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The Comparison of Two Approaches In Confucian Classics Studies

Zihan Xu

Good morning, Professor. Good afternoon, my fellow students.

Today I am going to share with you the topic of two approaches to study Confucian classics: the Han learning and the Song learning. This is the contents. The presentation is divided into three parts: The introduction of two approaches, the importance to scholarship, and my personal idea about it.

First is the introduction of the two approaches.

Song learning, also been mainly considered as interpretive way to study Confucius classics, while Han learning is mainly considered as philological.

If we want to know how each approach works, first we have to understand what is the purpose of each approach?

Actually, if we go back to the origin both approach came from, we could see why each approach the scholars supported had been arguing so long and intense, and why they would adopt each ideas and approach.

The purpose of two approaches is actually to make the idea of

Confucianism from the classics could be practised in the society which they consider it is helpful for the country, and the ideas of those sages or the philosophers of Confucian has to be explained clearly to avoid driving into the wrong way. Due to the series disaster and damage or lost of the classics, the original text of the classics was lost or twisted. Some scholars tried to

As for the Song learning, I would like to take Zhuxi and Chengyi as examples.

In my opinion, the way they commented are very clear and easy, and also confusing and sophisticated. In some sense, I might even think it is pretty arbitrary.

It is clear and easy, because they mainly applied the philosophical way to explain in the process of commenting, hardly see former scholar's theory, simply explaining text like teaching students without arguments or proof, and hardly see the explain on the character nor pronunciation.

It is confusing and sophisticated, because the sophisticated logic is supported by their own theory.

It is arbitrary, because if a beginner of Confucian classic learner read Zhuxi and Chengyi's commentary at the first time, that person would be surprised since he will discover that many sequence of the sentences has

been changed. Like they changed 在親民's 親 to 新 without any former scholar's theory to support, nor any support from philology and phonology. They even moved the sequence of a whole sentence '此謂知本，此謂知之至也', simply because he think it is Chengzi's idea so he changed.(竊取程子之意而補之)

But still, they are very great masters.I think the importance Song learning contributed is that they built up very firm philosophical rules for Confucianism. After Buddhism's ideas were received by the Chinese intellectuals, many Chinese people believe in Buddhism and began to attack Confucian's idea. They considered Confucianism as worldly dharma 世間法, which also hinted that Confucian's wisdom Chinese people has studies through many hundreds of years are not the highest wisdom, and it is better to put time on the learning of ultimate pure wisdom. When facing the Buddhism's brilliant logic and grand world view, the Song learning scholars step up to defend the Confucianism. They reorganized the logic of classics, named and defined the logic (like 三綱八目), and most importantly, they also received many theories from Buddhism and Taoism to improve or consummate the theory of Confucianism. Although many scholars today are criticizing that they used the Confucianism bottle to sale Buddhism and Taoism's water, but still, I think it is very important and meaningful.

As for the Han learning, their strict attitudes to the collection work are very impressive, and that is why they disagreed with the Song learning.

Wang Yinzhì said: ‘Scholars in the Tang, Song, and Ming Dynasties may have changed the text of classics without knowing the characters and the pronunciation, and they think that it is a mistake if there is no mistake, and I think that could not be called proper correction, and I will bravely change what they have changed.’

（唐、宋、明之士，或不知聲音文字而改經，以不誤為誤，是妄改也，吾則勇改其所改。）

And I think that is the spirit and the purpose of the Han learning, seeking truth from facts, so we called 實事求是.

I would like to take Kong Yingda and Zhengxuan as examples.

Kong had collated 22 version of *The Book of Ritual* 禮記, and they could be divided into three categories: firstly, he mainly applied Zhengxuan’s commentary as reference; secondly, he collected the collated version since the Han dynasty, the version wrote by famous scholars, like Caiyong, Luzhi, Wangsu etc, and the version from even earlier than Han dynasty; thirdly, other versions from the society may not

be the prevalent. We could see how serious he took his work, and we could also see the serious attitude of the Han learning scholars from their commentaries.

Like the beginning of *The Book of Rituals* said: ‘曲禮曰：“毋不敬，儼若思，安定辭”。’ Zhengxuan commented that: ‘the spirit of ritual is the respect.’(禮主于敬) Then he quoted Lu Deming’s comment: ‘the character 毋’s pronunciation is same to the character 無.’(毋音無) Then we can see here that Lu Deming used the explanation of the character 毋 from *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字 to explain the meaning of this one character. Then Lu mentioned that character 毋 is different from the character 母, and those unsupported version usually mixed two character wrong, so the readers mistake that the character 母’s pronunciation as 毋.

And we could see here that every idea they proposed has the former evidence to support, instead of explain the text totally by their own understanding.

These are the commentaries of Zhengxuan and Lu Deming, and we can see that Kong Yingda’s sub-commentary is pretty different. Kong said: ‘This chapter’s main idea is to explain the root of emperor’s rule, which is having a solemn attitude, and be careful about his body and words.’(此一節明人君立治之本，先當肅心謹身，慎口之事) Then Kong continued to explain the text. So we could see here that Kong actually

used the commentaries he agreed, and his work is mainly to explain the meaning of the sentences and words. Instead of explain the pronunciation and the original shape of characters, he would explain more the meaning and main idea of the text, and focus on the controversial points when even Zheng Xuan's version he consulted was not able to explain.

I think the importance of Han learning is that they corrected the huge mistake that scholars of Song learning made, and built the correct attitude for the following scholars what attitude a scholar should have when doing research.

As the respective shortcomings of the Han and Song schools gradually became apparent, the "Han-Song controversy" was gradually replaced by the academic orientation of taking the both side which is proposed by Chen Li 陳澧 and Zhu Yixin 朱一新 after emperor Daoguang and emperor Xianfeng of the Qing dynasty, both of them agreed that Han and Song studies had their own drawbacks: the drawback of Han studies was that it was obsessed with exegetical examinations and gave up the working on the interpretive way, thus becoming simply a kind of knowledge and nothing relates to the use of helping the society through education and philosophy; while the drawback of Song studies

was that it talked about the nature of the mind and just talk all daylong, and made scholars focus on talking too much without even actually reading and check the original classics. Therefore, they both advocated the unification of Han and Song, and that is what I think too, Confucianism could not lose any one of them. Still, if I must make choice between one of them, I would like to chose Han learning, because they are telling the truth at least. If a scholar of Confucianism would ever teach something which is not even from Confucius, then he is lying, and cheating his followers and Confucius. I don not think he could be called an disciple of Confucius.

Thank you for listening, any feedback and suggestions would be appreciated.