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# A New Interpretation of *Analects* 4.8

## 1. Introduction

In this study, I discuss various interpretations of *Analects* 4.8, ‘hearing the Way in the morning, dying in the evening without regret (*zhao wen dao xi si ke yi* . 朝聞道夕死可矣) .’ Confucius is known to have frequently discoursed on the principles that individuals should adhere to in their lives and rarely addressed the subject of death. Therefore, scholars put a premium on the *Analects* 4.8 due to its exploration of a life-or-death situation. For example, Fu Peijung 傅佩榮(2005) notes that the *Analects* 4.8 shows that, regarding life and death, it is possible that ‘*wendao* (Hearing the Way 聞道)’ is ‘a change of mind’, settling our life for good, which is one of the religious aspects of Confucius’s thought.<sup>1</sup> Liao Mingchun 廖名春(2009) provides a new perspective on the explanation of ‘*wendao*’. He states that ‘*wendao*’ refers to ‘attaining the way’ and this passage means that ‘if I could attain my ideal in the morning, I would be content to die that evening’, which embodies Confucius’s pursuit of putting principles into practice.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these studies, by examining the contents of *Analects* 4.8, Feng Minghua 馮明華(2024) analysed the Neo-Confucian philosophers of the Song dynasty’s perspective on the relation between the Way of Confucianism and life as well as death.<sup>3</sup> While previous studies have explored the logic between ‘*wendao*’ and ‘life as well as death’, a review of the literature reveals a lack of attention to the word ‘*zhaoxi* (Morning and evening 朝夕)’. This neglect raises a critical question: does the lack of the analysis of the word ‘*zhaoxi*’ limit the interpretive scope of *Analects* 4.8? Therefore, in the following, I examine the logical coherence of conventional interpretations of *Analects* 4.8 from both exegesis and hermeneutic perspectives. Subsequently, based on the conventional interpretations, I discuss the necessity of studying *zhaoxi* and adopt Paul Ricoeur’s (1913-2005) theoretical framework, time and narrative, to offer a new interpretation of *Analects* 4.8.

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<sup>1</sup> Fu Peijung 傅佩榮, ‘Confucius’s Certain Fixed Opinion about Death’ 孔子對死亡的某種定見, *Zhexue yu wenhua* 哲學與文化, 32.4, (2005), 61-71, (p.71).

<sup>2</sup> Liao Mingchun 廖名春, ‘Lunyu “zhaowendao xisikeyi” xinshi 《論語》「朝聞道，夕死可矣」章新釋’ (A new interpretation of *Analects* 4.8), *Qinghuadaxue xuebao* 清華大學學報, 24.6, (2009), 151-155, (p.154).

<sup>3</sup> Feng Minghua 馮明華, ‘Rudao yu sisheng: songru dui “zhaowendao, xisikeyi” de quanshi’ 儒道與死生：宋儒對「朝聞道，夕死可矣」的詮釋 (The way of Confucianism and life as well as death: Neo-Confucian philosophers of the Song dynasty’s the interpretation of *Analects* 4.8), *Fujian luntan* 福建論壇, 4(2024), 150-160, (pp.159-160).

## 2. Logical Inconsistencies in Main Conventional Interpretations of

### *Analects* 4.8

About *Analects* 4.8, conventional studies have primarily focused on the relationship between *wendao* and the *kesi* (Dying without regret 可死). In order to ascertain whether it is essential to study the function of the word ‘*zhaoxi*’, we must first have an overview of main existing interpretations of *Analects* 4.8 to examine whether these interpretations are logical.

#### 2.1 *Wendao*: hearing that there is the Way in the world

Supporters of this interpretation, led by He Yan 何晏 (196?-249) and Huang Kan 皇侃 (488-545), primarily develop their argument from the perspective of Confucius' political aspirations. They note that ‘*wendao*’ means ‘*wenshiyoudao* ( hearing that there is the Way in the world 聞世有道)’. What does *Analects* 4.8 mean? He Yan states that Confucius said that he was dying, but he had not heard that there was the Way in the world.<sup>4</sup> Confucius regrets that he failed to manifest the Way in practice. Huang Kan quotes Luan Zhao 樂肇 (dates unknown) ‘The Way exists to benefit the people, sages exist to implement the Way’ to further explain He Yan’s commentary.<sup>5</sup> It means that Huang Kan claims that, in the face of the collapse of ritual and music, in Confucius’s view, the ultimate purpose of existence is to implement the Way within society. Confucius strives to help people. If the Way were realised and heard, Confucius would consider his lifelong mission to have been fulfilled. Then it does not matter if he leaves this world. This is the reason why Confucius said that if in the morning he could hear that there was the Way in the world, he would have no regrets even if he were to die tonight.

In terms of He Yan and Huang Kan’s commentaries, we can find that the character ‘*Dao* (Way 道)’ is explained as two characters ‘*youdao* (The Way exists 有道)’. In other words, they interpret the character by adding characters. This violates the principle of exegesis. Furthermore, from the hermeneutic perspective, their interpretation would be partial and misleading promise. It is true that, as He Yan and Huang Kan suggest, Confucius once declared his political ideal, like ‘The Chou is resplendent in culture, having before it the example of the two previous dynasties. I am for the Chou.’<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, how to attain his

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<sup>4</sup> Huang Kan 皇侃, *Lunyu yishu* 論語義疏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), p.87. 言將至死，不聞世之有道。

<sup>5</sup> Huang Kan, *Lunyu yishu*, p.87. 樂肇云：「道所以濟民，聖人存身，為行道也。」

<sup>6</sup> D.C. Lau, *The Analects*. (The Chinese University Press, 1992), p.23.

political ideal? He claims, ‘If for a single day a man could return to the observance of the rites through overcoming himself, then the whole Empire would consider benevolence to be his. However, the practice of benevolence depends on oneself alone, and not on others.’<sup>7</sup> Moreover, why do people study Way? Confucius notes, ‘Men of antiquity studied to improve themselves; men today study to impress others.’<sup>8</sup> Confucius’s statements imply that core of the maintenance of social order and study is self-cultivation. Therefore, He Yan and Huang Kan’s interpretations are problematic, as it unduly emphasises the political ideals of Confucius while diminishing the core educational principle of his teachings: self-cultivation. Thus, He Yan and Huang Kan’s interpretations are questionable from both exegesis and hermeneutic perspectives.

## 2.2 *Wendao*: realising the Way to overcome the fear of death

From the mid-Northern Song dynasty onwards, Confucianism began to revive. Confronted with the prominence of Buddhism and Daoism, which hold an advantage in resolving the problem of life and death, some Confucian scholars of the period adopted the perspectives of Buddhist and Daoist to interpret Confucian classics.<sup>9</sup> For instance, regarding *Analects* 4.8, Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101) claims, ‘People who have not realised the Way, at the juncture of gain and loss, invariably lose their true nature. Hence, they must lose their true nature at the juncture of life and death.’<sup>10</sup> Su Shi believes that as long as people can realise the Way, then their true nature remains unchanged in the face of death. In his interpretation, *wendao* means realising the Way. Moreover, Su Shi’s interpretation implies that when people can *wendao*, they can confront death as they retain true nature. Su Zhe 蘇轍 (1039-1112) supports Su Shi’s statement.<sup>11</sup> The point is that Su Shi and Su Zhe argue that *wendao* can help people overcome their fear of death, so Confucius said that people, realising the Way in the morning, can accept dying at night. However, their interpretations raise a crucial question: does Confucius advocate that people realise the Way to overcome the fear of death? Indeed, Confucius made no statements about the Way that can deal with the problem of life and death. Rather than how to face death, he placed greater emphasis on what people actually

<sup>7</sup> Lau, *The Analects*, p. 109.

<sup>8</sup> Lau, *The Analects*, p. 141.

<sup>9</sup> Feng Minghua, ‘Rudao yu sisheng: songru dui “zhaowendao, xisikeyi” de quanshi’, p.153.

<sup>10</sup> Wang Ruoxu 王若虛, *Wangruoxu ji* 王若虛集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2017), p.43. 東坡云：「未聞道者，得喪之際，未嘗不失其本心，而況死生乎？」

<sup>11</sup> Shidian guji 識典古籍, *Lunyu shiyi* 論語拾遺 (1597) <[https://www.shidianguji.com/zh/?page\\_from=searching\\_page](https://www.shidianguji.com/zh/?page_from=searching_page)> [accessed 29 January 2026]. 「朝聞道，夕死可矣。」苟未聞道，雖多學而識之，至於生死之際，未有不失也。苟一日聞道，雖死可以不亂矣。死而不亂，而後可謂學矣。」

accomplished during their lifetime. Thus, when death approached, Confucius said, ‘The gentleman detests not leaving a name behind when he is gone.’<sup>12</sup> Therefore, Su Shi and Su Zhe’s interpretations may lack objectivity as it relies heavily on the Buddhist and Daoist perspectives.

### 2.3 *Wendao*: realising the principle of all things

Unlike Su Shi and Su Zhe, who interpret *Analects* 4.8 from a Buddhist perspective, Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) opposes explaining it through Buddhist doctrine. This is because Zhu Xi believes that Buddhist Way refers to escapism. Buddhists pursue Buddhist Way as they fear death.<sup>13</sup> Zhu Xi argues that the Way is meant to be studied and practised, not employed to resolve the problem of life and death. Hence, Zhu Xi explains ‘*Dao*’ as ‘the principle of all things’,<sup>14</sup> which refers to the relationships of ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, brothers and siblings, and friends.<sup>15</sup> Since *Dao* is the principle of all things, then every human being must *wendao*.<sup>16</sup> It is because the Way is intimately connected with people. This is the theoretical foundation of Zhu Xi’s interpretation of the relation between ‘Hearing the Way in the morning’ and ‘dying in the evening without regret’. Zhu Xi explains ‘*wen*’ as ‘realising (*Zhi* 知)’. In Zhu Xi’s opinion, this passage does not imply that people will die if they realise *Dao*. It emphasises that *Dao* must be realised. What is the point of a long life if people do not realise *Dao*?<sup>17</sup> Zhu Xi believes that if people truly realise *Dao*, they must be able to deeply believe in *Dao* and firmly protect *Dao*. If you are fortunate enough to have realised *Dao* without dying, you can continue raising your capacity for realisation (*Zhi* 知) to become a sage. If you die after realising *Dao*, at least you will not have lived this life in ignorance like animals.<sup>18</sup> Zhu Xi points out that *Analects* 4.8 stresses the importance of ‘realising *Dao*’ rather than ‘resolving the problem of life and death through realising *Dao*’.

With regard to Zhu Xi’s interpretation, we can find that Zhu Xi values realisation and he thinks that once people truly realise *Dao*, the correct action follows naturally. However, his interpretation does not align with Confucius’s thoughts. In the *Analects*, there is a passage

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<sup>12</sup> Lau, *The Analects*, p. 153.

<sup>13</sup> Cheng Shude 程樹德, *Lunyujishi* 論語集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), p.284.

<sup>14</sup> Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu zhangjuzhu* 四書章句集注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), p.70. 道者 事物當然之理。

<sup>15</sup> Cheng Shude, *Lunyujishi*, p.283. 吾之所謂道者，君臣父子夫婦昆弟朋友當然之實理也。

<sup>16</sup> Cheng Shude, *Lunyujishi*, p.283. 人事當然之實理，乃人之所以爲人而不可以不聞者。

<sup>17</sup> Cheng Shude, *Lunyujishi*, p.283. 人一生而不聞道，雖長生亦何為。

<sup>18</sup> Cheng Shude, *Lunyujishi*, p.283. 若知得真實，必能信之篤，守之固。幸而未死，可以充其所知爲聖爲賢。萬一卽死，則亦不至昏昧一生如禽獸然。

praising Zilu 子路(542-480 BCE)'s behaviour, 'Before he could put into practice something he had realised, the only thing Zilu feared was that he should be told something further.'<sup>19</sup> It is clear that there is gap between realisation and action. Therefore, when Zilu can put what he has realised into practice, he is praised. It is not as Zhu Xi claims that people who realise Dao have not lived in vain. Both realisation and action should be emphasised, rather than placing excessive emphasis on realisation, as Zhu Xi did.

Based on the analysis above, it is evident that these conventional interpretation can not fully reflect the view of Confucius. These conventional interpretations, which simply interpret *Analects* 4.8 through a discussion of the logic behind 'wendao' and 'dying without regret', conflict with Confucius's thought to some extent.

### 3. A Reinterpretation of *Analects* 4.8 from the Perspective of the Temporal Dimension

The preceding discussion reveals that the interpretation focusing on the relationship between 'wendao' and 'dying without regret' is partial. Thus, it is necessary to study the function of the word 'zhaoxi' that is overlooked in conventional interpretations. Because if Confucius merely wished to emphasise the relationship between 'wendao' and 'dying without regret' in the *Analects* 4.8, he could have simply employed a phrase like 'hearing the Way is worth dying for,' or 'if the Way is heard, I die without regret.' Yet Confucius specifically chose to mention 'zhaoxi'. According to the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), we know that people observing rituals should not (seek to) please others in an improper way, nor be lavish of their words.<sup>20</sup> If so, Confucius, as a man who valued propriety and adhered to ritual, will not waste words. Therefore, the study of 'zhaoxi' is essential.

'Zhaoxi' refers to a temporal dimension. The process of becoming a sage requires time. Confucius's process of self-cultivation proves this:

The Master said, 'at fifteen I set my heart on learning; at thirty I took my stand; at forty I was never in two minds; at fifty I understood the Decree of Heaven; at sixty my ear was attuned; at seventy I followed my hearts' desire without overstepping the line.'<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, Fang Dongmei 方東美 suggests the following:

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<sup>19</sup> Translation modified from D.C. Lau. Lau, *The Analects*, p.41.子路有聞，未之能行，唯恐有聞。

<sup>20</sup> Translation modified from James Legge. Chinese Text Project, *Liji*, <<https://ctext.org/ens>> [accessed 29 January 2026].《禮記·曲禮上》：「禮不妄說人，不辭費。」

<sup>21</sup> Lau, *The Analects*, p.11.

If scholars of Confucianism fails to grasp the secret of time, to unfold all the truths of the world and of the life within the passage of time, transforming it into a creative process, then the spirit of Confucianism is lost. Hence I state that from Confucius and Mencius to Xunzi, all can be called 'Time-man'.<sup>22</sup>

It implies that self-cultivation requires time. Change does not happen all at once. This explains why, in conventional interpretations, scholars seek to establish a logical closure between 'wendao' and 'dying without regret'. Given that time is so crucial, why does Confucius then propose a completely opposite thought, 'hearing the Way in the morning, dying in the evening without regret'? I believe that Confucius's focus here is on the conception of time. In the following, I cite Paul Ricoeur's perspective to illustrate this point.

It hard to define a period of time. Cosmic time itself, such as three o'clock or one hour, is not meaningful. It is merely a single moment. Moreover, people often perceive the duration of cosmic time differently. For instance, when engaged in enjoyable pursuits, time seems to fly by, whereas when performing unpleasant tasks, it passes slowly. This kind of time is called phenomenological time. To resolve this temporal paradox, Paul Ricoeur proposed employing 'narrative' and 'emplotment' as mediating forces to synthesise the cosmic time and phenomenological time, enabling humanity to find meaning within the paradox of time. Paul Ricoeur notes that 'Time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated in a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence.'<sup>23</sup> It means that when events occur during a particular period of our lives, that period begins to acquire meaning. Yet if these moments remain unconnected through narrative, they are still senseless fragments. Only by weaving together the time of past, present, and future through narrative does this span become a meaningful chapter in our lives. This narrative time is a time remembered.

From the perspective of Ricoeur's theory, it is easy to understand why Confucius said that 'hearing the Way in the morning, dying in the evening without regret.' Because this passage describes precisely what Ricoeur termed a meaningful period of time. If people hear the Way in the morning and dies in the evening, then this chapter depicts the following: upon hearing the Way in the morning, a person, driven by his heart set upon the Way, subsequently accepts the fact that he will die that evening. By evening, he departs this world. This is a

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<sup>22</sup> Fang Dongmei 方東美, *Yuanshi rujia daoia zhexue* 原始儒家道家哲學 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2012), p.38. 儒家若不能把握時間的秘密，把一切世間的真相、人生的真相在時間的歷程中展現開來，使它成為一個創造過程，則儒家的精神就沒有了。所以我說儒家由孔子、孟子到荀子，都可稱為「時際人」(Time-man)

<sup>23</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, (The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.52.

complete time and narrative. It means that time is articulated in a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning. Without the occurrence of ‘hearing the Way’, ‘morning and evening’ would be a meaningless cosmic time, yet the significance of this period becomes apparent through the hearing of the Way. Thus, the period from morning to evening is a time that has given meaning to life. In other words, in this passage Confucius suggests his conception of time: while the duration of a period matters, what is more significant is what happened during that time and whether it was meaningful. This aligns with our earlier discussion that Confucius emphasises what people accomplish during their lifetime.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, Mencius said, ‘He must not be double-minded whether he is to die young or to live long, but must keep cultivating himself to await whatever destiny may bring. In this way he establishes his own destiny.’<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, in the *Analects* 4.8, the word ‘*zhaoxi*’ plays a crucial role. ‘*Zhaoxi*’ means temporal dimension. Considering this temporal dimension, this passage reveals that Confucius emphasises the significance of time over its duration. Though the span of morning and evening is very short, it becomes profoundly meaningful because the individual has attained the Way. This is precisely why Confucius states that if people hear the Way in the morning, they may die in the evening without regret.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, in conventional interpretations of *Analects* 4.8, scholars focus more on elucidating the logic between ‘*wendao*’ and ‘dying without regret’. The problem with this interpretation is that it conveys only part of Confucius's thought. In previous research, no one has paid attention to the function of ‘*zhaoxi*’. Thus, it is necessary to reconsider how this passage should be interpreted. Since the word ‘*zhaoxi*’ appears in this passage, its study cannot be overlooked. The word ‘*zhaoxi*’ offers us a view of temporal dimension. From the perspective of Ricoeur's theory, the *Analects* 4.8 describes a meaningful time. ‘*Zhaoxi*’ itself is cosmic time, which is meaningless. Because of the occurrence of ‘*wendao*’, the time gives meaning to life and can be remembered. This implies that this passage reveals that Confucius emphasises the significance of time over its duration.

Of course, I am not suggesting that Confucius addresses his thoughts from a hermeneutic

<sup>24</sup> Lau, *The Analects*, p. 153. The Master said, ‘The gentleman detests not leaving a name behind when he is gone.’子曰：「君子疾沒世而名不稱焉。」

<sup>25</sup> Mengzi zuixin yingwen quanyiquanzhuben 《孟子》最新英文全譯全注本, trans. By Wu Guozhen 吳國珍 (Fuzhou jiaoyu chubanshe, 2015), p.301.

or phenomenological perspective. However, Ricoeur's theory does indeed offer a fresh view for interpreting *Analects* 4.8, thereby avoiding the logical quagmire of interpreting the relationship between 'wendao' and 'dying without regret'.

Although this article offers a new interpretation from the perspective of time and has resolved the question of why Confucius declared that 'heating Way in the morning, dying in the evening without regret', due to space constraints, this article does not explore how 'wendao' should be interpreted. Based on this article, further studying the interpretation of 'wendao' would undoubtedly deepen the understanding of the *Analects* 4.8.

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