AN INTERPRETATION OF “SHI KEYI QUN” 詩可以群

BY

JIA JINHUA

City University of Hong Kong

Confucius uses four terms to define the function of the Shi jing 詩經 (The Book of Poetry): xing 興, guan 觀, qun 羣, and yuan 源. In this article, I propose to analyze the interpretation of the third term, qun, in the context of Confucius’ ideas. Special attention will be paid to the etymological significance of the character, and historical and socio-cultural evidence will be used to assist in this exploration of the etymology.

It is first necessary to look at the traditional annotation and understanding of this term. Kong Anguo 孔安國 (fl. 141-87 B.C.) glosses qun as “to live in a group and cultivate by mutual discussion” (qunju xiang qiecuo 羣居相切磋). Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) explains it as “to be agreeable but not to follow other people unreasonably” (he er bu liu 和而不流). While these explanations elucidate connotations of the term, they do not approach its semantic nucleus. In order to do so, we need to trace the etymology of the character.

In the Shuowen jiezi 說文解字, Xu Shen 許慎 (55-149) defines qun as “derived from yang 羊 (sheep); jun 君 (lord) is phonophoric” (cong yang jun sheng 從羊君聲). Both Xu Xuan 徐炫 (916-91) and Xu Kai 徐幹 (920-74) suggest yang as an etymon because “sheep

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1 *Lun yu* 論語, 17: 9.
2 This term appears as yan 言 in a quotation by the *Da Dai Li* 大戴禮. See Cheng Shude 鄭德, ed., *Lun yu jishi 論語集釋* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 35.1212. Since this is a single variation, I will not take it into consideration.
3 *Lun yu jishi*, 35.1212.
4 *Lun yu jishi*, 35.1213.

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are naturally fond of living in flocks.” Duan Yucai (1735-815) says that from this meaning of a flock of sheep, the character connotes the meaning that beings of the same kind gather together. Other scholars list examples showing that *qun* was generally used to indicate groups of people or animals in Confucius’ time.

In the *Shuowen*, however, another *qun* is listed and explained as “living in a group; it is derived from *mian* (house), and *jun* is a phonophoric” (*qunju ye, cong mian jun sheng*). Wang Yun (fl. 1821-50) comments on the *Shuowen*:

[Xu Shen] uses the character *qun* to spell out the character *qun*, but the two characters originally had different usage. The former was used in expressions such as “a flock of three hundred [sheep]” (*sanbai wei qun*), and the latter in expressions such as “to be careful in learning and to enjoy company” (*jingye le qun*). The meaning of “living” (*ju*) is not significant, and it is mentioned simply because there is a “house” constituent.

Qian Zhen (fl. 1774) says, “in the *Lunyu*, ‘living in a group’ should originally have been written with the character *qun*.” Both Mao Jisheng (fl. 1796-1820) and Xue Chuanjun (fl. 1796-1820) indicate that the character *qun* should have been the standard one, but as it became interchangeable with *qun* in later times, the original distinction was forgotten. According to these scholars, *qun* was originally used to denote people living in group, and *qun* was used to mean the herding together of sheep. Later, the two characters became interchangeable and were used to indicate the gathering together of various kinds of beings. Gradually, the character *qun* became the preferred graph, and the character *qun* was forgotten.

A further graphic-phonetic analysis of the character *qun* shows that the constituent *mian* is a common determinative for “house,”

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9 This is a quotation from the *Shi jing*, 190/1.
10 This is a quotation from the *Li ji*, 36.3b, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, ed. Ruan Yuan （1764-849）(1816; reprint, Taipei: Yiwen yinshu guan, 1960).