

A Study of Zhang Xuecheng's View of The Chinese Classics

Introduction

Zhang Xue Cheng 章學誠 was one of the renowned scholars in Qing Dynasty. Yu Yingshi 余英時 regarded him and Daizhen 戴震 as the representative of the academic theories in Qing dynasty.¹ However, Zhang's most successful achievement was in historian but not in Chinese Classics Study. In Qing Dynasty, scholars claimed they have inherited the academic methodology from Han scholars 漢代經學家, therefore when they studied the classics, they mainly involved in Phonology、Philology、Exegesis 訓詁學, which is contrary to the scholarship in Song period 宋代學術. Zhang acknowledged that he was not good at those methodology,² he was gifted in interpretation 闡明義理, and he had great enthusiasm in studying the history. However, through his study in history, he gradually obtained some special understanding towards the Chinese Classics, which has great influence not only in his period but also for the generation. Based on various perspectives, Zhang pointed out the theory of "The Chinese Six Classics are all historical records" 六經皆史也.³ The reason why I choose this topic as my writing material is that I believe Zhang's theory towards the Chinese Classics has great influence throughout the history and can enlighten us. By studying his theory, we are also able to have a glimpse of the classical scholarship in Qing dynasty and its development. It will be useful and necessary for the study in the Chinese classics.

An overview of Zhang Xue Cheng's view of The Chinese Classics

The formation of Zhang Xuecheng's view of the Classics was mainly influenced by the academic style of the time. During the Qing dynasty, there was a strong emphasis

¹ Yu Yingshi 余英時, *Lun Dai Zhen Yu Zhang Xue Cheng* 論戴震與章學誠 (Beijing: Beijing San Lian Shu Ju 三聯書局, 2012)

² Zhang Xue Cheng 章學誠, *Wen Shi Tong Yi Jiao Zhu* 文史通義校注 (Beijing: Beijing Zhong Hua Shu ju 中華書局, 2014)

³ Zhang Xue Cheng 章學誠, *Wen Shi Tong Yi Jiao Zhu* 文史通義校注 (Beijing: Beijing Zhong Hua Shu ju 中華書局, 2014)

on Han Study 漢代學術, mainly in Philology and Phonology, and almost all scholars followed this trend, resulting in a rejection of other academic disciplines or methods, such as history study and interpretation 義理學. In response to this, Zhang Xue Cheng came up with his own viewpoint of the Classics when he focused on the academic work: "All The Chinese Six Classics are historical records" 六經皆史也, which he included in his most famous work, *Wen Shi Tong Yi* 《文史通義》. The following are some of the points that define Zhang's viewpoint of the Classics: its significance through the history, its pragmatism, and its targetedness.

1. Its significance through history:

Zhang Xue Cheng's view of the Classics has a strong significance for the times. Although Qing scholars claimed to have inherited the scholarship of the Han dynasty, emphasizing the philologic and rhythmic aspects and neglecting the interpretations of Song scholarship 宋代義理學, the drawbacks were obvious. As scholars competed to define the superiority of scholarship by the number of classics they examined and researched, they naturally ignored the importance of doctrine interpretation. The academic style became quite rigid and formalism in later times, and Zhang offers his own interpretation of the classics in response to this academic phenomenon. He argues that although the Tao 道 is said to be contained in the Six Classics, however because of time and its ages, they could only represent the Tao of their time. They cannot predict the many changes that will occur in later times.⁴ Therefore, the Six Classics have their own limitations, and it is obviously undesirable to be studied and researched in an archaeology way in order to apply them to the current time. Therefore, Zhang also agreed that if there are sages emerging in future, they are able to compile the new Six Classics for the benefit of future generations. This is a reflection of Zhang's view of the Classics on the times.

⁴ Zhang Xue Cheng 章學誠, *Wen Shi Tong Yi Jiao Zhu* 文史通義校注 (Beijing: Beijing Zhong Hua Shu ju 中華書局, 2014)

2. Pragmatism:

The second characteristic of Zhang Xuecheng's view of the Classics is pragmatism: Zhang also made the most famous statement: "The Six Classics are all the political codes of the previous kings 六經皆先王之政典也.⁵ The Six Classics are the way in which the previous kings preserved the political codes of their time, and Zhang also said that the sages would not give empty words and do anything without intention, but that their actions must be based on, or according to, the situation. The Six Classics are therefore the product of the pragmatic actions of the sages. In Zhang's view, the contents of the Six Classics are not hollow but are practical. It would be worthless to pursue pure knowledge in them. This concept coincides with his notion that the Six Classics preserve the political codes of the ancient world. Zhang's understanding of the Six Classics was practical, believing that the creation of the Classics was based on necessity but not empty.

3. Targetedness

Zhang Xue Cheng's view of the Classics was also very targeting to the academic style of the time. It was first proposed by Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 the understanding and interpretive of the Classics must be based on the research and study of philology and phonology, ensuring the accuracy and origin of the Classics.⁶ Later on, Dai Zhen 戴震 continued to develop this view and illustrated that the Six Classics contents the Tao of the sages, saying that: "We have the same nature as the sages, but the sages first obtained it and recorded in the Six Classics." 聖人先得我心之所同然.⁷ Therefore, the only way to discover the teaching that the sages imparted to us is to understand through the characters and rhyme of the Classics. This was the prevailing viewpoint at the time, and it was also the theoretical basis for the interpretation of the Classics by philology and phonology. Zhang argued that the Six Classics were not just antiques needed to be researched, but the product of the sages' pragmatic approach to

⁵ Zhang Xue Cheng 章學誠, *Wen Shi Tong Yi Jiao Zhu* 文史通義校注 (Beijing: Beijing Zhong Hua Shu ju 中華書局, 2014)

⁶ Dai Zhen 戴震, *Dai Zhen Quan Shu* 戴震全書 (An Hui: Huang Shan Shu She 黃山書社, 2010)

⁷ Dai Zhen 戴震, *Dai Zhen Quan Shu* 戴震全書 (An Hui: Huang Shan Shu She 黃山書社, 2010)

benefit the people and world. Zhang also wanted to rectify and save the prevailing academic style which was biased towards the worship of Han scholarship, and was therefore targeted.

A Comparison of Zhang Xue Cheng's Views on the Classics and Dai Zhen's

Yu Yingshi 余英時 considered that Zhang Xue Cheng was deeply influenced by Dai Zhen in his early years,⁸ but their academic approaches and views were very different in the later time. The following is a brief list of the differences between the two scholars in terms of their understanding of the Six Classics and their approaches to the study of the Classics:

Firstly, in terms of their viewpoint of the Six Classics, Dai Zhen believed that the Six Classics were the texts of the Tao, which were recorded by the ancient sages after they had acquired the Tao, and were of supreme authority, valid for all time, and its truth would not be changed and reversed through the history. Both Gu Yanwu and Dai Zhen used to say: "The Tao is in the Six Classics". In order to find the Tao in them, scholars must study and understand the characters and rhymes of them. This is where Dai Zhen's approach to the Classics.

In Zhang Xue Cheng's view, the sages were pragmatic, and would not spoke and wrote down a set of truths without intention. Through the study of the Six Classics, we can understand the political codes of the ancient times, which can be of great inspiration to us in formulating political codes and governing the country today. Zhang Xue Cheng believes that this is the significance of the Six Classics. As for the study approach to the Six Classics, Zhang did not advocate a textual or phonetic approach, in his view, this would be a loss of important overall meaning contented in the Classics, which in Chinese proverb is called “focusing the small will lose the great”因小失大. This is a significant difference between Zhang Xue Cheng and Dai

⁸ Yu Yingshi 余英時, *Lun Dai Zhen Yu Zhang Xue Cheng* 論戴震與章學誠 (Beijing: Beijing San Lian Shu Ju 三聯書局, 2012)

Zhen.

The influence of Zhang Xue Cheng's view of the classics on future generations

The academic achievements of Zhang Xue Cheng did not attract much attention at the time, mainly because the Qing scholarship did not value the methodology other than phonetics and phonology, so Zhang Xue Cheng's views on the Classics had little impact and few people paid attention to it. However, in later times, especially after the end of the Qing dynasty, many scholars began to value Zhang Xue Cheng's ideas as very progressive, and some even compared him to one of the greatest thinkers of the Qing dynasty.⁽⁸⁾ This was due to the fact that Zhang Xue Cheng's ideas were truly groundbreaking, giving people a new perspective on the Six Classics and a solid theoretical foundation on which to build their trust. Modern scholars such as Gong Zizhen 龔自珍 and Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 also endorsed the view that the Six Classics are all historical records. In general, Zhang Xuecheng's view of the classics was an inspiration, not only for the sake of saving the style of Qing scholarship at the time, but also as a valuable basis for future generations to understand the classics. Zhang Xue Cheng's view of the Classics is the result of his long and continuous study of classical literature and historical texts, and is a precious crystallisation of his scholarship, as well as a valuable academic legacy for posterity.

Conclusion

In summary, Zhang Xue Cheng's view of the Classics was special and significant, both at the previous time and today. He was very innovative in presenting the historical limitations of the classics and in explaining its meaning from a very new perspective. It is also one of the most important and reputable achievements of Zhang Xuecheng's entire academic career, a valuable crystallization of his scholarship. Although he was not the first to presenting the view, his writing has

made it possible to better publicized and has passed down for the next generation. Although Zhang Xue Cheng's main achievement was in history, which he himself considered to be his speciality, his greatest contribution to the Chinese Classics was his viewpoint that the Six Classics are all historical records. In choosing Zhang Xue Cheng's thoughts on The Classics as the subject of this study, it is hoped that an understanding of Zhang's views will help to provide a specific understanding of the evolution of the Chinese Classics as a whole, and provide further reference for future studies of the Chinese Classics. Zhang Xue Cheng was undoubtedly a very famous and important scholar of the Qing dynasty, and an understanding of his thoughts on the Classics provides a glimpse into another aspect of the development of scholarship in the Qing dynasty, as well as an important insight into the development of the Classics. The difference between Dai Zhen's and Zhang Xue Cheng's views on the Classics can also be seen as a difference between Zhang Xue Cheng and the scholars of his time. Zhang Xue Cheng's view reveals the pragmatic attitude of the ancient sages and their pragmatic approach, while Zhang Xue Cheng's view is also a reflection on scholarship of Qing dynasty, a kind of salvation and correction of the academic style of the time. It provides a new perspective for the study and understanding of the classics today, allowing us to view and study them in a more comprehensive and objective way.

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