



Readings in Zhu Xi and his Concept of Fate

Wednesday, May 12th, 2010

Liao Hsien-huei

The purpose of this reading session aimed to understand Zhu Xi's 朱熹 concept of fate as revealed in his writings and daily practice. Given that there are various passages in Zhu Xi's writings concerning fate, it was impossible to discuss them comprehensively during the course of our reading session. Even if we were able to analyze thoroughly his statements about fate, it is still questionable whether his practices are congruent with his explicit statements. To approach Zhu's view of fate and to keep the discussion manageable, this reading session focused on two texts related to Zhu's statement on and action towards fate. The first: "A preface dedicated to Xu Shibiao 贈徐師表序" is written by Zhu himself for a skillful diviner who was very active among his contemporary elite circle.¹ The other, entitled: "A dream of Daqian 大乾夢", is an anecdotal account written by Luo

¹ Zhu Xi, "Zeng Xu Shibiao xu" *Hui'an xiansheng Zhu Wengong wenji* 晦庵先生朱文公文集, *juan 75*, in *Zhuzi quanshu* 朱子全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), v. 24, p. 3626.

Dajing 羅大經 (1196-1242, *jinshi* 進士 1226) concerning Zhu's response to the question of dream revelation and fate raised by one of his disciples, Liao Deming 廖德明 (*jinshi* 進士 1169).²

Sketches of these two texts follow. In the first text, “A preface dedicated to Xu Shibiao”, Zhu begins with a detailed description of Xu's mantic ability, including his being conversant with the theories of *yinyang* 陰陽 and *wuxing* 五行 (the five phases), his accurate forecast of the persons who successfully advanced to *jinshi* degree in the locality and of the fortunes of several of Zhu's acquaintances. Based on the foregoing examples, Zhu concluded that it is not absurd for literati to admire Xu, nor is Xu's appreciation by the literati mere chance. Then, there comes the key point of this preface, Zhu spells out his view of human fortune in the words given to Xu on his departure: “Although human fortunes are immutable, many literati still tried to pursue them with human intelligence; in contrast, those which should be done according to the principle were not considered fate nor necessarily done by the literati. Why was it?” Bearing this puzzle in mind, in the end, Zhu hoped that Xu would raise this question with the Confucian-educated elite with whom Xu had the leisure time to chat. He believed that it would be helpful [to clarify the question? or to rectify their contradictory behaviour?]

In the second text, “A dream of Daqian”, Zhu appeared as the protagonist who modified his ideas about a predetermined,

² Luo Dajing, “Daqian meng” *Helin yulu* 鶴林玉露 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), *jiabian* 甲編, *juan* 3, p. 56.

unchangeable fate because of an episode involving his disciple, Liao Deming. When young, Liao prayed to the god of *Daqian* temple (in current *Fujian*) and was foretold in a dream that he would become a low-ranking official. After attaining *jinshi* status in 1169, he was indeed appointed as a local official with the title, as the god had predicted. He was unwilling to assume the post because he was afraid that it would be the highest of his official appointments and lead to the abrupt ending of his official career. Unable to make up his mind, Liao brought his dilemma to Zhu Xi, asking for advice. His crisis was indeed very difficult to resolve for it took several days for Zhu to find a suitable answer. Zhu drew a distinction between the fortune of humankind and that of inanimate objects, explaining to Liao that the former could change due to a change in human actions, while the latter was normally fixed. By highlighting the active role that an individual plays in the creation of his own fortune, Zhu persuaded Liao to assume the assigned post, strengthen his moral integrity and perform good deeds. Then, he concluded, there would be no need for Liao to agonize over his dream revelation.

There were several reasons for choosing these two texts as the subject of our discussion. First of all, Zhu's view of fate seemed quite different, as manifested in these two texts. In the first one, he holds fast to the Confucian idea of fate, arguing that one's life and fortune are immutable so that any attempt to alter them is futile. Contrarily, however, his standpoint changed in the second, as he emphasized that human fortune could be changed along with the changes in one's actions. It is intriguing whether there was indeed explicit inconsistency between Zhu Xi's words and actions,

how significant this conflict is, and how we should explain it. Secondly, it is worth noting that these two events occurred in the same year of 1169. In the first text, Zhu explicitly wrote the date at the end as the mid summer of the year of Jichou 己丑 of the reign Qianda 乾道³; namely, the year of 1169. In the second, the dialogue occurred supposedly also in 1169, when Zhu's disciple, Liao Deming, obtained the *jinshi* degree and was then assigned the aforementioned official post. Given that they referred to Zhu's view in the same year, it is apparent that this inconsistency was not the result of views held at different stages of his life, if it has to be considered such. Finally, the nature of these two texts and the authenticity of their contents also deserve attention and should be taken into account. Written by Zhu Xi himself for a diviner with whom Zhu and many contemporary literati were acquainted, the first text basically conveys first-hand information. In contrast, recounted by a member of the literati a few decades later, in anecdotal form, the second text conveys mainly indirect information.

The question of whether Zhu Xi was self-contradictory in his view of fate gave rise to a heated discussion during the reading session. For those who argued against Zhu's self-contradiction, the reasons lie in the different subjects with which he was dealing, or the different genres from which the information originated. Some suggested that Zhu's changing standpoints were due to the fact that he was dealing with different aspects of human fate in these two texts. In the first,

³ Qiandao (1165-1173) is the second reign title of the Southern Song Emperor Xiaozong 孝宗 (r. 1163-1189).

what Zhu insisted to be immutable is “fate 命”, as he used the words *fu* 賦 (endowment) and *ming* 命. What he meant to be changeable along with one’s actions in the second text is “fortune 運”, which was referred to as *jixiong huofu* 吉凶禍福 (good and bad fortune). Through differentiating between the immutable “fate” and changeable “fortune” of Zhu’s view, they believed that there might be no explicit inconsistency in his attitude towards fate. Others tended to defend Zhu’s consistency by questioning the authenticity of the content of the second text. Recounted by Luo Dajing a few decades later, in anecdotal form, the second text apparently conveys mere indirect, probably less reliable information than the first. Therefore, they argued that Zhu’s inconsistency might be the result of distorted, unreliable source material, as the second one manifested.

Still, Zhu’s inconsistency is not entirely baseless. First of all, according to the extant material, Zhu was not always consistent in terms of his words and actions. Take his son’s funeral in 1191 as an example. Because the geomancer (*yinyang jia* 陰陽家) instructed him not to excavate until the following year, he delayed the burial of his son’s coffin, storing it in a Buddhist monastery.⁴ This action, however, completely belied Zhu’s previous opposition to delaying burials, retaining coffins at home, or depositing them at Buddhist institutions. For a year before when he assumed the post of Zhangzhou 漳州 (Fujian) prefect, Zhu gave specific instructions on these ritual rules and laws relating to the mourning for and burial

4 Zhu Xi, “Yu Chen Tongfu 與陳同父” *Hui’an xiansheng Zhu Wengong wenji* 晦庵先生朱文公文集, *xuji* 續集, *juan 7*, in *Zhuzi quanshu* 朱子全書, v. 25, p. 4779-4781.

of local people. Violators of these funeral procedures, he claimed, would be subjected to a punishment of a hundred strokes.⁵ His practices diverged so markedly from his words that even modern scholars found it difficult to offer a sound explanation for them.⁶ Moreover, whether there is a clear distinction between fate and fortune in the Song literati's concept deserves further inquiries. There seemed to have been nuances between the literati's view of *xing* 性 (nature) and *ming* 命; the former was deemed changeable while the latter was not. Still, it is ambiguous whether the meaning of this so-called "nature" is equivalent to that of "fortune," and whether Zhu Xi himself drew a clear distinction between fate and fortune or fate and nature.

As to the credibility of the second, anecdotal account, it is possible that the information it contains is comparatively less reliable than the first one. However, given that Luo Dajing, the author of the second text, did not seem to have composed the text out of prejudice, we should not disregard it lightly. Being Confucian-educated, Luo Dajing obtained the *jinshi* degree in 1226 and later served as a Song local official. According to *Siku tiyao* 四庫提要, he was a supporter of the learning of the Way, for he often quoted the words of famous Southern Song Confucians, such as Zhu Xi, Zhang Chih 張栻 (1133-1180), Zhen Dexiu 真德秀 (1178-1235, *jinshi* 進士

5 Zhu Xi, "Quanyu bang 勸諭榜" *Hui'an xiansheng Zhu Wengong wenji* 晦庵先生朱文公文集, *juan* 100, in *Zhuzi quanshu* 朱子全書, v. 25, p. 4620-4622.

6 Chan Wing-tsit, for example, attributed this instance of grave geomancy to Zhu's daughter-in-law, stressing that Zhu gave no credence to it. *Zhu Hsi: New Studies* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1989), pp. 119-120.

1199), and so forth.⁷ Meanwhile, he was also fond of letters. Basically, his writings faithfully reflect the ideas of the sages and the virtuous. Based on the foregoing comments made by Qing scholars, it is clear that Luo's writing about Zhu Xi by no means sought to criticize or mock him. Instead, the story he recorded might have conveyed the message by highlighting Zhu's idea about fate, if not necessarily being factual. Equally important is the fact that the very same story has been recounted and discussed repeatedly by the literati of later periods, and the impact it exerted is probably more important than its anecdotal nature could have conveyed. Judging from the ways in which the Ming and Qing literati authors retold the story, it is worth noting that they showed no hint of suspicion about its authenticity. On the contrary, they took it seriously as proof of their views about fate. Some literati quoted it to exemplify that human fate is not predetermined, while others used it to emphasize the efficacy of dream revelations. In his miscellaneous account of *Xialaozhai zaji* 暇老齋雜記, Mao Yuanyi 茅元儀 (1594-1640), for instance, cited the whole story about Liao Deming, using Zhu Xi's answer to emphasize the importance of individual actions in determining one's fate.⁸ Similarly, citing Liao's story among others, another Ming author, Guo Lianghan 郭良翰, also criticized his contemporary for attributing one's good and bad fortune to fate.⁹ Rather than arguing against predestination,

7 "Helin yulu tiyao 鶴林玉露提要", in *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (Taipei: Taiwan Commercial Press, 1983, v. 865), p. 1a-2a.

8 Mao Yuanyi, *Xialaozhai zaji*, in *Siku jinhuishu congkan* 四庫禁毀書叢刊 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2000, v. 3:29), *juan* 22, p. 588-589.

9 Guo Lianghan, *Wenqi leilin* 問奇類林, in *Siku weishoushu jikan* 四庫未收書輯刊 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2000, ji輯7, v. 15), *juan* 27,

He Dongru 何棟如 (1572-1637, *jinshi* 進士 1598), quoted Liao's story to demonstrate the divinatory nature of dreams in his compilation of *Menglin xuanjie* 夢林玄解,¹⁰ as did Zhang Fengyi 張鳳翼 (1527-1613) who, in his *Mengzhan leikao* 夢占類考, collected similar stories from different periods to exemplify the efficacy of dream divination.¹¹

Although there was no consensus achieved regarding Zhu's view of fate, our discussion did indeed bring forth several important issues for further study. The first is how the Song literati perceived the concept of *xing* (nature), *ming* (fate), and *yun* (fortune), and whether there were differences among them. The second is how we should treat such source materials as the miscellaneous writings and other indirect information, and what precautions we should take when using them as historical evidence. Following the ambiguity of Zhu's concepts of nature, fate, and fortune, our translations of Zhu's key points in both texts also diverged significantly. The most controversial sentences lie in the first text:

“至於義理之所當為，君子所不謂命，則又聞其有必為者，何哉？”

and

“徐君之所從遊，多吾黨之士，坐語從容，試以是說諭之，庶乎其有益也。”

p.537-538.

10 He Dongru, “Yefang 謁訪” *Menglin xuanjie*, in *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995, v. 1064), *juan* 11, p. 14.

11 Zhang Fengyi, “Xuanjiao lang 宣教郎” *Mengzhan leikao*, in *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* 四庫全書存目叢書 (Tainan: Zhuangyan wenhua, 1995, v. 70), *juan* 7, p. 118.

Readings in Zhu Xi and his Concept of Fate

I think that further studies of Zhu's ideas about fate should be performed before we can translate these sentences more precisely and persuasively.

Original texts without punctuation

贈徐師表序 (朱熹,《晦庵集》,卷75,《四庫全書》,頁26b-27b)

南浦徐君師表論五行精極建安今年新進士數人大抵皆其所嘗稱許序引具存可覆視也一日見予屏山之下因以所知十餘人者驗之壽夭窮達之間中者八九以是知諸君之譽徐君也不爲妄而徐君之得諸人也不爲幸其挾諸人者不爲誇矣將行求予言以贈予惟人之所賦薄厚淹速有不可易者如此而學士大夫猶欲以智力求之至於義理之所當爲君子所不謂命則又未聞其有必爲者何哉徐君之所從遊多吾黨之士坐語從容試以是說諭之庶乎其有益也乾道己丑孟夏既望新安朱熹仲晦父書

(羅大經,《鶴林玉露》,卷13,《四庫全書》,頁17b-18b)

廖德明字子晦朱文公高弟也少時夢謁大乾夢懷刺候謁廟廡下謁者索刺出諸袖視其題字云宣教郎廖某遂覺後登第改秩以宣教郎宰閩請迓者及門思前夢恐官止此不欲行親朋友相勉為質之文公公曰待徐思之一夕忽叩門曰得之矣因指案上物曰人與器物不同如筆止能為筆不能為硯劍止能為劍不能為琴故其成毀久速有一定不易之數惟人則不然虛靈知覺萬理兼該有朝為跖而暮為舜者故其吉凶禍福亦隨之而變難以一定言今子赴官但當充廣德性力行好事前夢不足芥蒂子晦拜而受教後把麾持節官至正郎

Original texts with punctuation

贈徐師表序 (朱熹, 《晦庵先生朱文公文集》, 卷75, 《朱子全書》(上海: 上海古籍, 2002), 冊24, 頁3626)

南浦徐君師表論五行精極, 建安今年新進士數人, 大抵皆其所嘗稱許, 序引具存, 可覆視也。一日, 見予屏山之下, 因以所知十餘人者, 驗之壽夭窮達之間, 中者八九。以是知諸君之譽徐君也不為妄, 而徐君之得諸人也不為幸, 其挾諸人者不為誇矣。將行, 求予言以贈。予惟人之所賦薄厚淹速, 有不可易者如此, 而學士大夫猶欲以智力求之。至於義理之所當為, 君子所不謂命, 則又未聞其有必為者, 何哉? 徐君之所從遊, 多吾黨之士, 坐語從容, 試以是說諭之, 庶乎其有益也。乾道己丑孟夏既望新安朱熹仲晦父書。

大乾夢 (羅大經, 《鶴林玉露》(北京: 中華書局, 1997), 甲編, 卷3, 頁56)

廖德明, 字子晦, 朱文公高弟也。少時夢謁大乾, 夢懷刺候謁廟廡下, 謁者索刺, 出諸袖, 視其題字云「宣教郎廖某」, 遂覺。後登第, 改秩, 以宣教郎宰閩。請廷者及門, 思前夢, 恐官止此, 不欲行。親朋交相勉, 乃質之文公。公曰: 「待徐思之。」一夕, 忽叩門曰: 「得之矣。」因指案上物曰: 「人與器物不同, 如筆止能為筆, 不能為硯; 劍止能為劍, 不能為琴; 故其成毀久速, 有一定不易之數。惟人則不然, 虛靈知覺, 萬理兼

該，有朝為跖而暮為舜者，故其吉凶禍福，亦隨之而變，難以一定言。今子赴官，但當充廣德性，力行好事，前夢不足芥蒂。」子晦拜而受教。後把麾持節，官至正郎。