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On the Evolution of Interpretations of "Yan Ruo Si" in The Book of Rites

I. Introduction

"Yan Ruo Si"¹ in *The Book of Rites* is a core norm for Confucian gentlemen's self-cultivation. Ancient scholars across dynasties made rich textual explanations for it. Its interpretative connotation deepened step by step, forming a coherent theoretical line of traditional ritual studies. From the Han-Tang to the Song-Qing periods, scholars held distinct interpretative focuses. Han scholar Zheng Xuan stressed textual exegesis and focused on human daily demeanour. Tang scholar Kong Yingda followed Zheng Xuan's views, enriched lexical meanings, and expanded the theory to monarch self-cultivation and state governance. In the Song Dynasty, Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi took "Reverence" as a core moral idea, and built an inner spiritual basis for external etiquette. Qing scholar Sun Xidan combined Han and Tang annotations with Song Confucian theories, unifying external demeanour, inner thought and spiritual reverence.

A clear evolutionary path exists in relevant ancient commentaries. This paper argues that interpretations of "Yan Ruo Si" shifted from external behavioral norms to inner moral cultivation, while keeping the consistent core of inner reverence and solemn self-discipline. This change reveals the inner development of Confucian ritual studies, which gradually turned external ritual practices into internal spiritual cultivation. Taking Zheng Xuan's notes, Kong Yingda's *Liji zhengyi* and Sun Xidan's *Liji jijie* as core materials, this paper explores the evolution of such interpretations, and clarifies Confucius' self-cultivation logic that values inner reverence and develops virtue from outside to inside.

II. Textual Exegesis and Moral Principles with Physical Form as the

1 "Yan Ruo Si" 儼若思

Foundation

Starting from textual word meanings, Zheng Xuan laid the most basic exegetical interpretation for "Yan Ruo Si". He clarified the original meanings of core words and pointed out that "Yan" refers to a reserved, dignified and solemn facial state.² At the same time, he supplemented explanations combined with daily behaviors. When a person sits upright and thinks, his facial expression and bearing must be solemn and dignified.³

Different from the abstract moral elaborations of later generations, Zheng Xuan took familiar daily behaviors as examples to implement the practical connotation and behavioral manifestation of "Si" 思. When people are in a state of concentrated thinking, their body and mind will not be lazy or slack, and their appearance will naturally present solemnity and dignity. In other words, in Zheng Xuan's understanding, "Yan Ruo Si" means a reserved and dignified look, just like the demeanour when sitting upright and thinking.

It is evident that Zheng Xuan's interpretative logic of "Yan Ruo Si" is solely based on the norms of people's external appearance, behaviors and daily conducts. With specific textual exegesis and concrete behavioral scenarios, he objectively established the most basic interpretation direction of "Yan Ruo Si", focusing only on external physical forms without involving spiritual nature, and laid a foundation for further elaborations by Kong Yingda and Sun Xidan in later ages.

III. Inheriting Han Confucians and Expanding Educational Functions

Zheng Xuan's explanations are brief in content. On the basis of fully inheriting Zheng Xuan's viewpoints, Kong Yingda completed word-by-word explanations and moral supplementations,

2 Zheng xuan 鄭玄 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義, (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2000), p8.

"Yan" refers to a reserved, dignified and solemn facial state. 儼，矜莊貌。

3 Zheng xuan 鄭玄 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義, (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2000), p8.

When a person sits upright and thinks, his facial expression and bearing must be solemn and dignified. 人之坐思，貌必儼然。

expanding personal demeanour to the political level of monarch's education, and making the semantic logic of "Yan Ruo Si" more systematic and complete.

In terms of textual exegesis, Kong Yingda fully adopted Zheng Xuan's explanations, stating that "Yan" means a reserved, dignified and solemn facial state.⁴ He further split words and supplemented independent connotations. "Ruo" means to be like or seem. "Si" refers to calculation and thinking.⁵ On this basis, he extended Zheng Xuan's statements and stressed that when a person engages in careful calculation, thinking and planning, his external demeanour will accordingly be upright and sincere.⁶ Thus, he strengthened the connection between internal thinking activities and external appearance and bearing.

In addition, Kong Yingda broke the boundary of Zheng Xuan's interpretation limited to daily etiquette of ordinary people, and elevated the self-cultivation principle of "Yan Ruo Si" to the level of monarchs. He emphasized that wise monarchs should always maintain a reserved and solemn bearing, just like the facial expression of a person in careful consideration,⁷ so as to educate common people.

It can be seen that on the basis of Zheng Xuan's simple textual exegesis, Kong Yingda refined word explanations and improved sentence logic. At the same time, he broadened its scope of application and integrated the significance of monarch's self-cultivation and political education. This shows the expansion of his interpretation, yet its core is still rooted in Han Confucians' understanding of external upright appearance without delving into the level of internal spiritual cultivation, which leaves room for the development of Sun Xidan's interpretation.

4 Zheng xuan 鄭玄 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義, (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2000), p8.

"Yan" means a reserved, dignified and solemn facial state. 儼, 矜莊貌也。

5 Zheng xuan 鄭玄 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義, (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2000), p8.

"Ruo" means to be like or seem. "Si" refers to calculation and thinking. 若, 如也; 思, 計慮也。

6 Zheng xuan 鄭玄 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義, (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2000), p8.

When a person engages in careful calculation, thinking and planning, his external demeanour will accordingly be upright and sincere. 夫人計慮, 狀必端慤。

7 Zheng xuan 鄭玄 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義, (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2000), p8.

Wise monarchs should always maintain a reserved and solemn bearing, just like the facial expression of a person in careful consideration. 今明人君矜莊之貌, 如人之思也。

IV. Integrating Moral Principles and Practicing Self-cultivation with Reverence

Compared with Han and Tang scholars who emphasized external appearance, Sun Xidan's annotations in the Qing Dynasty realized theoretical integration. He combined Han and Tang commentaries with moral theories of Song Confucians, broke the boundary between external appearance, internal thinking and spiritual cultivation, and formed a complete and internally unified interpretation system with multiple layers.

First, he inherited Han and Tang theories and adhered to the foundation of traditional textual exegesis. Sun Xidan quoted original texts of Zheng Xuan and Kong Yingda, fully carrying forward the core viewpoints of Han and Tang dynasties. He recognized that "Yan" means reserved and dignified,⁸ affirmed that "Si" refers to calculation and worry, and reiterated the conclusion that external physical form will be upright and sincere when people engage in careful calculation, worry and planning.⁹ This completely retains the interpretative logic of Han Confucians who explained texts from the perspective of external physical forms.

However, Sun Xidan further introduced moral theories of Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi to construct the spiritual foundation of internal "Reverence". Han and Tang theories only explained what reserve and dignity are, but did not illustrate how to achieve them. Sun Xidan supplemented the internal basis with quotations from Song Confucians. He cited Cheng Yi's annotations and defined the connotation of reverence with "Concentration and Undistractedness". Concentration on one thing in the heart is reverence; keeping the mind undistracted and not wandering is unity.¹⁰ He also added that as long as external words, deeds and behaviours are neat, upright and solemn, the inner mind will be concentrated, and inner concentration will

8 Sun xidan 孫希旦, *Liji jijie* 禮記集解, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2018), p3.

"Yan" means reserved and dignified. 儼, 矜莊貌.

9 Sun xidan 孫希旦, *Liji jijie* 禮記集解, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2018), p3.

"Si" refers to calculation and worry, and reiterated the conclusion that external physical form will be upright and sincere when people engage in careful calculation, worry and planning. 思, 計慮也。人心有所計慮, 則其形狀必端慤也

10 Sun xidan 孫希旦, *Liji jijie* 禮記集解, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2018), p3.

Concentration on one thing in the heart is reverence; keeping the mind undistracted and not wandering is unity. 程子曰: 主一之謂敬, 無適之謂一

naturally resist improper distractions.¹¹ He also quoted Zhu Xi's theories to clarify the relationship between appearance and spiritual nature. Dignified and solemn demeanour is the natural external manifestation of people with inner reverence.¹² Therefore, he changed the logic of Han Confucians. Dignified appearance is no longer merely a state during thinking, but an embodiment of constant inner reverence and restrained mind, endowing external demeanour with spiritual origin.

On the dual basis of Han and Tang textual exegesis and Song Confucian moral theories, Sun Xidan finally took "Reverence" as the core practice of self-cultivation and realized the unity of internal and external self-cultivation. Whether in solitude without others' observation, or in interpersonal communication and handling affairs, all words, deeds and thoughts at all times and in all matters must take reverence as the root.¹³ Therefore, Sun Xidan integrated theories of various schools and redefined "Yan Ruo Si". It combines the dignified and solemn external form emphasized by Zheng Xuan and Kong Yingda in Han and Tang dynasties, and integrates the spiritual learning of inner reverence and restrained mind advocated by Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi in the Song Dynasty. The overall interpretation is that one's appearance should be dignified and solemn, looking as if maintaining careful thinking and reverent intention at all times.¹⁴

Thus, Sun Xidan completed the unification of Han and Tang textual exegesis and Song Confucian moral theories, upgrading "Yan Ruo Si" from a simple description of appearance to a self-cultivation principle of conforming to rituals in external form, keeping reverence in heart and unifying the inside and the outside.

11 Sun xidan 孫希旦, *Liji jijie* 禮記集解, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2018), p3.

As long as external words, deeds and behaviours are neat, upright and solemn, the inner mind will be concentrated, and inner concentration will naturally resist improper distractions. 又曰:但整齊嚴肅,則心自一,一則自無非僻之干矣。

12 Sun xidan 孫希旦, *Liji jijie* 禮記集解, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2018), p3.

Dignified and solemn demeanour is the natural external manifestation of people with inner reverence. 朱子曰:儼若思,敬者之貌也。

13 Sun xidan 孫希旦, *Liji jijie* 禮記集解, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2018), pp. 3-4.

Sun Xidan finally took "Reverence" as the core practice of self-cultivation and realized the unity of internal and external self-cultivation. Whether in solitude without others' observation, or in interpersonal communication and handling affairs, all words, deeds and thoughts at all times and in all matters must take reverence as the root. 愚謂人之治其身心,莫切乎敬,自不睹不聞以至於應事接物,無一時一事之可以不主乎此也。

14 Sun xidan 孫希旦, *Liji jijie* 禮記集解, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2018), p4.

The overall interpretation is that one's appearance should be dignified and solemn, looking as if maintaining careful thinking and reverent intention at all times. 儼若思,謂容貌端嚴,儼然若有所思也。

V. Conclusion

To sum up, the understandings of "Yan Ruo Si" in the commentaries and sub-commentaries of Zheng Xuan, Kong Yingda and Sun Xidan present an obvious progressive relationship. Zheng Xuan first defined word meanings through textual exegesis and established the interpretation focusing on external appearance starting from daily behaviors. Inheriting Zheng Xuan's theories of the Han Dynasty, Kong Yingda supplemented word meanings, connected thinking with external physical forms, and expanded its connotation to the political education of monarchs. Sun Xidan acted as a synthesizer, integrating theories of Han, Tang and Song Confucians, taking "Reverence" as the core, connecting appearance and demeanour, internal thinking and spiritual cultivation, and completing the moral sublimation from the outside to the inside.

Although the interpretations of the three scholars have different emphases, they share one core purpose. "Yan Ruo Si" is not merely an external norm, but the external manifestation of Confucian virtue cultivation with inner reverence and self-restrained solemnity.

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