

# The Contemporary Application of Confucius' Being Carefree<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** As can be observed from contemporary life, emotions like feeling distressed, anxious or stressful lasts through every stage in life. If these states of mind are not properly managed and regulated, they can lead to anxiety and other emotions, which greatly affect the well-being at all ages, thus spilling over from the individual to family well-being and then even to social harmony. According to research findings in psychology, negotiable views on fate are positively correlated with the perception of social adversity, the escape from psychological distress, and the attainment of happiness<sup>2</sup>. This paper argues that Confucius' thoughts, words and deeds all embody the concept of negotiable fate. In addition, the excellent Chinese traditional culture also contains the wisdom of being carefree, helping people lead a life free from shame or fear due to their sticking to the moral standard and teachings. Confucius' state of "no worries" is undoubtedly a contemporary remedy for confusion and anxiety.

## 1 Introduction

For the regulation of the psychological suffering, the teachings of Confucius, as part of the outstanding traditional Chinese culture, can provide contemporary references and utility. It can be reflected on the following two aspects: Confucius' philosophy on fate and Confucius' philosophy on being carefree (following one's heart while not exceeding the rules thus achieving the mindset of "no worries"). This paper aims to probe into these two aspects and look for the teachings and philosophy acting as guideline and remedy for contemporary psychological dilemma.

## 2 The concept of negotiable fate

Drawing on two related studies, the concept of negotiable fate can play an important role in the regulation of psychological suffering and the attainment of happiness. Specifically, Liu Huiying and Hao Xiangsen's study, "The Effects of Perceived Social Adversity, Psychological Distress and Negotiable Destiny on Suicide Risk: A Moderated Mediation Model" demonstrates that perceived social adversity was significantly and positively associated with emotional problems such as anxiety and depression, and negatively associated with feelings of well-being and control. Negotiable fate perceptions can help people gain a sense of control, as well as assign meaning to unexpected outcomes and persist in pursuing goals in undesirable situations. It can enhance an individual's sense of self-efficacy, sense of meaning in life and subjective well-being, maintain psychological fitness, and thus reduces the risk of self suicide<sup>3</sup>. In Chang's research, a

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scale was investigated and analyzed to conclude that negotiable fate promotes college students' subjective well-being and that the experience of meaning in life plays a part in mediating it<sup>4</sup>.

## 3 Confucius's philosophy on fate

In Chen Manqi's article, it is mentioned that "negotiable fate refers to the belief that individuals can negotiate their own fate by exercising their subjective initiative within the limited resources available<sup>5</sup>. In this sense, Confucius' philosophical wisdom embodies the negotiable view of fate. The concept of negotiable fate is reflected in Confucius' words and deeds. If we can meditate and savor the negotiable view of fate in Confucius' teachings, it will be of significant help to enhance subjective well-being, subside anxiety, and maintain psychological health, family happiness, as well as social harmony.

### 3.1 To know the destiny given by heaven.

The Analects says, "Without knowing the fate, one cannot be a gentleman", which means You cannot be a gentleman without knowing the regulation of Heaven and the responsibility people are born to take. This is because the regulation of Heaven is the law of historical development. It also refers to the responsibilities and duties that individuals are born with in this world. Without comprehending the regulation of heaven or the given responsibility, one cannot know the trend of the times. As Mr. Yang Bojun paraphrases in his *Translation and Commentary on the Analects of Confucius*: Confucius was not a fatalist, but he also puts emphasis on knowing the fate<sup>6</sup>.

Confucius' view of knowing the fate is still relevant and helpful in contemporary times. From the perspective of nature, all things in this world have their own way and their own laws. From the perspective of human being and society, family and the environment around are both given from birth, without the possibility of being chosen, and each person has his or her own duty and responsibility. On the basis of knowing our destiny and accepting it, Confucius had a higher level of understanding and pursuit, which was not to compromise and not to give up, and to live in the present.

### 3.2 Trying our best.

Knowing the destiny does not mean to do nothing or not trying hard. Rather, it means perseverance with a clear objective in mind and trying hard to make the best on the basis of the fate given. This is just another example illustrating negotiable fate. He did not compromise, did not give up, and lived in the present. In *The Analects*, it is recorded that Confucius once said, "When building a mountain out of soil, people may choose to stop and give up, although it's almost done. When filling up the low-lying land, people may choose to stick to it, although it's just the beginning of a tough course." Confucius uses the piling of mountains and the filling up of low-lying land to teach his students about the merit of perseverance. According to Mr. Yang Bojun's comprehension, It would be one's determination that helps in striving forward and finally succeed<sup>7</sup>. The perseverance of Confucius is evident in this example. Another example is the description of Confucius' experience and mentality in Mr. Ma Yong's book *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Confucianism*: "From the day Confucius returned to Lu until the day of his death, he was not stuck in the state of feeling depressed by his political disillusionment. Instead, he devoted himself to compiling ancient literature and training his disciples with the diligence of 'not knowing that old age was approaching', and the result was not only the formation of a basic theoretical framework and talent pool for the development of Confucianism, but also the setting up of a fairly complete set of wisdom resources for the future development of Chinese society"<sup>8</sup>.

From what has been presented above, we may clearly feel that Confucius' words and actions well illustrate his spirit and philosophy of accepting fate and keep perseverance. But perseverance does not imply that there is only one path through which people can step toward their aims. Just as the following part illustrates.

### 3.3 Confucius expressed his understanding on a real gentleman by saying that "Gentlemen are not limited to their expertise" and chose to make changes according to the development of the situation in reality.

Coming back to *The Analects*, "When building a mountain out of soil, people may choose to stop and give up, although it's almost done. When filling up the low-lying land, people may still choose to stick to it, although it's just the beginning of a tough course." In his

translation of *The Analects*, Mr. Yang Bojun adds to his understanding of this sentence that the chapter can also be explained in this way: "It is like piling up a mountain of earth, when almost done, if I (should) stop, I will. If (it should) be kept forward, then I will go forward<sup>9</sup>." According to Mr. Yang Bojun's understanding, we can consider that the principle of stopping and continuing here is based on "only righteousness". With the passage of time, changing in space or shifts in circumstances, one makes flexible and appropriate choices. But this does not mean a wavering of will or a lack of firmness on principle. On the contrary, as can be seen from Confucius' view of loyalty and forgiveness, such flexibility is based on a firm adherence to principle. It is a negotiable philosophy toward life, and it helps in accepting and adapting to the conditions. This is what we are still proud of and benefit from today. It is perhaps in this state of acceptance and adaptation that helps Confucius achieve the mentality of "no worries".

## 4 Confucius' philosophy on being carefree: following one's heart while not exceeding the rules

Confucius' attitude toward the given state of life can be fully interpreted as an exercise of subjective initiative in a negotiable view of destiny. As the article *Fate attribution, acquisition of sense of control and the functions of psychological adjustment in Confucian culture* suggests, the Confucian concept of negotiable fate makes it easier for individuals to make flexible attributions, increase their sense of control, and thus cope with major life events and realize psychological adjustment<sup>10</sup>. The philosophy and method of "dialectical view on destiny" can be still applied in contemporary times. While functioning as a mental regulation, it also helps in finding out the inner voice and develop our subjective initiative. By constantly being motivated in a given living conditions and bravely facing the constant changes, the individual seeks meaning while at the same time contributing to the development and progress of society through the realization of their own values.

Holding the above-mentioned view of Confucius on fate, in the face of uncontrollable destiny, one adheres to principles and relentless pursuit in order to realize one's mission. While At the same time, this is only part of Confucius' philosophy. Confucius also pursued a carefree state of "following one's heart and not exceeding one's rules". How could we achieve the state of carefree, or at least making improvements towards that mindset?

Confucius gives us a hint in *The Analects*:

### 4.1 To enjoy and thus being away from worries

#### 4.1.1 Acceptance of all that has been given to life with joy

It is written in *The Analects* that Zigong once said, "What is it like to be poor but without flattery and rich but without pride?" Confucius replied, "It is acceptable, but

still not as good as those who are poor but happy, and rich but well-mannered." It is the philosophy guiding us to be happy with what we are and what we are given, whether being poor or rich. When talking about Yanhui, Confucius comments, "The virtuous Hui is also a man who lives really simple life but does not change his happiness." Even in the midst of poverty and hardship, Yan Hui was still happy and eager to learn. Perhaps it was because he was happy with himself, and he had the inner peace of mind and could then enjoy the present moment and pursue its meaning.

Such contentment and concentration on the present saves us from the pain of restlessly seeking but not being able to get. What is there to worry about when you are in the company of joy? This is also true in contemporary circumstances: not to complain, and not to worry too much. Be still happy when you are poor, and be always polite although you are rich. Is this not a negotiable view of destiny? Such a state of mind and action is also acting on the change of destiny through the exercise of subjective initiative. This is just the contemporary use of Confucius' wisdom.

#### **4.1.2 Savoring happiness from engaging in the present:**

Material pleasures are always limited and fleeting, but the pleasure from spiritual pursuits is worth savoring. Confucius was happy to devote himself to what he loved, and he admired those of his disciples of the same kind. In the *Analects*, Confucius says of himself, "He is a man who has become indignant and forgotten his food, and who is happy to forget his worries, not knowing that old age is approaching." His pursuit of learning and concentration makes him even forget to eat and forget to worry. The pleasure and joy that comes from these spiritual pursuits is the source of happiness. Through the relentless refinement of what he loves, and the joy of doing it, one can naturally achieve the realization of self-worth, which is also a source of happiness, as well as a source of meaning and fulfillment.

Being engaged in the pursuit of one's loved career and having no spare time and energy to be distracted, thus enjoying the ultimate happiness which does not depend on anything outside. Focusing on the present moment brings a sense of happiness and being real, and naturally, there will be no place at all for anxiety or helplessness. Such concentration also undoubtedly leads to self-improvement, which will help to grasp new opportunities and thus realize negotiation with destiny. This is precisely what Confucius' "happiness without anxiety" teaches us in our lives today.

#### **4.2 Self-cultivation helps bring us away from worries.**

As Mr. Huang Renyu says in *Confucius and Mencius*, "Confucius, as recounted in *the Analects*, has a sense of relaxation..." And such a relaxed state and realm of Confucius stems from Confucius' wisdom and philosophy. We savor the words and actions of Confucius

in order to try to get closer to such inner quietness and openness<sup>11</sup>.

#### **4.2.1 A gentleman seeks help from himself rather than blaming the outside world or fighting for rights.**

*The Analects* states, "A gentleman demands of himself, whereas a normal person demands of others." In fact, it is the constant demand on oneself that enables self-cultivation, progress and improvement. Instead of thinking that others are bad, it may be a good way to gradually correct ourselves. To learn and make improvements, we are supposed to begin by correcting and cultivating ourselves. In *The Book of Rites*, there is a saying: "When a gentleman misses a shot, he should seek his own fault. You are not supposed to blame the target, rather, your own archery skills are to be improved. Actually rather than blaming, we should understand it as finding the internal cause and starting to act on it.

Meanwhile, by looking for flaw from ourselves, rather than blaming others, we are already free from worries and resentment toward others. As *The Analects* states, "If you are strict to yourself and rarely blame others, you will be far from resentment." If one can look to oneself and ask for more from themselves and less from the outside, one will be away from worries, resentment, and grievances. *The Rites* also has statements about being free from worry and resentment: "If one can correct himself often and does not ask from others, there will be no resentment." This kind of peace and free from resentment may be the reward of inner peace and freedom from worry. If you do not feel guilty, why should you worry or fear?

The perception of desire in Chinese traditional culture, especially Confucianism, is still of great relevance to our times. While the lack of purpose is obviously not conducive to development and progress, if it comes to the other end, the endless pursuit and desire for fame and fortune can lead to serious psychological imbalance and misfortune. This is why "not be pushy" is the key. Not seeking, not forcing, not complaining and not blaming, can help contemporary people get rid of anxiety, focus on the present moment and get out of their psychological difficulties. The power of "not be pushy" can bring inner peace and calmness, and reduce the pain of seeking but still not being able to obtain. While this may also help in concentrating on the present and thus making achievements. Conversely, when one chooses to take risks in the constant pursuit desires, it proves to have undesirable consequences in the long run.

#### **4.2.2 Moderation and adherence to principles bring the mindset of carefree.**

To be moderate means to be neither redundant nor deficient. Mr. Yang Bojun said, "Being moderate is the highest moral standard of Confucius"<sup>12</sup>. According to the *Analects*, Confucius once said, "To be moderate is a true virtue, and it is the highest standard! The people have not had it for a long time." However, being moderate is not a state swaying from side to side without adherence to

principles. Mr Wang Meng has the following interpretation of being moderate: "In modern life, the word 'moderate' even makes people think of being a smoothy. The reason might be that the state of being moderate is one that is neither radical nor manic, and not to the extreme as well...But it is also the firm adherence to principle<sup>13</sup>.

As has been mentioned above, being moderate is the adherence to principles that are just right. So how can adherence to principle make one free from worries? As *The Analects* states, "Wealth and nobility are the desires of men; if they are not obtained in the right way, I will not accept it. Poverty and lowliness are the abominations of men; if we do not get rid of them in a righteous way, I would prefer not change the present situation." So to become rich and be an official is what people want, but if it is not obtained in the right way, it is also unacceptable to a gentleman. By the same token, a gentleman will not get out of a situation like poverty or lowliness, which everyone avoids, if he does not get out of it in the right way. Here the principle is benevolence and righteousness. So a gentleman loves his money and takes it in the right way. This is how inner peace and freedom comes- from adhering to principles.

This is also true today. By being moderate and sticking to principles, there will be much less distress or moral condemnation in the mind, So we can understand that if we stick to our principles, then we have no worries. It is just a decision made by ourselves. With such moral self-consciousness and subjective initiative, it is natural to be frank and feel at ease. Conversely, if one loses the blessing of benevolence and morality, it is naturally detrimental to both the physical and mental well-being and happiness.

## 5 Conclusion

Confucius' practice of negotiable fate and the carefree state of mind remains a contemporary treasure, guiding us in our contemporary lives to the joy of being free from worry by being free from guilt. It can also be an effective solution to the contemporary experience of pain from daily frustration. This philosophy is conducive to the cognitive development of the individual and to the experience of freedom from worries, which in turn enhances one's sense of well-being and facilitates harmonious coexistence. In contemporary society, such perseverance and pursuit, acceptance and empowerment can reduce the social pressure on the individual, and at the same time relieves personal suffering. On the other hand, we will be able to devote to a cause that interests us, fulfilling our mission and at the same time making contribution to the society.

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