



A New Discussion of Confucius' Determinism

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Abstract

Whether Confucius is a determinist or not is controversial in academic circles. The key point is whether Confucius made predeterminate interpretation towards the concept of "ming" (destiny) or "Tian ming" (Heaven's Decree). Through careful study of Confucius' sayings on "ming" and "tian ming" in the Analects of Confucius and its classical annotation, it can be found that Confucius inherited the thought of determinism in the Shang and Zhou dynasties. He regarded "Tian" (Heaven) of "Tian ming" as the objective existence dominating all things. The "ming" and "Tian ming" of Confucius have similar meanings in the ancient meaning of ming as "Heaven's command". Therefore, Confucius was a determinist.

Keywords

Confucius, determinism, Tian ming, ming

1. Introduction

There is a great debate among modern scholars about whether Confucius believed in determinism (宿命論). The key point is whether Confucius made predeterminate interpretation towards the concept of "ming" (命, destiny) or "Tian ming" (天命, Heaven's Decree). Based on the discussion of Confucius' "Tian ming" theory by modern scholars, this paper is to carefully examine Confucius' sayings about "ming" and "Tian ming" in the Analects of Confucius, and finds that Confucius inherited the determinism of Shang (商) and Zhou (周) Dynasties. Both "ming" and "Tian ming" contain the ancient meaning of ming as "Heaven's command" (天令), so it can be said that Confucius was a determinist.

2. The debate of modern scholars on Confucius' determinism

Modern scholars can basically divide into two factions on whether Confucius was a determinist. Scholars such as Zhang Dainian, Fu Sinian, and Sun Qinshan regard Confucius as a determinist. Zhang Dainian believed that Confucius' ming means that people are helpless in the face of destiny (Zhang, 1996, p. 428), that is to say, Confucius' ming is objective rather than subjective. Fu Sinian pointed out that "the Analects of Confucius clearly contains the meaning of destiny" and "the decree of Heaven believed by Confucius is still more religious" (Fu, 2012, p. 66). Fundamentally speaking, for Confucius, the phrase "ming" is probably an abbreviation of "Tian ming" (Lau, 1979, p. 28), because both of them have universal and objective religious meaning. Sun Qinshan's view is similar to that of Zhang Dainian and Fu Sinian. He argues that Confucius is both a determinist and a theist. He points out that: "by connecting life experience with understanding Heaven's Decree, Confucius actually connected Tian ming with the objective law that does not depend on subjective will to a certain extent. Although there was a breakthrough in the mystery of Simian Tian ming, it was still far from denying determinism" (Sun, 2009). Confucius regarded Tian ming as the primary object of respect for a gentleman's moral cultivation. Confucius went through all kinds of dif-

facilities and hardships and only understood the meaning of Tian ming at the age of fifty, which proved that Tian ming is some kind of sacred objective law.

However, Yang Bojun, Li Zehou, David Hall and Roger Ames insisted that Confucius was not a determinist. Mr. Yang Bojun believed that Confucius is not a determinist because Confucius' ming is all about human affairs. But Mr. Yang paradoxically admitted that there is inevitability and contingency in human affairs (Yang, 2009). The inevitability of human affairs at least shows that fate is determined, rather than depending on the subjective will of the individual. Mr. Li Zehou argued that "ming means contingency, which is neither determinism nor divine intention. Even if we try our best, there will always be all kinds of unpredictable and irresistible happenings" (Li, 2008, p. 111). Mr. Li interpreted Confucius' ming as contingency, which basically denying that an individual's natural destiny is determined by "the will of Heaven" or "Heaven's Decree", and he focused on discussing Confucius' theory of understanding Destiny (知命) from the perspective of "becoming" rather than "being" of Destiny (Li, 2008, pp. 157-158). Mr. Li's empirical understanding of Confucius' ming is not reasonable. If Confucius' ming is purely accidental, then why should he act on the basis of reverence for Tian ming? David Hall and Roger Ames also argued that Confucius' ming is non-predetermined and changeable causal condition, and Tian ming should not be regarded as external and objectively existing moral imperative (Hall & Ames, 1987). Hall and Ames' view followed the radical empiricism of American pragmatism, but failed to accord with the predeterminism and transcendence of the phrase ming.

Based on the different views between the two groups of scholars, it is necessary for us to know the definition of the concept of "determinism" in the Chinese context. In the seventh edition of the Word-Ocean Dictionary (《辭海》), "determinism" has been explained that "a religious and idealistic doctrine that holds that the development of human affairs and history is determined by an irresistible and inevitable mysterious force (the will of Heaven or Destiny). It denies people's conscious initiative and people can only obey the domination of Destiny. The ancient Chinese Confucian 'fearing Heaven's Decree' and the ancient Greek and Roman Stoic 'obedience to fate' are all deterministic views." It is desirable that this definition recognises "determinism", in which human affairs are determined by the will of Heaven. Etymologically, the Shuo Wen Jie Zi (《說文解字》) lexicon explains ming 命 as "causing something to happen (使也), follows the components of kou 口 'mouth' and ling 令 'commanding'". The fundamental meaning of ming 命 is ling 令 "commanding". The Annotation of Shuo wen jie zi by Duan Yucai of the Qing Dynasty explains the component ling 令 of ming 命 as: "ling 令 means to give commands which have to do with the Kings. There have commands which are not coming from the Kings, but from the Heaven. Therefore, ming 命 also means the Heaven's command (天之令)." Ming 命 has two levels of meanings, the commands of the Kings (君令) and Heaven's command (天令). The former is empirical and particular, and the latter is transcendental and universal, and should be basically understood as a theory that people follow the irresistible and inevitable Heaven's command.

3. Confucius inherited the tradition of determinism in Shang and Zhou Dynasties

Confucius lived in the Spring and Autumn period and the spoke of "understanding Heaven's Decree" (知天命), "fearing Heaven's Decree" (畏天命) which showed that he had a very deep reverence and profound understanding of the tradition of Tian ming and there was a strong determinism in particular, and determinism inherited the thought of Tian ming in the Shang and Zhou dynasties, which recognized Tian 天 as a transcendent anthropomorphic god that could dominate the fate of all things in the universe. People in the Shang Dynasty believed in Tian ming 天命 and had not yet gotten rid of ignorant religious theology. During this period, there was a profound sense of determinism. In the Speech of Tang of the Book of Shang of the Book of Historical Documents, (《尚書·商書·湯誓》) the King Shang Tang (商湯王) said:

“有夏多罪，天命殛之。”

“...but for the many crimes of the sovereign of Xia, Heaven has given the charge to destroy him...”
(Legge, 2018, pp. 90-91)

The phrase “Tian ming” 天命 in this case is synonymous with Tian 天 or Di 帝 (the emperor or "god"), both of which refer to the anthropomorphic god. Tian ming can determine the good and bad fortune of the world, so it is feared by people at that time, the kings must uphold the will of Heaven to do the right thing. Therefore, in the

Speech of Tang the King Shang Tang said, "...as I fear God, I dare not but punish him..." (予畏上帝, 不敢不正) Also, the Chief of West's Conquest of Li of the Book of Shang of the Book of Historical Documents (《尚書·商書·西伯戡黎》) recorded that King Shang Zhou (商紂王) said:

“我生不有命在天。”

“Was not my birth in accordance with the appointment of Heaven (in favour of my House)?”

(Legge, 2018, pp. 150-151)

The tyrannical King Zhou thought he had the Decree of Heaven from God, but he was destroyed by the subordinate Zhou state for his immorality. In the Western Zhou Dynasty, people's understanding of Tian ming was gradually rationalized, and Tian ming was no longer fixed, but influenced to some extent by the ruler's virtue. "Matching Heaven with virtue" was the ideological characteristic of the theory of Tian ming in this period. As recorded in the Announcement to the Prince of Kang of the Books of Zhou of the Book of Historical Documents, (《尚書·周書·康誥》), the representative of the King Zhou Cheng (周成王), the Duke of Zhou (周公) issued an admonition:

“……惟乃丕顯考文王，克明德慎罰……惟時怙冒聞於上帝，帝休，天乃大命文王殪戎殷，誕受厥命越厥邦民……”

"...it was your greatly distinguished father, the king Wen, who was able to illustrate his virtue and be careful in the use of punishments. ...The fame, of him ascended up to the high God, and God approved. Heaven accordingly gave a grand charge to king Wen, to exterminate the great (dynasty of) Yin, and grandly receive its appointment, so that the various countries belonging to it and their peoples were brought to an orderly condition..." (Legge, 2018, pp. 216-219)

Because the King Wen was able to achieve the great feat of cultivating morality and taking good care of the people, the high God (天 Tian) knew about it and he delegated the power of governing the country to King Wen. The Duke of Zhou even put forward the idea that "Heaven's Decree is not unchanging" (惟命不于常). According to the King Wen of Da Ya of the Book of Songs (《詩經·大雅·文王》), it records:

“侯服于周，天命靡常。”

“They became subject to Zhou. The Decree of Heaven is not constant.”¹

(Legge, 2018, p. 521)

Although the Duke of Zhou believed that the Decree of Heaven could be changed, the King Wen (《文王》) also records, "Look to Yin as a beacon; the great appointment (Decree) is not easily (preserved)" “宜鑒于殷，駿命不易” (Legge, 2018, p. 523). That is to say, as the anthropomorphic god with moral will, Tian 天 of Tian ming 天命 is still unchangeable. It can be seen that people in the Western Zhou Dynasty still believed in the traditional determinism of the Shang Dynasty. Professor Chao Fulin pointed out that the concept of Tian ming in the Shang and Zhou Dynasties had undergone great changes, but this change did not fundamentally touch the authority of the Decree of Heaven. Heaven is still Heaven, and the Decree of Heaven is still the Decree of Heaven, it can only change the granted object. The Decree of Heaven is still an iron plate hanging over the head of the world, before which people have no freedom, but bow down and absolutely obey it (Chao, 2008, p. 46). In the background of the immovable thought of Tian in the theory of Tian ming in the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, Confucius inherited the idea of Tian ming. Based on the Analects of Confucius, Confucius himself described "understanding Tian ming at fifty" (2.4 五十而知天命) and "fearing Tian ming" (16.8 畏天命). This "Tian" is not different from the above-mentioned determinism tradition of the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, which still refers to the anthropomorphic god with moral will. Fu Sinian pointed out: "Confucius' concept of Tian ming, just like the tradition of the Western Zhou Dynasty and the Spring and Autumn period. No new theories have been created by Confucius in it. Confucius' Tian ming refers to the will of Heaven, which determines the success or failure of human affairs (Fu, 2012, p. 163). In the Ba Yi of the Analects of Confucius (《論語·八佾》3.13), Confucius said: "He who offends against Heaven has none to whom he can pray." “獲罪於天，無所禱也” (Legge, 2016, p. 85). Besides, according to the Yang Huo of the

¹ James Legge translated “周” and “天命” into “Chow” and “the appointment of Heaven” respectively, and I made minor correction to the translation of Legge.

Analects (《論語·陽貨》17.19), Confucius also said:

“天何言哉？四時行焉，百物生焉。”

“Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being produced?”

(Legge, 2016, p. 644)

It seems that Confucius believed that Tian ming is a kind of fixed Heaven's command, it is not subject to human will and dominates the fate of human beings and regulate the operation of everything. Therefore, judging from the intellectual history of the concept of Tian ming, Confucius belongs to the ranks of determinists.

4. Confucius' ming has an objective and fateful power over human affairs

When Confucius simply talked about ming 命 which refers to an objective power to determine human affairs. In the Yan Yuan of the Analects (《論語·顏淵》12.5), Confucius' disciple Zi Xia said, “There is the following saying which I have heard - ‘Death and life have their determined appointment; riches and honours depend upon Heaven.’” “商聞之矣：死生有命，富貴在天” (Legge, 2016, p. 405). Professor Chen Tongsheng (陳桐生) point out that Confucian disciples learned most of the truth from Confucius, so Zi xia was most likely to hear the saying from Confucius (Chen, 2009, p.147). Mr. Qian Mu (錢穆) explained that “I am not in charge of ming 命. Like people born, not their own desire to be born. Death is not one's own desire to die” (Qian, 2011, p. 286), which suggests that perhaps in Confucius' view, the existence of human life ultimately depends not on the individual, but on the external environment. Life and death, wealth and poverty are not determined by the individual, but by the environment, Confucius called it ming 命.

In the Yao Yue of the Analects (《論語·堯曰》20.3), Confucius said: “A man has no way of becoming a gentleman unless he understands Destiny” (Lau, 1979, p.160). Huang Kan (皇侃) commented that:

“窮謂貧賤，達謂富貴，並稟之於天，如天之見命為之者也。”

“Failure means poverty, and success means wealth, which is determined by Heaven.”

(Huang, 2013, p.524)

Lao Siguang's interpretation of Confucius' concept of ming is the "objective limitation" (Lao, 2015, p. 103), it is more accurate to say that the limitation of Heaven and earth on human beings. He who wants to become a gentleman with virtue, one should not break away from external restrictions and try to pursue wealth.

5. The commonality of Confucius' ming and Tian ming

For Confucius, the phrase ming 命 can be connected with the transcendent concept of Tian ming 天命, both of them pointing to a kind of determinism appeal. Mr. Xu Fuguan believed that "all the words of ming in the Analects of Confucius refer to the fortune", and said that "ancient and modern annotators do not know that there is an obvious difference between ming and Tian ming in the Analects of Confucius" (Xu, 2009, p. 57). Mr. Xu's argument is not reasonable enough. In fact, it is difficult for us to strictly distinguish between ming and Tian ming in the Analects of Confucius. The key point is that they cannot be separated from the meaning of Heaven's command (天令). In the Yong Ye of the Analects (《論語·雍也》6.10), it says:

“伯牛有疾，子問之，自牖執其手，曰：‘亡之，命矣夫！’”

Bo Niu was ill. The Master visited him and, holding his hand through the window, said, "We are going to lose him. It must be Destiny..."

(Lau, 1979, p. 82)

Huang Kan commented: "It means that Bo Niu really should not die because of his talent and morality, but dying now is the command of ming 命" (Huang, 2013, p. 135). Zhu Xi explained that:

“命，謂天命。言此人不應有此疾，而今乃有之，是乃天之所命。” (Zhu, 2012, p. 87)

"Ming means Tian ming. This man (Bo Niu) should not have had this disease, but now it happens, and it is the Decree of Heaven."

Xing Bing also commented that: "Do good deeds but encounter evil, it is not caused by the man himself, so Confucius attributed it to ming which also means Tian ming." "行善遇凶，非人所召，故歸之於命，言天命矣夫。" (He & Xing, 2000, p. 82) The ming mentioned by Confucius in the Yong Ye means the destiny of heaven and natural talent. Although "Bo Niu" with both ability and virtue did good deeds, he got seriously ill and was about to die. This kind of reward for good deeds and evil deeds is the result of the arrangement of fate, which is not easily changed by human power. In the Xian Wen of the Analects (《論語·憲問》14.36), Confucius said,

“道之將行也與？命也。道之將廢也與？命也。公伯寮其如命何！”

"It is Destiny if the Way prevail: It equally Destiny if the Way fails into disuse. What can Kung-po Liao do in defiance of Destiny?" (Lau, 1979, p. 130)

According to Huangkan's interpretation, he said:

“子路之道廢興，由天之命耳。雖公伯寮之譖言，其能違天命而興廢于子路耶？”

(Huang, 2013, p. 381)

"Whether the way of Zi Lu is abandoned or not is decided by the Decree of Heaven. Although Gongbo Liao is disrespectfully to slander, Can he disobey the Decree of Heaven and abandon the way of Zi Lu?"

This chapter means that the right to do or not to do is determined by the Decree of Heaven, not by Gongbo Liao's slander. Generally speaking, this is the hopeless desperation of Confucius for his expected ambition and career, and he finally had to resort to the unknown ming 命 or Tian 天. Perhaps, it is the expression of human seeking some certainty to find a place for his soul. Confucius' interpretation of the phrase ming has not lost its ancient meaning of "Heaven's command", so it can be inferred that Confucius' the phrase ming and the phrase Tian ming have the same meaning in the level of the objective existence of "Heaven's command" (天令). Both of them are the decisive force of objectivity. In the Wan Zhang I of Mencius (《孟子·萬章上》), Tian 天 and ming 命 have been defined appropriately by Mencius, he said:

“莫之為而為者，天也。莫之致而至者，命也。”

"That which is done without man's doing is from Heaven. That which happens without man's causing is from the ordinance of Heaven". (Legge, 2017, p. 271)

When Confucius talked about ming 命, he never seemed to be separated from the objective domination of Tian 天 "Heaven", which was the fundamental reason why he did not get rid of the traditional determinism.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, Confucius believed in the determinism of Shang and Zhou dynasties, Tian 天 "Heaven" as an anthropomorphic god who dominated the universe. The phrase ming 命 "Destiny" recorded in the Analects of Confucius has an objective power to determine human affairs, and ming cannot be changed by individual will and human agency. Confucius' interpretation of the phrase ming has not lost the ancient meaning of "Heaven's command" (天令). His phrase ming 命 and Tian ming 天命 have the same meaning in the level of the objective existence of "Heaven's command". Therefore, Confucius' thought is not completely free from the influence of traditional determinism.

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