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The Inheritance of Confucius Culture by Zeng Shen

Zeng Shen 曾參 is a famous sage in Chinese history. Throughout his life, he carried on the Confucian idea of filial piety, remembering the teachings of Confucius and passing them on to future generations. Among them, the two classics of Filial Piety and The Great learning are the most well-known. It is said that both classics were written by Zeng Shen. This article will try to observe the virtue of Zeng Shen from his words and deeds, and try to explain his inheritance of Confucius thought.

Respect and the Transmission of the *Book of Filial Piety*

Zeng Shen, as one of Confucius's disciples, actually came into contact with Confucius in his later years. However, he was very deferential to Confucius, and that was a great reason for his ability to go deeper into Confucius. First of all, we need to know that Confucius, as a sage, taught the same things to his students, even his own children. Chen Kang 陳亢, a student who recorded in *the Analects* of Confucius, once asked Bo Yu 伯魚, the son of Confucius, whether Confucius had taught him anything different from others. However, from Bo Yu's reply he learned that Confucius had not given his son special instruction. What he taught his son was the same as what he taught the other students. It is mentioned in the original text, ‘問一以得三，聞詩，聞禮，又聞君子之遠其子也.’¹ The translation by myself that, ‘I asked one question and I got three answers: We need to learn the book of songs, the ritual and the fact that a sages is not close to his children.’ Yin Tun 尹焞 to the notes mentioned that, ‘孔子之教其子，無異於門人，故陳亢以為遠其子’² He explained what Chen was saying and saying that the teachings of Confucius were the same for everyone, and that was not adulterated with selfishness and this is also the reason why Chen Kang will have misunderstandings. Therefore, in this passage we can learn that the teachings of Confucius are not different, and he treats every student equally even his children.

1 Zhu Xi 朱熹, *The Variorum of the Four Books 四書章句集注* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1983), p.175.

2 Zhu Xi 朱熹, *The Variorum of the Four Books 四書章句集注*, p.131.

Since Confucius taught all the same things, there must have been something exceptional in Zeng Shen's ability to learn the essences of Confucius' knowledge in the few years he spent with him. We know that Confucius was very old when he met Zeng Shen. However, he learned very well in these short years. From the fact that Confucius entrusted his grandson to Zeng Shen, it can be seen that Confucius valued Zeng Shen very much. Confucius did not entrust his grandson to a rich disciple or a very powerful disciple, but to Zeng Shen, who was young and without much wealth or powerful. It is enough to show Confucius's approval of Zeng Shen. And one of the primary reasons why he was able to learn so well was that he was very respectful to Confucius. The first sentence of the Book of Rites is that, 'do not be disrespectful 毋不敬.'³ The first sentence of the book is enough to see the importance of respect and Zeng Shen was very concerned about that. At the beginning of the *Filial Piety*, when Confucius was about to teach Zeng Shen about filial piety, he asked Zeng if he knew. The text describes Zeng Shen's actions, '曾子避席曰.'⁴ The translation by myself is that, 'Zeng Shen immediately got up, went to Confucius's side, saluted and consult.' From this, we can see his respect for the teachings of Confucius and his eagerness to learn. What is important is that Confucius taught him lessons that he would remember for the rest of his life.

Confucius mentioned that, '身體髮膚, 受之父母, 不敢毀傷, 孝之始也.'⁵ It means that, 'Our bodies, hair and skin are given to us by our parents. We dare not damage our bodies at will. This is the basis of filial piety.' However, we know that Confucius died when Zeng Shen was twenty and seven years old, so this instruction was made by Confucius before Zeng Shen, the age of twenty seven. In *the Analects* mentioned that:

When Zeng Shen was seriously ill, he gathered his disciples and said to them, "Look at my feet and look at my hands. The Book of songs says that you should

³ Su Xidan 孫希旦, *Li Ji Ji Jie* 禮記集解(Beijing: Zhong Hua Book Company, 1989)p.3.

⁴ Li Longji 李隆基注, Xing bin 邢昺疏, *Xiao Jin Zhu Shu* 孝經注疏(Peking University Press,2000) p.3.

⁵ Li Longji 李隆基注, Xing bin 邢昺疏, *Xiao Jin Zhu Shu* 孝經注疏, p.4.

be careful as if you were walking beside an abyss, as if you were walking on ice.
From now on my body will be free from damage. Disciples!

曾子有疾，召門弟子曰：“啟予足！起予手！詩云：‘戰戰兢兢，如臨深淵，如履薄冰。’而令而後，吾知免夫！小子！”⁶

From here we can see that, he was closer to the end, but he still kept in mind the teachings of Confucius when he was in his 20s. And he practiced hard all his life. He did not relax his demands on the eve of his life. All of this came from his respect for the teachings of Confucius and the practice of filial piety. It is because of his real practice of filial piety that will pass the Filial Piety of Confucius and it is evident from his behavior that he really has done.

Zeng Shen's Cultivation and the Great learning

The Great learning is also written by Zeng Shen. Zhu Xi once mentioned in the beginning of his commentary on this book that,

Cheng Hao said: "The Great learning is the book left behind by Confucius, is to guide the beginner's virtue. Zhu Xi said that now we can see the ancients talking about the order of learning article only this one, *the Analects* and Mencius are in second place.

子程子曰：“大學，孔氏之遺書，而初學入德之門也。”於今可見古人為學次第者，獨賴此篇之存，而論、孟次之。⁷

This shows the importance of the Great learning for Confucian scholars. And then Zhu Xi's commentary on the first paragraph of the Great Learning also mentioned that, ‘蓋孔子之言，而曾子述之。其傳十章，則曾子之意而門人記之也。’⁸ Again, we can see that this article is from Zeng Shen. In fact, this article is also a transmission of Confucius' teachings by Zeng Shen. Its origin lies in the fact that Confucius just turned it into a text and passed it on to later generations by Zeng Shen as a messenger. However, in order to pass on this kind of knowledge, you need to practice it yourself,

6 Zhu Xi 朱熹, *The Variorum of the Four Books* 四書章句集注, p.103.

7 Zhu Xi 朱熹, *The Variorum of the Four Books* 四書章句集注, p.3.

8 Zhu Xi 朱熹, *The Variorum of the Four Books* 四書章句集注, p.4.

and it cannot be passed on through memory. Therefore, Zeng Shen must have implemented it in his life.

In fact, we can also see that Zeng Shen's life is full of the Great Learning through the classics. As mentioned in the Great Learning of self-cultivation is the most basic one is 格物. When it comes to this point, we may first think of Yan Hui's indifference to material desire. However, in fact, Zeng Shen is also like this. The story of Zeng Shen is mentioned in Shuoyuan 說苑 that,

When Zeng Shen wore simple clothes and plowed the land, the king of Lu asked someone to grant Zeng Shen a piece of land. The man said, Please use it to mend your clothes. However, Zeng Shen did not accept it, and he did not accept it several times. The ambassador was puzzled and asked, "You are not asking for it, but it was given to you, so why did you not accept it?" Zeng Shen said, "The one who accepts will be afraid of the one who gives him something, and the one who gives it will be proud of it. Even if you give it to me, you will not be proud of it, but can I not be afraid?" Therefore, Zeng Shen did not accept it in the end.

曾子衣敝衣以耕，魯君使人往致封邑焉。曰：“請以此修衣。”曾子不受。反復往，又不受。使者曰：“先生非求于人，人則獻之，奚為不受？”曾子曰：“臣聞之，受人者畏人，予人者骄人，纵子有賜，不我骄也，我能不畏乎？”終不受。

9

It can also be seen that Zeng Shen is indifferent to material desires, which is also the basis of self-cultivation. In addition, Zeng Shen is very diligent about self-cultivation. It is mentioned in *the Analects* that he often reflects on himself many times a day. In the original article, it is written: ‘I will reflect on myself many times a day. 吾日三省吾身’¹⁰ It can also be seen that Zeng Shen worked very hard for self-cultivation and

⁹ Luo ShaoQin 羅少卿注, *Xin Yi Shuo Yuan Du Ben* 新譯說苑讀本, p.107.

¹⁰ Zhu Xi 朱熹, *The Variorum of the Four Books* 四書章句集注, p.3.

never slackened off. From here, we can also see the Confucian emphasis on self-cultivation. In this aspect, Zeng Shen regards it as more important than his own life. The Book of Rites also recorded a story about Zeng Shen before his death. This story tells that before his death, Zeng Shen found that his mattress was too expensive for his status at that time, and according to the etiquette, it was not for him to enjoy. So he insisted on replacing the mattress. Although people around him advised him that he was already very sick and to wait until tomorrow to replace it, he still insisted and mentioned that he only hoped that his death would not deviate from Dao. However, he left this world without waiting for him to lie down again.¹¹ We can also see that his demand for himself is not relaxed even in the face of any situation.

Conclusion

To summarise, Zeng Shen inherited the culture and teachings of Confucius, and more importantly, he put them into practice in his own life. Both his personal practice of filial piety and his high self-cultivation are enough to feel his greatness. And presumably future generations will learn not only the two classics he wrote, but also the virtues of his personality. This is also the purpose of our study of the classics, to put them into practice in our lives, just as Zeng Shen put into practice the teachings of Confucius.

¹¹ Su Xidan 孫希旦, *Li Ji Ji Jie* 禮記集解(Beijing: Zhong Hua Book Company, 1989)p.177.

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