

A NOTE TO ERKES' PAPER

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Of speculation concerning the meaning of Chinese words and phrases, there has been much. Better than any amount of speculation is, however, the study of usage.

Concerning the ancient meaning of the Chinese phrase *sz-wang* 死亡, we need to consult the *Shuo-wen Jie-dz* 說文解字, sub its radical 457, which is *wang*. This word is there defined as "tao 逃, to flee". Then *sz-wang*, as a consociation of related but not identical expressions, anciently had the meaning of the English phrase, "dead and gone". This Chinese phrase is used with the above meaning in various ancient texts, in the *Gung-yang-juan* 公陽傳 (Duke Huan, year XI), the *You-li* 周禮 (twice), the *Dzo-juan* 左傳 (nine times), the *Mencius* 孟子, and later. Since the Lao-dz must be dated about 300 B.C. (*Journ. Amer. Orient. Soc.*, 61, Dec. 1941, pp. 215-21), most of the above usage is older than that of the Lao-dz.

Philosophers and religious men, because they need to discuss the problem of immortality, inevitably adapt the meaning of such a phrase as *sz-wang* to their own philosophies. The meaning of this phrase in the works of such writers then constitutes a reinterpretation rather than a statement of the phrase's ordinary meaning. Such usages are consequently more indicative

concerning the philosophy of the writer than of the phrase's ordinary meaning.

Quite parallel to the phrase *sz er bu wang* is another common ancient phrase, *sz er bu hsiu* 死而不朽. Granet, in his *Chinese Civilization*, p. 302, furnishes us with characteristic speculations about its meaning. He states that formerly it signified, "Do not allow the flesh of a dead man to rot". Men of refined feelings saw in it a piece of advice, "[Leave good examples which] do not corrupt, even after death!" The great preferred, "[In a noble race] death itself does not bring corruption [since the clan continues to exist]". They would have liked it to mean, "After his death, [the body of a great man] is not subject to corruption".

The source of these interpretations is not mentioned. There is however a passage in the *Dzo-juan* which explains this phrase (Duke Siang, year XXIV; Legge, p. 505^{1,3,4}, 507a; Couvreur, II, 407-9): "When the Clan Uncle Mu 穆叔, [Shu-sun Bao], went to [the state of] Dzin, Viscount Süan of Fan 范宣子 questioned him, saying: 'The ancients had a saying, "To die but not to decay (*sz er bu hsiu*)". What does it mean?'. . . The Clan Uncle Mu said . . . 'I, Bao, have heard that the greatest sages set up [examples] of virtue, the next [greatest] set up [examples] of meritorious deeds, and the next [greatest] set up [examples] of outstanding speeches. Although [these examples] existed long ago, they have not disappeared. This is what is called, 'Not to decay'."

Here the phrase, "To die but not to decay" is plainly used to denote the immortality of fame and of influence. The text proceeds to deny that the immortality of a clan or that continued occupation of high rank constitutes this kind of immortality.

In view of the Lao-dz's familiarity with the Chinese literature of his age, I believe we must interpret the sentence in his Ch. 33 according to the above saying, to state that genuine long life is to be found only in the immortality of fame and influence. The commentators on his book, who lived much later and were influenced by the alchemistic attempt to attain physical immortality or other doctrines, distort his original meaning.

The two conceptions in the phrases *sz er bu wang* and *sz er bu hsiu* are interestingly echoed and combined in a saying found in the *Huai-nan-dz*, 20: 17b (*Huai-nan Hung-lie Dzi-jie* ed.), "Although a superior man may be dead and gone, his name and fame will not be destroyed 君子雖死亡其名不滅".

In view of the circumstances that the passages from the *Jou-li* and *Dzo-juan* are actually the oldest ones quoted by Erkes and that the expression *sz wang* has continued to possess in almost all cases the meaning found there, *viz.*, "be dead and gone", perhaps we may draw an interesting conclusion: A Chinese set expression composed of two or more characters, such as *sz wang*, *sz er bu wang*, or *sz er bu hsiu*, is actually not one word, but

a phrase composed of distinct words (*cf.* "On the Supposed Monosyllabic Myth", *Journ. Amer. Orient. Soc.*, 72, April 1952, pp. 82, 83). Ordinarily such a phrase has a single, unitary meaning and may be translated by a single English word. Since, however, it is composed of distinct words, it may occasionally be employed with an unusual meaning. Such a reinterpretation may or may not "catch on". Then the meaning of a Chinese phrase depends on the period in which a passage was written, sometimes upon the intent of a particular author. Certain Daoists and Buddhists attempted to reinterpret in accordance with their individual philosophies the pregnant phrase *sz er bu wang*. But they found no consensus of opinion and their interpretations did not "catch on". Hence the need for great care in making translations of Chinese phrases.