

Zheng Xuan's transmission and practice of Confucius' ideas

I. Introduction

Zheng Xuan 郑玄, a famous ancient Chinese scribe, was a master of the two Han dynasties, and his studies are of epoch-making significance in the history of classics. The Qing dynasties scholar Pi Xirui 皮锡瑞 praised Zheng Xuan as the most thoughtful educator after Confucius. He said, he has become a great master of his generation, not only because of his academic excellence, but also because of the excellence of his system. Many scholars have recently focused their studies on Zheng Xuan's attainments in philology and exegesis. On the contrary, studies of his philosophical thought and his practice have been somewhat lacking. Zheng Xuan's educational ideas were not specifically written in a book, but his personal philosophy of education can be reflected through his commentary on the Classics.

II. Zheng Xuan's Educational Thought

The study of the ancient school system laid the theoretical foundation for Zheng Xuan's thought on education. The classical Confucian books record educational activities prior to the Western Zhou, mainly in *the Rites of the Zhou* 周禮 and *the Book of Rites* 禮記, with unsystematic and in some cases contradictory accounts of education. Zheng Xuan set out to study the ancient school system for the sake of better teaching activities.

First, the names and nature of the ancient schools are examined. *The Book of Rites of Wang Zhi* 王製 records the different names and locations of schools in the Youyu Shi, Xiahou Shi, Yin dynasties, and Zhou dynasties, and the differences between those run by the sons of heaven and the vassals and those run by the people.¹ Zheng Xuan divides them into two categories: Da Xu 大學 and Xiao Xue 小學. Da Xu and Xiao Xue, according to the content of their teaching. The difference between the Da Xue and Xiao Xue is the different age of entry, according to the *Shanshu Zhuan* 尚書傳, At the age of fifteen one enters Xiao Xue and at the age of eighteen one enters the Da Xue.² In ancient times, the students of official schools were mainly composed of Guo Zi 國子 and scholars 學士, and Zheng Xuan's Li Ji Zheng yi explains that the so-called Guo Zi were the sons of the nobility, and the so-called

¹ Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, Shi San Jing Zhu Shu, 十三經註疏, Li Ji Zheng Yi, 禮記正義, Beijing: ZhongHua Book Company, p.1442.

² Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, Shi San Jing Zhu Shu, 十三經註疏, Li Ji Zheng Yi, 禮記正義, p.1342.

scholars were the talents selected through examinations.

Zheng Xuan believed that what was learned in the ancient schools were both virtues and skills, which were taught by separate teachers. Moral cultivation is the cultivation of moral character in students, starting with their minds and hearts, retaining the good and removing the bad, and then moving on to their behaviour, retaining the good and removing the bad, and implementing these in their daily lives. The future direction of the students is towards government positions and their good heart, the heart to serve people is very important. Learning the Way refers to the acquisition of knowledge and skills, in ancient times the six arts, which included, among others, the study of ritual, music, archery, horse riding, calligraphy and mathematics. These skills develop good character in students and are also very useful skills in the future.

With regard to learning, the teacher is the most important aspect of the success or failure of teaching. The teacher's moral character, knowledge base and teaching attitude are directly linked to the quality of education. *The Book of Rites* contains a great deal of information about the requirements for teachers, and Zheng Xuan's commentary contains a great deal of exposition and discussion of the traditional way of teaching. Such people are not qualified to be teachers, as in the case of *the Book of Rites* of Learning, who only master the various kinds of knowledge in books by memory. The so-called Ji Wen 記問 means to recite miscellaneous difficulties and miscellaneous sayings, and to discuss them for the scholar at the time of the lecture. Another example is *the Book of Rites Qu Li* 曲禮, which says that a child should always be taught the right ideas, not by deception.³ Zheng Xuan talks about how a teacher's character must be upright; children are innocent by nature and extremely malleable, so they must have good role models around them; if what they see and hear is true, they will become true; if what they see and hear is false, how can they do not become false? As well as being of good character, teachers are also required not to slacken in their academic pursuits. It is only when one learns that one knows one's own shortcomings, and when one is a teacher that one realises that there is knowledge that one does not understand. Zheng Xuan's life was also marked by the spirit of 'tireless practice', as he devoted himself to his studies for decades, never stopping his studies.

On this basis, Zheng Xuan offers his own views on the status of the teacher. Confucianism has a tradition of respect for the teacher, but the dignity of the teacher is not achieved by the teacher's social status alone; it requires the teacher to cultivate both 'inside and outside' and to be loved for his or her high moral character and talent. Zheng Xuan believed that respect for teachers was an important part of social education. In his commentary, Zheng Xuan describes the rituals that King Wu of Zhou 周武王 followed when he called on Jiang Taigong 姜太公 as his teacher to ask him questions. Although King Wu was the son of Heaven, he was still required to observe the rites of a disciple in dealing with his teacher.

³ Mao Heng 毛亨, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, Shi San Jing Zhu Shu 十三經註疏, Li Ji Zheng Yi, 禮記正義, p.1234.

III. Zheng Xuan's Educational Practice

Zheng Xuan also articulated his own ideas and principles of education in the process of collating the Confucian canon. Confucianism advocates a close link between aspiration and behaviour as one, and *the Analects of Confucius* 論語 is still not as good as being happy with the Way despite being poor, or being modest and courteous despite being rich.⁴ Zheng Xuan's *Commentary on the Analects of Confucius* explains that to be happy means to aspire to higher virtue and to seek learning, to worry only about one's own learning and virtue and not about one's living environment, and that even if one is in poverty, one should not worry about suffering from it, and that one should aspire for virtue no matter what the circumstances. To have aspirations but not to act is to cheat; not to have aspirations but to act will inevitably lead to detours, so physical action needs to be regulated by rites.

Thinking and understanding are equally important educational principles in Confucianism. *The Analects of Confucius* records that if one studies without thinking, one will be confused and at a loss, and if one thinks without studying, one will be puzzled and get nowhere. Zheng Xuan carried this idea forward in his commentary, believing that it is important to inspire students to open up their minds, not to draw conclusions instead of them, and that what is gained through reflection is simply more profound. If learning is not done through reflection, implementation and experience, it will be easily forgotten. While it is important for the student to think, it is equally important for the teacher to help correct the student's thinking. Do not enlighten a student until he has tried to understand but cannot; do not enlighten him until he understands but cannot express it perfectly. If he is not able to raise one and reflect three, do not proceed further. Zheng Xuan believes that the teacher must inspire the student only when the student has a strong desire to know, and after he already has a certain understanding. The teacher must give the students room to think, so that they can think well and solve problems independently and consciously.

Zheng Xuan also valued the teaching of his students according to their abilities. According to the biography of Zheng Xuan in *the Book of the Later Han Dynasty* 後漢書, when he returned to his hometown after more than ten years of study, he had nearly a thousand students following him around. His disciples were numerous and spread all over the country. Among his famous disciples were Zhao Shang, Cui Yan, Wang Jing, Hu Jia and more than thirty others. Zheng Xuan had a very comprehensive perception and evaluation of the standard of his disciples, for example, he thought that Ren Yuan was a man of virtue, and he was subsequently promoted to an official position, and after several promotions he became the governor of a province, teaching and educating the people. This shows that Zheng Xuan had the ability to read people and would teach students of different levels in the way that best suited them, and those who followed him benefited greatly, even if scholars who came from far away were able to gain real rewards.

It may seem difficult to describe a person both erudition and specialisation, but

⁴ Zhu xi 朱熹, *Si Shu Zhang Ju Ji Zhu*, 四書章句集註, Beijing: ZhongHua Book Company, October 1980, p.52.

Zheng Xuan's learning was both extensive and in-depth. Zheng Xuan's Book of Commandments son records that he focused mainly on the study of classical books in order to gain a depth of knowledge. There is no shortage of reference books to expand his field of knowledge and to select reliable books to study for evidence. Zheng Xuan showed his ability in astronomical and calendrical calculations when he studied with Ma Rong 馬融. Zheng Xuan's commentaries on the Classics uphold the virtue of Confucius of stated but not created, and of believing and being good to the past, and he quoted from the commentaries of many scholars without adding his own subjective judgement, leaving it to the choice of future generations of scholars

He was dedicated to the study of sources and was so rigorous in his studies that Duan Yuche once praised Zheng Xuan in *Jing Yi Za Ji Xu* 經義雜記序 for his great work in proofreading for thousands of years. Mr. Zhang Shunhui, who wrote *Zheng Shi Jiao Kan Xue Fa Wei* 鄭氏校讎學發微, believes that Zheng Xuan's achievements in proof-reading were manifested in 12 areas, including changing the group of books to write about ancient books and collating titles, and making great innovations in the field of cataloguing. In all these respects, Zheng Xuan's work has been used as a model by all those who have aspired to the task of collating ancient books in later times. The development of Chinese exegesis matured during the Han dynasty, and the exegesis of Zheng Xuan during the Han dynasty was again the highest achievement. Because people may call an object differently because of differences in geographical time, there is exegesis, a discipline that uses language to explain language. Zheng Xuan's *San Li Zhu* 三禮註 and *Mao Shi Jian* 毛詩箋 use almost all the methods of exegesis, such as marking pronunciations, explaining dialects, and explaining systems. Zheng Xuan's commentary on the classics played a leading role in the exegesis of later generations, and was the origin of Chinese exegesis. The role of Zheng Xuan in the development of exegesis, which encompasses both phonetics and phonology, cannot be overlooked.

IV. Conclusion

In summary, Zheng Xuan's study of the ancient schools and his exegesis of ancient texts has also led to the articulation of his own educational philosophy. He made a clear contribution to outlining traditional Confucian education, and not only that, he was also very good at putting into practice the teachings of Confucius, from talking about the unity of aspiration and behaviour; valuing the student's thinking as well as the teacher's enlightenment, and so on. His teacher, Ma Rong, claimed that Zheng Xuan had learned all his essence and that he was indeed a great Confucian scholar.

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