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An Exploration on the Chinese Character *Qi* 器

Word count: 1,554

Respected Provost, Miss Deng and my classmates, good morning. My name is Siyao Zeng. The topic I shall like to share with you today is ‘An Exploration on the Chinese Character *Qi* 器’.

The presentation is separated into four parts: first I would share my motivation of why I chose this topic. Second, I shall explore the original and extended meanings of *qi*. After that I am going to talk about my personal understanding. And finally, my conclusion.

Motivation

Now, let’s start with the first part. There is a teaching recorded in the *Analects*, it is stated, ‘*Junzi buqi* 君子不器’,¹ which literally means ‘An exemplary man, *junzi*, is no vessel.’² However, the value of ‘To succeed in a field, to be a useful person.’ has been the basic expectation on children given by Chinese parents through the ages. Here, what Confucius said looks going against this traditional value. I was confused by the relationship between the exemplary man, *junzi*, and *qi*. By knowing that the teachings of ancient saints and sages are always wise and reasonable, I was intrigued to explore the definition of the character *qi*, which is the key word of this teaching, and try to dig out the profound implication imbedded in the teaching. Today I am going to share this with you.

Meanings of *Qi*

¹ Zeng Shen, 曾參, Zi Si and others, 子思等, *The Analects, The Doctrine of The Mean and The Great Learning* 《學庸論語》, (Xiamen: Xiamen University Press, 2008), p.13.

² Trans. by myself with reference to D. C. LAU, *The Analects* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1979), p.64.

Now let's move on to the second part, the meanings of *qi*. First, let's focus on the original meanings.

By looking up in the *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, the author Xu Shen said, 'The character *qi* means utensils 器, 皿也.'³ The annotation of Duan Yucai said, 'The original meaning of *min* 皿 (utensil) specially refers to items that are used for meals, such as plates, glasses and pots. Thus, *min* can be defined as household utensils, while *qi* is a general designation of all utensils and implements.'⁴ In ancient China, carriages, clothing, jades, weaponry, and armour, are also the usual items that called *qi*.

Xu Shen further said, '象器之口，犬所以守之'.⁵ The definition of this statement is, *qi* has a *ji* 𠂔 radical, which is consisted by four 口(mouths). Commonly, a utensil has its own mouth, the four 口(mouths) here is regarded as 'many different kinds of utensils'; while dog is a domestic animal that good at guarding, thus, the character *qi* originally shows an image, as we could see on the slide, that a dog is guarding the surrounded 'mouths', which indicates the utensils that it guards are *qi* (implements).

Now let's move on to the extended meanings of *qi*.

First, vessels always use to contain things, therefore, *qi* could extend to mean the breadth of a person's mind. It is always said that, how big the achievement could one reach, depends on how broad the one's mind is.

Then, for each implement has its utility value, *qi*, could also be regarded as the basic ability and value of a person to live in the society. When using it as a verb, *qi* could extend to mean 'Employing the services of a person within the limits of his capacity'.

³ Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen Jiezi Zhu* 《說文解字注》, (Taipei: Hungyeh Publishing Co. Ltd., 2016), p.87.

⁴ Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen Jiezi Zhu* 《說文解字注》, (Taipei: Hungyeh Publishing Co. Ltd., 2016), p.87.

⁵ Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen Jiezi Zhu* 《說文解字注》, (Taipei: Hungyeh Publishing Co. Ltd., 2016), p.87.

There is an idiom we often say, *Liangcai qishi* 量才器使 when choosing somebody for a position of responsibility.

Furthermore, as different *qi* has their distinctive function and own range of application, it could also extend to mean ‘Certain kind of responsibility that a person would be able to undertake specially’. For example, there is a Chinese idiom *Jiangxiang zhiqi* 將相之器, to describe a person who is talented and broad-minded enough to undertake the position of the general or the minister of a state.

Furthermore, as *qi* can be very helpful or even indispensable in our daily lives, it also has a sense of ‘Importance’. There is a Chinese term *qizhong* 器重, which literally means ‘Highly thought of’ or ‘Is valuable for’. In the Book of *History of the Latter-Han Dynasty* 後漢書, the figure Chen Chong was a virtues person whom is also talented in governing, the description of him is *Chaoting qizhi* 朝廷器之,⁶ which literally means Chen Chong was highly thought of by the Emperor and the whole country at that period.

Let’s come to *Junzi buqi* 君子不器.

The translation of D.C. LAU. stated, ‘The exemplary man, *jun zi*, is no vessel. i.e, he is no specialist, as every vessel is designed for a specific purpose only.’⁷ From this, we may ask, being a specialist in some field is kind of a success that many people yearn for, why does Confucius suggest to act on the opposite? Here, we should understand the meaning of the term *buqi* 不器.

We have mentioned that every implement or vessel has its determinate function and application range. This represents its existing value on one side, while its limitation on the other side. Due to this characteristic, an implement could never offer services which are beyond its designed purpose. Likewise, ordinary people always have their

⁶ Fan Ye 范曄, *History of the Latter-Han Dynasty*《後漢書》, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), p.1553.

⁷ Trans. by D.C. LAU, *The Analects* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1979), p.64.

professional skills to solve problems in a fixed range, which does not work if problems beyond. Hence, in this term, *qi* is extended to mean the limitation of the talents and skills of a person. In addition, the character *bu* 不 is a negative word, the term *buqi* usually refers to a talented person, who, unlike an implement with limited use, but rather versatile and all-round.

After understanding the meaning of *buqi*, the connotation of the whole teaching is much more clear. Concerning to the term, *junzi*, the annotation of Zhu Xi stated, “‘*Junzi*’ is an appellation of a man who is outstanding and virtuous.”⁸ From the prospective of the whole teaching, Xing Bing further explained that, ‘This teaching indicate the virtue of the exemplary man *junzi*. We all know that, boat could travel on the river while car could drive on road, if they swap for the situation of each other, they could not work. On the contrary, *junzi* is not only specialised in a mere field, but also his virtues and talents are boundless and applicable in all-round way. *Junzi*, obeys to righteousness and acts as the occasion demands, applying his virtue and talent to benefit all beings in all realms.’⁹ This is why say *junzi*, is ‘no specialist’.

Personal Understanding

When I was exploring the original and extended meanings of *qi*, interestingly, I found that they could represent two forms of achievements in a person’s life.

First, the external achievement, which could be concluded by the term *chengqi* 成器.

As the *Book of Rites* refers, ‘玉不琢 不成器 人不學 不知道’,¹⁰ which means ‘Jade

⁸ Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 《四書章句集注》, (Hangzhou: Xiling Seal Engraver’s Society Publishing House, 2011), p.73.

⁹ He Yan 何晏, Xing Bing 邢昺, *Exegesis of the Thirteen Classics: Annotation on the Analects* 《十三經注疏·論語注疏》, Committee for the Exegesis of the Thirteen Classics 十三經注疏委員會, Li Xueqin 李學勤, ed., *Exegesis of the Thirteen Classics* 十三經注疏, (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 1997), p.2464.

¹⁰ Wang Mengou 王夢鷗, *Liji Jinzhu Jinyi* 《禮記今註今譯》, (Beijing: New World Press, 2011), p.316.

cannot be made into any item or utensil without being cut and polished - one cannot become useful and knowledgeable without being educated'. Thus, people often use *chengqi* to describe a person whom is filial and capable of supporting himself while further contributing to the society. In my opinion, different people have different talents and skills to apply in many aspects in the society. Although their capacities and influences are different, they are still useful. If we could be a useful person, working towards a better society, then we are living a successful and valuable life.

Second, the inner achievement, which called *buqi* 不器. Among all the annotations of '君子不器' that I have learned so far, the clearest and most compendious interpretation, I shall say, is given by Li Bingnan. He accounted, 'When an occasion arises with a big need, we should do our best to lend our hands for responding. When a small need occurred, we should respond it by helping as the situation needs. No matter how big or small the things we do, if it could benefit the general public, we shall do it whole-heartedly. Therefore, the exemplary man, *junzi*, would never stop for the current success, never content with one talent in one field, but keep responding, keep learning. He is experienced and knowledgeable, versatile and humble, while always reflecting on himself and seeking inner achievement - the truth of the *Tao* 道, which is invisible and spiritual - all these make him a *junzi*.'¹¹ From this statement we could see, if the term *chengqi* tends to refer to the visible talent and career, that *buqi*, on the other hand, is to put more emphasis on the cultivation of moral character, the aspiration of unscrambling the *Tao* and the righteous deeds complying with the *Tao*.

In fact, these two achievements are not easy to reach, most people tend to reach the formal one of them, only a few people could both. However, we should attach more importance to the inner part, to cultivate our moral principles and virtues, for these

¹¹ Li Bingnan 李炳南, *the Essence Teachings of the Analects of Confucius* 《論語講要》, (Taiwan: Shyh Hyah International, 2016), p.65.

two superior quality, intrinsically, are the foundation of all career. Otherwise, the external career will not be sustainable.

Conclusion

Let's back to the beginning. Dose the teaching of Confucius conflict with parents' expectations of their children? Obviously, they are not contradictory, but complementary. By exploring the original and extended meanings of *qi*, we could now understand the full meanings of *Junzi buqi*. In the end, I came to realise that, the modest spirit of letting go of current success, the brave actions of stepping put of our comfort zone and the moral principle of acting righteousness, all these, might be the wisdom that ancient Chinese sages wanted to hand down to the later generations through this teaching.

That's all for my presentation today, thank you for your listening.

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