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It Needs Observation to Know Others But Reflection to Know Oneself

Zihan Xu

Good afternoon, Professor and Miss Wu. Good morning my fellow students. The title of this presentation is *It Needs Observation to Know Others, But Reflection to Know Oneself*, which is a sentence from the thirty-three chapter of Tao Te Ching . Today, I would like to share with you this chapter and the idea Lao Tzu expressed in it.

This is the contents. The presentation is divided into three parts: Introduction, Text Explanations, and Personal Feelings.

Firstly, I would like to briefly introduce the structure of this presentation. I would compare the different English versions of this chapter which is translated by three famous scholar: Mr. James Legge, Mr. Lau Din Cheuk and Mr. Xu Yuanchong,

Then give my own analysis which is based on the explanation of Master Han-Shan Te-Ch'ing and Mr. Chen Guying whose explanations are very inspiring to me.

And in the last part, I would talk my personal understanding about the idea of Lao Tzu expressed in this chapter, and the reason I choose this chapter for the presentation.

Next is the text explanation and comparison of two translation version.

This is the original text.

知人者智，自知者明。

(J)He who knows other men is discerning;, he who knows himself is intelligent.

(D)He who knows others is clever; He who knows himself has discernment.

(X)It needs observation to know others, but reflection to know oneself.

The translation of James Legge and D. C. Lau have no much differences, the difference is just the word ‘discerning’, ‘clever’ and ‘intelligent’. James Legge used word ‘discerning’

to explain ‘智’, by contrast, D. C. Lau used the almost the same word ‘discernment’ to explain ‘明’.

But Xu Yuanchong’s translation is very different from the former two. In my opinion, his translation is more poetic, and what is more, here he did not translate the original text word by word and did not follow the sequence either, but as for me, I think his version is much easier for me to understand.

I like this sentence very much, and I will share my feelings about it in the end.

勝人者有力，自勝者強。

(J)He who overcomes others is strong, he who overcomes himself is mighty.

(D)He who overcomes others has force; He who overcomes himself is strong.

(X)Physically strong, one can conquer others;
mentally strong, one can conquer oneself.

This sentence is like the former one. The first two

translation makes me confused: What is the difference between strong and mighty? I searched on Oxford dictionary, the explanation to the word ‘mighty’ is ‘Very strong and powerful.’ So, I do not really understand what the author wants to express. But when we look at Xu Yuanchong’s translation, we could know that: ‘oh! Physically strong, one can conquer others; Mentally strong, one can conquer oneself.’ just like so many famous generals in the history, they could conquer a country, or defeat a millions of enemies, but they can not conquer their desire which makes them have a very tragic end.

知足者富，強行者有志

(J)He who is satisfied with his lot is rich; he who goes on acting with energy has a (firm) will.

(D)He who knows contentment is rich; He who preserves is a man of purpose.

(X)Content, one is rich;
with strong will, one can persevere.

The translations of ‘知足者富’ are pretty same, just the sequence is different. Although the translations of ‘強行者有

志’ is different in words and sequence, but I think three of them are all easy to understand.

Mr. Chen Guying commented that the character ‘強’ here has different explains. ‘強’ means strong, powerful and force something or someone, but many scholars think ‘強’ here is actually transformed from the character ‘勤’ which means diligent, showing care and effort in your work or duties. The pronunciation of two character is also very close in the ancient time, and it is more understandable if you put ‘勤’ here.

不失其所者久，死而不亡者壽。

(J)He who does not fail in the requirements of his position, continues long; he who dies and yet does not perish, has longevity.

(D)He who does not lose his station will endure, He who lives out his days has had a long life.

(X)Staying where one should, one can endure long;
Unforgettable, one is immortal.

I think the translations of ‘不失其所者久’ are similar.

Here James Legge translated ‘死而不亡者壽’ into ‘he who dies and yet does not perish, has longevity.’ I think it is a little bit hard to understand, does it mean someone’s body will not be rotten after his or her death?

And Xu Yuanchong’s version makes me think this person must be famous or having done something great so that everyone would not forget him.

I personally like D. C. Lau’s translation here. Collins Dictionary explains this word as: ‘If you live out a dream or a idea, you do the things that you have thought about.’¹ When I read that, I could imagine this person must have a real life, he has understood the real meaning of living, so death is not important to him anymore, since that death will not be the end of him.

And last part is my personal understandings and feelings about this chapter.

Master Han-Shan commented in his book that: (此因上言侯王當守道無為，故此教以守之之要也²), I translated into ‘It

¹ <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/live-out>

² 憨山[Han Shan]：老子道德經解[Laozi Daodejing Jie] (Wuhan: Chongwen Shuju, 2015), p.72.

says that the rulers should follow the divine law without interfering with it, so that Han-Shan thinks why Lao Tzu teaches them the key point of following the divine law — or we could also call it Tao, or the way. In my opinion, master Han-Shan thinks that Lao Tzu want to tell those rulers that do not increase your desire, do not try to conquer other countries, do not chasing the outside things which could bring disasters to your people. It talks in a abstract philosophical way, but I feel like that the motivation or the standpoint of the ideas in this chapter was expressed in a political way and relates to the reality of the society at that time.

The interesting thing is that Mr. Chen Guying has different idea about this chapter: (本章講個人修養與自我建立³), I translated into ‘This chapter talked about the self-cultivation and the establishment of oneself.’ its seems there is nothing about political things like running country or ruling people.

Personally, I think both explanations are correct. When we are reading something, we need to consider the context of that person.

But the important thing is to know that those sage’s

³ 陳鼓應[Chen Guying] : 老子注譯及評介[Laozi Zhuyi Jipingjie] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2015), p.184.

teachings are like water, it just like what Bruce Lee said: ‘Be formless, shapeless, like water. You put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water into a bottle, it becomes the bottle.....water can flow, or it can crash.’⁴ So I think the idea is the idea, the teaching is the teaching, but things really matters is what could we use and benefit from these old sayings thousands of years ago.

I used to like observing the people around me, and I think I am smart, I even share my analysis with my friends, and they often impressed by my instinct. One day, I discovered that this analysis did not help me at building better relationships with other people. Then I learned from our ancestor: It needs observation to know others, but reflection to know oneself.

Indeed, it could be called ‘Clever’ if one knows others very well, but it is not beneficial to one if the discernment is not based on the improvement of oneself. *Geyan Lianbi* (《格言聯璧》) said: (工於論人者，察己必闊疏), I translated into ‘Good at judging others, fail at knowing self.’⁵

And in the Catholicism, it is also said: ‘Why do you look at

⁴ <https://3g.163.com/v/video/VCTBJTGG6.html><access:13/7/2022>

⁵ 增廣賢文格言聯璧誦讀本[Zengguang Xianwen Geyan Lianbi Songduben] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2020), p.116.

the speck in your brother's eye and not see the plank in your own eye? Take first the plank out of your own eye, then you will see clearly enough to take the speck out of your brother's eye.'⁶

I have experienced this myself. Once I pointed out to my friend that I do not dare to give her suggestions because she got angry easily. To my surprise, she also told me that she was also afraid to give me advises, because I got angry easily too.

Then I think back my recent behavior and sayings, I was startled: She is right, I did behave to my friends in an impatient way, especially when I was busy.

So, I was deeply impressed by Lao Tzu's wisdom, indeed, it needs observation to know others, but reflection to know oneself. You can know what kind of person someone is by observing his or her characters, hobbies and tempers et cetera, but what about myself? I think that knowing oneself is much more difficult than knowing others. especially in the modern society, people are encouraged to chasing the external things for the reason of promoting economy and improving living standard etc. All the outside things are improving like rocket, the world changes in a fast way that never seen in human history. These changes happened in one day might take one hundred years to

⁶ (Bible (Catholic Pastoral Edition) Mathew 7:3、 5)

achieve in the ancient time. But what about human's mind, things inside our bodies? The morality, the level we know ourselves, has it improved? Or even declined?

So, Lao Tzu did not say that the outside things is not important, maybe he just want to tells us: Could you slow down your step young man, where are you going? There is no need to rush. Take break, look at yourself. You know so many knowledge, do you know yourself? What kind of person you are? What kind of person you were? Who are you? If you do not know these answers, would you stop running and think about it?

And here is my bibliography.

This is all for my presentation. Thank you for listening, any feedback and suggestion would be appreciated.

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