

The Enlightenment of Ancient Chinese Characters to Modern People

Motivation

The motivation of studying *tai* 泰 is the curiosity about this word when I read *The Analects*. Confucius once said: ‘The superior man has *tai* but not pride, the small man is proud but not *tai*.’ 君子泰而不驕，小人驕而不泰¹。This sentence appears two times in *The Analects*, so I thought this sentence is important for people. Moreover, I want to understand what is the condition of *tai* but not pride. And then I can try my best to achieve this standard.

Meanings of *tai* 泰

In the *Shuo Wen Jie Zi Zhu*, an ancient dictionary, Xu Shen 許慎 said that the meaning of *tai* is sliding. *Cong gong and shui, da sheng*. 從𠂔水，大聲² It means that the character *tai* have *gong* 𠂔 (two hands) and *shui* 水 (water) as semantic constituent and *da* 大 (big) as a phonetic constituent. Duan Yucai 段玉裁 explained that *tai* consists of two characters — 𠂔 and 水 (We can look at the power point. 𠂔 look as if two hands and *shui* is water), which means water in hands slides easily³. In other words, water flows in a free way, therefore, the extended meaning of *tai* is *zongtai* 縱泰, which is also the meaning of *tai* of *tai* but not pride 泰而不驕 from *the Analects*.

According to *Shuo Wen Jie Zi Zhu*, *Guoyu Huoyong Cidian* and *Zhonghua Dazidian*, I made a map to show from the the original to extended sense of *tai*. The original meaning of *tai* is sliding. There are many extended meanings of the character. For

¹ Li Bingnan 李炳南, *the Essence Teachings of the Analects of Confucius* 《論語講要》 (Taiwan: Shyh Hyah International, 2016), p.552.

² Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen Jiezi Zhu* 說文解字注 [Commentary on Shuowen] (Taipei: Hungyeh Publishing Co. Ltd., 2016), p.570.

³ Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen Jiezi Zhu* 說文解字注 [Commentary on Shuowen] (Taipei: Hungyeh Publishing Co. Ltd., 2016), p.570.

example, barrier-free (*tong* 通), free or ease and comfortable (*zong tai* 縱泰 and *shu shi* 舒適). people can be described by 縱泰 and 舒適, while, it can be used to describe a country——國泰民安, it means a country is prosperous and the people live in peace. Besides, *tai* not only can be represented a state in spirit like take things calmly 處之泰然 but also can be described a physical condition as physical and mental relaxation 心多體泰. In general, it is easy to happen that people indulge themselves if they stay in a comfortable environment for a long time. Hence, *tai* also have the meaning of *taichi* 泰侈 (self-indulgent and luxurious) . In addition, *tai* and big 大 is interchangeable, *tai* have the meaning of big, and also have the meaning of biggest 大之極也. It is the biggest, therefore, it is also meant the most honorable. In ancient China, *tian* 天 (sky and heaven) have been called *taiyuan* 泰元 and *wudi* 五帝 (five emperors) have been called *wutai* 五泰. The above is a brief introduction for the original and extended meanings of *tai*.

As above, *tai* have various meanings. In the phrase of *tai* but not pride from *the Analects*, *tai* means *zongtai*. However, what does *tai* mean? What kind of state is it? I attempt to analyse it in three ways: references of *the Analects* commented by previous people; other words in *the Analects*; translation of *the Analects*.

Many scholars in China have annotated *the Analects*. Most of them like He Yan 何晏, Jiao Xun 焦循, Zhu Xi 朱熹 and Qian Mu 錢穆 said that *tai* means *zongtai* or *anshu* 安舒 (sedateness and at ease) . In *Lunyu Jijie Yishu*, He Yan 何晏 annotated that the gentleman is at ease, they look like arrogant but it is not really; small people have scruple but actually arrogant⁴. In *SiShu ZhangJu JiZhu*, Zhu Xi 朱熹 said that a gentleman follows *tianli* 天理——the law and the principle of nature, hence, they are sedate and at ease but not pride and indulgent; a base man indulge their desire, so they are the opposite⁵. Professor Li Bingnan 李炳南 said that the character *zong* 縱 in the

⁴ Trans. by myself with reference to He Yan 何晏, *Lun Yu Ji Jie Yi Shu* 《論語集解義疏》 (The Commercial Press, 1937), p.188.

⁵ Trans. by myself with reference to Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu Zhangju Jizhu* 《四書章句集註》 (Hangzhou: Xiling Seal Engraver's Society Publishing House, 2011)p.184.

Chinese phrase *zongtai* 縱泰 has the sense of easiness (*shuhuan* 舒緩) and self-indulgence (*fangzong* 放縱). In other words, it is without restraint⁶. In *Lunyu Biecai*, Mister Nan Huaijin 南懷瑾 said that *tai* means magnanimity 度量寬宏, broad-minded 胸襟開闊, openhearted or clear and bright 光明爽朗. A superior man is at ease without pride; the small man is not only proud but also self-contemptuous, therefore, they always feel upset and distracted⁷.

And then, using other words in *the Analects* to interpret this word. In chapter 20 of *the Analects*, Confucius said, whether he has to do with many people or few, or with things great or small, he does not dare to indicate any disrespect —— is not this to maintain a dignified ease without any pride⁸? this words translated by James Legge. While D. C. Lau translated it, the gentleman never dare neglect his manners whether he is dealing with the many or the few, the young or the old. Is this not being casual without being arrogant⁹?

Finally, let's see how this sentence have been translated. James Legge interpret, the superior man has a dignified ease without pride. That means man has pride without a dignified ease.¹⁰ D. C. Lau interpreted, the gentleman is at ease without being arrogant; the small man is arrogant without being at ease¹¹. Gu HongMing 辜鴻銘 and Wu Guozhen 吳國珍 interpreted *tai* as dignified and poised respectively. To sum up, *tai* have been translated as dignified ease, at ease, dignified and poised.

Personal Understanding and Experience

Comparatively the above explanations are abstract. Ease and unconstraint are the state of *tai*. Then, how to perform and practice it in our life?

⁶ Trans. by myself with reference to Li Bingnan 李炳南, *the Essence Teachings of the Analects of Confucius* 《論語講要》(Taiwan: Shyh Hyah International, 2016), p.552.

⁷ Trans. by myself with reference to Nan Huaijin 南懷瑾, *Lunyu Biecai* 《論語別裁》(Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 1996), p.632.

⁸ Trans. by James Legge, *The Analects* (Zheng Zhou: Zhong Zhou Guji Press, 2016), p.279.

⁹ Trans. by D.C. LAU, *The Analects* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1979), p.159.

¹⁰ Trans. by James Legge, *The Analects* (Zheng Zhou: Zhong Zhou Guji Press, 2016), p.177.

¹¹ Trans. by D.C. LAU, *The Analects* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1979), p.123.

As I mentioned before, Mister Nan Huaijin 南懷瑾 said that a superior man is at ease without pride; the small man is not only proud but also self-contemptuous, therefore, they always feel upset. Pride and inferiority are antonyms, some people might wonder why these two contradictory states can appear in the same person. In fact, when we look at ourselves and other people, we will find that this happens a lot. And it is very likely that a person is in the mood of inferiority at this moment, the next moment he or she will be proud. Why is that? In my opinion, in fact, both pride and inferiority are due to the thought —— being swayed by considerations of gain and loss 患得患失.

In the face of the examination, people are swayed by considerations of gain and loss, they will feel nervous and anxious. With these emotions, people are no longer at ease. When people know they do better than others, they will feel involuntarily proud. And in the process of the next exam, they are likely full of anxiety, worry about that the score will be lower than last time and their test is not good. When they know others are better than themselves, they will feel inferior, always think themselves are too bad, others always do better than them. In this way, it is full of emotions in the process of test, not in a comfortable state.

When Master Wudao 悟道 explained this sentence, he said that a small man is boast of themselves and looks down on others. They are afraid that they do something wrong. And then, others will look down on them and think that they are better than others. This is just pride. Zi Lu 子路 with ragged clothes stand with people with fabulous clothes, he not felt ashamed. Zi Lu 子路 thought that all are equal, without the difference of poverty or wealth and noble or humble¹². In our life, do we feel envy and oneself inferior because they are better than us in terms of eating, clothing and article they use. Do you expect yourself to be superior to others in life?

¹² Master Wudao 悟道, Mei Ri Lunyu 每日論語,
<https://ft.amtb.cn/index.php>, 23 January 2021.

How to avoid arrogance and inferiority, make ourselves at ease? I think the first thing is that we need to understand that no matter how tall or short, thin or fat and adults or children they are, they all have the same self-nature. Sakyamuni Buddha said that, ‘Amazing! Amazing! All beings have the wisdom and virtues of a Buddha but cannot attain them due to their wandering thoughts and attachments¹³.’ If this is the case, why do we need to cling to something and treat others differently? If we do not cling to something and treat others differently, the feelings of pride and inferiority would never arise. Therefore, people should understand this first.

After we understand this truth, we will avoid the attitude of treating everyone differently, we will have the same attitude towards all people, that is the gentleman treat everybody and everything with the same respect no matter the many or the few, the young or the old 君子無眾寡，無小大，無敢慢¹⁴. With such attitude, people will be able to face all things without being arrogant.

Conclusion

In the process of studying the character *tai* , I feel the broadness and profoundness of Chinese characters, which teach us how to be a human. It is a state of life —— At ease without arrogance, but also the wisdom of dealing with people and things. People can achieve this state, they will not have so many troubles and worries and can be at ease.

¹³ *Da Fang Guang Fo Hua Yan Jing* 《大方廣佛華嚴經》 (Zhong Sheng Wen Hua Publishing Company Limited), p.0631.

¹⁴ Li Bingnan 李炳南, *the Essence Teachings of the Analects of Confucius* 《論語講要》 (Taiwan: Shyh Hyah International, 2016), p.838.

Bibliography

Books (English)

D.C. LAU, The Analects (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1979)

James Legge, The Analects (Zheng Zhou: Zhong Zhou Guji Press, 2016)

Books (Chinese)

Duan Yucai 段玉裁, Shuowen Jiezi Zhu 說文解字注 [Commentary on Shuowen] (Taipei: Hungyeh Publishing Co. Ltd., 2016)

Da Fang Guang Fo Hua Yan Jing 《大方廣佛華嚴經》 (Zhong Sheng Wen Hua Publishing Company Limited)

He Yan 何晏, Lun Yu Ji Jie Yi Shu 《論語集解義疏》 (The Commercial Press, 1937)

Li Bingnan 李炳南, the Essence Teachings of the Analects of Confucius 《論語講要》 (Taiwan: Shyh Hyah International, 2016)

Nan Huaijin 南懷瑾, Lunyu Biecai 《論語別裁》 (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 1996)

Zhu Xi 朱熹, Sishu Zhangju Jizhu 《四書章句集註》 (Hangzhou: Xiling Seal Engraver's Society Publishing House, 2011)

Websites (Chinese)

Master Wudao 悟道, Mei Ri Lunyu 每日論語,
<https://ft.amtb.cn/index.php>, 23 January 2021.