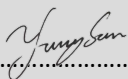


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The Study on the Teacher-Student Relationship between Confucius and Zi Gong

I.Introduction

In history, the sage Confucius travelled around the world and taught 3,000 disciples , among whom were Yan Hui, Zi Lu, Zi Gong and Zi Xia. During his life, Confucius also adhered to the principle of ‘Education without discrimination’ and taught students who came from afar seriously. Because of Confucius careful teaching and his principle of “gentle, kind, respectful, frugal , and yielding”溫良恭儉讓, his friendship with his students became very deep. Among the many students, Zi Gong was one of the earliest to follow Confucius and remained with him until his death, thereby having a relatively long period of association. Moreover, his personal virtues, abilities, and reputation were well recognized among his peers . This study uses Zi Gong as a distinct point of entry, examining the interactions and experiences between him and Confucius in order to more deeply clarify and understand the nature of their relationship. It is hoped that this investigation will provide modern readers with a model of the teacher–student relationship as exemplified in ancient times, while also offering further references for subsequent research on the figures of Confucius and Zi Gong.

II. the Relationship of Teaching

Zi Gong, originally named Duanmu Ci, was a native of the State of Wei during the Spring and Autumn period. According to the ‘*Historical Records - Zhongnis Disciples*’, Zi Gongs age was ‘thirty-one years younger than Confucius’. Confucius was born in 551 BC, so Zi Gong was born in 520 BC. Zi Gong was very eloquent and had a lively personality. In addition, through further enquiry, we can find that in *the Analects*, there are 38 records about Zi Gong, second only to Zi Lu, which is the most direct demonstration of the frequent interaction and communication between Zi Gong and Confucius. Among them, there are four times when Zi Gong directly asked Confucius questions about ‘gentleman, friendship,

benevolence, and politics’¹問君子，文友，問仁，問政。 These questions cover different aspects and fields, which shows that Zi Gong himself was very willing to take the initiative to seek out a teacher to discuss his problems. In addition, Zi Gong showed that he was good at thinking in the process of asking questions and kept on giving the teacher difficult questions. Moreover, Zi Gong also liked this kind of question-and-answer style of constant back-and-forth questioning, for example, when Zi Gong asked questions about the key points of politics², what was considered a scholar, and the good and bad feelings of the townspeople, he liked to engage in a back-and-forth debate, to which Confucius would also patiently give further answers.

Apart from teachers answering students questions, there are also occasional in-depth discussions on academics, for example, when discussing poems by Confucius and Zi Gong, Confucius would also say, 「賜也，始可與言詩已矣！告諸往而知來者。」 “With one like Ci, I can begin to talk about the poems. I told him one point, and he knew its proper sequence.” This is a compliment to Zi Gong. It is also recorded in the Analects of Confucius: 「子貢欲去告朔之餼羊。子曰：「賜也，爾愛其羊，我愛其禮。」 “Zi Gong wished to do away with the offering of a sheep connected with the inauguration of the first day of each month. The Master said, "Ci, you love the sheep; I love the ceremony."” Here we can also see that even though the two of them have different ideas about the same thing, they will still express their own ideas directly, and this kind of mutual discussion between teachers and students is worth learning from. Confucius would not only explore and instruct Zi Gong in his studies, but would also give him special guidance in his virtues. For example, because Zi Gong was very eloquent, Confucius made a point of criticising and mentioning him, and he

¹ 子貢問君子。子曰：「先行其言，而後從之。」

子貢問友。子曰：「忠告而善道之，不可則止，無自辱焉。」

子貢問為仁。子曰：「工欲善其事，必先利其器。居是邦也，事其大夫之賢者，友其士之仁者。」

² 「子貢問政。子曰：「足食。足兵。民信之矣。」子貢曰：「必不得已而去，於斯三者何先？」曰：「去兵。」子貢曰：「必不得已而去，於斯二者何先？」曰：「去食。自古皆有死，民無信不立。」

would also compare him with Yan Hui³, the best student in his class, in order to motivate him to move upward. In the Analects of Confucius: 「子貢方人。子曰：「賜也賢乎哉？夫我則不暇。」」 Zi Gong was in the habit of comparing men together. The Master said, "Ci must have reached a high pitch /pitʃ/ of excellence! Now, I have not leisure for this." When Confucius heard that Zi Gong was criticising others, Confucius also commented directly, hoping that Zi Gong would look back on himself instead of looking outwards at the faults of others. Sometimes Zi Gong would even say something at a higher level, such as: 「我不欲人之加諸我也，吾亦欲無加諸人。」 “What I do not wish men to do to me, I also wish not to do to men.” Confucius said directly to Zi Gong, “You cannot do it yet.” This shows that Confucius was very critical of Zi Gong, but this does not mean that Confucius disliked Zi Gong; Confucius behaviour also shows that he had high expectations of his disciple. In addition to his unrelenting /ˌʌn.rɪˈlen.tɪŋ/ criticism of Zi Gong, Confucius was never shy about praising his senior disciple, as Confucius himself said: 「賜不受命，而貨殖焉，億則屢中。」 “Ci does not acquiesce in the appointments of Heaven, and his goods are increased by him. Yet his judgments are often correct.” He also recognised Zi Gong's ability to generate wealth, and Confucius himself once said 「富而可求也，雖執鞭之士，吾亦為之」 “If the search for riches is sure to be successful, though I should become a groom with whip in hand to get them, I will do so.” In addition, Confucius also commented on Zi Gong's three strengths, namely, 「達、辯、敏」 ‘diplomatic, eloquence, and sensitivity’, thinking that his intelligence at least exceeded that of ordinary people, and even exceeded his own in the area of ‘sensitivity’. The fact that Confucius could frankly and graciously admit that his student had surpassed him shows that Confucius and his disciple really had a relationship of mentor and friend, and that they had completely learnt from each other's mistakes. In

³ 子貢利口巧辭，孔子常黜其辯。問曰：「汝與回也孰愈？」對曰：「賜也何敢望回！回也聞一以知十，賜也聞一以知二。」《史記·仲尼弟子列傳》

addition, we can also see that Confucius had a very deep understanding of his own students, otherwise it would not have been possible for him to know the strengths and weaknesses of his students so clearly, and to give them guidance accordingly. When he assigned his disciples to save the state of Lu 魯國 in the future, he even purposely refused the recommendations of many disciples, and allowed Zi Gong to travel alone, which also shows Confucius's trust in and understanding of Zi Gong.⁴

III. the Relationship of Trust

From another perspective, apart from teachers knowing and trusting their students, students also know and trust their teachers very well. For example, when someone slandered Confucius, almost every time, Zi Gong would come forward to refute the slander and prove the reputation of his teacher. He himself even compared Confucius to the sun and the moon, believing that his teachers virtue and wisdom were beyond the ability of mere mortals to fathom. *The Analects of Confucius* also records a rebuttal by Zi Gong to Chen Zi Qin 陳子禽.⁵ When Zi Gong was confronted by Chen Zi Qin 陳子禽 who praised Zi Gong but slandered his teacher, Zi Gong did not hesitate to rebuff him and said, 「生榮死哀」 “To be alive is to be honoured, but to be dead is to be grieved for.” These words express the high respect and esteem he has for Confucius. There is also an account in *the Historical Records* of a time when Confucius and his disciples were lost:

When Confucius traveled to the state of Zheng, he became separated from his disciples and stood alone by the eastern gate of the outer city. A man from Zheng told Zi Gong, "There's a man at the eastern gate. His forehead resembles Yao's, his neck is like Gao Yao's, and his shoulders resemble Zi Chan's. However, from the waist down, he is three inches shorter than Yu. He looks utterly exhausted, like a stray dog with no home." Zi Gong repeated these words to Confucius. With a

⁴ 田常欲作亂於齊，憚高、國、鮑、晏，故移其兵欲以伐魯。孔子聞之，謂門弟子曰：「夫魯，墳墓所處，父母之國，國危如此，二三子何為莫出？」子路請出，孔子止之。子張、子石請行，孔子弗許。子貢請行，孔子許之。《史記·仲尼弟子列傳》

⁵ 陳子禽謂子貢曰：「子為恭也，仲尼豈賢於子乎？」子貢曰：「君子一言以為知，一言以為不知，言不可不慎也。夫子之不可及也，猶天之不可階而升也。夫子之得邦家者，所謂立之斯立，道之斯行，綏之斯來，動之斯和。其生也榮，其死也哀，如之何其可及也。」

heartily laugh, Confucius replied, "Appearances are trivial. But comparing me to a stray dog with no home—how true! How true!"

The key point here is the abstract description of Confucius appearance by a Zheng people. The author does not care about the popularity of portraits at that time. First of all, no matter how this kind of abstract description, when he said it out of his mouth, as a student, Zi Gong was able to understand that this was his own teacher, which is already an unbelievable thing. At the same time, in these descriptions, most of them were using the appearance of ancient celebrities who were wise and virtuous, as well as the description of the final loss of the family dog, but Zi Gong was able to understand it directly, so the author can think that, in his heart, Confucius was just like a sage in the society of the time, but he was depressed, which is a sharp contrast. From this, we can see that Zi Gong also recognises and supports his teacher from the bottom of his heart, and he also has great respect and noble feelings for him, and at the same time, expresses his sympathy for the misfortunes and injustices suffered by his teacher.

From the teachers point of view, Zi Gong was also a very beloved student of his. Confucius also had many deep exchanges with Zi Gong and revealed his heartfelt feelings, for example: 子貢曰：「有美玉於斯，韞匱而藏諸？求善賈而沽諸？」子曰：「沽之哉！沽之哉！我待賈者也。」 Zi Gong said, "There is a beautiful gem here. Should I lay it up in a case and keep it? or should I seek for a good price and sell it?" The Master said, "Sell it! Sell it! But I would wait for one to offer the price." Here, Confucius expresses to Zi Gong his wish to wait for a wise man to fulfil his ambition and to perpetuate his culture. On the other hand, history also records an incident in which Confucius reveals his heart:⁶ In 481 B.C., when a Qilin 麒麟 (special animal) was hunted to death, Confucius sighed that his own path had come to an end, and told Zi Gong that only heaven could understand him. Such a record of deep and intense inner thoughts is recorded in several books, but of all the students, it is

⁶ 「西狩見麟，曰：『吾道窮矣！』喟然嘆曰：『莫知我夫！』子貢曰：『何為莫知子？』子曰：『不怨天，不尤人，下學而上達，知我者其天乎！』」

only with Zi Gong that it is most frequently told.

By the time Confucius was old, he had already suffered many blows.⁷ Firstly, he lost his son in his old age, then he lost his beloved disciple Zi Lu, and at the same time, he failed to achieve his own ideals, so his state of mind at that time could be said to be extremely painful. Confucius could only think of his pupil, Zi Gong, and asked with concern, ‘Why are you so late?’ This shows that the friendship between teacher and pupil could not be contained in the words of ‘transmitting the Dao 傳道, imparting knowledge 受業, and resolving doubts 解惑’.

At that time, Zi Gong even helped to organise Confucius’ funeral, and even adjusted the funeral rites with the understanding of Confucius’ habits before his death⁸. Zi Gong’s ability to do so is not something that can be understood by ordinary care and understanding, but rather by his commitment to his teachers philosophy and even his deep understanding of his teacher. Although we cannot be sure how many parts of the funeral service Zi Gong was responsible for, we can still see that Zi Gong’s intention was very good. And then, after the other disciples had completed the standard three-year mourning period (a Confucian tradition of grieving for a parent or teacher) and departed, Zi Gong alone remained by Confucius’ tomb, observing an additional three years of mourning. He stayed for six full years before finally leaving.⁹ This profound act reflects the deep mutual bond between Confucius and Zi Gong—a relationship of unwavering devotion that commands deep respect.

IV. Conclusion

In summary, the bond between Confucius and Zi Gong transcended mere scholarship. Their relationship was built on rigorous intellectual exchange, mutual exploration of ideas,

⁷ 明歲，子路死於衛。孔子病，子貢請見。孔子方負杖逍遙於門，曰：「賜，汝來何其晚也？」孔子因歎，歌曰：「泰山壞乎！梁柱摧乎！哲人萎乎！」因以涕下。謂子貢曰：「天下無道久矣，莫能宗予。夏人殯於東階，周人於西階，殷人兩柱間。昨暮予夢坐奠兩柱之間，予始殷人也。」後七日卒。

⁸ 孔子之喪，門人疑所服。子貢曰：「昔者夫子之喪顏淵，若喪子而無服；喪子路亦然。請喪夫子，若喪父而無服。」《禮記·檀弓上》

⁹ 「孔子葬魯城北泗上，弟子皆服三年。三年心喪畢，相訣而去，則哭，各復盡哀；或復留。唯子貢廬於冢上，凡六年，然後去。」

and a profound master-disciple dynamic where the teacher's "sternness born of deep care" met the student's unwavering reverence and devotion. During their time together, Confucius patiently guided Zi Gong, adapting his teachings to moments of opportunity, while also treating him as a trusted confidant, sharing wisdom through an open-hearted bond. In return, Zi Gong did what he could to help his teacher, and used his influence in business to make Confucius famous at that time, which is still praised today!