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A Study of the Influence of Sitting and Standing Posture on People

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Respected provost, Miss Deng, good afternoon. My name is Ruxin Zhang and I would like to share with you the topic on the influence of sitting and standing posture on people.

The presentation will be divided into three parts. The first part is ‘Motivation’, the second part is ‘Analysis’. And finally, I will share with you ‘Self Thoughts’.

Motivation

Let’s start with the first part.

Today I want to share with you the sentence from *The Book of Rites* 禮記, which is related to the sitting and standing posture of the ancients. The original text is that ‘If a man be sitting, let him do so as a personator of the deceased; if he be standing, let him do so reverently, as in the ritual of showing reverence to ancestors.’¹

The reason I chose this sentence is that when I was at home, my parents often reminded me that my sitting and standing posture is not standard enough. They thought my eyes were too close to my desk, and when I stand, I often hunchback and cannot stand like a pine tree. So they worry that these bad postures will affect my health. In fact, my shoulders and back would often feel sore. Although my parents often reminded me that I should maintain the correct posture, I always habitually maintained the posture that I thought was comfortable. However, through learning the course of selections from *The Book of Rites*, I suddenly realized why *The Book of*

¹ Original text: ‘若夫坐如尸，立如齊。’ Trans. by James Legge, *Summary of the Rules of Propriety Part I*, and I have made some changes, <https://ctext.org/liji/qu-li-i/zh?en=on>, 30 Oct 2021.

Rites, including many Chinese classics, places great emphasis on things like sitting and standing posture, as well as some of the most basic rules of behavior in life. In fact, these classics are not to restrict and require our behavior, but to protect us. Therefore, I have done a little research about it.

Analysis

Now let's move on to the second part.

First of all, there are two interpretations of the character *fu* 夫. One is to interpret the character *fu* as a true man. That is to say, as an adult, he must sit upright to show his respectful attitude². The other is to interpret the character *fu* as a modal particle³. According to this interpretation, the word *ruofu* 若夫 is a sentence-initial tone word, it is usually used at the beginning of a sentence or paragraph to indicate that another matter is being brought up. And it can be translated into 'as for'. But in fact, it often has no actual meaning⁴. These two interpretations will not be compared and discussed here.

Next, the original says that when people are sitting, they should behave like *shi* 尸. The character *shi* usually means corpse. Therefore, if the original text is interpreted with the usual meaning of the character *shi*, it is easy to misinterpret this sentence. It can easily be interpreted to mean that when we sit, we should be as motionless as a corpse. But as we all know, rites have been handed down from ancient times to the present, it has been tested by history and time, and it must be reasonable. Therefore, the above explanation is not the original meaning of the ancients. In order to truly

² Li Bingnan 李炳南, *The lectures of Summary of the Rules of Propriety Part 1*, <http://www.minlun.org.tw/1pt/1-dreamweaver/24-01.htm>, 30 Oct 2021.

³ Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *The Collection of Annotations to The Book of Rites* 禮記集解(Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1989), p.5.

⁴ Han Dian, <https://www.zdic.net/hans/%E8%8B%A5%E5%A4%AB>, 30 Oct 2021.

understand the intentions and wisdom of the ancients, it is necessary to understand the meaning of the character *shi* correctly.

In *The Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注, the author Xu Shen said, ‘尸，陳也. The character *shi* means display.’⁵ Duan Yucai further explains that ‘*Shi* is the personator in the ritual of showing reverence to ancestors, because it was like the deceased.’⁶ In *The Kangxi Dictionary* 康熙字典, ‘*Shi* is interpreted as a personator of the deceased, and in the ritual of showing reverence to ancestors, *shi* usually played the role of the deceased.’⁷ By looking up these dictionaries, we can basically understand the meaning of *shi* in the original text, which should refer to some kind of sacred symbol in the ritual of showing reverence to ancestors. Since it is related to the ritual of showing reverence to ancestors, after reading the contents related to it in *The Book of Rites*, we can naturally get an exact explanation. There is a saying in *The Book of Rites* that says, ‘According to the rule in the ritual of showing reverence to ancestors, a grandson acted as the representative of his grandfather.’⁸ In other words, during this ritual, it is the grandson of the deceased who plays the role of the deceased. Therefore, *shi* sits in the position of receiving reverence and worship from others. At this point, the meaning of *shi* in the original text has been clarified.

Further, why did the ancients do this at the time of this ritual? In *The Yili* 儀禮, the annotator Zhengxuan said, ‘A filial person feels a sense of loss when he cannot see his loved ones during the ritual of showing reverence to ancestors.’⁹ He hoped that during this ritual, he would really see his loved ones enjoying the food that he had

⁵ Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注(Taipei: Hungyeh Publishing Co. Ltd., 2016), p.403.

⁶ Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注(Taipei: Hungyeh Publishing Co. Ltd., 2016), p.403.

⁷ Zhang Yushu 張玉書, Chen Tingjing 陳廷敬, *The Kangxi Dictionary* 康熙字典(Hongkong: Chung Hwa Book Co. (H.K.) Ltd., 1958), p.227.

⁸ Original text: ‘夫祭之道，孫為王父尸。’ Trans. by James Legge, *A summary account of sacrifices*, <https://ctext.org/liji/ji-tong/zh?en=en>, 31 Oct 2021.

⁹ Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, *Exegesis of the Thirteen Classics: Proof and annotation of Yili* 十三經注疏·儀禮注疏(Taipei: Yewen Publishing Company, 2001), p.496.

contributed. So the *shi* was established so that when people see the *shi*, they can project their feelings for their loved ones on the *shi*, allowing people to express their feelings for the deceased in a concrete way. Why should the grandson of the deceased play such an important role instead of his son? In *The History of Chinese Customs* 中國禮俗史, the author said that according to the ancestral temple system, the left side is *zhao* 昭 and the right side is *mu* 穆. The alternate generation is the same *zhao* or *mu*, so the grandson can represent his grandfather¹⁰. It is further extended to ‘*Shiwei sucan* 尸位素餐’, which means that a person sits in that place like *shi* at work, he receives a salary but is not loyal to his duty¹¹. This is the extended meaning of *shi*.

Then, if we look at the sentence ‘*Zuorushi* 坐如尸’, we can easily understand its meaning. When a person is in the position of being worshipped and is receiving offerings from others, his attitude is naturally very dignified and solemn. Moreover, he is a personator of the ancestors, so he must be very respectful when he sat there. In reality, even if people do not act as *shi* in their daily life, they do not sit casually. In *The Collection of Annotations to The Book of Rites* 禮記集解, the author also said that although people do not act as *shi*, when they sit, they must sit uprightly like *shi*¹².

Next, the original text says, ‘*liruzhai* 立如齊’, *qi* 齊 here is pronounced as *zhai* 齋. In *The Collection of Annotations to The Book of Rites*, the author also said that *zhai* refers to the process of the ritual showing reverence to ancestors¹³. Li Bingnan also said that *qi* is pronounced as *zhai*, and that before the ritual of showing reverence to ancestors, people should fast and ablution for three days. People must stand upright during the ritual and must not put their hands behind their backs. Because people will

¹⁰ Wang Guimin 王貴民, *The History of Chinese Customs* 中國禮俗史(Taipei: Wenjin Publishing House, 1989), p.5.

¹¹ Han Dian, <https://www.zdic.net/hans/%E5%B0%B8%E4%BD%8D%E7%B4%A0%E9%A4%90>, 31 Oct 2021.

¹² Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *The Collection of Annotations to The Book of Rites* 禮記集解(Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1989), p.5.

¹³ Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *The Collection of Annotations to The Book of Rites* 禮記集解(Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1989), p.5.

hold their chest out when they put their hands behind their back, people should avoid appearing arrogant. Therefore, people should bend their bodies like chime stone. And when people stand in daily life, their standing posture is also very respectful, as if they were attending the ritual and seeing their ancestors in front of them. From an emotional point of view, during the ritual of showing reverence to ancestors, when filial people are standing, their bodies will lean forward slightly. This is because when filial people see their ancestors coming, they will unconsciously want to be close to their ancestors, so their bodies will unconsciously lean forward.

Self Thoughts

Let's now move on to the last part.

Through studying this course, I realized that *The Book of Rites* does not require and bind us. On the contrary, it is to protect and help us. Why do I think so? Like the sentence that I am sharing with you today, including *The Dizigui* 弟子規 said, 'I will always walk composed, with light and even steps. I will always stand up straight and tall.¹⁴' and so on, they are all some of the most basic norms of life. If a child's childhood education is not strict with him in these aspects, his behavior will become very casual and loose, and even his behaviors will make others feel uncomfortable. This casual standing and sitting posture will have a detrimental effect on the child's bone development. For example, studies have shown that the reported rate of hunchback among primary and secondary school students in Beijing is about 26.2% and the incidence of abnormal body posture is close to 50%. And there is evidence that incorrect sitting posture is one of the key factors causing the problem.¹⁵

¹⁴ Original text: '步從容，立端正。' Trans. by The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, *Dizigui*, (Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 2015), p.56.

¹⁵ Wang Fubaihui 王富百慧, *Jiuzuoshijian Shentihuodong Yu Qingshaonian Shentizitai yichang* 久坐時間、身體活動與青少年身體姿態異常, China Youth Study 中國青年研究, 6(2021), 6

Moreover, if a person has a loose attitude, this loose attitude will extend to all aspects of his life. Even if he usually pays attention to his sitting and standing posture, this loose attitude will come out naturally when he does other things. This attitude will have a negative impact on his interpersonal relationships, because he is so casual in his daily life, it is unlikely that he will suddenly become cautious in the face of important matters. Therefore, a person's important abilities start from the small things of life, and a person's bad habits start from ignoring the details of life. Therefore, *The Book of Rites* is actually to help us form good habits from the details of life and take preventive measures. On the contrary, when a person stands and sits in a dignified and appropriate manner, he will be respected by others. In *The Confucian View of the Body* 儒家身體觀, the author Yang Rubin says that a person with dignified and appropriate manner will command the respect of others, and his behaviors will cause others to follow suit.¹⁶ It is thus clear that a person who behaves in a dignified and appropriate manner can gain the respect and even the trust of others.

However, it is worth noting that if people do not actively follow these basic norms of life, no matter how good the classics are, they cannot play their due role, and people just apply mechanically. *The Book of Rites* says, 'Always and in everything let there be reverence.'¹⁷ Li Bingnan also said that if a person is not respectful, even if his words and actions are in line with the rules, it is just an actor performing.¹⁸ And a respectful person will naturally have a respectful attitude when he is sitting or standing. Not only that, when he did anything, he was respectful and completed it very seriously. Even expressions and gestures, he will be different from others because of his different attitudes.

In conclusion, although the original text has only eight characters, the intention

¹⁶ Yang Rubin 楊儒賓, *The Confucian View of the Body* 儒家身體觀 (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 2019), p.31.

¹⁷ Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *The Collection of Annotations to The Book of Rites* 禮記集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1989), p.1.

¹⁸ Li Bingnan 李炳南講述, Xu Xingmin 徐醒民敬記, *Xuelu Shuxue Yulu* 雪廬述學語錄 (Taichung: Ruicheng Book Company, 2016), p.44.

behind the sentence is really well-intentioned. By regulating these two ordinary things in life, it cultivates our respectful attitude towards all things. If we put this respectful attitude into practice in our lives, it will help us improve and develop ourselves faster. In *The Great Learning* 大學, it is said that ‘ Things have their root and their branches. Affairs have their end and their beginning. To know what is first and what is last will lead near to what is taught in *The Great Learning*.¹⁹’ As the most important foundation, we must start self-cultivation from the details of life, we should seriously keep good habits and remove bad habits. Otherwise, no matter how good the external performance is, it is just a castle in the air.

This is my presentation, if there is any mistake in the content, any suggestions and advice would be appreciated, thank you very much.

¹⁹ Zhu Xi 朱熹, *The Variorum of the Four Books* 四書章句集注(Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1983), p.3.

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