

An Attempt to Resolve the Problem of Teenage Rebellion by Examining the Teaching of Two Verses from *The Treatise on Response and Retribution*

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I. Introduction:

The Treatise on Response and Retribution 太上感應篇 is an important and valuable classic from the Taoist tradition. Although it only comprises around one thousand and two hundred words, despite the short length, it offers much guidance in relation to the appropriate conduct required in various facets of life. The core teaching of this classic is on the natural relationship of cause and effect, in other words, we reap what we sow; this kind of teaching sets up moral standards in society and educates the people to distinguish right from wrong. Therefore, this classic could have its special meaning and value to our contemporary society, as its teachings can guide us to resolve many of the problems that we face nowadays. For instance, teenage rebellion has become an evident problem in the modern society. During the adolescent years, teenagers generally feel resistant against the instructions and advice given by their parents and the elders, they would rather listen to and take their friends' suggestions. If the friends are of decent nature, then taking their advice could have a positive effect, but what if the situation was the contrary? In today's presentation, I will refer to the verse - 「是非不當，向背乖宜」 from the teachings of The Treatise on Response and Retribution (太上感應篇) to explore the problems of teenage rebellion and attempt to propose some possible solutions.

II. The Interpretation of the Phrase “是非不當，向背乖宜”

The meaning of the eight characters in this phrase appears to be very straight forward. 「是非」 indicates the principles of the right and wrong of all things; 「不當」 could be interpreted as “improper”; 「向」 has the meaning of “getting close to”, while 「背」

means “to go against” or “to turn one’s back on”; and 「乖宜」 can be explained in the same way as the meaning of 「不當」. The interpretation of the entire phrase can be understood as “to confuse right and wrong; to distant oneself from the virtuous people but to get close with those of improper conduct.”¹

Although these eight characters are used to describe the crimes and offenses of government officials in The Treatise on Response and Retribution 太上感應篇, but this phenomenon can also be found in other people, for example, in teenagers, as they undergo an adolescent rebellion period. During this period, they like to believe in their own thoughts and ideas, and gradually, they refuse to communicate with and become unwilling to take advice from their parents, but instead, they would rather spend most of their time with friends. It is evident that the age of offenders is falling younger and it is not rare to see teenagers being involved in crime activities.² So what are the reasons for such misconduct in teenagers, while they should be spending those years establishing correct views and values?

III. The Phenomenon and Its Root Cause

As we know, teenagers are easily influenced by their environment and their character is still at a developing stage. As the saying goes ‘Nurture determines a person’s character, and one is judged by the company one keeps.’ During this critical time period, what they come to contact with could shape their view of the world, so parental guidance is very important and essential. However, the common phenomenon is that teenagers gradually become resistant against advice from their parents, they would rather listen to their peers; when bad influence is encountered, their understanding of the right values could be distorted. The root cause of this phenomenon may be due to the trend of the general social environment, as well as the adolescent’s character change.

The development of modern society has changed people’s way of living. In the past, the man usually worked and supported the family financially, while the woman took care of housework, such as looking after the children. Moreover, a traditional Chinese family could

¹ Translated by Taiyu Cao. Original text: ‘是非不當，向背乖宜。’ *Taishang ganying pian huibian* 太上感應篇彙編 (Hongkong: Huazang jingzong xuehui 華藏淨宗學會, 2013), p.457.

² Yuan Suoxiu 原所秀, ‘Guanyu qingshaonian xindongxiang ji yufangce de tantao 關於青少年犯罪新動向及預防策的探討’, *Liaoning jingcha xueyuan xuebao* 遼寧警察學院學報, 120.2 (2020), pp. 32-36.

have a few generations living under the same roof; everyone would sit together in the garden or by the fire after dinner, to chat about their day. You can rarely see such a sight in modern China, what's being replaced is that both parents are busy at work and the children spend most of their time completing homework from school.

Under such trend of the general social environment, parents and children gradually begin to live in two separate social circles and there are not many opportunities between the two to form a healthy environment for good communication. The feeling of estrangement is not obvious when the child is young, as they still tend to trust what their parents say; but as they reach adolescence, not only are there changes in their physical appearance, but a perception of self-identity is also developing, provoking a sense of independence. They begin to have their own views and opinions, and wish to escape from the control of adults. They are more emotionally sensitive and start to pay more attention to what other people think of them. I remember when I was eight, I used to walk along the streets singing and did not care what the others thought about me. But I realised this feeling changed when I was fifteen, it did not feel natural to sing in public anymore. Teenagers do have some unique characteristics, during adolescent years, they desire for more personal space and independence. If a good foundation for communication was not established when they were young, then it could be more challenging to do so when they are teenagers. As a result, it would be harder for them to accept guidance from their parents.

As their self-identity is being developed, their self-esteem becomes greater, which may result in stronger subjective judgment. They may also do things to prove that they have grown up, such as partying with friends all night. Parents may harshly scold them for this behaviour in the same way as when they were young, but this will lead to stronger resistance and increase their defense against the parents. In comparison, friends would not scold them harshly, so consequently, teenagers would be more willing to listen to their friends.

In addition, with the development of information technology, it is very easy for teenagers to explore the world through Internet access. Although the internet is a neutral platform in itself, depending on how it is utilized, it does contain the world's good and dark side. On the one hand, through the internet learning platform, they could gain more knowledge to enhance their understanding of the world and to establish moral values; on the other hand, there is also the possibility that they could encounter materials on violence and pornography, such content may stimulate their curiosity. Being overly obsessed may lead them to imitate in real life.

Also, teenagers of similar interests can become connected through the internet without the geographic inconvenience. Being able to connect with friends of same interests around the world could further shut them off from their parents, as the internet can satisfy their various needs.

IV. Possible Solutions

We have now looked at the causes of teenage rebellion against their parents. This occurrence is quite unhealthy for teenagers' self-development as an improper system of values can be formed. So the phrase from the treatise can naturally describe their situation. Next, I would like to propose some possible solutions from both the parents and the children's perspectives.

Firstly, it is the importance of family education from parents. It's undeniable that parental intervention plays a vital role in the identification of right and wrong values. A child's first and most influential teacher is his parents; once a good parent-child relationship is built, then their positive influence on the formation of the adolescent's character is irreplaceable. However, nowadays parents rarely fulfill the role of mentor, largely due to the misunderstanding that education should happen at school, some also feel that they should give children enough space for self-development. However, eminent scholar Huang Zongyi from the Ming dynasty once said, 'You cannot say you love your children if you do not teach and discipline them.' This directly points out that parents' true love for their children is through attentive care and proper teaching, this does not equate to sending them to various tuition classes. One way of teaching them is to give their children certain responsibilities, such as duties around the household, regardless the nature of the duty; it can be as simple as cleaning, or as important as participation in the arrangement of family finance. Moreover, parents could involve them in their decision-makings and value and consider suggestions from their children. By doing so, children will feel closer with their parents and a relationship of trust between the two is built. As a result, teenagers will be more receptive towards parents' advice; and are more likely to consult with their parents when they hear and see improper things from their peers and the internet; hence their right views of right and wrong could be well founded. Teaching by example is also critical. By observing the ways their

parents deal with things can subconsciously form their own values, as actions speak louder than words.

Secondly, it is from the perspective of the teenagers. It is helpful when they have clear goals for the future. Goals work like a lighthouse that leads the path ahead of them. When they know what they want in life, they will work hard towards achieving the goals and are less likely to be affected by bad influences. Confucius once said that I knew my aspiration for learning since I was fifteen.³ At a young age, eminent scholar Fan Zhongyan aspired to becoming a virtuous minister or a good doctor for the purpose of helping all people.⁴ There is a famous saying by Prime Minister Zhou of China that his learning was for the rising of china.⁵ These examples prove that when one holds clear aspiration for the future, one knows the direction of life; then all things and people that are unrelated to their goals cannot impose negative influences on them. This is a very important point.

V. Conclusion:

Overall, although the phrase 「是非不當，向背乖宜」 is used in the Treatise on Response and Retribution to describe the crimes and offenses of government officials, but it can also be used to describe the phenomenon of teenage rebellion in the contemporary society. The root causes of this problem have a number of aspects, such as the lack of parental intervention due to their busy work lives, and the teenager's character change resulting in independence, which distance them from their parents. Moreover, there are also influences from peers and the internet. There are a number of possible solutions, but I believe that family education from parents is the most significant. Family education should not only start when problems start to surface, but should rather act as companionship and guidance in the process of growing up. Lastly, if the teenagers have clear future aspirations, then they are less likely to be affected by negative influences.

³ Translated by Taiyu Cao . Original text: '吾十有五而志於學。' He Yan 何晏, Xing Bing 邢昺, *Lunyuzhushu* 論語註疏 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), p.16

⁴ Wu Zeng 吳曾, 'Nenggaizhai manlu 能改齋漫錄', in *Yingyin wenyuange cikuquanshu* 景印文淵閣四庫全書, ed. by Aixinjueluo Yongrong 愛新覺羅·永瑤 and Ji Yun 紀昀 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1986), vol. 850, p. 752.

⁵ Translated by Taiyu Cao. Original text: '為中華之崛起而讀書'. Shipingyang 石平洋, Zhou Enlai de chuxin: Wei zhonghua zhi jueqi er dushu, 周恩來的初心：為中華之崛起而讀書, (2019)
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