

# On the Role of Proverbs in the Composition of Family Instruction

## --- Taking Double Morals Hall Instruction as an Example

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### Abstract

Proverbs have been collectively created by folk people of the human society since ancient times. They are spread widely from mouth to mouth. As concisely and comparatively stereotyped artist statements, they have summed up the rich wisdom and universal experience of the masses, becoming the important carrier of the history of social attitudes. Family instructions are specially written for ancient Chinese families or the clan old people to educate the children. As documents written for a certain purpose, family instructions belong to the education within families. As a great feature of Chinese ideological and cultural treasure house, they have played an important role in popularizing Confucianism. To compose family education with proverbs can make it easy and popular thus making the Confucius education spread more broadly.

**Keywords:** Proverbs, Family instruction, Confucius thought, Double Morals Hall Instruction

The book of Rites says that proverbs are slang words. Shangshu names proverbs as slang words. It can be seen that, generally speaking, proverbs are a kind of existing folk-sayings with something in it. Text Notes and Word Explanations interprets proverbs as the hearsay and Guangya also says so. It is recorded in Taiping Yulan that hearsays are proverbs. There are words in Xuanying of Tang Dynasty in his book, saying that proverbs are words that have experienced generations after generations. That is to say, having undergone for many years, proverbs become a kind of set language with a certain format due to the popular usage.

As for the researches of the proverbs, in Yang Shen's book, Proverbs in the Past and Present, there are classical and profound words of the late sages and the ordinary people. Some slang or folk words, which are not worthy of being named proverbs are actually considered to be proverbs. Mr. Guo Shaoyun in his Study of the Proverbs (Novel Monthly, Issue 2, 3 and 5 of Volume 2 in 1921) explains the features and functions of the proverbs to indicate their artistic values. He said that "proverbs are the result that people have achieved in the practice and expressed in beautiful words. They can be used publicly in daily talks and have the functions of regulating the acts of the people." British Daily Post on Nov 14, 2007 carried a part of new article of Jeff Roles, a psychologist, in Study of Proverbs. He studies some of the proverbs in the daily life and explored the ideas reflected in it and gave scientific proofs of some theory deduced in the proverbs.

Therefore, it can be defined that proverbs are, since the ancient times, the artistic set words or sentences created collectively in the folk world of the human beings, which are simple and concise in meaning and spread widely with strong style of popularization. What they have reflected involves every aspects of the social life. Simple and easy words are always adopted to reflect profound meaning, which is closely related with the daily life of the ordinary people, to vividly express the rich life experience of the people in the society. They are conclusions drawn from the rich wisdom and universal laws of the masses and the important carrier of the history of outlooks on society. If proverbs can be used properly, text will become lively and vivid and more expressive.

Family instruction is the document written by the ancient Chinese families or the elder people of a clan to educate the offspring. It belongs to the education within a family or a family clan and has a distinctive feature in the Chinese ideological and culture treasure. Rooted in the social structure with the basic feature of patriarchal clan system, it takes Confucius thought as the mainstream guiding principle and "has played an important role, which can not be ignored, in the spread of the Confucius thought to the folk world. To some degrees, it can be said that family instructions have build a bridge between the sage's learning and the penetration of the earth

people, by which Confucius ethical thought reached the realm of the mind of the masses.”(Wang, 2006, p.34)

The writer of Double Morals Hall Instruction is Wang Huizu (1731-1807). Huanzeng and Longzhuang Scholar are his names, too. He is from Xiaoshan, Shaoxing of Zhejiang Province. His father died when he was young so he was raised by his two mothers. At the age of twenty three, he became an official and for thirty four years he had been a famous Shiye in Shaoxing. During the long period, he had experienced several failures in the royal examination and finally passed it in the fortieth year of Qianlong period at the age of forty six. When he was fifty eight, he went to Ningyuan of Hunan Province to be the governor. After retired from the position, he worked hard in writing and achieved a lot. Hong Jiliang once praised him that “as a son he is obedient, as an assistant to a high official, he is famous. To be an official, he follows rules docilely. After retired, he becomes profound in learning. He disciplined himself very much and worked whole heartedly. He is actually perfect.” (Shao, 1977, p. 77). What Mr. Hong said is true about his personality. As a famous Zhejiang scholar gent in the period of Qianlong and Jianjing period, Wang Huizu honestly inherited the spirit of the practical use of East Zhejiang School. On the one hand, he put his whole life in practicing the mission of the scholar bureaucrats: “of publicizing the civilization for the court”. However, he often felt that he had not enough in leanings. And it is like what he said “there is no perfect virtue or personality. On the other hand, he required that his offspring should “be useful for the times”. He also stressed that “being a Confucius scholar is loftier than any other occupations that virtuous men have engaged in.” If it is not the right way, other method of life can be chosen. Therefore, farming is the root, though it is secondary to the line of bureaucrat. People can depend on any other line to achieve the success and form families. But it is important to do it honestly and adhere to it consistently.” (Double Morals Hall Instruction, 1995, p. 178)

Double Morals Hall Instruction has six volumes and there are 219 articles in it. Volume 1, Talking about the Ancestors, tells the family lineage of the Wang and the good words or actions or stories of the ancestors, that is, record of the virtue of the ancestors. Volume 2, Self-discipline, is mainly about the problem of the cultivation of morality. Nothing regretful will be left if a task is completely done. Volume 3, Governing Family, relates the way of governing family and managing money. Volume 4, Dealing with the World, discusses how to agree with the complicated social environment. Volume 5, Educating the Children, emphasizes the way of instructing the children. In the eyes of Wang Huizu, keeping the present court continuous and making it stronger depends on it because children are the hope of a family. Whether the children are filial or not decides the prosperity or decline of a family. Therefore, education is of great importance. Volume 6, Teachers and Friends, is mainly about the way of respecting teachers and making friends. It also exhorts that the children should be careful to make friends.

In the preface to the autobiography, Wang Huizu writes “I wrote Double Morals Hall Instruction to instruct the children... I want to with my children talk about the ways to cultivate ourselves and communicate with the other people. Some disclose the truth, while others try to proved something with true events. All about the good words or actions, of teachers or fiends are praised by word of mouth or written in paper. After some time, a book come into being...Though simple and plain, the texts of my Instruction are the laws, regulations or commandments that should be known by generations of children and women.” (Double Morals Hall Instruction, 1995, p. 244).

Rich life experience makes him deeply know the ways of the world and the human relations. Double Morals Hall Instruction, resulting from his ten years of life experience, is the conclusion of the life of ups and downs and the integration of the doctrines of the oracles. It is used to train the young generation to adapt themselves to the society with more purposeful and practical content and to meet the challenges from the society to be a true man. It is named Instruction by a Mediocre Person. “I was strong when I was young. But when I become old, I begin to follow rules docilely. Thus I am trite. Except the stale virtue and words, I have nothing else. Therefore, I have named it Instruction by a Mediocre Person. The so-called Double Morals Hall is because I have not suffered a lot thanks to my two mothers... I know I am a mediocre person so I dare not hope my offspring to be sages in the future. Let them learn something from the books of Yan and Yuan. They will gain the knowledge of oracles, as is considered to be good. ” (Double Morals Hall Instruction, 1995, pp.158, 159). Therefore, suiting both refined and popular tastes is one of the features of this book. It is characterized especially in the aspect of elegance to the vulgarity and highlighted in the demonstration of the popular culture.

Suiting both refined and popular tastes is clear in citations and quotations to disclose the truth or to prove the occurrences. The citations or quotations of the refined culture are from Book of Yi, Book of Songs, Li, Shu, Lunyu, Mengtius, Daxue, Moderation, Family Instruction of the Yan, Examples from Family Yuan, and Moral Classics. For example, in the article that words cannot involve in libel, there is something like that, the speaker is innocent and the listener should take warning. The same is in the prelude of a part, Guanju, of Book of Songs. But Mr. Wang adopted it in another way, he warned his children that “the ancient people had these words but we

can not cite them as a law or regulation. All those that are taboos or sarcastic words should be carefully adopted when we cite ... a man of honor must be prudential. He should be cautious not to get into trouble because of words.” (Double Morals Hall Instruction, 1995, pp.158, 159).

As for the application of the popular culture, the citations or quotations of proverbs are quite distinctive, as is one of the best interpretations of mediocrity. Wang Zuhui believed that proverbs are likely to be more profound than Tao; we don't know their origin but they are clear enough in meaning or connotation; the words apparently may occur now but actually in the remote past. There are many forms of them, such as, “there are proverbs saying”, “proverbs say”, “proverbs go that”, “words say”, “it is said that”, “there is an old saying that”, “ancient people said that”, etc.

This text believes that compositions of family instructions aim at solving the basic problem that what kind of persons the children will become in the future. So it is one of the designations of personality. Perhaps it is the best effective one. That is the primary question that Double Morals Hall Instruction should face. After the discussion of efforts that should be made, the following are what people must do. Those who have five senses and four limbs are called people. The so-called emperor and minister, father and son, husband and wife, brothers, friends are the general titles of the people. Officials, businessmen, farmers and craftsmen are the classifications of the people. However, if ministers can not be loyal to the emperors, children can not be filial to their parents, they are not worth the names. If officials are not investigative and farmers are tired of farming, they are not true officials or farmers. If people want to do well, they should display their characters. There are proverbs going that there is “zuo (means do)” in “zuo prime minister (to be a true prime minister), zuo ordinary people (to be ordinary people), zuo parents and zuo children (to be good parents and good children)”. If nothing is achieved, it is because it is not done. Therefore, the word of man is a reclame. If you want it to be substantial, it is inevitable to practice.

Here, human beings are classified according to aliases. It is the general program of the whole book. It points out that if people want to be their best, they should display their behaviors or abilities. Then a proverb is cited to show the profound meaning by using a simple example. Prescribed by the proposition of what person to be or how to be a true man, the book develops. The followings are about the use of proverbs.

The first is about individual's cultivation. “Leaving a lot of money to the children is no better than giving them a classic book to read” is cited to indicate it is good to store books. “There are three hundred and sixty trades, and every trade has its master” is quoted to explain that the readers should not admire the name of a scholar. “A scholar studies the medicine, and cooking is like a piece of cake” is cited to show the easiness. “If you can not become a good prime minister, you had better practice medicine” is used to expound that people should be cautious to choose the medical career. “Staying in a store with net in hand” is cited to explain that “if you keep the net in hand, you are sure to get fish. Likewise, the store itself can not get interests. But if you keep the store on, you can get money. In a word, consistency is precious.” “If the mouth of a duck is ground to be sharp, the price of chicken will be low” is quoted to explain that “changing should agree with the times. Therefore, consistency is very important to ensure the success.” “If his words are always empty and gorgeous, he will achieve nothing till he becomes old” is used to emphasize the bad result of incredibility. “He who can not resist the temptation of the gold on the ground or the beautiful women that is easy to get is the true man” is adopted to demonstrate the two big difficulties, money and beauty that man may face in daily life. “There is something valuable in the things you have bought at low price. Furniture cost you much but it may be durable” is quoted to show that it is not always good to get temporary benefit. “Those who want to gain great advantages will lose something at last”, as is a truth in history.

The second is about the family life. “More brothers will be better when their parents are in need of help but fewer will be better to share the legacy” is quoted to indicate that friendship is more difficult than filial obedience. “... therefore, late sages cited what is said in Shu to indicate that only filial obedience can make brothers harmonious. Since the ancient times, it is interest that has made brothers lose harmony.” “The eldest brother should be treated as father” is used to expound that younger brothers should respect their elder brothers. “if both the husband and wife are diligent, it will be easy for them to earn their livings. However, if they are lazy, they will become beggars though they have had many mu of the field” is used to show that thrift is a brother of diligence. “The salt pot is down, so is the vinegar” is cited to explain that diligence is an especially important quality for a woman. “To be a yiliao (wise) wife is more difficult than to be a bailiao (clever) maid” is quoted to show that a woman should be taught how to be a true woman. “yiliao” can be found in volume 8 of Classified Utterance of Zhuzi. It reads “he who is born gift will achieved all. That is to say, it is no necessary for him to exert more efforts.” There is what Wang Shouren said in his Record of Inheriting Custom, reading: great people can know all things through some occurrences. Good understanding has nothing with time. Only through several

occurrences at present, you can know what other things will be. It means that after one important problem is solved, the other things will be easy to settle down.

The third is about the social life. “Bask grain if it is sunny” and “ships should be fit for the river” are used to show that power can not be depended on excessively. “Returning the money in time, it will be easy to borrow money next time” is adopted to expound debt should be paid as soon as possible. “It is harmful to eat preserved vegetable with salt when thirsty” is used to indicate that people should not provide loans with high interests. “To make things more beautiful is no better than to offer help in time” is quoted to explain that people who failed should be treated properly. “A prime minister should pay his respect to the county governor” is cited to expound that local leaders should be respected. “If you want everything to be smooth, you should pay your respect to the local officials” is quoted to show that the sophisticated people can not be ignored. “Ten years can make a person rich or poor” is cited to demonstrate the truth that success and failure can change in turn.

In a word, Double Moral Hall Instruction has used a great number of proverbs and proved them with what the writer had seen or heard. Profound truths are talked about in daily words, which are simpler and the grounds of arguments are more persuasive. Thus Double Morals Hall Instruction is more amicable with the taste of household food. It can be easily understood by ordinary people and is helpful for the Confucius thoughts to break through the scope of a family and to spread in the society broadly.

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