

Understanding the Fate Views of Ming Dynasty Literati Through “A Fortunate Man and Dongtinghong”

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Abstract: In the Ming Dynasty, two distinct views on fate emerged among literati: “predestination theory” and “changing fate theory.” The former adhered to the acceptance of predestined fate, denying subjective agency, believing that fate cannot be altered by individual efforts. The formation of this perspective was closely related to the disillusionment of literati in their careers and the harsh reality brought about by the intense competition in the prosperous commodity economy of the Ming Dynasty. Analyzing this phenomenon is conducive to understanding the contradictions between Ming Dynasty monarchy and the development of the commodity economy, as well as the external manifestations of self-contradictory thoughts and influencing factors. Utilizing the method of literature review, this study primarily interprets the chapter “A Fortunate Man and Dongtinghong” from “Amazing Tales-First Series,” presenting new concepts and finding relevant supporting materials based on previous research.

Keywords: Ming Dynasty literati, views on fate, San Yan Er Pai

1. Introduction

Articles on “A Fortunate Man and Dongtinghong” primarily focus on depicting the figures of merchants and commercial activities. Qin Liang, through the interpretation of “A Fortunate Man and Dongtinghong,” summarized the commercial activities and business models of the Ming Dynasty [1]. Guo Xiulan’s interpretation of the figurative language in “A Fortunate Man and Dongtinghong” provides an overview of the Confucian merchant image in the Ming Dynasty [2]. However, there are few articles analyzing the views on fate expressed by Ling Mengchu. By delving deeper into the thoughts expressed by the author, we can observe the transformation of Ming Dynasty literati’s concepts and its underlying reasons.

This paper builds upon previous research to analyze the text, summarizing the predestination theory and changing fate theory expressed by the author through the text. Through this analysis, we aim to further explore the reasons behind the change in the fate views of Ming Dynasty literati.

2. Observing Ming Dynasty Literati's Views on Fate through "A Fortunate Man and Dongtinghong"

2.1. Predestination Theory

Ancient views on fate varied across different cultural and philosophical systems, but generally exhibited a tendency towards predestination. Ancient people commonly believed that the fate of human life was determined by supernatural forces such as heaven, earth, and spirits, emphasizing the power of destiny.

In the "Analects" in the chapter "Xian Wen," it is stated, "When the Way prevails in the world, that is fate; when the Way declines in the world, that too is fate." Clearly, Confucius believed that all things in the world were determined by "fate," which not only determined a person's birth, aging, sickness, and death but also determined success or failure in wealth, status, and career.

Following this, Mencius further subdivided "fate." He believed that benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom were things one could "attain or lose by seeking or abandoning," hence "what is sought within me." Wealth and status, however, were things that one could only obtain through "proper means but ultimately by fate," hence "what is sought externally." [3] Scholars thereafter conducted in-depth explorations and studies building upon Mencius's ideas. Before the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the Confucian view of fate tended towards predestination, arguing for the natural rationality of current life circumstances [4]. In other words, in a highly hierarchical feudal society, individuals were unable to resist fate. Early Confucian thought, as understood by American sinologist Benjamin Schwartz, believed that "(Confucius believed) the only domain he could control was his own cultivation and his ability to influence his disciples" [5]. Early Confucian thought emphasized understanding fate and waiting for it to be rectified in order to achieve righteousness.

In "A Fortunate Man and Dongtinghong," the viewpoint of predestination theory is also present. The author begins by stating, "For those born with extreme foolishness and ignorance, even with shallow literary skills, they will still achieve academic success; even with mediocre martial arts skills, they will still receive great favors. It is truly a matter of timing, fortune, and destiny! There are two well-known sayings: 'If fate is poor, digging up gold turns it into copper; if fate is rich, picking up white paper turns it into cloth' [6]. The author elaborates on this idea through the stories of Jin Weihou and Wang. Jin Weihou, a broker, kept the silver he earned from his business dealings, stating, "If it's good silver, I'll keep it without moving it, once it accumulates to a hundred taels, I'll melt it into a large ingot." Throughout his life, he melted a total of eight ingots, intending to give each of his four sons "a pair as a family treasure." However, one night, the silver spoke to Jin Weihou, saying, "We have no predestined relationship with you, so we've come to bid farewell in advance," and then disappeared to a certain village under the care of someone surnamed Wang. When Jin Weihou arrived at Wang's house and confirmed the situation, Wang showed him the silver. Jin Weihou inspected it and said, "This old man's fate is so thin, he cannot bear it." Upon parting, Wang gave Jin Weihou three taels of silver, but as Jin Weihou left Wang's house, the silver slipped out of a tear in his pocket and fell by the doorstep. It was later found by Wang's servant during cleaning, thus the money ultimately belonged to Wang. Regarding this, the author sighs, "If it is not meant to be his, he will not even get three taels, let alone eight hundred. If it is meant to be his, he will get it, whether it is three taels or eight hundred", once again echoing the concept of predestination theory.

2.2. Changing Fate Theory

Individual destiny is not entirely controlled by the heavens but is influenced by one's own actions — acts of goodness can improve one's fate, while evil deeds may lead to unfavorable outcomes. This concept is known as changing fate theory [7]. Early Confucianism, while emphasizing the inability

to change fate through human efforts, also cautioned against indulgence and waiting passively for fate's arrangements. Instead, individuals should focus on fulfilling their responsibilities without excessive concern for results, emphasizing personal effort and diligence. As Wang Anshi stated, "Sages do not speak of fate; they instruct people to fulfill their human responsibilities" ("Collected Works of Wang Wengong," Volume Twenty-Seven, "Dui Nan") — in modern terms, "do your best and leave the rest to fate."

Ling Mengchu was born in the late Ming Dynasty, a period of prosperous commodity economy, and his works were influenced by the philosophical trends of the late Ming period, mainly affirming human nature's pursuit of wealth and vindicating commerce and merchants [8]. Ling Mengchu did not entirely agree with the predestination theory. He emphasized the role of human agency, asserting that destiny was not predetermined. In "A Fortunate Man and Dongtinghong," he first depicts Wen Ruoxu as a merchant who repeatedly suffered losses in business, earning him the nickname "Unlucky Wen." Ling then provides a detailed analysis of Wen Ruoxu's business failures, rejecting the notion that "if someone produces a lazy person, it's fate that they will be lowly; if someone produces a wicked person, it's fate that they will be poor." He believes that Wen Ruoxu's business failures were not due to bad luck. Therefore, Ling Mengchu devotes much ink to explaining the reasons behind Wen Ruoxu's business losses, aiming to introduce to readers the idea that Wen Ruoxu's business failure was not due to bad luck but rather his failure to fully study the various factors influencing business success or failure.

For instance, Wen Ruoxu's experience of losses in selling fans is described. Hearing that fans sell well in Beijing, Wen Ruoxu invites someone to sell fans from Suzhou to Beijing, hoping to make a small profit through regional price differences. In order to increase the selling price of the fans, he pays someone to imitate famous poems and paintings on the fans, indicating his emphasis on commercial information and business acumen. However, due to his lack of understanding of Beijing's climate, he fails to take effective measures to prevent moisture and mildew. When the fans arrive in Beijing during the humid rainy season, they become stuck together and moldy, shattering all his hopes. From Wen Ruoxu's handling of the value of the fans, it can be seen that he is not unintelligent or lazy; the author further explains that the reason the fans did not sell was because Wen Ruoxu was limited in collecting, absorbing, and processing market information, which had nothing to do with fate. The author then describes how Wen Ruoxu, with his own efforts and the help of friends like Zhang Da, eventually attains wealth. Though the process was arduous, the outcome was excellent, illustrating the saying "When luck retreats, gold loses its luster; when fortune comes, even the stubborn iron shines."

3. Ming Dynasty Literati: Reasons for the Emergence of Two Views on Fate

3.1. Difficulties in Obtaining Official Positions

Looking at the methods of obtaining official positions in the Ming Dynasty, there were several pathways: (1) Through academic institutions; (2) Through examination subjects; (3) Through recommendation; (4) Through selection [9]. Despite the various paths to obtaining official positions, many literati still failed to be selected for various reasons. Scholars often faced numerous difficulties in pursuing success in the imperial examinations, often requiring years of strenuous efforts to achieve, as evidenced by the common experiences of many writers in the Ming Dynasty imperial examinations. Taking examples from the "Collected Poems of Past Dynasties," such as Zhang Qi and Chen Yimeng: "Zhang Xing Hua Qi... born into a poor family, went to study in Wu and Chu at a young age, reciting until midnight every night, and waking up to continue reciting with water splashed on his face by his disciples. In the year of Hongzhi Wuwu, he passed the local examination, and the next year he became a Jinshi, reaching the age of Ai... From childhood to old age, he diligently pursued poetry, devoting

his heart and soul to writing, resulting in the 'Baizhai Collection' in ten volumes, admired by many for his diligent efforts." "Chen Tai Pu Yi... at the age of five, he could converse fluently, at eight he could imitate ancient paintings, at ten he could compose poetry, and at twelve he wrote the 'Chi Bao Shan Fu,' widely circulated and praised. He became a Jinshi in the year of Zhengde Dingchou, and later became a Shuji, already at the age of forty-eight" [9]. Ling Mengchu also corroborates this point in "A Fortunate Man and Dongtinghong," stating: "Those proficient in literature can speak endlessly, but when not needed, a few sheets of paper cannot cover a sauce jar; those skilled in martial arts can shoot a hundred paces, but when not needed, a few arrows cannot cook a pot of rice." In such circumstances, many unsuccessful literati consoled themselves with the predestination theory, believing that their failure to enter officialdom was due to their fate. For the sake of social stability, rulers inevitably supported this view.

3.2. Development of Commerce

In the later period of the Ming Dynasty, the officialdom was relatively corrupt. Official positions could be purchased with money, which generally occurred in two ways: first, through direct donation to obtain an official position. The advantage was the ability to quickly and conveniently enter the officialdom, but the drawback was the enormous expense and associated risks. "Nowadays, the court only seeks to take advantage of people. Once they know you've bought your way in, they'll wait for you to take office for a month or two, and then they'll hook you. It's all just a waste of money." The other method was through bribery to gain protection from the government. Ling Mengchu lamented, "Nowadays, those who serve as officials are greedy for wealth and seek favor from the rich, abandoning the words 'uprightness and fairness' as if they were nothing".

From a dialectical perspective, such practices could lead to social unrest. However, from the perspective of socio-economic development, this atmosphere encouraged merchants to pursue wealth, thus significantly promoting the development of commerce. Hence, there was the saying, "Goods from China taken elsewhere would double or triple in price; similarly, goods from elsewhere brought to China would also undergo the same. With each exchange, there could be eight or nine times the profit, so people would risk their lives on this path." Merchants, in pursuit of wealth, fearlessly traversed the seas and faced hardships to seek fortune. From another perspective, in the later period of the Ming Dynasty, possessing wealth could change one's destiny, even altering one's social status. This practice was also a manifestation of changing fate theory, where fate was no longer dictated solely by the heavens but was within one's own control.

3.3. Emergence of Wang Yangming's Neo-Confucianism

Wang Yangming's Neo-Confucianism was the most significant philosophical trend in the middle and late Ming Dynasty. It had a profound influence on the historical and philosophical thinking of the Ming Dynasty, which scholars have summarized into four aspects: (1) Influence on heterodox historical thinking; (2) Influence on practical learning tendencies in historiography; (3) Influence on the change in historiography style and the rise of textual criticism; (4) Promotion of the compilation of academic history and innovation in historical literature genres [10].

This article briefly analyzes the impact of Wang Yangming's Neo-Confucianism on the thinking of Ming Dynasty literati. The central idea of Wang Yangming's Neo-Confucianism theory was to reconcile the divided mind and principle of Cheng-Zhu Confucianism, integrating external principles into subjective consciousness, thereby endowing "my mind" with great autonomy and agency. This shifted the subject from being a follower of external principles to becoming the possessor of those principles, liberating the subject's thinking while undermining the external ideological authority [11]. It is believed that to some extent, Wang Yangming's ideas greatly influenced the concept of changing

fate theory among Ming Dynasty literati. When faced with difficulties in pursuing officialdom, literati needed solace, and Wang Yangming's thoughts happened to meet this need. For example, Ling Mengchu, in "A Fortunate Man and Dongtinghong," described how the merchant Wen Ruoxu, despite numerous business failures, persisted and eventually risked his life to pursue wealth with Zhang Da and others. This description was largely influenced by Wang Yangming's philosophy. Although the process was arduous, Wen Ruoxu eventually became "a wealthy merchant in Fujian, married and established a family there. Within a few years, he only visited Suzhou once to see old acquaintances, then returned home. To this day, his descendants prosper, and his family remains affluent and unending." Wang Yangming's doctrine emphasized the autonomy of the subject and the importance of the subject's "spiritual clarity," advocating for the cultivation of individuality among literati. Furthermore, the further propagation of Wang Yangming's Neo-Confucianism by later scholars of the Left further enhanced its influence on the intellectual and cultural landscape of late Ming society. This phenomenon was aptly summarized by the late Ming literary figure Yuan Hongdao: "It wasn't until modern times that figures like Wang Wencheng and Luo Xijiang emerged, truly grasping the essence of ancient sages, entering the halls of Confucius, unraveling the rods of Tang and Yu, wielding the swords of literature and martial arts, shaking the deafness and blindness of their time" [12]. Ling Mengchu's depiction of how merchants could change their destiny not only demonstrated his disbelief in predestination theory but also indirectly highlighted the influence of Wang Yangming's Neo-Confucianism on the literati's concept of changing fate theory. At the same time, this story, to some extent, conveyed the message to contemporaries that one's fate could be altered through one's own efforts.

4. Conclusion

This article has explored Ling Mengchu's discussions on predestination and changing fate in "A Fortunate Man and Dongtinghong." In reality, the topic of "fate" can still provoke intense discussions today, not only existing in ancient times but also in contemporary society. For example, our fiercely competitive civil service examinations and public servant exams today can be seen from the perspective of ancient individuals as examinations akin to entering officialdom. How should we perceive this?

Every individual's circumstances are unique. Some people, when faced with prosperity, may become careless, forgetting the principle of "being watched by ten eyes and pointed at by ten hands," and abandon the principles of self-discipline, ultimately leading to unfortunate situations or even turning to crime. In times of prosperity, increased freedom often leads people to neglect laws and moral standards, engage in wrongdoing, and eventually face the consequences. Conversely, understanding one's limitations and maintaining a sense of vigilance in times of prosperity, continuously self-improving, and striving diligently can lead to significant progress in one's career, life, and family. Life is full of challenges and risks, and difficult times cannot be completely avoided. However, when difficulties arise, facing them bravely with outstanding character and intelligence, overcoming them, can lead to personal growth and improvement.

Of course, we can also learn moderately from the excellent traditional Chinese cultural thoughts. In traditional Chinese culture, Confucianism advocates for engagement in the world, while Daoism advocates for detachment. Daoism, while advocating for going with the flow, also mentions that if one cannot change their fate, they should adapt and be content with the situation. Instead of dwelling excessively on self-regret and complaints, one should seek joy in the lows of life, cultivate the soul, and attain a state of broad-mindedness. Perhaps hidden within the depths of life's adversity lies the opportunity to change one's fate. Although life is filled with thorns and mud, we should not be troubled by the thorns and mud beneath our feet but should lift our heads to gaze at the vast and boundless starry sky above and the twinkling lights not far away.

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