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The Analysis of Character *Sheng* 聖 (virtuous) in Chapter 19 of the *Daodejing* 道德經

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Venerable Shengmiao, Miss Deng, good afternoon and good evening. My name is Pang Hoi Na and I would like to share with you the topic on ‘The Analysis of Character *Sheng* 聖 (virtuous) in Chapter 19 of the *Daodejing* 道德經’. The presentation will be divided into three parts, introduction, definition analysis, and last part is the conclusion.

1. Introduction

The words of the *Daodejing* are few, but they contain profound truth. For a long time past, whether those antonyms which Laozi uses quite often in his text are explained correctly worth discussing. The words account of the *Daodejing* is about 5000, he praises Sages about 32 times. Gaoheng says, ‘皆視為至高之人而無詆訾之語 He treats Sages as the loftiest exists without any dissatisfied.’¹ From his words, we know he adored Sages. But in chapter 19, there is a sentence that ‘絕聖棄知，民利百倍 Do not seek for virtuous and give up resourcefulness, people can get hundredfold benefits.’² It seems like Laozi is criticizing those virtuous and resourceful people. Does it mean Laozi is self-contradictory or does he say for other reasons? The past annotations have very different explanations of this sentence. Some of the journals mentioned this question but just briefly. In this discussion, the character *sheng* will be the focus to judge those various explanations, by knowing the original meaning, extensional meaning, and contextual meaning of the character *sheng* we can know more about Fanxun 反訓 and Laozi’s unique insight.

¹ Gaoheng 高亨, Laozi zhenggu 老子正詁 (The annotations of Laozi) (Shanghai: Kaiming Book Company, 1943), Vol. 1, 43. Translated by myself.

² D.C. Lau, Chen Fong Ching, *Philosophical works-A concordance to the Laozi* (Hong Kong: The Commercial Press, 1996), No.24, 57. Translated by myself.

2. Definition Analysis

2.1 The original meaning and extensional meaning of the character *sheng*

First, let us talk about the original meaning of *sheng*. *Shuowen* says, ‘聖，通也。从耳，呈聲。The character *sheng* means understand thoroughly. It follows the semantic component *er* (ear) and the ancient sound of phonetic *cheng*.’ Li Xiaoding’s *Collected Annotations of Jiaguwen* points out that,

‘(甲骨文)象人上着大耳，从口，會意。聖之初誼為聽覺官能之敏銳，故引申訓『通』；賢聖之義，又其引申也……許君以形聲說之，非是。聽、聲、聖三字同源，其始當本一字。The original graphic shape of *sheng* in the script on tortoise shells or bones highlights the big ear on one’s head. It is a system to graph that follows the component *kou* (mouth). The primitive meaning of *sheng* emphasizes the incisive sense of hearing so its extended meaning is *tong* 通 (penetrating). The meaning of sainted is the stretching out of its first extended meaning. The explanation of phonogram by Xu is incorrect. Because these three characters *ting* 聽 (listen), *sheng* 聲 (sound), *sheng* (understand thoroughly) are cognate which means they are the same word at the beginning.’³

The handwriting of *sheng* in the script on tortoise shells or bones is  which is similar to the one who has big ears. *Shangshu zhushu* 尚書注疏 (The annotation of *shangshu*) says, ‘於事無不通謂之聖 Sage is the one who cannot be obstructed in the way of the world.’⁴

People seldom use the original meaning of the character *sheng* but its extended meanings are used frequently. The explanations of *sheng* mostly go in three directions nowadays. Firstly, it means those virtuous, experienced, and reasonable people, such as *sheng ren* 聖人 (sages). Secondly, it refers to experts of study or artistry, for example, *shi sheng* 詩聖 (sage of poetry). Lastly, it means the respectful name of ancient kings, like *shengzhi* 聖旨 (the imperial decree). These three meanings of virtuous, expert and respectful names of ancient kings are all the extended meanings of *tong* 通 (penetrating).

³ Li Xiaoding, 李孝定, *Jiaguwen jishi* 甲骨文字集釋 (The Collected Annotations of Jiaguwen, 1965), The National research institute of history language monograph 50, Vol.12, 3519. Translated by myself.

⁴ (Tang) Lu deming, Kong yingda, (唐)陸德明音義, 孔穎達疏, *Shangshu zhushu* 尚書注疏 (The annotation of *shangshu*), (Qing) Jiyun, Yongyong, (清) 紀昀, 永瑤等編纂, 景印文淵閣四庫全書 (Complete Library in Four Branches of Literature - Wen Yuan Ge) (Taipei: Taiwan Commercial Press, 2008), Complete Library in Four Branches of Literature, The Complete Library in Four Branches of Literature - Wen Yuan Ge, book 54, Vol. 11, 242. Translated by myself.

2.2 The contextual meaning of the character *sheng* in annotations

Someone says the *sheng* should be terminated because it refers to one being sainted only in appearance without practice. Another point of view says the *sheng* itself has no problem, but its effect is not suitable for the public at the time, so sages have to give it up. The last opinion worth referring to is that to give a different explanation of *jue* 絕 (not hunting for) then the meaning of *sheng* will be in line with the context. I will list different annotations of the character *sheng* in chapter 19 and find out its real meaning by comparing the pros and cons.

(1) To oppose the name of virtuous

Most of the annotations explain the *sheng* in their own way, but they act in unison to agree it was different from its general meaning. The first type explains the *shengzhi* as someone kind and wise in the lay world. Their virtue is good but does not achieve the stage of real sage. For example, Wangbi explains it as ‘*奇才之善也* the good of intelligence and skill’⁵ which is similar to benevolence and smart. These three words also represent three aspects of kindness, including talent, practice, and effect. Gaocheng says the *sheng* just means ‘*僅是博通深察* good at thinking and observation’.⁶ It only means someone who has ‘*大智曰聖* the same intelligence with sage’, but there is still a big gap between one and the real sage.⁷ Zhangzi explains the level of sage in his chapter *tianxia*, mentions that,

‘*以天為宗，以德為本，以道為門，兆於變化* The sage is someone who follows the principle of nature, behave based on moral, treats Dao as everything’s entrance, understand the trace of changing before happen’.⁸

When explaining the next sentence ‘*絕仁去義* Do not seek for benevolence and give up rightfulness,’ they attach the note about why using the fake virtuous and benevolence is not

⁵ Zong fubang, Guxun huizuan 故訓匯纂 (Traditional Semantic Annotations) (Wuhan: Institute of ancient texts research of Wuhan University), Chapter *er*, 1835. Translated by myself.

⁶ Gaocheng 高亨, *The annotations of Laozi*, Vol.1, 43. Translated by myself.

⁷ Gaocheng quoted the poem *Kaifeng* 凱風 to explain *sheng* 聖 as *shan* 善(kindness), quoted the poem *Xiaopan* 小弁 to explain *sheng* 聖 as *qi* 齊(regular), quoted the chapter *Dasi* of *Zhou etiquette* to explain *sheng* 聖 as *zhi* 知(knowledge), *ren* 仁(benevolence), *yi* 義(rightfulness), *zhonghe* 中和(harmony); quoted the chapter *yifa* of *Yi zhou shu* to explain *sheng* 聖 as *wenrou* 溫柔(gentle), *shan* 善(kind). Gaocheng 高亨, *The annotations of Laozi*, Vol. 1, 43. Translated by myself.

⁸ (Jin) Guoxiang, (晉)郭象, *Zhuangzi zhu* 莊子注(The annotation of Zhuangzi), *the Complete Library in Four Branches of Literature - Wen Yuan Ge*, book 1056, Vol.10, 161. Translated by myself.

enough for governing the country. The annotation of *Dadai etiquette* says, ‘其所謂聖知，自務乎作為，好為天下之先，民不受其利而蒙其害’ This kind of virtuous is one assumes he is right, making the policy not follow the nature principle so people cannot get any benefit but harm.’ All these annotations point out that the *sheng* is not in line with its original meaning which means it is the virtue with a mask. Therefore, give up the disguised virtue and wisdom, people can easily be attaining their nature.

(2) To oppose the Confucian sage

Some scholars think Laozi wants to show his opposition to the Confucian sage. But the six moral principles appeared in the *Zhou etiquette*, ‘知、仁、聖、義、忠、和’ wise, benevolence, virtuous, rightfulness, lofty, harmony’ stand side by side in this book.

Zhengxuan annotated as

‘知，明於事。仁，愛人以及物。聖，通而先識。義，能斷時宜。忠，言以中心。和，不剛不柔。(Wise is completely understood. Benevolence is love for people and everything. Virtuous is to know the changes before happening. Lofty is judged correctly by time. Harmony is the balance of tough and soft.)’⁹

Therefore, virtue is not Confucius’ creation which Laozi needs to oppose. Laozi was the elder generation than Confucius which means he did not need to be strongly opposed to Confucius. Even this situation exists, Laozi does oppose Confucian sage persistently. How about the benevolence, filiality, and faithfulness that Laozi fully recommends in other chapters? It seems self-contradiction. Therefore, the word ‘絕聖棄知’ Do not seek for virtuous and give up resourcefulness’ possibly not guide us to give in the Confucian sage.

The first importance of communication is to express clearly. They say the *sheng* is not directly refers to sages but a kind of virtue which is the same with wise, benevolence, and faithful. Furthermore, they think the sage in the *Daodejing* and Confucianism is different. The *sheng* tells the national leader but not the public, to give up his political talent. It is further confusion if we treat this *sheng* as the lower level or pretend sacred. Because this kind of clarification is similar to Fanxun. Fanxun means we use the antonym to explain the word which is unclear and difficult to understand. If this *sheng* is not *sheng*, how can we make sure the other 32 characters of *sheng* represent its original meaning? Hence, if explaining the

⁹ (Han)Zhengxuan, (Tang)Lu deming, Jia gongyan, (漢)鄭氏注, (唐)陸德明音義, 賈公彥疏, *Yili zhushu* 儀禮注疏, *the Complete Library in Four Branches of Literature - Wen Yuan Ge*, book 102, Vol.4, 92. Translated by myself.

sheng as its antonym or low version, both ways have a logical contradiction and copy mechanically in disregard of specific conditions. People agree with Fanxun is because they do not know the usage of language has so many different situations such as borrowed graph through sound, the transfer of semantics, the change of graphic form, the convergence of dialect sound, etc.¹⁰ It needs to be clarified by a lot of research and reasoning.

The version of *chujian* 楚簡本 does not include this sentence may because it was deleted by its owner. If the owner of the collection of books does not like the conflict context between Laozi and Confucius, to a largely extend, he will delete it. Therefore, to agree the existing version of Laozi was edited by others is entertaining doubt.

(3) To oppose the side effect of virtuous

This clarifies seems more appropriate. Although the good policy is established for seeking welfare for the people, applying on the people whose condition is not suitable will cause interference. It is the distinction between existence and non-existence which Laozi mentions so many times. He opposes leaders to insist on their wisdom and intelligence when situations change. Some scholars may compare the political talent between one another, but actually to give up the untimely decision is important for all leaders. Heshang gong says, ‘絕聖製作，反守初元……棄智慧，反無為 To fulfill one’s expectations, do not look for the virtuous policy. To go back to non-existence, give up resourcefulness.’¹¹ Cheng bixu says, ‘聖者，謂制度法象、功用陳跡之聖也。絕之者，欲復其渾樸也。(Virtue is a kind of appearance, policy, function, and formality. Not seeking for it is the way to attain non-existence.)’¹² Hanshan’s annotation says, ‘鬥斛權衡符璽仁義之事 It is the way which leaders using their power to apply virtuous in the society.’¹³ The intelligence of Sage is to benefit the public with a well-functioning society. If the custom is bad, people have wrong thoughts about the policy which helps to increase crime. ‘且仁義本為不孝不慈者勸，今既竊之以為亂 It means virtue can no longer be a homily on morals but the tool for criminal.’¹⁴ It is time to give in the virtuous policy, put an end to their thoughts which can make people attain to their

¹⁰ Zhou bixiang, Shiyong xungu xue 實用訓詁學 (Taipei: hungyeh, 2015), 149. Translated by myself.

¹¹ D.C. Lau, Chen Fong Ching, *Philosophical works-A concordance to the Laozi*, 57. Translated by myself.

¹² Chen bixu, *Daode zhenjing zhuagshi cuanweipian* 道德真經藏室纂微篇(The annotation of Daode zhenjing)(Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House,1988), book13, 75. Translated by myself.

¹³ (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), *Daode jing jie* 道德經解(The annotation of Daode jing)(Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2009), 60. Translated by myself.

¹⁴ (Ming)Shi deqing,(明)釋德清, Huang shuhui 黃曙輝(點校), *The annotation of Daode jing*, 60. Translated by myself.

nature easier. Therefore, the contextual meaning of *sheng* is to perish the side effect of virtue but not virtue itself.

Shen zengshan has a creative opinion that it is time-wasting to explain the character *sheng* to other meaning. The better way is to identify the differences between the character of *jue* 絕 and *qi* 棄 (give up). The character *qi* refers to giving up what we own. The character *jue* refers to giving up what we did not get. In these parallel sentences, all the previous one is better than the latter. The character *sheng* (virtuous) is better than *zhi*(resourcefulness), the *ren* 仁(benevolence) is better than *yi* 義(rightfulness).¹⁵ In addition, *jue* contains the meaning of *jiequ* 戒取(not continue, cut off) which hints the matter need to cut off is something everyone likes. The character *jie* 戒 (abolish) is similar to the character *wu* 毋(do not). For example, chapter Zihan in the Analect says, ‘子絕四：毋意、毋必、毋固，毋我。’(You should avoid four things: subjectively speculate, must be fulfilled, stubborn prejudices, self-centered.)¹⁶ These four requirements are good for a leader in a normal situation, but they get together means the leader’s opinions are too strong. Back to Laozi’s context, *jue* can be explained as *wu* 毋(do not). Do not consider oneself to be sage, do not use resourcefulness to govern the country. Shen’s opinion may not be completely right, but it has reference value. It is better to translate the characters *sheng* and *zhi* as negative meanings. Whatever it is the low version or fake version of *sheng zhi* (virtuous and resourcefulness), it is something most people do not want, Why does Laozi need to use a chapter to explain it?

3. Conclusion

In the *Daodejing*, Laozi praises the governing of sage at least nine times, the other twenty-three times also praise sage’s teaching by both word and practice. Therefore, to judge that the character *sheng* in chapter 19 is its general meaning, Laozi encourages leaders to cut off the side effect, to give up their good policy if it is not suitable for the public at that time. It will be a more appropriate explanation than others. If a good measure cannot bring a good result,

¹⁵ Shen zengshan, *Laozi zoujin qingnian* 老子走進青年(Laozi keeps accompany with youth)(Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2007), 226-227. Translated by myself.

¹⁶ (Wei)Heyan, (Tang)Lu mingde, (Song)Xingbing, (魏)何晏集解, (唐)陸德明音義, (宋)邢昺疏, *Lunyu Zhushu* 論語注疏(The annotation of the Analects), book 196, Vol.9, 605.

it is correct to change. This explanation will not be a conflict with other chapters, and it is deep enough to conclude the profound thought of Laozi.

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

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