixia Mountain in Nanjing and was inspired by Yungu Zen Master. He learned that the "fate is controlled by oneself, and the luck is pursued by people". Then he decided to introspect himself, cultivate himself, and work hard to change the fate. After hard work, he succeeded in the examination, and had a child, which changed the prophecy of Mr. Kong's "dying at fifty three years old" and "no child." Yuan Huang, with his personal experience of trying to change his own destiny, warned the descendants that "the saying that claims the fortune is pursued by oneself is the word of sage; if the saying thinks future and destiny are only determined by gods, it is the worldly theory."

In a certain sense, Yuan Huang's study of life is actually the study of changing life. Destiny can't be calculated, but is made by oneself. Why is our life like this now? That is what we have made through a long period of time. It is accumulated bit by bit and is the "present made by the past". However, our present is not ideal. If we continue to go on and don't know how to change and improve, then what will our life be in the future? It is not difficult to know by looking at the life now. Therefore, "we should create the future at present". Therefore, we cannot continue to build the future in the way we have done in the past. "Everything in the past died yesterday; everything in the future is born today." As long as you know the mistakes and change them, cultivate your own morality, and change your own way of thinking and behavior, you can change the so-called fate. It can be seen from this that Mr. Liao Fan's "study of life" includes a positive attitude towards life and behavior choices.

### III. THE LIFE WISDOM OF DOING THE GOOD BASED ON DISTINGUISHING THE GOODNESS

Doing good deeds is the basic requirements of traditional Chinese morality. Being friendly is also the basic requirement of socialist core values at the individual level. Both the earnestly enjoin "doing the good at present without considering the future" ("Augmented Yin") in the folk, and the wise gatha "don't do evil things but do everything good to the world" ("Ekottara-Agama") in religions thought have the consistent ideological connotation, namely persuading people to do the good. On the one hand, the motives for people to do the good are from the "sense of compassion" of Mencius (volume one of "Mengzi·Goazi"), which is feeling of sympathy. Mencius said: "The reason why it is said that everyone has compassion and sympathy for others is because if someone suddenly sees a child falling into the well today, he will have the feeling of fear and sympathy. This is not because he wants to improve the relationship parents of this child, he wants to gain a reputation among their neighbors, or he hates the cry of the child." (Volume one of "Mencius Gongsun Chou") Mencius believes that the human are willing to do the good, so doing the good is partly due to the human conscience and nature. Of course, the motive for doing the good also comes from another aspect, namely the "retribution for sin" that has widespread influence in China. The idea of "good and evil must at last have their reward" is

reflected in Confucian culture and Buddhist thought, and has a profound impact on people's thinking and behavior. In the mythical novels prevailing in the Six Dynasties of China, many stories about good and evil were told.

People are willing to do the good encourages people to do good things, which is conducive to social harmony and progress. "Making friends with honesty and doing the good to neighbors, having pity on orphans and widows, respecting the elderly, and caring for young children, relieving the people affected by the disaster to meet the urgent needs, and eliminating conflicts by resolving them, building bridge and pavement for people to walk conveniently, and digging river and making ships to help people to cross river, Setting up a free school for children to receive enlightenment education and establishing a civilian granary for storing food to relieve famine" ("Qian Family Instruction") is the ancestors' expectations to future generations in the ancient family instruction. In the current era, among the socialist core values with 24 characters, the word "friendly" is also a moral requirement for individual citizens. Since ancient times, doing good deeds have been promoted by our mainstream values. "Do not fail to do good even if it's small; do not engage in evil even if it's small." has always been talked about by educators. "Liao Fan's Four Lessons" is also a book on morality. In the part "the way of accumulating merits" of the book, Yuan Huang lists ten examples to prove that "the family doing good must have luck", which means that good deeds have rewards. For example, the ancestors of Yang Rong saved a drowning man and the descendants became prestigious. He achieved the purpose of persuading people to do good and advocated the world to do good deeds and find happiness by oneself.

The essence part or more valuable part of "Liao Fan's Four Lessons" is not to "persuade people to do the good" but to "teach people to distinguish goodness". We need to do good things, but we also need wisdom when doing good things and good deeds. Before doing good, we need to identify the good. It is necessary to use wisdom to distinguish the true and false, upright and mistaken, yin and yang, right and wrong, biased and just, half and full, big and small, and difficult and easy. What is true good and false good? The monk Zhongfeng interprets that cursing or beating others may not necessarily be evil while respecting people may not be good; greed for money may not be evil, while honesty may not be good. "If the deeds benefit others, it is public and true; if it benefits the individual, it is private and false." Good deeds from the heart are true and good; what is done to show for others is hypocrisy; what is done without expectation for reward is true goodness; the good deeds with requirement are false goodness." What is upright goodness and mistaken goodness? Yuan Huang interprets that benefiting the world, loving others and respecting others are upright goodness; flattering the world, hating the world and cynicism are mistaken goodness. "All these should be distinguished carefully."

If we do good deeds without exploring the reason, we will waste our hard work and get opposite result. Wisdom should be used to discern "false goodness, unrighteous righteousness, indecent rites, unbelievable belief, and false

kindness" to make correct behavior choices. Only by doing the good based on distinguishing goodness can we get more blessings. So how can you do the good? Yuan Huang further enumerated ten principles of doing good deeds. First is to be kind to others; second is to love and respect others; third is to help others; fourth is to persuade people to do good; fifth is to save people in danger; sixth is to build beneficial things; seventh is to give up money for blessing; eighth is to protect the rightness and law; ninth is to respect elders; tenth is to love things and life.

#### IV. THE ATTITUDE TOWARDS LIFE OF CONSTANTLY INTROSPECTING AND BRAVELY CORRECTING MISTAKES

To err is human. As Yuan Huang said, we are all ordinary people, and the fault is as much as the thorns on the hedgehog, but when we think about the past, we often cannot see our faults. It is because "the heart is careless and the eyes are blind". We don't know we are wrong because we are careless. However, only when we know the fault can we correct them. Therefore, ancient gentlemen will be happy to hear their faults. "Volume one of Mencius Gongsun Chou" said: "Zi Lu, people are happy when they are told their faults." Only by correcting mistakes can people continue to develop and make progress, so people need to constantly reflect on themselves, and know the faults to correct them. Zeng Zi said: "I have to do a lot of self-review everyday: am I loyal to the master? Am I honest with friends? Have I reviewed what the teacher taught" ("The Analects of Confucius-Learning") "Knowing the mistakes and correcting them is the biggest goodness". Constantly rethinking and correcting the mistakes after knowing them it is a positive and brave attitude towards life. Correcting mistakes after knowing them was also praised by Chinese traditional culture. The stories of "offering a humble apology" ("the Historical Records — Biography of Lian Po and Lin Xiangru"), and "Zhouchu killing the flood dragon" ("A New Account of the Tales of the World-new Start" of Liu Yiyiqing in Southern Song Dynasty) has been passed down with approval.

However, the problem that makes many people more distressed is that they know the mistakes but it is hard to correct them. Another valuable aspect of "Liao Fan's Four Lessons" is that Yuan Huang not only clearly pointed out that correcting mistakes and doing good deeds can obtain blessing and avoid a great disaster, but also elaborates a set of methods for correcting mistakes. How can we correct mistakes? Firstly one needs to have "three senses": the first is the sense of shame. The second is the sense of awe. The third is the sense of brave decision. "If you have the three senses, you can correct your mistakes as if the ice meets the sun of spring, so there is no need to worry if the ice can melt." Yuan Huang thinks that correcting mistakes needs "to be brave enough" and cannot wait and withdraw because of hesitation. We should be brave to bid farewell to the old self and create new one. "There have been many past events, but have nothing to do with today. The things will happen in the future begin from today. This is the new principle." This is in line with Confucius's thoughts of "If I know the truth in the morning, I won't regret to die at night." ("The Analects of

Confucius · Liren") This means to begin from the moment without the slightest hesitation like the wind and thundering, which is beneficial to correcting mistakes.

There are three ways to correcting mistakes: to correct the things, to correct the principle, and to correct the mind. That is forbidding deeds, knowing the reason, and cultivating the mind. These three methods are hierarchical, and different methods require different efforts and can achieve different effects. Those who are good at correcting mistakes know the reason before forbidding things. "Maybe the best way to correct mistakes is to cultivate the mind, which can make the mind peaceful quickly, so that the mind can discover the bad thoughts and eliminate them once they appear. If you fail to do so, you must know the reason for the mistake. If you can't know the reason, then you should forbid the behavior. Achieving the above three points is the best strategy to correct mistakes." Yuan Huang believes that the best way to correct mistakes is to correct the mind because "mistakes are made by the mind, so it should be corrected by the mind." People's mistakes and correction are all from the mind, so "cultivating the mind" should be placed on the primary position. The thinking of grasping the root of mistakes is obviously influenced by the philosophy of the mind since the middle of the Ming Dynasty. Wang Yangming's "the conversation at Tian-quan bridge" concludes his lifelong thoughts into four sentences: "The mind is not good or evil originally. If there is good and evil, it means your thoughts are active. Knowing what is evil and what is good is a good knowledge. Doing good deeds and removing bad deeds are based on the understanding of things." Zhu Xi also talked about the things, but he make efforts outward, seeking the "reason" of external things. Wang Yangming's "Investigation of things" is making effort inward to research people's conscience. The core lies in making efforts in the "selfishness" of "mind" and holding integrity in the mind. "[2] As stated in the "method of correcting mistakes" in "Liao Fan's Four Lessons", you only need to be kind, so that righteous thoughts always exist in the mind, and the evil thoughts will naturally not pollute you." From this, it can be seen that Yuan Huang's thought of "cultivating the mind and correcting mistakes" is in line with Wang Yangming's philosophy of the mind.

There is also inextricable links between "mistakes are made by the mind, so it should be corrected by the mind" and "Zen" thoughts. Yuan Huang said that "there are thousands of kinds of faults, all of which are rooted in the mind. If there is no distracting thought in minds, how can mistakes happen?" "The Sixth ancestor Hui Neng said: "for the outside world, we shouldn't have the idea to do bad things and see the nature in our mind. This is meditation." Making mind and thoughts correct and seeing the nature is the good method of correcting mistakes.

## V. CONCLUSION

"Liao Fan's Four Lessons", written in the Ming and Qing Dynasties which is four or five hundred years from now has become an important part of Chinese traditional culture. In treating traditional culture, we can neither accept it in full and carry out revivalism, nor simply negate it and adopt

historical nihilism. Comrade Mao Zedong's principle of "absorbing the essence and discarding the dross; making the past serves the present and introducing new ideas" still has important guiding significance for us to treat traditional culture. Due to the social and historical conditions at that time and the limitations of people's level of understanding, there are some decaying and anti-modern contents in "Liao Fan's Four Lessons". However, inheriting it abstractly according to Comrade Mao Zedong's 16-character policy, the flash of its thought can still be found. It has a practical reference for the modern people's life cultivation and life practice, which is worthy of the title of "Book of Life Wisdom".

## REFERENCES

- [1] Ru Qihe. An Analysis of "Lun Heng Guxiang" and "Qianfulun Xianglie" [J]. *Journal of Beijing Normal University (Social Sciences)*, 2008, (3): 135-140. (in Chinese)
- [2] Guo Jimin. Wang Yangming's Theory of Confucianism and Buddhism [N]. *Social Sciences in China*, 2017-7-11. (in Chinese)