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Application of Semantic Exegesis in the Interpretation of Classic Text

Introduction:

In the *Analects*, many passages are difficult to interpret, for example, the seventh passage in the 學而 chapter. Although there have been many commentaries and annotation written for this passage, but they are not consistent. In this case, the method of text exegesis should be used to investigate the most reasonable interpretation. After thousands of years of development, Chinese text exegesis has gradually formed a relatively comprehensive research system, which mainly consists of methods based on text form, sound and semantics. In this presentation, I will attempt to apply the method of Semantic Exegesis to help me more precisely interpret a particular passage from *the Analects*.

There will be three parts. Firstly, I will outline the interpretations proposed by past scholars; then an introduction on what is Semantic Exegesis. Then lastly, I will attempt to use Semantic Exegesis to interpret the passage.

An Excerpt of Classic Text to be Examined

子夏曰：「賢賢易色，事父母能竭其力，事君能致其身，與朋友交言而有信。雖曰未學，吾必謂之學矣。」

Annotation By Past Scholars

There has always been some disagreement over the interpretation of “賢賢易色”, and the source of such disagreement comes from the various interpretation of the word “色”. The

interpretation of “色” is a determinant in the meaning of the verse.

1. 「色」 is interpreted as “the beauty of wife”

The first interpretation of 「色」 is “the beauty of wife”. Scholars such as 楊伯峻¹ and 李炳南² accepted this interpretation as they observed the content following 「賢賢易色」 involved serving parents and the emperor and establishing friendships, all of which are associated with personal relations, therefore, 「賢賢易色」 should also follow the same concept. For this reason, 「色」 is interpreted as the beauty of one’s wife, and the character 「易」 is understood as “to belittle” or “to ignore”. In 李尋傳 of *Han Shu*, Yan Shigu annotated 「易色」 as to belittle beauty. 「賢賢」 in this case means to attach higher importance to the virtues of one’s wife.

2. 「色」 is interpreted as “the beauty of women”

The difference in the second interpretation to the first is the object of 「色」. The former is within the traditional Five Cardinal Relationships, while the second refers to the appearance of all women. This view is based on the self-cultivation of sincerity.

Mr. Huang Kan believes that it is human nature to like beautiful things, however, this love for beauty should be transformed to the admiration for the virtuous. This view is acknowledged by scholars 邢昺、朱熹 and 李培宗, as the establishment of the root of self-cultivation should be built upon a non-lustful heart. So accordingly, 「賢賢易色」 is defined here as “transforming the lust for beauty to admiration for the virtuous”. The meaning of 「易」 is now “transform” or “change” as 「色」 here refers to “the beauty of all women”, and 「賢賢」 holds

¹ Translated by Taiyu Cao, Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Lunyu Yizhu* 《論語譯注》, (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1982) p.5-6.

² Translated by Taiyu Cao, Li Bingnan 李炳南, *Lunyu Jiangyao* 《論語講要》, (Taiwan: Taizhong fojiao Lianshe, 2016 年) p.16.

the meaning of respecting the virtuous.

3. 「色」 is interpreted as “one’s countenance”

Another interpretation excludes the element of “beauty” but refers to one’s countenance. Scholar Huang Kan explained that the first 賢 means “to respect” and the second 賢 indicates virtuous people. So as to show respect to the virtuous, the look of admiration and reverence naturally emerges. Therefore, 「色」 is understood as countenance here. Mr Nan Huaijin agrees with this view. He describes 「賢賢易色」 as in an equal position with the latter three. He believes that it is natural to act respectfully towards the virtuous, and similarly in the other three personal relations, such conduct shows that one has truly learnt.

Scholar Huang Huaixin inspected this verse in the context of the chapter. He pointed out that 「賢賢易色」 appeared in 學而, hence it must be closely related to the subject of “learning”; and the virtuous are considered the best teachers, so it is the proper attitude and a natural gesture to show respectful countenance when meeting the virtuous.

II What is “Semantic Exegesis”?

“Semantic Exegesis” is a text interpretation method that directly uses the existing meaning of the words without considering their relationship with form and sound. However, the meaning of text is a very complex subject. The interpretation of text can be influenced by the following factors: extended meaning formed in the development of language, specific meaning derived from restricted context, special cultural connotation related to unique social and cultural backgrounds, as well as language pattern of different times and writers. All of the mentioned will have a certain impact on text interpretation.

“Semantic Exegesis” consists of ways such as “Synonymous Interpretation”, “Semantic Boundary” and many more. Synonymous Interpretation uses synonyms to explain each other. A main feature of the Chinese language is that some characters can stand for the same meaning, so when a word is difficult to explain, its synonym is sometimes used to describe its meaning. For example, in the 釋詁 chapter of 爾雅, characters 績、勳、功 can all be explained with 功, meaning achievement,³ because they are synonyms. This text interpretation method is used very commonly in ancient dictionaries such as Shuowen Jiezi and Erya.

Semantic Boundary interprets words by description, metaphor or assigning definition. 郭在貽 stated in *the Study of Exegesis*: “to clarify the boundary of text interpretation in one or a few sentences, and to elaborate and define the concepts and connotation expressed by the words is called Semantic Boundary.”⁴ For example, in the 釋親 chapter of *Erya*, it says: “The one being born before the man is called the older brother 兄, the younger brother 弟 is the one born after; Father’s sister, younger or older, is an aunt 姑.” This part defines the concept of 兄、弟、姊、妹、姑, so as to demonstrate the text meaning in a more transparent and logical way. The method of Semantic Boundary compensates the shortcomings of Synonymous Interpretation, as it is able to deliver a more detailed and comprehensive interpretation.

The above mentioned are the most common semantic exegesis methods used to interpret a word or a phrase in classic text, but the reason why this presentation chooses to use Semantic

³ Translated by Taiyu Cao, [Jin] Guopu 郭璞, *Erya* 《爾雅》 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Guji Press, 2015) p.8.

⁴ Translated by Taiyu Cao, Guo Zaiyi 郭在貽, *Exegesis* 《訓詁學》 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005) p.46.

Exegesis to explore the most appropriate meaning of the passage is due to a significant principle, and this is described as “Exegesis is dependent on Context” “觀境為訓” by 周大璞.⁵ Although polysemy exists in the Chinese language, but the context of text can set boundaries for its meaning and provide an exclusive interpretation. Therefore, it is particularly important to carefully examine the context if we wish to precisely interpret the meaning.

III Interpretation of the Chosen Text by Applying Semantic Exegesis

We have now finished looking at the methods and principles of Semantic Exegesis, let's try and interpret the chosen passage by using this methodology.

i) The Literal Interpretation of 「色」

Shuowen interprets 「色」 as "a person's vital energy 氣 is reflected in the facial skin coloration." From this we can see that the original literal meaning of 「色」 refers to the colour of our facial skin that reflects the condition of our health. I'm sure we have all experienced this before, for example, when we are tired, our face gives the look of tiredness, when we stand in the wind and feel really cold, the colour of skin turns pale.

On this basis, the meaning of “countenance” is extended. Duan Yucai annotated that a filial son would express his deep love to his parents through showing an amiable, cheerful and gentle countenance. *Liji* also states that the looks (色容) of worry and seriousness are also descriptions of countenance (人面顏色).⁶ 中庸 cited 詩經·大雅·皇矣 that if I am virtuous, I

⁵ Translated by Taiyu Cao, Zhou Dapu 周大璞, *Xunguxue Chugao* 《訓詁學初稿》, (Wuhan: Wuhan University Press, 2015) p.197.

⁶ Translated by Taiyu Cao, [Han] Zhenxuan 鄭玄注, *Liji Zhengyi* 《禮記正義》 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), P. 1079.

do not need to appear harsh and stern.⁷ Confucius further explains that trying to transform people with a harsh voice and countenance is the least ideal way. All of the mentioned classic texts demonstrate that the word 「色」 is an expression on one's face that arises from one's thoughts.

Furthermore, the meaning of beauty is extended from the interpretation of countenance, so the word “色” also refers to beauty and especially the beauty of women. The word 色 in 夏·五子之歌 of 尚書: 「訓有之，內作色荒，外作禽荒。甘酒嗜音，峻宇彫牆。有一于此，未或不亡。」⁸ refers to the obsession of women's beauty. 孔傳 also states 色 indicated the appearance of women. 孔穎達 once wrote that the beauty of women is pleasant to see for men; it is common to interpret “色” as beauty of women in classic texts. According to the above mentioned statements, it can be contended that the meaning of 「色」 is further derived as the beauty of women from the interpretation of countenance.

ii) Further Analysis on 「賢賢易色」 from the perspective of the Analects

We can see from the above explanation of the word 「色」 that it contains a variety of meaning, all of which are quite commonly known in the time of *the Analects*; therefore, it is difficult to determine the exact meaning from looking at the character itself, we need to investigate the most reasonable interpretation by examining the context.

By examining the Analects on the whole, it is found that the interpretation of “賢賢易色” from the perspective of the Five Cardinal Relationships seems untenable. First of all,

⁷ Translated by Taiyu Cao, [Han] Maoheng 毛亨, *Maoshi Zhengyi* 《毛詩正義》 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), P. 1213.

⁸ Translated by Taiyu Cao, [Han] Kong Anguo 孔安國, *Shangshu Zhengyi* 《尚書正義》 (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), P. 213.

Confucius did not elaborate much on the “Relationship between husband and wife” in *the Analects*, moreover, the Five Cardinal Relationships did not appear as an independent theme in this classic. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to interpret 「賢賢易色」 as “when choosing a wife, one should attach higher importance to her inner virtue rather than her external beauty.” Also, 「賢賢易色」 is followed by three other personal relationships but is only missing the relationship of siblings; this shows that using the Five Cardinal Relationships as the main standpoint for this interpretation is not satisfactory. And during Confucius’ time, marriages were arranged by parents, a man was not free to choose his own wife. For these reasons, I think it is not tenable to use 色 to imply the beauty of wife based on the Five Cardinal relationships.

The explanation of 「易色」 as “transforming the love for beauty” needs to be further examined. Poem 關雎 of 詩經 says a gentleman would pursue a modest and fair lady. Chapter 為政 of the *Analects* states that “The Book of Poetry contains 300 poems, and they all convey pure thought.”⁹ This proves that people's appreciation of "beauty" seems to be a positive motive in the time of Confucius, then why does it need be transformed into the admiration for the virtuous?

According to my statistics/calculation, "色" appears in 25 places in the *Analects* (excluding 賢賢易色), amongst them only 3 have the meaning of beauty. Two of them can be found in 《子罕篇》 and 《衛靈公篇》 where Confucius lamented that he had never seen a man who desires virtue more than his desire for beauty; and the third one is from 季氏篇 and it says that people should restrain themselves from lusting for beauty in their youth. We can gather from this information that it is not Confucius’ intention to encourage people to remove their appreciation for "beauty" if it was in a positive way. So under this context, it seems more reasonable to interpret 「易」 of 易色」 as “is like” rather than “transform”, so as to mean

⁹Translated by Taiyu Cao, [Wei]Heyan 何晏, *Lunyu Zhushu* 论语注疏（十三经注疏）, (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000), P.8.

“admiring virtue as one would appreciate beauty.”

In the third interpretation, the explanation of 「易色」 as “to dignify one’s countenance,” seems more rational. In the *Analects*, apart from the 3 places that indicate “beauty”, the others mainly refer to “countenance”. In another part of 季氏篇, Confucius states that a man of virtue has nine kinds of thought, among them, the thought of having a kind and gentle countenance fits this interpretation of 「色」; similarly, if a man dignifies his countenance when meeting a virtuous person, this manner corresponds with the statement by Confucius: “In seeing a man of virtue, we should try to become his equal.” As stated by Huang Huaixin, the theme of 學而 chapter is about “learning”, and Confucius’ learning attitude is proven in his saying “When I walk along with two others, they may serve me as my teachers”. We can see that his joy when meeting the virtuous cannot be compared with the ordinary happiness of seeing beautiful things. Based on this, it would be a natural gesture to show respectful countenance when meeting virtuous people and with such proper attitude, we can certainly serve our parents and superiors with utmost effort and treat friends with sincerity. I think this interpretation is most comprehensive and appropriate.

Conclusion:

Overall, after examining the three possible interpretations by applying Semantic Exegesis, I find 「易色」’s third interpretation of “to dignify one’s countenance” to be the most reasonable. Not only is it more in line with the overall context of 學而 chapter, but it also corresponds with Confucius’ idea of “striving to equal oneself to a virtuous man 「見賢思齊」. In addition, this interpretation is also more fitting with the literal meaning of 「色」. This is my evaluation from the perspective of Semantic Exegesis for this passage from *the Analects*.

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