

# An Exegetical and Cultural Examination of “*Shi er you ze xue, xue er you ze shi* 仕而优则学，学而优则仕”

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## Abstract

“*Shi er you ze xue, xue er you ze shi* 仕而优则学，学而优则仕 (An official versed in state affairs should amplify his knowledge; an intellectual well equipped with knowledge should serve the state.)” was put forward by Confucian scholars during the Spring and Autumn Period in the light of the social reality that many people had not yet learned to serve, but its connotation was often misinterpreted by later generations as “the theory of studying to become a government official”. Examined from an exegetical and cultural point of view, it can be seen that “*xue* 学” refers to the study of moral and etiquette norms and knowledge of literature, and “*you* 优” means “abundance, spare capacity”. “*shi* 仕” refers to being an official; ‘*Shi er you ze xue* 仕而优则学’ is a compromise way adopted by Confucianism to solve the contradiction between ideals and reality; ‘*xue er you* 学而优’ is the prerequisite for ‘*shi* 仕’; and ‘*shi* 仕’ is a bridge for Confucianism to realize the ideal of helping the world.

**Keywords:** *xue er you ze shi* (学而优则仕), *shi er you ze xue* (仕而优则学), Lunyu 《论语》, Zi Xia 子夏

## 1. Introduction

In Lunyu 《论语》 (the Analects) chapter on Zi Zhang 子张, it is recorded: “Zi Xia yue : ‘*Shi er you ze xue, xue er you ze shi.*’ 子夏曰:‘仕而优则学，学而优则仕.’ (Zi Xia said ‘An official versed in state affairs should amplify his knowledge; an intellectual well equipped with knowledge should serve the state.’ ” Regarding this passage, He Yan's 何晏 Collected Commentaries cites Ma Rong's 马融 annotation: “*shi you ze xue, xing you yu li, ze ke yi xue wen ye.* 仕优则学，行有余力，则可以学文也. (If one excels in official duties, he has surplus energy to study literature.)” Huang Kan's 皇侃 Commentary and Explanation elaborates:

“*Shi er you ze xue*’ means having surplus energy after fulfilling one’s official responsibilities. If one manages official affairs merely by adhering to regulations, and still has extra capacity, then he should further delve into the teachings and precedents of past rulers. ‘*Xue er you ze shi*’ suggests that while study does not directly establish official positions, officials must be competent, hence those with sufficient academic achievements should advance into officialdom” Later Xing Bing's 邢昺 commentary, Zhu Zi's 朱子 set of notes, Liu Bao Nan's 刘宝楠 justice, etc., followed this statement, and modern scholars also agree with it, such as Yang Bo Jun 杨伯峻 (1980, P. 215), who translates this sentence as “Zi Xia said: ‘When you are an official, if you have the spare capacity, you will go to study; and when you have studied, if you have the spare capacity, you will go to be an official.’” The reason why Zi Xia put forward such a viewpoint is related to the social reality that in the Spring and Autumn period there were many people who had not studied but had become officials, but in later times it was often misinterpreted to mean that the purpose of studying was to become an official. In this regard, there is no lack of modern scholars who have attempted to reinterpret the meaning of the phrase in order to give it a proper name, such as Tan Foyou 谭佛佑 (1980), Luo Anxian 罗安宪(2005), Yang Xi 杨曦(2021), and so on. Whether these new claims are credible or not remains to be discussed. In this paper, from an exegetical and cultural point of view, on the premise of determining the ideological relationship between Zi Xia and Confucius, focusing on the use of the *Lunyu* 《论语》 (The Analects) of Confucius as a source of evidence, and taking into account the social and cultural background of the Spring and Autumn period, we examine the meaning of the phrase “*Shi er you ze xue, xue er you ze shi*”, and the reasons for this view.

## 2. The Relationship between Zi Xia and Confucius in Terms of Intellectual Succession

Zi Xia 子夏, forty-four years younger than Confucius, was a favorite disciple of Confucius in his later years, and was ranked in the “literature” section of the “*kongmen sike* 孔门四科 (four subjects of Confucius)”. Zi Xia was born into a poor noble family, but he was diligent and studious. He was the first person to systematically organize and teach Confucian classics after Confucius, and made great contributions to the transmission of Confucian literature and the development of Confucianism, and was regarded as the originator of the transmission of scriptures. In his later years, he was the teacher of Wei Wenhui 魏文侯, and lectured in the area of Xihe 西河 in the state of Wei 魏, founding the famous “Xihe xuepai 西河学派 (Xihe School)”, which gave birth to the early Legalist thought and had far-reaching influence. (Wang Hongxia 王红霞, 2006).

The *Lunyu* contains a total of 15 statements by Zi Xia, and a comparison of these statements with those of Confucius reveals that Zi Xia's thought is the inheritance and development of Confucius' thought. The following examples illustrate this point:

### 2.1 From the *Lunyu* –Zi Zhang 《论语·子张》

Zi Xia yue: “Jun zi xin er hou lao qi min; Wei xin, ze yi wei li ji ye. Xin er hou jian; Wei xin, ze yi wei bang ji ye.” 子夏曰:“君子信而后劳其民; 未信, 则以为厉己也. 信而后谏; 未信, 则以为谤己也.” (Zi Xia said, “An intelligent man will not order the people to toil until he is trusted, or they will think they are exploited. He will not criticize the sovereign till he wins

his confidence, or the sovereign will think himself vilified.” )

### 2.2 From the Lunyu-Weizheng 《论语·为政》

Zi yue: “Ren er wu xin, bu zhi qi ke ye. Da che wu ni, xiao che wu wu, qi he yi xing zhi zai?”  
子曰:“人而无信，不知其可也。大车无輓，小车无輓，其何以行之哉？”(How can an untrustworthy man be employed? said the Master. Could a large cart go without a yoke-bar or small cart without a cross-bar?)

### 2.3 From the Lunyu-Yan Yuan 《论语·颜渊》

Zi Gong wen zheng. Zi yue: “Zu shi, zu bing, min xin zhi yi.” 子贡问政。子曰:“足食，足兵，民信之矣。”

Zi Gong yue: “Bi bu de yi er qu, yu si san zhe he xian?” yue: “Qu bing.” 子贡曰:“必不得已而去，于斯三者何先？”曰:“去兵。”

Zi Gong yue: “Bi bu de yi er qu, yu si er zhe he xian?” yue: “Qu shi. Zi gu jie you si, min wu xin bu li.” 子贡曰:“必不得已而去，于斯二者何先？”曰:“去食。自古皆有死，民无信不立。”

(Zi Gong asked about the art of ruling. Confucius said, “A country must have enough food, enough forces, and faith of the people.”

Zi Gong said, “Which of the three may be dispensed with if obliged to?” Confucius said, “Military forces.”

Zi Gong asked, “Which of the two remaining may be dispensed with if obliged to?” Confucius said, “Food. Though people will die without food, yet it is so since the olden days. But without the faith of the people, a country cannot stand.”)

Zi Xia believed that while one should not transgress major moral principles, there could be some flexibility in minor behavioral details. This aligns with Confucius’s philosophy of praising the “superior ruler” who adheres to both major and minor virtues, the “mediocre ruler” who adheres to major virtues but may falter in minor ones, and criticizing those who fail in major virtues yet claim minor achievements.



From the above, it can be seen that as a disciple of Confucius, Zi Xia’s thoughts are to a large extent the inheritance and development of his teacher’s thoughts. Moreover, due to his own outstanding literary accomplishments, his utterances tend to be more concise and profound. “*Shi er you ze xue, xue er you ze shi*” actually implies the relationship between Zi Xia and Confucius in terms of ideological succession, which will be mentioned in detail below.




Include in these subsections the information essential to comprehend and replicate the study. Insufficient detail leaves the reader with questions; too much detail burdens the reader with irrelevant information. Consider using appendices and/or a supplemental website for more detailed information.

### 3. Interpretation of “Shi er you ze xue, xue er you ze shi”

To accurately comprehend the meaning of the phrase “*Shi er you ze xue, xue er you ze shi*”, it is essential to first understand the connotations of the three key words within it: “xue 学”, “you 优”, and “shi 仕”. The following analysis delves into these terms in detail.

#### 3.1 Interpretation of “xue 学”

The traditional Chinese character for “xue 学” before simplification was “學.” In ancient times, the concepts of “jiao 教 (teaching)” and “xue 学 (learning)” were not clearly differentiated. The character “jiao 教” in oracle bone inscriptions initially appears as  (The Collection of Oracle Bones Inscriptions 28008), a pictophonetic character with the radical “pu” (攴) signifying an instructor holding an implement, indicative of the act of teaching, and the phonetic “yao 爻” providing the sound. Later, to emphasize the target audience of children, the semantic radical “zi 子” was added, yielding  (The Collection of Oracle Bones Inscriptions 10).

Similarly, the character “xue 學” in oracle bone inscriptions is depicted as  (The Collection of Oracle Bones Inscriptions 108732), combining “gong 井 (representing hands)” and “mian 宀 (representing a house). The former signifies the act of learning through hands, while the latter represents the place of learning. Together, they convey the meaning of “learning.” To further emphasize that children were the primary learners, the semantic radical “zi 子” was appended beneath “mian 宀” as seen in bronze inscriptions  (Collection of Bronze Inscriptions 2837). Additionally, some bronze inscriptions added “pu 攴” to form the character “xiao 敎”, an alternative form of “xue 學” depicted as  (Collection of Bronze Inscriptions 4330), with the same fundamental meaning of learning or imitating.

In ancient times, the verbs “to impart” and “to receive” shared the same term, and “jiao 教” and “xue 學/敎” were interchangeable. Over time, they differentiated into distinct words. Consequently, in pre-Qin literature, “jiao 教” “xue 學” and “xiao 敎” could often be used interchangeably.

Based on the above, in pre-Qin texts, “xue 学” can signify both “learning” and “teaching”. Tian Jianrong 田建荣(1991) argues that in “*shi er you ze xue*” “xue” should be interpreted as “xiao 敎”, implying “teaching”, while in “*xue er you ze shi*,” “xue” retains its meaning of “learning.” According to this interpretation, the entire phrase conveys that “when one excels in official duties and has spare capacity, one should engage in teaching; when one excels in learning and has spare capacity, one should take up official duties.” However, upon a comprehensive review of the *Lunyu* in light of other contexts, this interpretation appears to be inaccurate.

The character “xue 学” appears 63 times in the *Lunyu* (excluding the phrase in question), and

in every instance, it unequivocally signifies “learning.” Examples include “Xue er shi xi zhi 学而时习之(Review what you have learned from time to time)”, “Wu shi you wu er zhi yu xue 吾十有五而志于学 (At the age of fifteen, I resolved to devote myself to learning)”, and many others, where “xue” consistently denotes “learning”. Moreover, sentences with similar structures in *Lunyu*, such as “Xue er bu si ze wang, si er bu xue ze dai 学而不思则罔, 思而不学则殆 (Learning without thinking leads to confusion; thinking without learning results in danger)” and “Jun zi zhou er bu bi, xiao ren bi er bu zhou 君子周而不比, 小人比而不周 (The gentleman associates with all, not cliquing; the petty man cliques, not associating with all)”, do not exhibit instances where the same word has different meanings in different parts of the sentence.

Given this consistency, it seems unlikely that only in “*shi er you ze xue*” does “xue” signify “teaching”. Therefore, we conclude that in both parts of the phrase, “xue” denotes “learning”.

The question that naturally arises after defining “xue” as “learning” is what constitutes the content of learning. In the *Lunyu*, under the chapter titled “xue er《学而》” Zi Xia states:“Xian xian yi se; Shi fu mu, neng jie qi li; Shi jun, neng zhi qi shen; Yu peng you jiao, yan er you xin. Sui yue wei xue, wu bi wei zhi xue yi 贤贤易色; 事父母, 能竭其力; 事君, 能致其身; 与朋友交, 言而有信. 虽曰未学, 吾必谓之学矣.(Respect the virtuous, and change your preferences accordingly; serve your parents with all your strength; serve your ruler with your very life; be honest in your dealings with friends. Even if one says he has not studied, I would still consider him as having studied.)”

From this passage, we discern two types of “xue”: the “xue” of “not having studied” and the “xue” that “I would consider him as having studied.” While “Respect the virtuous, and change your preferences accordingly” has been a subject of much debate throughout history and is not the focus here, the remaining three aspects—“serving parents”, “serving the ruler” and “honest dealings with friends”—are clearly related to human conduct and morality. Zi Xia’s view is that if one can adhere to these standards, they are indeed engaged in learning, implying that the first and foremost aspect of learning, according to him, is the study of moral and ethical norms.

Confucius echoed a similar sentiment in the *Lunyu-Xueer* 《论语·学而》:

Zi yue: “Di zi ru ze xiao, chu ze ti, jin er xin, fan ai zhong, er qin ren. Xing you yu li, ze yi xue wen.”子曰: “弟子入则孝, 出则悌, 谨而信, 泛爱众, 而亲仁. 行有余力, 则以学文.”(A disciple, when at home, should be filial; when abroad, respectful to his elders; careful and truthful in what he says; loving all men, and drawing near the virtuous. If he has energy to spare after performing all these, let him devote it to the study of literature.)

Here, Confucius believed that after fulfilling the virtues of filial piety, respect for elders, honesty, universal love, and closeness to the virtuous, one should, if capable, delve into the study of literature. Although Confucius did not explicitly label these virtues as “xue,” his numerous references to “hao xue 好学 (being studious)” throughout the *Lunyu*, such as “Jun zi shi wu qiu bao, ju wu qiu an, min yu shi er shen yu yan, jiu you dao er zheng yan, ke wei

hao xue ye ji.君子食无求饱，居无求安，敏于事而慎于言，就有道而正焉，可谓好学也已(The superior man does not seek to satisfy his appetite with food, nor his ease with residence. He is earnest in his affairs and cautious in his speech. He approaches men of principle for the rectification of his own conduct, and may be said to be a studious man) and “You Yanhui zhe hao xue, bu qian nu, bu er guo.有颜回者好学，不迁怒，不贰过. There was Yan Hui, who was studious. He did not transfer his resentment to others, nor did he repeat a mistake”, indicate that the study of moral and ethical norms is indeed considered “xue” in Confucian thought.

Confucius also prioritized the study of moral and ethical norms above all else, with the subsequent study of literature answering Zi Xia’s question about the nature of the “xue” that has not yet been studied—namely, literary knowledge. As stated in the *Lunyu*, “The Master taught four things: wen 文(literature), xing 行(conduct), zhong 忠(loyalty), and xin 信(truthfulness).” Among the four, literature is listed first, signifying its importance as a foundation for learning, while the latter three pertain to moral cultivation. In the same text, under the chapter titled “The Advanced Disciples,” it is noted that Zixia himself was renowned for his proficiency in literature and had once enlightened Confucius with his understanding of the *Shijing* 《诗经》, demonstrating his mastery of both types of “xue”.

### 3.2 Interpretation of “you 优”

The traditional Chinese character for “you 优/優”, before simplification, is a pictophonetic character consisting of the semantic radical “ren 人(person)” and the phonetic radical “you 憂”. According to the *Shuowen Jiezi* 《说文解字》 under the “人部” (radical for persons), “優” is defined as “饶也”, meaning abundant or sufficient. Meanwhile, under the “攴部”, “憂” is described as “和之行也,” and cited from the Book of Poetry as “布政憂憂,” signifying harmonious governance. Qiang Yunkai’s 强运开 *Shigu Shiwen* 《石鼓释文》 (Interpretation of Stone Drum Inscriptions) quotes Zhang Derong’s 张德容 view that “‘憂’ is the original form of ‘優’... In the seal script, ‘優’ was used for ‘憂’ and ‘憂’ for ‘愚’, subsequently leading later generations to forget their original meanings” (quoted from Li Pu 李圃, 2002, p. 656). Ma Xulun 马叙伦(1985, p. 92) further explains: “According to Niu Shuyu 钮树玉, ‘憂憂’ in the *Xizhuan* 《系传》 (Commentary on the Changes) and *Yunhui* 《韵会》 (Rhyme Collection) is written as ‘優優’. According to the ‘走部’ (radical for walking), ‘趨’ means walking lightly. This sound (referring to 憂) shares the same initial consonant with 影纽, and is thus a transitive character. In present-day Hangzhou, they say ‘憂憂地走’ to describe walking lightly and silently... ‘和之行也’ is likely a misinterpretation of ‘和也, 行貌.’ ‘和也’ implies a slow and leisurely walk, while ‘行貌’ describes the manner of such a walk.” In this light, “憂” is the original form of “優”, with its primary meaning being to walk leisurely, which by extension signifies ampleness or sufficiency.

In the *Lunyu* of Confucius, “優” appears only three times. Besides the two occurrences to be discussed here, the other is in the chapter *Xian wen* 《宪问》: “Meng gongchuo wei zhao wei lao ze you, bu ke yi wei Teng Xue da fu. 孟公绰为赵魏老则优，不可以为滕薛大夫.(If Meng Gongchuo were to serve as an elder statesman in the Zhao and Wei states, he would have ample time; but he could not serve as an official in the small states of Teng and Xue.)”

Xing Bing's 邢昺 commentary explains that if Meng Gongchuo were to serve in such a capacity, he would have ample leisure. Known for his "lack of desire," Meng Gongchuo would be overwhelmed by the complexities of governance in small states like Teng and Xue but would have ample time and resources in the larger states of Zhao and Wei, where his abilities would be more than sufficient. Here, "優" carries the meaning of "sufficient" or "ample." Similarly, in the phrase "*Shi er you ze xue, xue er you ze shi*", "優" should also be interpreted as "sufficient" or "ample". When one has ample resources, they possess the capability to excel, and hence, "優" eventually acquired the meaning of "excellent" in later Chinese.

Linking this to Confucius' statement "Xing you yu li, ze yi xue wen 行有余力，则以学文", we can see that Zi Xia's remark "xue er you ze shi 学而优则仕" represents a development of Confucius' and his own belief that "even if one says they have not studied, I would still consider them learned." There are two forms of learning: first, learning to be a virtuous person, and second, learning literature. If one has sufficient energy left after mastering these, they can serve in official positions. What does it mean to serve? This will be addressed in the following section.

### 3.3 Interpretation of "*shi 仕*(To Serve in Official Positions)"

According to the *Shuowen Jiezi* 《说文解字》, "仕" is defined as "learning". However, in the context of "Shi er you ze xue, xue er you ze shi 仕而优则学, 学而优则仕", "shi 仕" and "xue 学" are paired, indicating that "shi 仕" does not mean "learning". Duan Yucai's 段玉裁 commentary on the *Shuowen Jiezi* 《说文解字》 under the character "宦" states that "事, 士, 仕" were interchangeable in ancient times. "shi 仕" is synonymous with "shi 士." In bronze inscriptions, "shi 士" is depicted as 士 (Collection of Bronze Inscriptions 5421), resembling the shape of an axe with its blade facing downward, similar to the character for "wang 王(king)" in oracle bone script and bronze script (Xiaochen 𠩺 You) and (Collection of Bronze Inscriptions 2694). In ancient times, rulers conquered lands with force, using axes and halberds symbolizing their authority. Originally, "士" referred to officials in charge of administering punishments, hence the axe image representing their authority. As recorded in the *Shangshu-Yaodian* 《尚书·尧典》: "Ru zuo shi, wu xing you fu. 汝作士, 五刑有服.(You shall be the minister, and enforce the five punishments.)" Ma Rong 马融 explains that "士" was the head of the judiciary. In the *Zuozhuan* 《左传》 (Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals), "Shi rong wei da shi 士荣为大士(Shi Rong was the chief minister)", and Du Yu 杜预 comments that "Da shi, zhi yu guan ye. 大士, 治狱官也.(Chief minister, refers to an official in charge of administering punishments.) Later, "Shi 士" evolved to signify the execution of duties. In the *Shijing* 《诗经》, "Wu wang qi bu shi? 武王岂不仕? (Was King Wu not a minister?)" Mao Heng 毛亨 transmits that "shi 仕" means duties, while Zheng Xuan 郑玄 further explains that King Wu used his accomplishments as his duties. Eventually, "Shi 仕" came to represent the act of serving in official positions. Zhang Taiyan 章太炎(1981, p. 173) mentions that "士" means duties, which evolved into "仕" for learning and also encompasses "giving service." Lu Zongda 陆宗达 (1981, P.12) explained furthermore, "仕"

evolved into “宰,” referring to slaves performing duties within the house, who gradually gained authority and became officials. Duan Yucai 段玉裁 notes that “仕” means entering officialdom, which is its contemporary meaning, citing the example of “Shi er you ze xue, xue er you ze shi” to demonstrate that “shi” already meant “serving in official positions” during that time.

In the *Lunyu* 《论语》, “shi 仕” appears eight times. Besides the two occurrences discussed here and the two mentioned by Duan Yucai 段玉裁, the other four instances are as follows: In the chapter *Yang Huo* 《阳货》, when asked about his willingness to serve, Confucius replies, “Nuo; Wu jiang shi yi 诺; 吾将仕矣.(Yes, I will serve in official positions.)” In this context, “serving” refers to holding official positions. In the chapter “Zi Lu yu zhang ren 子路遇丈人”, “bu shi 不仕(not serve in official positions)” contrasts with “yin zhe 隐者(being a recluse)”, clarifying that “shi 仕” means serving in official positions. In the chapter *Gongye Chang* 《公冶长》, “Ling yin Zi wen served as Ling yin three times,” where “Lingyin” is an official position, further confirming the meaning of “serving in official positions”.

In summary, “xue 学” refers to learning moral and ritual norms and literary knowledge; “you 优” signifies “ample” or “sufficient”, which is not far from the meaning of “excellent”; and “shi 仕” refers to serving in official positions. Yang Bojun’s 杨伯峻 translation of “If one serves well, one should study; if one studies well, one should serve” for the phrase “*shi er you ze xue, xue er you ze shi*” is accurate.

#### **4. Reasons Behind the Proposition of “Shi er you ze xue, xue er you ze shi”**

##### *4.1 “Shi er you ze xue, xue er you ze shi” as a Compromise between Ideal and Reality in Confucianism*

As mentioned earlier, having sufficient resources from learning is a prerequisite for serving in official positions. Then why is there the notion of “shi er you ze xue?” Does Zi Xia’s statement contradict itself? In fact, it does not. Understanding this requires a contextual analysis. During the Western Zhou Dynasty, the patriarchal hereditary system was practiced, and although not strictly adhered to during the Spring and Autumn Period, most scholars were still from aristocratic families, with many serving without prior learning.

In the *Lunyu*, Confucius states, “Zi yue: ‘xian jin yu li yue, ye ren ye; Hou jin yu li yue, jun zi ye. Ru yong zhi, ze wu cong xian jin.’ 子曰:‘先进于礼乐, 野人也; 后进于礼乐, 君子也。如用之, 则吾从先进。’(Those who first become proficient in ritual and music are rustic people; those who first attain official positions and then become proficient are the sons of noblemen. If I had to choose, I would follow the rustic people.)” This reflects that noblemen’s sons often entered politics without being proficient in learning. When Zi Gong 子贡 asked about contemporary politicians, Confucius replied, “Yi! Dou xiao zhi ren, he zu suan ye? 噫! 斗筲之人, 何足算也? (Alas! These petty-minded people are not worth mentioning!)” Similarly, in the *Zuozhuan* 《左传》 Cao Gui 曹刿 remarked, “Rou shi zhe bi, wei neng yuan mou 肉食者鄙, 未能远谋(The rulers are narrow-minded and lack far-sighted plans.)” These comments indicate that many politicians during that time did not meet the standards of learned and virtuous scholars, revealing a lack of learning among those in power.



Zheng Guo Zi Chan's proposal of "xue er hou ru zheng 学而后入政(learning before entering politics)" criticized the unlearned hereditary aristocrats. Recognizing that the situation of unlearned officials would not change immediately, Zi Xia encouraged them to study moral and ritual norms and literary knowledge in their free time. Thus, "xue er you ze shi" represents the ideal condition for entering politics in Confucianism, while "shi er you ze xue".

#### 4.2 "xue er you" as a Precondition for Entering Political Career

On one hand, "during the political transformation triggered by social changes in the Spring and Autumn period, the increasing corruption of the aristocratic group and the rising trend of ritual governance ideology opened up a path for ordinary people to 'enter politics after studying'." (Wu Longhui 吴龙辉, 1996, P.27) However, what was broken through struggle was only the aristocracy's monopoly on political power, and what ordinary people gained was only the right to "enter politics". Whether they could ultimately embark on a political career depended on whether their personal conditions met the needs of the ruling aristocracy.

"Rituals and music played a greater role in life during the Spring and Autumn period than in the Western Zhou Dynasty" (Wu Longhui 吴龙辉, 1996, P.15), because during the stable regime of the Western Zhou Dynasty, the Zhou emperor genuinely led the vassal states, and diplomatic relations between the vassal states were relatively simple, generally involving only ceremonial visits. However, in the turbulent Spring and Autumn period, "due to the loss of an authoritative arbitrator like the Western Zhou royal family, whether there was 'ritual' became the basis for diplomatic struggles between countries." (Wu Longhui 吴龙辉, 1996, P.15) In *Zuozhuan*《左传》 many diplomatic struggles among vassal states were carried out in the name of ritual. For example, when discussing the relationship between Jin 晋 and Zheng 郑, Fu Zi 富子 and Zi Chan 子产 of Zheng State 郑国 said, "Wo jie you li, fu you bi wo ,guo er wu li , he yi qiu rong?我皆有礼，夫犹鄙我，国而无礼，何以求荣？(We both follow rituals, but they still despise us. If a country has no rituals, how can it seek prosperity?)" (*Zuozhuan-Zhao Gong's 16th Year* 《左传•昭公十六年》) This indicates that large countries often invaded smaller ones under the banner of "no ritual". Therefore, the success of diplomatic struggles was not only related to the country's strength but also closely linked to whether diplomats understood rituals. For instance, Zi Chan of Zheng State, who understood rituals, repeatedly used them as weapons in diplomatic conflicts to win favorable situations for Zheng. However, hereditary aristocrats were often arrogant, extravagant, and ignorant of rituals, becoming a laughingstock and even bringing disasters to their countries. Thus, talents who understood rituals and related knowledge were welcomed by rulers. For example, Confucius, what the monarchs valued was his proficiency in ritual and music culture, hoping to use it for their own benefit. Therefore, only those who were proficient in moral, etiquette norms, and literature knowledge had the opportunity to be favored by rulers and enter a political career. Hence, Confucius said, "Bu huan wu wei, huan suo yi li 不患无位，患所以立(Do not worry about having no position, but worry about what qualifies you for the position)." (*Lunyu-liren* 《论语•里仁》).

On the other hand, Confucius advocated moral education for the people and attached great

importance to the exemplary role of rulers. Therefore, he required rulers to have good character cultivation. As stated in the *Lunyu-Xianwen* 《论语·宪问》: “Shang hao li, ze min yi shi ye. 上好礼, 则民易使也. (If the superiors value rituals, it will be easy to govern the people.)” *Lunyu-Zilu* 《论语·子路》 reported: “Qi shen zheng, bu ling er xing; Qi shen bu zheng, sui ling bu cong. 其身正, 不令而行; 其身不正, 虽令不从. (If the ruler's conduct is upright, he can govern without giving orders. If his conduct is not upright, even if he gives orders, they will not be obeyed.)”

In the above examples, Confucius believed that as long as the ruler possessed qualities such as “hao li 好礼(valuing rituals),” “shen zheng 身正(upright conduct),” the people would also follow and emulate these qualities. Confucius used the metaphor of “Jun zi zhi de feng, xiao ren zhi de cao 君子之德风, 小人之德草(the virtue of the superior is like the wind, and the virtue of the inferior is like the grass)” to illustrate the absolute power of this influence, because “Cao shang zhi feng, bi yan 草上之风, 必偃(when the wind blows over the grass, it must bend)” meaning “Shang you suo hao, xia bi shen yan 上有所好, 下必甚焉(what the superiors like, the subordinates will imitate even more.)” Conversely, if the ruler possesses bad qualities, the people will also imitate them. For instance, in the *Lunyu-Yanyuan* 《论语·颜渊》: “Ji kangzi huan dao, wen yu kong zi. Kong zi dui yue: ‘Gou zi zhi buy u, sui shang zhi bu qie. 季康子患盗, 问于孔子. 孔子对曰: ‘苟子之不欲, 虽赏之不窃.’(Ji Kangzi was troubled by frequent occurrences of theft, and Confucius’s solution was to advise him to “Bu yu 不欲(suppress his desires)”. This way, even if people were encouraged to steal, they wouldn’t do it. This means that because Ji Kangzi himself had a strong desire for material things, it influenced the people, and that's why they stole. Therefore, Confucius strongly opposed those who had not studied or were not well-educated from becoming officials. As stated in the *Lunyu-Xianjin* 《论语·先进》: “Zi Lu shi zi gao wei fei zai. Zi yue: ‘Zei fu ren zhi zi.’ 子路使子羔为费宰. 子曰: ‘贼夫人之子.’ (Zi Lu appointed Zi Gao as the governor of Fei. Confucius said, "This is harmful to the people.)” Confucius believed that appointing the insufficiently educated Zi Gao 子羔 as an official was harmful to the people. So when “Zi shi qi diao kai shi 子使漆彫开仕(Confucius appointed Qi Diao Kai to an official position)” and Qi Diao Kai 漆彫开 replied, “Wu si zhi wei neng xin 吾斯之未能信(I am not yet confident in my abilities)”. Confucius was very pleased. Confucius believed that Qi Diao Kai's cultivation had already reached the qualifications for an official position, but Qi Diao Kai still believed that he was not yet qualified. This was a high demand on himself, so Confucius expressed his appreciation. However, as stated in the *Lunyu-Liren* 《论语·里仁》, “Fu yu gui, ren zhi suo yu ye 富与贵, 人之所欲也(wealth and honor are what people desire.)” There are few people as humble and cautious as Qi Diao Kai.

Therefore, the reason for “xue er you ze shi” is based on two considerations: Firstly, it is based on social reality. Only by possessing good moral and etiquette knowledge and literature can one gain the appreciation of the rulers and embark on an official career. Secondly, it is based on performance considerations after becoming an official, emphasizing the role model of superiors and having high demands on this. In a nutshell, “xue er you” is a prerequisite for entering an official career.

#### 4.3 “shi” is the Bridge for Confucianism to Realize Its Ideal of Benefiting the World

Confucius advocated actively pursuing an official career. His travels around various states were motivated by his desire to be appointed by the rulers, thus realizing his ideal of benefiting the world. His lamentations after encountering obstacles everywhere also reveal his lifelong wait for the opportunity to “Da ze jian shan tian xia 达则兼善天下(achieve success and benefit the world)”. As stated in the *Lunyu-Yang huo*《论语·阳货》:“Wu qi hu gua ye zai? Yan neng xi er bu shi? 吾岂匏瓜也哉? 焉能系而不食? (Am I a gourd? How can I be tied up and not eaten?)” And in the *Lunyu-Zi Han*《论语·子罕》:“Zi Gong yue: ‘You mei yu yu si, wen du er cang zhu? Shi shan gu er gu zhu?’ Zi yue: ‘Gu zhi zai! Gu zhi zai! Wo dai gu zhe ye.’ 子贡曰: ‘有美玉于斯, 韞椟而藏诸? 示善贾而沽诸?’ (Zi Gong said, ‘Suppose there is a piece of beautiful jade here. Should we put it in a box and hide it, or show it to a good merchant and sell it?’ Confucius said, ‘Sell it! Sell it! I am waiting for a buyer.’)”

Whether comparing himself to a “gourd” or using “beautiful jade” as a metaphor, it is evident that Confucius was resolute in his intention to pursue an official career. Many of his disciples also became officials, such as “Zi You wei wu cheng zai 子游为武城宰(Zi You became the governor of Wu Cheng)” “Zhong Gong wei ji shi zai 仲弓为季氏宰(Zhong Gong became the governor of the Ji family)” .

Zi Xia said, “Bai gong ju si yi cheng qi shi, jun zi xue yi zhi qi dao 百工居肆以成其事, 君子学以致其道(Craftsmen stay in their workshops to accomplish their tasks, while gentlemen study to achieve their principles).” (*Lunyu - Zi Zhang*《论语·子张》). Considering Confucius's words, “Tian xia you dao ze jian, wu dao ze yin 天下有道则见, 无道则隐(When the world is governed with justice, one should come out and serve; when there is no justice, one should hide.)” (*Lunyu - Tai Bo*《论语·泰伯》), this “dao 道(principle)” can be understood as political clarity, social prosperity, and stability. Zi Xia believed that studying is to achieve this “dao.” Naturally, the “shi” in “xue er you ze shi” is not the goal of studying but just a means to achieve the “dao”. Confucius believed that “xiu ji yi an bai xing 修己以安百姓(one should cultivate oneself to ensure the well-being of the people).” An official career is not the goal of his study and self-cultivation. Instead, it is just a bridge to help him realize his political ideals. After becoming an official, using his power to benefit the world and bring peace to the people is his true purpose. And Confucius did not believe that only those who hold official positions can contribute to political development. Practicing filial piety and brotherly love, and extending these virtues to the political domain, are also manifestations of political engagement. However, the social reality of “ke zheng meng yu hu 苛政猛于虎(harsh governance being fiercer than a tiger)” constantly reminds Confucius of the urgency of the situation, and it is imperative to rescue the people from misery. The impact of personal practice of filial piety and brotherly love on politics is too slow, so Confucius chose to enter politics directly. The power and status of an official can promote political ideals more quickly and effectively, having a far greater impact than simply practicing filial piety and brotherly love without holding office. Therefore, Confucius advocated actively seeking political office.

While holding political office provides a convenient way to promote political ideals, it also opens a shortcut to seeking wealth and status. This is a dangerous temptation that Confucius

was always wary of. Therefore, he advocated embracing poverty and contentment, rejecting material gains and upholding righteousness, aiming to motivate his disciples to resist temptation and devote themselves to the pursuit of truth. Confucius strongly condemned those who hold political positions but fail to uphold morality and instead seek personal gain. The *Lunyu-Xian jin* 《论语·先进》:

Ji shi fu yu zhou gong, er qiu ye wei zhi ju lian er fu yi zhi. Zi yue: “Fei wu tu ye. Xiao zi ming gu er gong zhi, ke ye.” 季氏富于周公，而求也为之聚敛而附益之。子曰：“非吾徒也。小子鸣鼓而攻之，可也。”(The Ji family was wealthier than the Duke of Zhou, and Ran Qiu helped them accumulate even more wealth. Confucius said, “He is no longer my disciple. You may attack him with drums, my students.”)

Confucius was so angry about Ran Qiu’s behavior of helping the Ji family accumulate wealth that he severed their teacher-student relationship and even allowed his other disciples to attack him. Similarly, he strongly condemned Ran You and Ji Lu for failing to prevent the Ji family from attacking Zhuanyu, saying, “Wei er bu chi, dian er bu fu, ze jiang yan yong bi xiang yi? 危而不持，颠而不扶，则将焉用彼相矣? (If they cannot steady a person when he is in danger or support him when he stumbles, what use is an assistant like that?)” (*Lunyu-Ji shi* 《论语·季氏》). These two cases of negligence in office demonstrate that holding political office is not the goal of learning. Rather, it is a bridge for Confucianism to realize its ideal of benefiting society. If one intends to use political office for personal gain, they should not seek such a position. This also explains why one should only seek political office after excelling in learning, as moral and ethical improvement helps resist external temptations while in office.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, the traditional understanding of the phrase “shi er you ze xue, xue er you ze shi” is accurate. Zi Xia’s proposal of this viewpoint was based on considerations of social reality and insights into human nature. It should not be simplified as “studying to become an official,” as some later interpretations have suggested.

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## Notes

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