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The Explanations for the Character *Du* 毒 in *Zhouyi* 周易 and the Changes of Its Meaning

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Respected provost, Miss Deng, good morning. My name is Manyu Yang. Today I would like to share with you a topic about the Exegesis.

When people reading the ancient Chinese classics, it is not hard to realise that the same characters convey different meanings in today and in the past. If people understand every character with its modern explanations, they may not be able to catch on the meanings of classics. In this situation, it is important to use exegesis knowledge to analyse the original meaning of characters. This is a process which full of surprises, and you will find how characters had been made and the changes of its meaning during hundreds and even thousands of years. Today, I would like to share with you the explanations for the character *Du* 毒 in *Zhouyi* 周易, a Chinese classic which had been written in almost 3000 years ago. The presentation will be divided into five parts. I will firstly introduce how the character *Du* cannot be understood as its modern meaning in *Zhouyi*. In the second to the forth part, I will use three ways of exegesis ,which are analysing through shape, analysing through sound and analysing through texts to draw conclusions of the meanings of the character *Du*. The last part will be the conclusion.

1. How can't the character *Du* be understood as its modern meanings in *Zhouyi*

The character *Du* came up in two of *I-Ching's* Hexagram. The first one is in the *Shi* 師 Hexagram and the second one is in the *Shike* 噬嗑 Hexagram. The original texts are shown here. If people use the modern meanings of the character *Du* to

interpret these two sentences, it causes problems. In *the New Version of Modern Chinese Dictionary*, the character *Du* is defined as a noun which means : 1. Harm; 2. Harmful materials; 3. Narcotic drugs; 4. A metaphor for the things which can harm people's ideology.¹ In its verb form, it means: 1. Hate; 2. Harm 3. Using harmful drugs to kill or hurt.² However, these explanations do not work well on explaining these two original texts of *Zhouyi*. For the first sentence, if using the modern meanings of *du*, it becomes “using this hand to harm the world, as people following it, how could it be bad? No, nothing would go wrong.”(以此毒天下，而民从之，吉又何咎矣。)³ It is strange to say that harming the world is something good for people in traditional Chinese classics. For the second sentence, it becomes “Encountering poison when biting the dried meat, it is a small accident which will not bring big harm.”(噬腊肉，遇毒，小吝，無咎。)⁴ This sentence sounds very odd as well. Therefore the character *du* must contain other meanings in the ancient times of China. People can use the knowledge of Exegesis to look for the original meaning of *du*.

2. Finding out the original meanings —— Analysing through shape

The first step of finding the original meaning is follow the six principles theory of Chinese script to analyse the shape of the character. It helps people to find out the way of the character being made. We often use a book called *Shuowen jiezi* in this step. In *Shuowen jiezi*, the character *du* is explained as ‘Heavy. The harmful grass usually grow together and look luxuriant . The radical of the character is *che* 𠂔 and

¹ National Academy for Educational Research, *the New Version of Modern Chinese Dictionary*, <https://dict.revised.moe.edu.tw/dictView.jsp?ID=2284&q=1&word=%E6%AF%92>, accessed in 5th Nov 2021.

² National Academy for Educational Research, *the New Version of Modern Chinese Dictionary*, <https://dict.revised.moe.edu.tw/dictView.jsp?ID=2284&q=1&word=%E6%AF%92>, accessed in 5th Nov 2021.

³ Huang, Chung-tien, *Zhouyi Chengzhuan* 周易程傳(Gaoxiong: Gaoxiong Fuwen Tushu Press, 2017), p.72

⁴ Huang, Chung-tien, *Zhouyi Chengzhuan* 周易程傳, p.192

ai 毒’.(毒，厚也。害人之艸，往往而生。从中，从毒。)⁵ *Che* 中 is interpreted as “Newly grown grass and trees”(艸木初生也).⁶ *Ai* 毒 means ‘people who are immoral’(人無行也).⁷ These two characters give us an image of ‘harmful grass’(害人之草). This image may be very close to the modern meanings of the character *du*, but it still has minor differences. This is because the word ‘harmful’(害人) is not as serious as what it means today which are more likely to be ‘fatal, deadly’.

In the meanwhile, as we mentioned before, *Shuowen jiezi* says *du* means ‘heavy’(厚也). Even though the two radicals have strong connection with the meaning ‘harmful’, does the character *du* originally means ‘harmful’? How do we understand the word ‘heavy’ correctly?

To answer the first question, we can check the ancient form of character *du* which is 𣎵. The xiaozhuan form of it is . *Shuowen jiezi* says: ‘𣎵, the ancient form of *du* 毒, the radical is *dao* 刀’(𣎵，古文毒，从刀).⁸ For the meaning of the radical *dao* 刀, Duan Yucai annotated that it ‘means harmful’(所以害人也).⁹ It is clear that no matter the ancient form or the modern form of character *du* 毒 contain radicals which represent ‘harmful’, hence the meaning ‘harmful’ should have existed in the first place.

To analyzing the detailed meaning of ‘heavy’(厚), I referred to a book called the *Shuowen jiezi yizheng* which is written by *Guifu*. He analysed that: ‘the pronunciation of the character *hou* 厚 is close to *du* 毒... *Zhanguoce Qince* says, you cannot gain a great victory.(非能厚勝之也) *Gao You*’s annotation says, the character *hou* 厚 means great.(厚，大也)...*Zhouyu* says, the richer the flavor is, the more deleterious it

⁵ Xu, Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字(Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press, 1978), p.17

⁶ Xu, Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, p.17

⁷ Xu, Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, p.517

⁸ Xu, Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, p.17

⁹ Duan, Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注(Taipei: Hungyeh Culture Press, 2018), p.22

becomes.(厚味寔臘毒)Wei Zhao's annotation says, rich flavor contains great harm (味厚，其毒亟也).'¹⁰ From the explanations above, people can realise that the character *hou* 厚 does not equal to 'thick', it is more closely connected to a kind of condition and status of things. Sometimes it can also be used to describe bad condition.

Another important material which reveals the meaning of *hou* 厚 is in the explanation of the character *du* 𧈧, *du* 𧈧 is the cognate of the character *du* 毒, and I will explain this part later. In *Shuowen jiezi*, the character *du* 𧈧 is explained by the character *hou* 𧈧.¹¹ Duan Yucai says, 'even though many versions had written the character *hou* 𧈧 as *hou* 厚. I shall correct it here. Xu Shen thought the *hou* which means the thickness of things should be written as 𧈧(𧈧各本作厚，今正。許意厚薄字當作𧈧。)'.¹² For the character *hou* 厚, Xu Shen explained it as 'the greatness of mountains (山陵之厚也)'.¹³ These two explanations shows that the character *hou* 𧈧 refers to the thickness while the character *hou* 厚 refers to great level of certain condition of things.

To sum up this part, the character *du* contains the meaning of 'being harmful' which is similar to its modern meanings, but its original meanings have wider range than its modern meanings. The character *du* was not limited in describing bad and evil, it was more neutral in ancient times. Duan Yucai says, '*du* has both of kind and evil meanings, just like the character *xiang* 祥 can be used to describe both of good fortune and bad fortune, the character *chou* 臭 contains both meanings of good smell

¹⁰ Gui, Fu 桂馥, *Shuowen jiezi yizheng* 說文解字義證(Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Press, 1987), p. 46

¹¹ Xu, Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, p.111

¹² Duan, Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注, p.688

¹³ Xu, Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, p.209

and bad smell’(毒兼善惡之辭，猶祥兼吉凶，臭兼香臭也).¹⁴ Therefore, the original meaning of *du* is to describe the great degree of certain things and conditions, or to express the meaning of harmful.

3. Finding out the original meanings —— Analysing through sound

Except for the shape of characters, the sound of them can also reflect the original meanings. Mrs. Chou says, ‘the sound of Chinese language can convey meanings, in other words, meanings are contained in the sound’.¹⁵ Therefore, it is reasonable to say that homophonous or nearly homophonous graphs are likely to hold the same meanings. However, the pronunciations of characters change through different time period. Today if we want to figure out the meanings of *du* in *Zhouyi*, we must chase back to its original pronunciation in ancient time. Duan Yucai says, ‘the character *du* 毒, *du* 𪔐 and *du* 篤 are homophonous and historically interchangeable graphs (毒與𪔐、篤同音通用。)’.¹⁶ Zhu Junsheng says: ‘*du* 毒 can be borrowed to replace the character *du* 督 (毒，假借為督。)’.¹⁷ ‘It can be explained as *du* 簪 (蓋以簪為訓。)’.¹⁸ In ancient times, the character *du* 毒 are interchangeable with the characters *du* 篤, *du* 𪔐, *du* 督, *du* 簪. I have listed their morphemic component in ancient times.

	上古聲紐 Initials	段玉裁 17 韻 部 Finals (following Dua Yucai’s 17 ancient- time finals)	陳新雄 32 韻 部 Finals (following Chen Xinxiong’s 32 ancient-time finals)	擬音 Restructuring pronunciations

¹⁴ Duan, Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注, p.22

¹⁵ Chou, Pi-hsiang 周碧香, *Shiyong xunguxue* 實用訓詁學[Practical Exegesis](Taipei: Hungyeh Culture Press, 2015), p.57

¹⁶ Duan, Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注, p.22

¹⁷ Zhu, Junsheng 朱駿聲, *Shuowen tongxun dingsheng* 說文通訓定聲(Wuhan: Wuhan guji shudian press, 1983), p. 292

¹⁸ Zhu, Junsheng 朱駿聲, *Shuowen tongxun dingsheng* 說文通訓定聲, p. 292

毒	定	尤 ¹⁹	覺 ²⁰	duk ²¹
篤	端	尤 ²²	覺 ²³	tuk ²⁴
督	端	尤 ²⁵	覺 ²⁶	tuk ²⁷
簪	端	尤 ²⁸	覺 ²⁹	tuk ³⁰
竺	端	尤 ³¹	覺 ³²	tuk ³³

From this form, we can see these 5 characters share the same finals, this phenomenon is called *dieyun* 疊韻 in phonology, and their initials are very similar, too. Professor Zhu says, ‘in the ancient-time language system, people use a certain pronunciation to represent a meaning or a concept. As this connection between the sound and meaning becomes definite, people create a series of characters which share the similar sound to represent the same meaning. This series of characters are called cognate(同源詞)’.³⁴ Now we see these four characters share the same final with the character *du* 毒, their initials are similar. If the original meanings of them are also similar, they can be defined as cognates to the character *du* 毒, *du* 毒’s original

¹⁹ Duan, Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注, p.828

²⁰ Chen, Xinxiong 陳新雄, *Guyin yanjiu* 古音研究[A research for the ancient-time phonology](Taipei: Wunan tushu press, 1999), p. 361

²¹ Based on Wangli’s restructuring system. To see Hanzi gujinyin ziliaoku 漢字古今音資料庫, <https://xiaoxue.iis.sinica.edu.tw/shangguyin?kaiOrder=1307>, accessed in 5th Nov 2021

²² Duan, Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注, p.828

²³ Chen, Xinxiong 陳新雄, *Guyin yanjiu* 古音研究, p. 361

²⁴ Based on Wangli’s restructuring system. To see Hanzi gujinyin ziliaoku 漢字古今音資料庫, <https://xiaoxue.iis.sinica.edu.tw/shangguyin?kaiOrder=1307>, accessed in 5th Nov 2021

²⁵ Duan, Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注, p.828

²⁶ Chen, Xinxiong 陳新雄, *Guyin yanjiu* 古音研究, p. 361

²⁷ Based on Wangli’s restructuring system. To see Hanzi gujinyin ziliaoku 漢字古今音資料庫, <https://xiaoxue.iis.sinica.edu.tw/shangguyin?kaiOrder=1307>, accessed in 5th Nov 2021

²⁸ Duan, Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注, p.828

²⁹ Chen, Xinxiong 陳新雄, *Guyin yanjiu* 古音研究, p. 361

³⁰ Based on Wangli’s restructuring system. To see Hanzi gujinyin ziliaoku 漢字古今音資料庫, <https://xiaoxue.iis.sinica.edu.tw/shangguyin?kaiOrder=1307>, accessed in 5th Nov 2021

³¹ Duan, Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注, p.828

³² Chen, Xinxiong 陳新雄, *Guyin yanjiu* 古音研究, p. 361

³³ Based on Wangli’s restructuring system. To see Hanzi gujinyin ziliaoku 漢字古今音資料庫, <https://xiaoxue.iis.sinica.edu.tw/shangguyin?kaiOrder=1307>, accessed in 5th Nov 2021

³⁴ Zhu, Jianing 竺家寧, *Xunguxue zhilv* 訓詁學之旅[The Journey of Exegesis](Taipei: Xinxuelin Press, 2019), p.26

meaning will be closely connected with these four characters.

According to *Shuowen jiezi*, *du* 篤 means ‘horse walks slowly (篤，馬行頓遲也。)’³⁵ Duan Yucai annotated, ‘*Du* 篤 means firm and thick (篤，固也。篤，厚也。)’³⁶ The character *du* 督 means ‘to observe and to inspect, and another meaning is eye pain(督，察視，一曰目痛也。)’³⁷ Both of the character *du* 管 and *du* 筮 means ‘thick(𦰩也)’³⁸ Therefore, we can see that there is only one character *du* 督’s original meaning has no connection with the character *du* 毒. *Du* 毒 is only a borrowed graph for the character *du* 督. However, the other three characters’ original meanings have connection with the character *du* 毒，hence these four characters are cognates and they share similar original meanings. It is also the evidence of the pronunciation ‘duk’ and ‘tuk’ means *hou* 厚 in the ancient times.

4. Finding out the original meanings —— Analysing through texts

After analysing the original meanings of *du* 毒 by working on its shape and sound, the third step should be going back to the original texts of *Zhouyi*, to see if these explanations cope well with the context of original texts. During this process, we firstly pick up some of the annotations for the original texts.

(1) The original text: 以此毒天下，而民從之，吉又何咎矣。³⁹

Annotations：1. Ma Rong (馬融)：to manage.⁴⁰

2. Wang Bi (王弼)：to order.⁴¹

3. Kong Yingda (孔穎達)：to order.⁴²

³⁵ Xu, Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, p.200

³⁶ Duan, Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注, p.470

³⁷ Xu, Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, p.132

³⁸ Xu, Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, p.111

³⁹ Huang, Chung-tien, *Zhouyi Chengzhuan* 周易程傳, p.72

⁴⁰ To see Huang, Chung-tien, *Zhouyi Chengzhuan* 周易程傳, p.72

⁴¹ Wang, Bi 王弼, Kong, Yingda 孔穎達, *Zhouyi zhushu* 周易註疏[The annotation and explanation for *Zhouyi*], to see Yang, Jun 楊軍, *Shiba mingjia jie zhouyi* 十八名家解周易[Eighteen famous annotations for *Zhouyi*](Changchun: Changchun Press, 2009), vol.2, p. 135

⁴² Wang, Bi 王弼, Kong, Yingda 孔穎達, *Zhouyi zhushu* 周易註疏[The annotation and explanation for

4. Cheng Yi (程頤) : to harm.⁴³
5. Hu Yuan (胡瑗) : to order.⁴⁴
6. Xu Zhirui (徐志銳) : to harm.⁴⁵

From the annotations listed here, we can see that the character *du* 毒 has been explained as ‘to manage, to harm and to order’. The interpretations of ‘to manage’ and ‘to order’ refer to that the character *du* 毒 can be the borrowed graph of *du* 督. The original meaning of *du* 督 is ‘to observe and to inspect’, and it is extended to mean ‘manage and order’. Although the interpretation of ‘to harm’ is related with the original meaning of *du* 毒, it does not cope well with the context because of saying ‘harming the world is propitious’ does not sound right. Therefore it is better to interpret the character *du* 毒 here to ‘manage’ or ‘order’. The translation of the whole sentence should be: Using this hand to manage the world, and people would follow, it is propitious and surely nothing would go wrong.

Then let us take a look at the second text.

(2) The original text: 噬腊肉，遇毒，小吝，無咎。⁴⁶

Annotations : 1. Wang Bi (王弼) : a metaphor for resentment starting to form.⁴⁷

2. Kong Yingda (孔穎達) : Bitter and rotted things.⁴⁸

3. Cheng Yi (程頤) : Strong and bad taste.⁴⁹

Zhouyi], to see Yang, Jun 楊軍, *Shiba mingjia jie zhouyi* 十八名家解周易, vol.2 p. 135

⁴³ Cheng, Yi 程頤, *Yichuan yizhuan* 伊川易傳[Yichuan’s annotation for Zhouyi], to see Yang, Jun 楊軍, *Shiba mingjia jie zhouyi* 十八名家解周易, vol.5, p.20

⁴⁴ Hu, Yuan 胡瑗, *Zhouyi kouyi* 周易口義[The annotation for Zhouyi], to see Yang, Jun 楊軍, *Shiba mingjia jie zhouyi* 十八名家解周易, vol.5, p.294

⁴⁵ Xu, Zhirui 徐志銳, *Zhouyi dazhuan xinzhuan* 周易大傳新注[A new annotation for the Zhuan of Zhouyi], vol.1, p. 81

⁴⁶ Huang, Chung-tien, *Zhouyi Chengzhuan* 周易程傳, p.192

⁴⁷ Wang, Bi 王弼, Kong, Yingda 孔穎達, *Zhouyi zhushu* 周易註疏[The annotation and explanation for Zhouyi], to see Yang, Jun 楊軍, *Shiba mingjia jie zhouyi* 十八名家解周易, vol.2 p. 172

⁴⁸ Wang, Bi 王弼, Kong, Yingda 孔穎達, *Zhouyi zhushu* 周易註疏[The annotation and explanation for Zhouyi], to see Yang, Jun 楊軍, *Shiba mingjia jie zhouyi* 十八名家解周易, vol.2 p. 172

⁴⁹ Cheng, Yi 程頤, *Yichuan yizhuan* 伊川易傳[Yichuan’s annotation for Zhouyi], to see Yang, Jun 楊軍, *Shiba mingjia jie zhouyi* 十八名家解周易, vol.5, p.50

4. Lai Zhide (来之德) : The part with strong taste in a dried meat which has been sitting out for too long.⁵⁰

Among these four annotations, Wang Bi explained it mainly about its extended meanings. Kong Yingda regarded the character *du* as ‘bitter and rotted things’. This explanation is based on *du*’s original meaning which is ‘heavy’. Cheng Yi interpreted the character *du* as a description of taste instead of a certain thing. Lai Zhide combined the interpretations of Kong Yingda and Cheng Yi by saying it is The part with strong taste in a dried meat which has been sitting out for too long. Thinking of in the original text below, it talks about ‘it is a small accident which will not bring big harm’. The explanation of Lai Zhide is the most appropriate and detailed one for the context. Therefore, the translation of the whole sentence is : Encountering some parts with strong taste when biting the dried meat (that had been sitting out for long time). It is a small accident but will not bring big harm

5. Conclusion

In order to finding out the right explanations for the character *du* 毒 in *Zhouyi*, we have explored its original meanings from three aspects: the shape, sound and texts. During this process, people can realise that though *du* means something which is very harmful and mortal today, it was used as a word more neutral in the ancient times. Its original meaning is ‘heavy’, and mostly used to describe the great level of certain subject. It has also been extended to describe bad but not mortal things due to its radicals contain the meaning of ‘harmful grass’. Although these original meanings are relevant to its modern meaning to some extent, they are still not completely matched. This is why it is difficult to understand the two original sentences of *Zhouyi*. Finding out the original meanings of Chinese characters is important, because it always help

⁵⁰ Lai, Zhide 来之德, *Zhouyi jizhu* 周易集注[The assembled annotations of Zhouyi](Beijing: Jiuzhou Press, 2004), p. 313

us to understand the classics better.

This is all for my presentation today. Any feedback and suggestions would be appreciated. Thank you very much for listening.

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