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The Analysis of Chinese Character *xue* 學 from the Confucian Analects

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Respected Provost and Ms Deng, good morning! My name is Wang Xinyu, The topic I would like to share today is the analysis of Chinese character *xue* 學 from the chapter one of the Confucian Analects.

My presentation will be divided into four parts. Let us look at the outline. The first part is introduction. The second part is the analysis. The third part is the previous scholars' study on the character *xue* 學 and the final part is the conclusion.

I. Introduction

Learning is extremely important for everyone. We have been learning since we were born. When people are in childhood, they learn to walk and talk by leaning their parents' behavior. When they are teenagers, they gain a wide knowledge from their teachers by leaning and when they enter society, they need to learn a variety of different survival skills. So, it can be said that leaning is with people all their life and only by constantly learning, we can get improvement and progress. It is said in *the confucian Analects* that The Master said, 'is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?'¹ I often hear this classical paragraph in my daily life, but I am not very clear about the exact meaning of the character *xue* 學. Therefore, this time I try to collect the interpretation of *xue* 學 by the previous scholars to explore its exact meaning here.

II. Analysis

1. The analysis between 學 and 數

When I searched the word *xue* 學 in *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, I found that the form of the character *xue* 學 is different from the one we use now. In the ancient times, The form of *xue* 學 is like this—— *xiao* 數. About the relationship of *xue* 學 and *xiao* 數, there are two types

¹ James Legge, : *The confucian analects* (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhongguji chubanshe, 2016), p.3.

of explanation.

(1) The character *xue* 學 is the abbreviated phonetic of the character *xiao* 敎

The form of character 學 in *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 is that—*xiao* 敎. The explanation of *xiao* 敎 in *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 is enlightenment (覺悟也), *juewu* 覺悟 means a state that you come to understand or become aware of something. *xue* 學 has *jiao* 教 and *jiong* 冂 as a semantic constituent. *jiong* 冂 means a state of blindness. *Jiu* 臼 as the phonetic constituent. *Xue* 學 is the abbreviated phonetic of *xiao* 敎. (學, 篆文敎省)² So, according to *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, *xue* 學 is the seal script of *xiao* 敎 and the two should be the same character, expressing enlightenment. However, The later generation scholars thought that *xue* 學 should be distinguished from *xiao* 敎.

(2) The two characters are independent but cognate

Mr. Zhang Zilie of the *Ming* dynasty wrote in *Zhengzitong* 正字通: the character *xue* 學 is different from *xiao* 敎. Some classical literary work false rumour *xiao* 敎 as *xue* 學. Regarding *xue* 學 as *xiao* 敎 is wrong.³ There is a controversy in the two books because of whether *xue* 學 and *xiao* 敎 are the same character. So I look up the meaning of *xue* 學 in *Zhonghua dictionary* 中華大字典. It is said that ‘according to *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, *xue* 學 is the same as *xiao* 敎. So, we can see that in the ancient times, *xue* 學 and *xiao* 敎 is one character. But the later generations consider that *xue* 學 and *xiao* 敎 are separate character. The pronunciation of *xiao* 敎 is 胡孝切, its meaning is ‘to teach somebody’. The pronunciation of *xue* 學 is 胡覺切, its meaning is ‘to model somebody’.⁴ In order to confirm whether *xue* 學 and *xiao* 敎 are divided into two characters in later generations, I

² Original text: ‘敎, 覺悟也。從教冂, 冂, 尚矇也, 臼聲。學, 篆文敎省。’ Xu Shen 許慎, Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezhuzhu* 說文解字注 (Taipei: Hongyewenhua youxiangongsi, 2016), p.128. Trans. by myself.

³ Original text: ‘學與敎別。諸家泥經傳敎譌作學, 合學敎為一……學與敎同, 誤也。’ Guoxue dashi, ‘*xue* 學’, *Zhengzitong* 正字通: <http://www.guoxuedashi.com/kangxi/pic.php?f=zhengzitong&p=539> [accessed 1st January 2021] Trans. by myself.

⁴ Original text: ‘按說文。學即敎之重文。則古以敎學為一字可知。後人分別之。則敎音胡孝切。其義為教人。學音胡覺切。其義為效人。效人所以自覺。教人所以覺人也。’ Guoxue dashi, ‘*xue* 學’, *Zhonghua dazidian* 中華大字典: <http://www.guoxuedashi.com/kangxi/pic.php?f=zhdzd&p=430> [accessed 1st January 2021] Trans. by myself.

checked the *Wang li ancient Chinese dictionary* 王力古漢語字典 written by the well-known modern linguist Wang Li. I found that the character *xiao* 敎 is indeed listed as an independent word in this dictionary. Its pronunciation is *xiao*(胡教切) and meaning is ‘teach’. Therefore, I believe that *xue* 學 and *xiao* 敎 should be the same character in ancient times, and their meanings may be similar. This is also mentioned in *Hanyu Dictionary* 漢語大字典, It is stated that ‘in the ancient times, *xue* 學 has both ‘teach’ and ‘learning’ two meanings.(古教、學原為一字), Later, *xue* 學 and *xiao* 敎 are divided into two characters.’⁵ So, today the character *xue* 學 is commonly used by people, but people know very little about the character *xiao* 敎. In fact, *xue* 學 and *xiao* 敎 have been divided into two characters. The former character *xue* 學 focuses on achieving a state of enlightenment by learning from others. The latter character *xiao* 敎 focuses on awakening others through teaching. Today people normally use the character *jiao* 教 to express its meaning. That is my personal analysis of character *xue* 學 and *xiao* 敎.

2. The original meaning and extended meaning of the character *xue* 學

The explanation of *xue* 學 in *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 is enlightenment (覺悟也). The comment on this sentence by Duan Yucai stated that, it is said in *Xueji* 學記 in the *Book of Rites*. Through learning, you will know your own inadequacies, and you will be self-reflexive when you know these inadequacies. When you teach others, you will find some new problems in this process, and then you will try to overcome and solve them, which will help you to strengthen yourselves. So teaching benefits students as well as teachers.⁶ According to Duan Yucai, we can comprehend character *xue* 學 from two aspects, which is teach and learning.

The oracle bone inscription of *xue* 學 is like this——‘𠂔’. On the glyph, we can see that the upper part looks like two hands. It means to give support and a helping hand. The yao 爻 in

⁵ Original text: ‘按：古文字或從白持爻以教膝下之子，或從子學爻于大人膝前，古教、學原為一字，以後分化為二。’ Hanyudazidian Bianjiweiyuanhui 漢語大字典編輯委員會, *Hanyu dizidian* 漢語大字典 (Hubei: Hubeicishu chubanshe, Sichuan: Sichuancishu chubanshe 1996), p.428. Trans. by myself.

⁶ Original text: ‘學記曰，學然後知不足，知不足然後能自反也。按知不足所謂覺悟也。記又曰，教然後知困，知困然後能自強也。故曰，教學相長也。’ Xu Shen 許慎, Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jieyizhu* 說文解字注 (Taipei: Hongyewenhua youxiangongsi, 2016), p.128. Trans. by myself.

the middle part of character *xue* 學 has the meaning of learning *Yao* 爻. The *mi* 宀 in the lower part indicates the meaning of teaching under the house. The character *xue* 學 in the form of *Jinwen* 金文 is like this——「」、「」. On the basis of the oracle bone script, the word *zi* 子 is added below, Showing the meaning of teaching children. Or adding *pu* 攴 below, *pu* 攴 has the meaning of hitting, so it can indicate the meaning of strict supervision and guidance. Overall, according to the analysis of character *xue* 學's graphic shape, the original meaning of 學 should be that children be taught by their parents and then come to understand of something. According to the *Hanzi yuanliu dictionary*, The seal script of *xue* 學 is also divided into two forms *xue* 學 and *xiao* 敎, similar to *Jinwen*. Today, the two characters are simplified as *xue* 学 and *xiao* 教 and express different meanings.⁷

I have checked the *Hanzi yuanliu dictionary* and tried to put the extended meanings of *xue* 學 in order. This is a character card I made. First of all, the original meaning of *xue* 學 is 'learning'(example:學而不思則罔，思而不學則殆。). Then, 'Learning' can be extended to 'imitation 模仿'(example:貧家而學富家之衣食多用，則速亡必矣。). The results of learning can be extended to 'knowledge 學問' and '學識'(example:百家之學). There is different kinds of '學問 knowledge'. So it can be extended from '學問 knowledge' to '學科 various subjects'(example:文字學 Philology and 心理學 Psychology). People who study these subjects are called '學者 scholars' Finally, it can be extended to the place of study. In ancient times, there was '*Tai Xue* 太學' and in modern times, there is '學校 School'. All of the above are the meanings of the extension of the character *xue* 學.

III. Annotations by Scholars in Different Dynasties

1. Enlightenment

Lunyü zhushu 論語注疏 state that 'It is said in *Baihutong* 白虎通 that the character *xue* 學 means enlightenment(*jue* 覺). To come to know something unknown is enlightenment.'⁸

⁷ Original text: '篆文承接金文，也分為二體。隸變後楷書分別寫作學與敎。後二字表意各有分工。如今簡化作學與教。' Gu Yankui 谷衍奎, *Hanziyuanliu zidian* 漢字源流字典 (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2003), p.398. Trans. by myself.

⁸ Original text: '《白虎通》云：『學者，覺也，覺悟所未知也。』' He Yan, 何晏, Xing Bing 邢昺, *Lunyü zhushu* 論語注疏 (Beijing: Beijingzhigong chubanshe, 2016), p.1. Trans. by myself.

2. To model others

Sishu jizhu 四書集注 state that ‘the character *xue* 學 means to model those good examples. It is true that human’s nature are all positive, but the younger generation should have good examples to model. If they can regard those exemplary people as their role models and then they will be influenced by them and become a good person finally.’⁹

3. learning

Duluny zhaji 讀論語札記 state that ‘I suppose that the character *xue* 學 in the ancient times is learning *Shi* 詩經, *Shu* 尚書, *Li* 禮記 and *Yue* 樂經.’¹⁰

Lunyu jiangyao 論語講要 state that ‘the character *xue* 學 means the way of learning to be a good person. To learn as a good person at the beginning and finally to learn as a saint. That is *xue* 學.’¹¹

Lunyu jinzhu jinshi 論語今注今釋 written by Mao Zishui state that ‘The character *xue* 學 here refers to learning the principles of self-cultivation and learning the knowledge which will bring benefit to the world.’¹²

The above has collected part of the explanations of the character *xue* 學 by various scholars and which can be divided into two categories. One side is moral field, such as the influence of model mentioned by Zhuxi. The other side is the field of cognition. Like Mr. Liguangdi 李光地 said in *Duluny zhaji* 讀論語札記 ‘learning *Shi* 詩經, *Shu* 尚書, *Li* 禮記 and *Yue* 樂經’ is *xue* 學.

⁹ Original text: ‘學之為言效也。人性皆善，而覺有先後，後覺者必效先覺之所為，乃可以明善而復其初也。’Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Xishu jizhu* 四書集注 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2010), p.54. Trans. by myself.

¹⁰ Original text: ‘學字，先儒兼知行言。愚謂古人所以為學者，《詩》、《書》、禮、樂四術而已。’Guoxue dashi, *Duluny zhaji* 讀論語札記: www.guoxuedashi.com/sikuquanshu/fanti/1722c/16036.html [accessed 1st January 2021] Trans. by myself.

¹¹ Original text: ‘學即是學作人之道，初學為士人，以至學為聖人，皆不離學。’Li Bingnan 李炳南, *Lunyu jiangyao* 論語講要(Wuhan: Hubeichangjiang chubanjituan, changjiangwenyi chubanshe, 2011), p.1. Trans. by myself.

¹² Original text: ‘這裡的學字，是指學修己的道理和學濟世利人的知識而言的。’Mao Zishui 毛子水, *Lunyu jinzhu jinshi* 論語今注今釋(Taiwan: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1979), p.1. Trans. by myself.

From my viewpoint, I think that the interpretation of the character *xue* 學 by Mr. Mao Zishui is the most appropriate. Because it is really a good strategy for learning to develop self-cultivation and learn skills that can benefit others at the same time.

IV. Conclusion

The interpretation of character *xue* 學 in the sentence ‘is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?’ are various in different dynasties. This article analyzes the two characters ‘*xue* 學’ and ‘*xiao* 教’, and examines the original meaning of the character ‘*xue* 學’ and its extended meanings. Also, collecting the interpretations from various scholars in different dynasties. To sum up, the definition of character ‘*xue* 學’ here is to learn a certain subject, or a certain way to improve self-cultivation. In fact, the key of success is to practice what you have learned often. If you only want to learn more and more new things but do not want to practice them, it will be difficult to strengthen what you have learned. Only through constant review and practice of what we have learned can we understand its essence. Only we are very proficient at what we learn, then we can use them to help others and contribute to the world.

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