

Educational implications of *Yuan Shi Shi Fan* for the construction of new era family values

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Abstract: As an important component of traditional family instructions, *Yuan Shi Shi Fan* contains values that transcend its time, including the principles of self-cultivation (advocating learning and morality, correcting faults and encouraging goodness), the principles of friendship (cautious association, prudent words and deeds), and the principles of family management (prioritizing filial piety and fraternal duty, practicing diligence and frugality). Moreover, the narrative approach and linguistic features of *Yuan Shi Shi Fan* are distinctive, rooted in a humanistic philosophy. By focusing on the emotional and psychological state of its educational audience, it seeks to edify and transform people through emotional resonance. With its accessible language and vivid narratives, it strives to maximize the (moral edification) function of family instructions.

Keywords: *Yuan Shi Shi Fan*; family instructions; family education

1 Introduction

Yuan Shi Shi Fan, a classic of traditional family instructions, contains timeless wisdom on self-cultivation and family management, such as advocating learning and morality, filial piety, fraternal duty, diligence and frugality. Its humanistic, emotion-guided approach to edification, along with its accessible and vivid narrative language, provides rich resources and significant reference value for the construction of family values in the new era.

2 Main connotations of *Yuan Shi Shi Fan*

2.1 Core content of *Yuan Shi Shi Fan*

(1) Self-cultivation: Advocating Learning and Morality, Correcting Faults and Encouraging Goodness.

Regarding the principles of learning for younger generations, *Yuan Shi Shi Fan* extends the Confucian ideal of diligent study from two perspectives: the "useless use" and the "practical use" of learning, both centered on the ultimate goal of moral cultivation. The "useless use" refers to the life significance of reading and learning. Yuan Cai emphasizes that even if one does not study classical texts, it is still greatly beneficial, as immersing oneself in learning prevents idleness and ensures association with learned and virtuous individuals, avoiding contact with petty people. Regarding the "practical use" of learning, Yuan Cai provides a tiered career choice based on individual circumstances. Any livelihood that support one's life without disgracing one's ancestors is acceptable, with the two principles regarded as the criteria for professional ethics and conduct.

In addition to exhortations for diligent learning, Yuan Cai interprets the way of self-cultivation, emphasizing the important role of self-reflection, self-discipline, fault correction, and encouraging goodness in shaping character and managing household affairs. Citing the *Analects*—"Be strict with yourself and lenient with others"—Yuan Cai advocates

this as a fundamental principle of personal conduct. While pursuing self-discipline, one should not make excessive demands on others. He regards the capacity to practice self-reflection as a measure to distinguish the virtuous from the petty [1].

(2) Friendship: Cautious Association, Prudent Words and Deeds.

As social beings, individuals inevitably engage in social interactions. Yuan Cai constructs a series of principles for social intercourse: caution, humility, and prudence in words and deeds. He advocates treating everyone equally, neither flattering the noble nor despising the humble. Judging people by wealth or status is not the conduct of a virtuous person. Yuan Cai's view on friendship is characterized by respect and humility, and stresses prudence in both words and deeds. He disapproves of slick talk and ingratiating manners, advocates instead restraint and taciturnity. Concise speech benefits both parties, it saves the speaker from regret and spares the listener from complaints. One should not disclose private matters indiscriminately, lest they be exploited or envied, nor be duplicitous or slanderous behind others' backs. With prudence and integrity, one need not fear or argue when faced with criticism.

(3) Family Governance: Prioritizing Filial Piety and Fraternal Duty, Practicing Diligence and Frugality.

Filial piety and fraternal duty are virtues long esteemed by the Chinese people. Yuan Cai puts forward unique insights, neither advocating blind filial piety nor rigidly adhering to seniority. Instead, starting from practical family conflicts, he examines issues from the perspectives of both parents and children, explaining causes and solutions in a rational and empathetic manner with great practical value.

Children should be filial because parents care for them with deep affection from infancy, a debt that cannot be fully repaid even with a lifetime of devotion [1]. Yuan Cai asserts that those who fail to practice filial piety are no different from beasts. In addition to emphasizing the importance of filial piety, he also highlights the role of fraternal respect in building harmonious family relationships. To maintain sibling harmony, parents should love equally, and siblings should act with fairness and fulfill their respective roles.

2.2 Educational philosophy of *Yuan Shi Shi Fan*

(1) Person-Centered Core Concept: Confucian culture values human-centeredness, emphasizing inner moral cultivation and self-perfection. Yuan Cai inherits and develops this humanistic philosophy in his family instructions. In handling familial relations, he traces conflicts to their roots, attributing most disputes to temperamental differences. He proposes solutions through communication and mutual understanding between fathers and sons, as well as between brothers, pursuing harmony while respecting differences. He neither suppresses nor overly constraints the individuality of younger generations, nor does he advocate blind obedience or excessive indulgence. In self-cultivation, he advocates regulating desires through propriety and righteousness, neither prohibiting nor indulging natural desires, but promoting moderation.

(2) Emotional and Transformative Approach to Edification: *Yuan Shi Shi Fan* analyzes family discord from the perspectives of emotional psychology and personality traits. For example, he explains that parents may worry about a child living in poverty, and this reflects their equal love, not favoritism. Thus, affluent children should empathize with others and not harbor resentment that leads to family discord. This educational approach does not rely on moral preaching but aims to touch and transform people emotionally, evoking emotional identification. The solutions proposed are grounded in reality and practically actionable, rather than merely staying at the textual level.

By analyzing people's emotional and psychological conditions, it becomes possible to propose targeted solution to family conflicts, pursuing overall harmony rather than absolute fairness. This approach remains relevant for managing contemporary family and social relations.

(3) Accessible, Detailed, and Vivid Narrative Style: Although Yuan Cai was a scholar-official, his work was not intended solely for the elite class. The language is accessible, detailed, and vivid, rooted in reality with complete depictions. This method of edification avoids abstract obscurity, aiming to maximize the utility of family instructions and reach ordinary households.

When teaching the virtue of tolerance, Yuan Cai not only explains necessity of endurance in family life but also elaborates on how to practice it. He uses metaphors, such as comparing poor tolerance to a breached floodwall, vividly depicting its dangers. He distinguishes between being able to endure, knowing how to endure, and being good at enduring, using plain language to clearly present the pros and cons. This approach is both cautionary and practical, enhancing the persuasiveness and impact of the teachings.

In summary, the educational approach and language of *Yuan Shi Shi Fan* are distinctive, which stems from careful consideration of all parties' positions, attitudes, and emotional-rational dynamics. Rather than a mere process of indoctrination, it is more like sincere and heartfelt communication, offering valuable insights for updating contemporary education, especially ideological and political education.

4 Contemporary value of integrating *Yuan Shi Shi Fan* into the construction of family values for the new era

4.1 Enriching the content of contemporary ideological and political education

The above ideas align with contemporary civic moral norms and long-revered virtues. Integrating the advanced content of *Yuan Shi Shi Fan* into contemporary ideological and political education, leveraging its accessible language, helps deepen the cultural heritage and historical depth of such education, bridging it with the realities of people's lives. Under the principle of critically inheriting the past to serve the present through critical inheritance, we can extract content from *Yuan Shi Shi Fan* that meets contemporary needs, deeply explore its educational essence, and discard what is obsolete. Guided by the goal of cultivating well-rounded builders and successors of society, traditional family instructions can form a resource for contemporary ideological and political education.

4.2 Optimizing contemporary family education concepts

Family education has unique advantages due to blood ties, making it easier for the educated to accept the influence of educators [2]. *Yuan Shi Shi Fan* pays special attention to the real feelings of the educated, using their emotions and psychological states as entry points for analysis and strategy formulation. This approach of appealing to emotion and reason facilitates the in-depth absorption of educational content.

Family education differs from subject teaching; its primary mission is to shape people. Therefore, it must pay close attention to the actual feelings of learners during the learning process and the practical difficulties they encounter in practicing virtues. By adhering to a problem-oriented approach, putting oneself in the learner's position, and focusing on the goal of cultivating, inspiring, and shaping individuals, one can get to the heart of contradictions, guide learners to maintain correct political direction, and help solve practical problems. Integrating emotional appeal and respecting learners' subjective feelings maximizes their sense of identification, providing emotional support for educational work. Only with inner identification can learners sincerely affirm the political concepts conveyed through family education and genuinely practice social moral norms. Flexibly applying the approach of integrating emotion into reason in family education helps overcome the passive situation of past indoctrination and resolve potential conflicts between educators and learners.

4.3 Highlighting the enlightening function of family instructions

Yuan Shi Shi Fan contains profound educational connotations, through which we can appreciate the uniqueness and irreplaceable value of family education. Emphasizing the enlightening function of family instructions makes explicit the

importance of family education and provides references for improving the content and methods of contemporary ideological and political education.

Self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and world peace are a progressive process. The family is the fundamental arena for self-cultivation; family education is the primary path; family instructions are systematic written records; and family values are the ethos formed by members practicing these instructions. Although educational concepts differ across eras, the core content of cultivating virtue and aspiring to goodness remains eternal, and the position of family education as the first stage of child education is unchanged. Family education has unique advantages in affinity, accessibility, and practicality compared to social and school education. The edifying function of family education is often realized through practice, focusing on daily words and deeds as external manifestations of inner virtue. By correcting inappropriate behaviors, family education purifies character through learning by doing, enabling a transformation from external behavior to inner virtue. The role model of parents is also crucial, as young children unconsciously imitate their parents' words and actions. This not only lays a foundation for children's virtue but also encourages parents to regulate their own moral conduct. Integrating ideological and political education into family instructions can align its content with public order, good customs, and social ethics, promoting the popularization, daily use, and life integration of ideological and political education.

5 Conclusion and prospect

Yuan Shi Shi Fan, as a representative of excellent traditional family instructions, holds deep value worthy of exploration. Its content on moral edification and educational characteristics remain brilliant in contemporary society. By critically drawing on its educational connotations and applying them appropriately, we can help optimize ideological and political education to meet the requirements of the times.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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