

New Interpretation on “*Qin Bu Shi* (寢不尸)” in *The Analects of Confucius**

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“When sacrifices are to be offered to ancestors, *Shi* (尸) is indispensable. This ceremonial convention has been kept intact in the dynasties of Yu, Xia, Shang and Zhou.” *Shi* refers to a person alive in place of the deceased to be sacrificed. *Shi* is required to stand in the sacrificial ceremony in Xia dynasty, which is called the *standing Shi*, while in dynasties of Shang and Zhou, *Shi* is supposed to be seated, calling the *sitting Shi*. The sitting posture of *Shi* at the sacrificial ritual then is different considerably from the way we sit on the buttocks today. *Shi* is expected to sit on the knees. Specifically, *Shi* should keep a kneeling position, with knees on the ground and buttocks on the heels whilst his head bowing and his back arching. Accordingly, *Qin Bu Shi* (寢不尸) in *The Analects of Confucius* should be interpreted as one should not bother to adopt the *sitting Shi* posture while retiring to bed, rather than the version, as has been annotated by Yang Bojun, “Confucius does not sleep (lying stretched out) like a dead body.”

Keywords: *The Analects of Confucius*, *Shi*, sitting posture

The phrase *Qin Bu Shi* (寢不尸), which is taken from the *Chapter of Fellow Villagers* in *The Analects of Confucius*, has been annotated by Yang Bojun in his *Vernacular Translation and Annotations of the Analects* as “Confucius does not sleep (lying stretched out) like a dead body” (107). Another similar explanation of this phrase recurs in the book *Interpretations on the Analects* by Xu Zhigang, which is demonstrated as “Confucius did not sleep as a corpse lying straight” (126). Based on his understanding, *Shi* (尸) is annotated as a dead body. Regrettably, such annotations are misconceptions of the original text in *The Analects of Confucius*. The main sticking point results from the fact that the denotative meaning of *Shi* nowadays is quite different from its connotation in the Spring and Autumn period (770B.C~476 B.C). By this token, influential as Yang’s book is, such misinterpretations require further clarification.

The standpoint that *Shi* is mistakenly annotated for a dead body by such scholars as Yang Bojun derives from its dispensational interpretations by ancient scholars ever since the Warring States period (476B.C~221 B.C). For example, in his *Collected Explanations on the Analects*, He Yan (?~249), a scholar from the state of Wei (220~265) during the Three Kingdoms period (220~280), quoted Mr. Bao Xian’s (7 B.C~65) annotation of *Shi*, “Mr. Bao said, one should not lie around on his back, stretching out his hands and feet as a dead body did”; In his detailed note, he wrote, “*Shi* means a dead body... In the book *Minute Rules of Propriety*, it is recorded that

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one should not lie prostrate when sleeping”(141). In the book *Collected Annotations on the Analects* authored by Zhu Xi (1130~1200), a celebrated scholar in Song Dynasty (960~1279), it is annotated that *Shi* refers to the state when one sleeps on one’s back like a dead body. Zhu also cited what is illustrated by Fan Zhongyan (989~1052), “We resent sleeping on our back. It is not because that such sleeping posture is similar to that of a corpse, which is distasteful. It is because that indolence and arrogance should be kept restrained in one’s physical bearing. Even when one sprawls out, s/he should know the bounds of propriety” (103). In the book *Annotations and Emendations on the Analects* by Ruan Yuan (1764~1849), the annotation by Duan Yucai (1735~1815) is quoted as follows, “We detest lying straight when in bed because it is the way a corpse lies, not a living soul”(2498). The root cause of such plausible annotations and farfetched illustrations arises from the fact that *Shi* is mistaken for a corpse and it is its extended meaning not its literal sense that is employed in expounding the phrase *Qin Bu Shi*.

The key to accurate comprehension of the phrase *Qin Bu Shi* lies in the proper understanding of the Chinese character *Shi*: Whether is it meant for a dead body or for a living soul on behalf of a certain deceased progenitor? In addition, misunderstandings may crop up as a result of substantial difference in the sitting posture of the ancients and modern generations. Hence, appropriate interpretation on the phrase *Qin Bu Shi* still demands further exploration.

Brief Conceptual History of the Chinese Character *Shi*

A word undergoes constant changes with the passage of time, from its form to its content, its connotation to its denotation, and its semantic meaning to its stylistic meaning as well. It is so unstable that any meaning of a word has to be defined and determined by its specific context in which it is employed. Just as Ludwig Wittgenstein put it, “meaning as use”, namely, as for a word, to mean is to be used. The word *Shi* is no exception.

As is elucidated in *An Introduction to Chinese Philology* by Gao Heng(1900~1986), the grapheme of the character *Shi* “resembles the image of a person bending his legs” (175). A similar annotation of *Shi* that “is like a person whose knees are bending”(134) can also be found in *An Elementary Introduction to the Origin of Chinese Characters* by Kang Yin (1926~1999). In his paper, *Lexical Annotation on Qin Bu Shi* from *The Chapter of Fellow Villagers in the Analects*, Zhou Keyong (1950~) asserts that the character *Shi* in the phrase *Qin Bu Shi* should be annotated as “bent shanks” (119). From such character styles as the Bronze inscription and the Small Seal Script, the character *Shi* evidently reveals the image of a sitting posture with one’s shanks bent [a common sitting posture in the Spring and Autumn period, namely, “to keep a kneeling position, with knees on the ground and buttocks on the heels” (Yang 107)]. In other words, the pictogram of *Shi* means the sitting posture of a living soul in place of the deceased to be sacrificed.

The literal sense of *Shi* refers to “a living soul representing the deceased to be sacrificed in ancient sacrificial rituals” (Xinhua 438). In Confucius’ time, *Shi* is meant for the person to be sacrificed with a sitting posture popular in the Spring and Autumn period. Naturally, disciples of Confucius follow this conventional usage to give an account of the sentence *Qin Bu Shi*.

The character *Shi*, which is meant for a living soul at a sacrificial ceremony, evolves gradually into the image of a corpse or a dead body during the Warring States period. This denotative meaning derives from the concrete historical context in which “one looks like *Shi* who does not speak or act at the ancient sacrificial rituals” (Yan Can’s words). Thus, the usage of *Shi* as a dead body is settled afterwards.

As is explicated in *Analytical Dictionary of Characters*, the character *Shi* signifies “(a dead body) being laid out, resembling a person lying in bed”(Xu 149). Similar illustration on *Shi* has been stated in *Chapter Demise of Emperors, Public Debate at the White Tiger Temple* by Ban Gu (32-92), “*Shi* is meant for (a dead body) being laid out, a person losing his/her mettle and vigor only with his/her corporal body being left laid out” (49). Such annotations of *Shi* are traceable to the denotative meaning of a sacrificial *Shi* (a living soul at rituals). Xu Shen (58~147), the compiler of *Analytical Dictionary of Characters* (whose compilation ranges from the year 100 to the year 121), mainly based his undertaking on the prevailing usage of characters of the day (that is, he basically annotated characters in accordance with previous references). Accordingly, the interpretation of *Shi* in *Analytical Dictionary of Characters*, “*Shi*, a pictogram, resembles a person lying in bed if written in the writing style of the Small Seal Script” (159), follows the popular usage of this character in the Eastern Han dynasty (25-220).

Comparisons between annotations on the character *Shi* from notable works cannot be neglected. As is annotated in *Analytical Dictionary of Characters*, “The character *Shi*, the image of deity, resembles a person lying in bed.” A further detailed explanatory note on “a person lying in bed” is presented as follows in the book *Annotations on Analytical Dictionary of Characters* by Duan Yucai, “The character *Fu* (伏) means lying face downwards. This character resembles a person lying prostrate with his head bowing and his back arching.” The book, *Minute Rules of Decorum, Book of Rites*, relates a rule of social etiquette, “It is impolite to sit on the floor with one’s legs stretched out; and it would be uncomfortable to prostrate when sleeping” (Zheng 56). The former part of this sentence, *Zuo Wu Ji*, signifies that when you sit, do not split your legs wide apart while the latter one, *Qin Wu Fu*, as is expounded in *Notes and Commentaries on the Book of Rites*, “The character *Qin* means lying to sleep while *Fu*, face downwards. When one lies to sleep, he/she should lie on his/her side or back but not face downwards”(Zheng 57). From comments above-mentioned, it is inaccurate to understand the phrase *Qin Bu Shi* by drawing on the knowledge of *Qin Wu Fu* because the posture of *Fu* differs sharply from that of the sitting *Shi* at sacrificial rituals.

Postures and Rituals of *Shi* at the Sacrificial Ceremony

Such dynasties as Xia, Shang and Zhou have witnessed a solemn sacrificial ceremony presenting *Shi*, a living soul in place of the ancestor to be sacrificed. Postures of *Shi* vary in different eras. To be specific, it is required that *Shi* be standing in Xia dynasty while be sitting in Shang and Zhou dynasties at the sacrificial ceremony.

“Important are the worships and military affairs for a country,” as is stated in *The History* by Zuo Qiuming. Complicated, miscellaneous and hierarchical as they are, sacrificial rituals are an integral part of the rites of Zhou dynasty. Regrettably, the collapse of rites during the turbulent Spring and Autumn period brings about the failure to observe scrupulously the ancestral rites at the sacrificial ceremony. As a result, the ritual of employing *Shi* has been dispensable at that time, which perplexed Mr. Zeng (505 B.C~432 B.C), who once asked Confucius, “Is *Shi* indispensable when offering sacrifices? Is it suitable if *Shi* is absent from the sacrificial ceremony?” “*Shi* is indispensable when hosting an adult sacrificial ceremony. What’s more, grandsons should bear the role of *Shi*. If they are too young, they should be carried in breast; and if grandsons are not available, kindred grandsons with the same surname may be taken as an alternative. In contrast, when hosting a sacrificial ceremony for minors who die young, *Shi* should no longer be present because they have not grown up. Likewise, absence of *Shi* at an adult

sacrificial ceremony is equivalent to a sacrificial ceremony for premature death”, answered Confucius (Zheng 1399). Their interlocution indicates that the Spring and Autumn period has witnessed diverse attitudes towards the rite of worship: some may still insist following the traditional propriety of inviting a living soul to signify the deceased to be sacrificed at the ceremony while others may not. By this token, it is understandable that Mr. Zeng has been in bewilderment when gaining from Confucius the knowledge of “*Shi* is indispensable when hosting a sacrificial ceremony”. The fact is that this traditional etiquette has been in collapse at that time and such rituals are only components of what Confucius imparts to his disciples as a way to acquaint themselves with the rites of Zhou dynasty. Another example may well illustrate this point. There recorded a story in *Chapter Eight Yi, Confucian Analects* as follows: Tsze-kung intended to leave out the offering of a sheep to be sacrificed at the inauguration of the first day of each month. The Master said, “Ts’ze, you love the sheep; I cherish the ceremony.” Thus, it can be inferred that the rites of Zhou dynasty have undertaken tremendous changes in the Spring and Autumn period and formalities at the sacrificial ceremony have been simplified, altered or even annulled.

Minute Rules of Propriety adapted from *Book of Rites* relates that a man of noble character will hold in his arms his grandson instead of his son (Zheng 86). In other words, grandsons are qualified for acting as *Shi* for his deceased forefathers while sons are disqualified at the sacrificial ceremony. As is annotated in *Rites of the Single Victim Offering* from *Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial*, “*Shi* refers to the living grandson of the deceased (at the ceremony). The one who acts as *Shi* for his grandfather is the eldest son of the host while the one who serves as *Shi* for Mi (one’s deceased father whose tablet is preserved in the ancestral temple) is the one on behalf of the host to fulfill fatherly courtesy.” Apart from grandsons, younger brothers may as well serve as *Shi*. A good case in point is an excerpt from *Mencius*. Mencius said, “(You may respond by asking) who do you respect, your uncle or your younger brother? He will say ‘to pay respect to my uncle.’ You should then ask him ‘If your younger brother is playing the role of the deceased at a funeral, to whom should you pay respect?’ In that case he will say that he would pay respect to his younger brother. Then you should ask, ‘Why don’t you continue to respect your uncle?’ He will respond that respect in this case hinges on his status” (Jiao 746). *Rites of Requiem after Burial* from *Book of Rites* records, “To pray for and extend good wishes to *Shi*.” Zheng Xuan (127~200) comments, “*Shi* refers to the memorial tablet established for deceased ancestor. When worshipping ancestors, the filial son feels at a total loss not seeing his deceased ancestor present. In this case, filial children work out an idea that they send a living soul sitting behind the altar of a memorial ceremony, acting as the deceased during the performance of sacrificial rites. The living soul thus is called *Shi*. Additionally, if the deceased is male, his grandson will serve as *Shi*. Likewise, if the deceased is female, the role of *Shi* is bound to be assumed by females, but not the son of a concubine” (87).

Actually, the practice that Confucius tells Mr. Zeng *Shi* is indispensable in ancestral worship is only confined to one situation—a sacrificial ceremony held under the chief minister’s or state official’s level. A more detailed annotation in the book *Gongyang Commentary on Spring and Autumn Annals* by He Xiu (129~182) relates, “In memory of Gods, *Shi* is indispensable at the memorial ceremony. Sacrificial ritual has it that high court ministers may serve as *Shi* for the emperor and state officials may act as *Shi* for dukes. From the high court ministers and state officials downwards, their grandsons may play the part. *Shi* should assume the posture of standing in Xia dynasty and sitting in Shang dynasty while Zhou dynasty has earned its name by hosting a grand ceremony with six living souls altogether embodying *Shi* at a time” (Ruan 2280). “The proper way to hold a

solemn ceremony of ancestral worship is to invite the grandson of the deceased, namely, the worshipper's son, to play the part of *Shi* signifying the deceased father. Equally important, the worshipper is supposed to place his son, the *Shi*, on the pedestal, and face northwards to show pious respect to the *Shi*, the deceased father. In so doing, the worshipper intends to instruct his son the mourning way to fulfill his filial duty. This sacrificial ritual reveals a filial devotion from son to father” (Zheng 87).

It can be further inferred from the annotations by He Xiu that *Shi* is required to stand in Xia dynasty and to sit in Shang dynasty. Though it is not mentioned whether *Shi* should stand or sit at the ceremony in Zhou dynasty, it is explicitly laid down in *Sacrificial Vessels* from *Book of Rites* as follows, “In Zhou dynasty, *Shi* has to sit all the time at the rituals. There are no fixed formalities to exhort *Shi* to keep up august deportment or to partake. By the same token, worshippers should conduct what a filial son naturally does as usual. In contrast, *Shi* in Xia dynasty has to stand all the way until the ceremony comes to an end while in Shang dynasty, *Shi* has to sit all the way” (Zheng 868). Another corroboration has been documented in *A Comprehensive Study of Chinese History* composed by Du You (735~812), a celebrated statesman and historian in Tang dynasty (618~907), “Employing *Shi* is an essential part in such memorial services as worshipping Heaven and Earth, offering sacrifices to ancestors and praying for the prosperity of the country since before Zhou dynasty. Sadly, the ritual of employing *Shi* disappears from the scene of sacrificial ceremony from the Qin (221B.C~207B.C) and Han (202 B.C~220) dynasties downwards”; and “*Shi* will be present at various sacrificial ceremonies, minor or massive, in Zhou dynasty” (1354). As the sacrificial rite of Zhou dynasty follows that of Shang dynasty, *Shi* will sit all through the ceremony. Though *Shi* has to sit all along at the rituals in Shang and Zhou dynasties, the way they sit at that time differs considerably from the way we sit on the buttocks today (The way to sit on one's buttocks stems from such countries as the ancient Egypt and ancient India, and has been introduced into China by way of the Silk Road during the period of Wei-Jin and the Northern and Southern Dynasties [222~589]. It has become a widely-accepted sitting posture in Song dynasty [960~1279]). At rituals, *Shi* usually sits on heels.

Su Shi (1037~1101), a great man of letters in Song dynasty, once remarked, “When holding a sacrificial ceremony, *Shi* is indispensable. Otherwise, it is just called a memorial service” (56). The rite that *Shi* is an integral part of a sacrificial ritual only exists before the Warring States period. Li Hua (715~766) stated in his paper *On Divination* that *Shi* is essential at a sacrificial ceremony. This rite has remained unchanged in the Yu, Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties. However, this traditional practice has been eliminated in the Warring States period. Ever since then, no *Shi* can be seen at sacrificial rituals. Gu Yanwu (1613~1682), who was a distinguished thinker, historian and linguist in late Ming and early Qing dynasty, commented, “Ancestral worship in ancient times will always be held with *Shi* acting as a substitute for the deceased instead of placing the portrait of the deceased on a pedestal. *The History* by Zuo Qiuming records ‘Ma Ying once served as the *Shi* in the Temple of Lv Shang’; The book *Mencius* also relates that younger brothers may play the role of *Shi*; from the Spring and Autumn period downwards, *Shi* no longer shows up at the rituals. Such statements as ‘The portrait (of one's ancestor) should be arranged in the ancestral shrine’ begins with the book *The Conjuring* by Song Yu (about 298B.C~222B.C). The Warring States period witnessed the rite of employing *Shi* at the sacrificial ceremony in discard while placing portrait of ancestor in the temple in vogue” (819). *Shi* has been free from the sacrificial rituals ever since the Warring States period. When holding memorial services, people mainly offer sacrifices to wooden statues of ancestors or the statues of Buddha. Thereafter, as has been put to textual research in

Encyclopedia of Five Rites by Qin Huitian (1702~1764), a scholar and official of Qing dynasty (1636~1912), a sacrificial ceremony void of *Shi* can only barely call what it is; Actually, it is only the ancestral worship offering articles of tribute, oblations or wine.

In his paper, *Annotation and Clarification on “Qin Bu Shi”*, Zeng Yongsheng advances that the character *Shi* in the phrase “*Qin Bu Shi*” adapted from *The Analects* conveys its denotative meaning, namely, *Shi* is meant for (a dead body) being laid out, thus, the phrase *Qin Bu Shi*, by his interpretation, “One should not lie stretched out when sleeping (so as to maintain his dignity)” (95). Evidently, such arguments are less grounded. By common sense, men and women will spread their arms and legs comfortably when sleeping.

By applying the extended meaning of a character to the annotation and interpretation of its literal sense will inevitably result in misconceptions. The proper way to understand and expound a certain character from classic books is to take into account its contextual milieu. Specifically, readers should take into consideration the temporal and spatial context in which the character lies. Misconceptions will easily crop up if annotations of a character are to be undertaken semantically different.

Cheng Shude (1877~1944), a distinguished legal historian, author of *Collected Annotations on the Analects*, holds the view that the character *Shi* in *Qin Bu Shi*, does not mean a dead body or a corpse... *Qin Bu Shi* clarifies that when one retires for the night, he may bend, stretch, toss and turn in bed as he pleases (724-725). Cheng’s interpretation of the character *Shi* is justifiable, yet due to the difference of sitting postures between the past and present, his explanation of the phrase *Qin Bu Shi* still lies equivocal.

Commentary on the Analects states, “*Shi*, a living soul in place of the deceased to be sacrificed, is supposed to go into abstention and lodge in the inner bedchamber. As a matter of course, *Shi* does not have to keep dignified when sleeping as s/he does during fast period” (Cheng 724). At sacrificial rituals, *Shi* should conduct himself/herself sedately, with a dignified and graceful expression on the face. As is annotated by Zheng Xuan in *Book of Rites*, “Now that *Shi* occupies the position of deity, s/he must sit with circumspection and dignity” (13). Another sentence adapted from *The Analects* may also verify this argument, “*Qin Bu Shi, Ju Bu Ke* (It is not necessary for us to behave as gravely as *Shi* does at the sacrificial ceremony when sleeping, nor do we have to behave with reserve at home as if we would entertain distinguished guests)” (Yang 107). In this sentence, the former part and the latter one construct an inter-textual relationship, thus the expression of *Qin Bu Ke, Ju Bu Shi* is also workable. Another case in point to illustrate the inter-textuality is as follows, *Shi Bu Yu, Qin Bu Yan* (As the proper propriety goes, we should not talk while eating, nor do we speak when we are ready to sleep.). As can be seen, Confucius advocates that *etiquette*, code of conduct, should be applied flexibly in accordance with specific circumstances. When in public or on sacrificial occasions, one should observe scrupulously the etiquette. However, on private occasions, one may feel at ease, free from any restraint of ceremonial proprieties.

A Conclusion

The Spring and Autumn period, in which Confucius lived, witnessed *Shi*, a living soul signifying the deceased to be sacrificed, sitting at the sacrificial ceremony. However, the sitting posture then (to sit on one’s heels with his head bowing and his back arching) differs sharply from that of today (to sit on one’s buttocks). Accordingly, *Qin Bu Shi* in Confucius’ eyes intends that one does not necessarily sleep in the same way *Shi* sits at the sacrificial rituals, nor does one have to be in a dignified manner while sleeping.

By common sense, one may sleep on one's side, on one's back or on one's stomach if only s/he feels comfortable. What's more, no one could maintain only one posture while sleeping. The most common sleeping posture is to sleep on one's back, which, in terms of traditional Chinese medicine, is called *corpse lying*. It is investigated that about 60% of people choose to sleep on their back, forming the optimum sleeping posture recommended by doctors.

As can be seen, there is scientific logic behind Confucius' proposal of *Qin Bu Shi*. In contrast, it is incorrect that Mr. Yang Bojun annotated the character *Shi* in the phrase *Qin Bu Shi* as a corpse or a dead body and interpreted the phrase as Confucius does not sleep (lying stretched out) like a dead body. Such misrepresentation of the original text arises from misunderstanding of the character *Shi* and the neglect of its contextual use: its literal sense from the Spring and Autumn period upwards, its concrete postures in different historical periods and the evolution of the sitting posture in the long course of Chinese history. Should the extended meaning of the character *Shi* be applied to the interpretation of its literal meaning, misconception will surely crop up due to its semantic changes. A good case in point is the interpretation of the character *Shi* in the phrase *Qin Bu Shi* adapted from *The Analects*. *Shi* should be annotated in accordance with the literal sense in the Spring and Autumn period instead of its extended meaning from the Warring States period onwards. What enlightenment can be gained from this case is as follows: no matter what textual research is to be conducted or textual interpretation is to be undertaken, the temporal and spatial context of a character, a discourse or even a text should never go unnoticed. More importantly, one should keep on guard all the time against the interference of one's own preconceived knowledge in the course of rendering annotations on Chinese characters whose denotative meanings may vary with the process of history.

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