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A Study on Two Approaches to Studying Confucian Classics

Good morning, Professor Honey, and Good afternoon my classmates. My name is Ruxin Zhang and today I would like to share with you two approaches to studying the Confucian classics, the philological and the interpretive. I will introduce and compare these two approaches through examples.

The presentation will be divided into three parts. The first part is 'Introduction', the second part is 'Analysis'. And finally, I will share with you 'Personal View'.

Introduction

Let's start with the first part.

Today I want to share with you two approaches to studying the Confucian classics, The first is the philological approach, which used to be commonly known as *xiaoxue* 小學.¹ The social context of this approach is because, with the development of society, the expression of language and the writing of characters have changed constantly. Different interpretations of the meaning of characters will affect the understanding of the meaning of classics, so the exegesis and interpretation of the characters in classics become very important. In the Han Dynasty, scholars began to use this approach to study the Pre-Qin classics. By the Qing dynasty, Confucian scholars placed greater emphasis on the importance of philology, phonology, exegesis, bibliography, and textual criticism in the study of classics, and gradually developed it into an independent discipline. The other is the interpretive approach, compared with the former approach, this approach focuses more on grasping the essence of the classics from a macro perspective, and focuses on the interpretation of their views on the classics. Its negative effect is that it is easy to detach from the classical text.

¹ He Gengyong 何耿鏞, *Zhongguo Jingxue Yu Yuyan Wenzixue* 中國經學與語言文字學, Journal of Xiamen University 廈門大學學報, 8(1986), 163

After clarifying the definition of these two approaches, I will choose two representative scholars from each of the two approaches, two of them study *the Book of Changes* 易經 and two study *the Book of Songs* 詩經. I will introduce the research approaches of the two scholars in the same classic to compare and analyze their characteristics.

Analysis

Now let's move on to the second part.

The first is *the Book of Changes*, which is the top of the Confucian classics, so it is very important. The representative scholar of the interpretive approach I selected is Wang Bi from the Three Kingdoms Period, who was a key figure in the transformation of Yi learning from *xiangshu* 象數 to *yili* 義理, and his representative is *the Note of the Book of Changes* 周易注.² Wang Bi's interpretation concept of *the Book of Changes* was *deyiwangyan* 得意忘言, and he implemented the linear extension mode from *yan* 言 to *xiang* 象 and then to *yi* 意.³ That is to say, by studying the text of *the Book of Changes*, he explores the meaning of the hexagrams. For example, in his annotation of *Hexagram zhongfu* 中孚卦, in addition to explaining the text's superficial meaning, he expanded its meaning to explain that the virtue of honesty can affect animals as small as pigs and fish. So his commentary here is mainly about the internal meaning, rather than being limited to the meaning of characters.⁴

The representative scholar of the philological approach I selected is Hui Dong from the Qing Dynasty, He was the founder of the Wu School of Qian-Jia School, and his family passed on the classics for four generations. He admired the Yi learning of the

² Wang Yi 王毅, *Quanshixue Shiyexia De Wangbi Yizhu Yanjiu* 詮釋學視野下的王弼易注研究, Journal of Shanxi Datong University 山西大同大學學報, 3(2011), 21

³ Wang Yi 王毅, *Quanshixue Shiyexia De Wangbi Yizhu Yanjiu* 詮釋學視野下的王弼易注研究, 22

⁴ Wang Yawei 王姬維, *Wangbi Zhuxi Zhouyi Zhushi Bijiao Yanjiu* 王弼、朱熹《周易》注釋比較研究, Doctoral dissertation of Shaanxi Normal University 陝西師範大學博士學位論文, 2012, 43

Han Dynasty, but did not accept it entirely. Moreover, he also attached great importance to the change of characters and pronunciation. His representative is *the Shu of the Book of Changes* 周易述, in this book, he makes full use of the knowledge of philology, phonology, and exegesis to explain *the Book of Changes*.⁵ He not only quoted a large number of ancient books to exegesis classics, but also used the knowledge from a variety of disciplines, including astronomy, music, arithmetic, and ritual. For example, when he annotated the last line of the *Hexagram lv* 履卦, he used the methods of *xingxun* 形訓, *shengxun* 聲訓, and *yixun* 義訓 to study the character *kao* 考. For the character *xiang* 祥, he extensively quotes ancient classics to support it.⁶ When he annotated the divination of *Hexagram kan* 坎卦, he not only used exegetical methods, but also used astronomical knowledge and records in *the Book of Rites* 禮記.

The second is *the Book of Songs* 詩經, the representative scholar of the interpretive approach I selected is Zhu Xi, He was a great master of Neo-Confucian in the Southern Song Dynasty, and was called the Cheng-Zhu school with the Cheng brothers. One of his representatives is *the Shiji Zhuan* 詩集傳, which breaks with the authority of the interpretation approach to political edification centered on *the Maoshi Xu* 毛詩序, and created a new situation in the hermeneutics of *the Book of Songs*. He advocated a ‘hanyong 涵泳’ approach to the interpretation of *the Book of Songs*, that is, to discover the meaning behind the text through reading, and established the principle of text-centered interpretation. For example, for the poem Kai Feng 凱風, *the Maoshi Xu* considers to be a poem in praise of a filial son. But Zhu Xi did not think so, he explored its original meaning from the text of the poem, and thought that it was a poem about a filial son blaming himself for not being able to fulfill his filial duties.⁷

⁵ Chen Xiuliang 陳修亮, *Shilun Huidong Zhouyishu De Zhiyi Tese* 試論惠棟《周易述》的治易特色, *Studies of the Book of Changes* 周易研究, 1(2005), 43

⁶ Zhao Xiaocui 趙曉翠, *The Study of Hui Dong's Yi-ology—Based on the Paradigm Shift* 惠棟易學研究——以范式轉移為視角, Doctoral dissertation of Shandong University 山東大學博士學位論文, 2018, 139

⁷ Li Jian 李健, *Zhuxi Shijing Quanshi Sixiang Yanjiu* 朱熹《詩經》詮釋思想研究, Master thesis of Heilongjiang University 黑龍江大學碩士學位論文, 2010, 12

The representative scholar of the philological approach I selected is Zheng Xuan, who extensively annotated the Confucian classics and was the great master of scripture in the Eastern Han Dynasty. One of his representatives is *the Maoshi Jian* 毛詩箋, a book of commentaries on *the Maoshi Guxun Zhuan* 毛詩故訓傳. He created a unique style of interpreting the classics, and enriched the method of exegesis. In addition to commenting on the meaning of characters, he also paid more attention to the meaning of sentences and the structure of chapters, making the structure and logical relationships of *the Book of Songs* clearer. Moreover, Zheng Xuan added explanations to the meanings of characters and phrases that were not explained in *the Maoshi Guxun Zhuan*. For example, in the poem Gan Tong 甘棠, he added an explanation of the character *bai* 拜 that was not explained by the previous scholars.⁸ In the poem Fa Mu 伐木, he further explained the meaning of the sentence, based on the previous interpretation of the word *cuncun* 蹲蹲.⁹

Personal View

Let's now move on to the last part.

Through the introduction and analysis of the two approaches, it seems to me that either approach is very important for the study of the Confucian classics. However, if we focus on one approach and refuse to accept another approach, we will fall into a misunderstanding. Specifically, if we only pay attention to the philological approach, we can correctly interpret the meaning of characters and words, thus helping us to understand the original texts. But if an interpretive understanding is lacking, it will be difficult to grasp the main idea of the text from a macro perspective. Similarly, if we only pay attention to the interpretive approach, we will become more and more accustomed to interpreting the text according to our own meaning, and gradually

⁸ Duan Hongyu 段虹羽, *Zhengxuan Maoshijian Xungu Yanjiu* 鄭玄《毛詩箋》訓詁研究, Master thesis of Shenyang Normal University 沈陽師範大學碩士學位論文, 2015, 8

⁹ Duan Hongyu 段虹羽, *Zhengxuan Maoshijian Xungu Yanjiu* 鄭玄《毛詩箋》訓詁研究, 11

separate from the text, and thus failing to ensure the accuracy of understanding.

To sum up, we should use these two approaches in a reasonable way when studying the Confucian classics. Only by making good use of these tools can help us to better understand the wisdom of the ancients.

This is my presentation, if there is any mistake in the content, any suggestions and advice would be appreciated, thank you very much.

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