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Two approaches of explaining Chinese Classics

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Good morning Professor Honey, and good afternoon my dear classmates. Today I would like to share two approaches to explaining Chinese Classics, the philological and the interpretive.

The report will be expounded from four aspects. At the outset, let us first understand the meaning of these two approaches. Secondly, I will give you examples to show you how these two ways can be used to interpret texts. Thirdly, I will discuss the characteristics and importance of these. Finally, I will tell you my own views and why.

In the Cambridge dictionary, Philological means that relating to the study of language, especially its history and development. I understand it to mean "the textual research" (*Kaoju* 考據) in Chinese. The term first appeared in the Song Dynasty, but "the textual research" flourished during the Qianlong 乾隆 and Jiaqing 嘉慶 period of the Qing Dynasty. Its main task was to collate, proofread, annotate and edit ancient texts. Its scope of study was centred on scripture, and was extended to include traditional Chinese philology, phonetics, history, astronomy, water and geography, and so on. The word *Kao* 考 in *Kaoju* 考據 initially means to knock, and by extension, to seek and test, while *Ju* 據 means to have something to rely on. Thus the philological is the study of classical languages through various traditional Chinese philology methods, the collation, examination and study of ancient texts that have been passed down.

Interpretive means related to explaining or understanding the meaning of something. I think that is an explanation approach named *Yili* 義理 in China. "The term *Yili* was already widely used during the pre-Qin and Han dynasties. In that period, the term *Yili* was used to refer to the principles and concepts of living in the Chinese world. However, the meaning of *Yili* during the pre-Qin and Han periods was somewhat different from the Song Dynasty. The theory of *Yili* was the most basic of moral in the Song Dynasty. In *the Book of Rites*, "Faithfulness(*Zhongxin* 忠信) is the essence of rites; righteousness(*Yili* 義理) is the text of rites. Without the foundation, it cannot be established; without the text, it cannot be done." It is clear that righteousness is a principle, a concept. This is why the study of interpretive focuses on the exposition of Confucianism texts from the perspective of ideas and theories.

Next, I will give four concrete examples to show you how ancient scholars used these two methods to explain the classics. There was a sentence in Chapter 17(*Yanghuo* 陽貨) of *the Analects of Confucius*:

The Master said, "Of all people, girls and servants are the most difficult to behave to. If you are familiar with them, they lose their humility. If you maintain a reserve

towards them, they are discontented."¹

子曰：“唯女子與小人為難養也，近之則不遜，遠之則怨。”

Huang Kan 皇侃 of the Southern Liang Dynasty followed Dong Zhongshu's 董仲舒 thought that men are superior to women in terms of Yinyang and five elements. He believed that this sentence juxtaposed "women" and "the mean man", regarded them as people of low morality, and was opposite gentlemen. A gentleman will respect him as others get closer, while women and the mean man will resent when they get closer, because others will not accept themselves. This is to explain this sentence from the perspective of the moral ideology of that era.

However, Liu Baonan 劉寶楠, a scholar in the Qing Dynasty, based on the study of Du Yu's 杜預 annotation of "women's resentment" in *Zuo Zhuan* 左傳 and the annotation of women and the mean man in *the Book of Changes* 易經, finally concluded: "Xiaoren 小人, that is, a hypocrite who is tainted with popular customs and a person of humble character and shallow knowledge "referred to in the previous chapter of this article."

In *the Book of Songs* 詩經, we can often see the explanation of these two methods. There was a poem called Pao You Ku Ye 匏有苦葉. Mao Heng's 毛亨 *Preface to the Poems* 詩序 said that this poem satirizes the emperor Xuan of the state Wei 衛 because he had a promiscuous relationship with a woman. Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 believed that the woman here referred to Yijiang. Kong Yingda 孔穎達 believed that this was also to satirize the woman, but *Preface to the Poems* only satirized the emperor was to persuade the monarch. The first and third chapters were to blame the emperor for not following the law and rites to marry women. The second and fourth chapters were to blame women for violating the law of etiquette and having relations with the emperor. So before the Tang Dynasty, Mao Heng, Zheng Xuan and Kong Yingda, claimed that this poem was a satire on the lewdness of the emperor Xuan of the state Wei, which was to explain this poem with their own understanding of history and thinking.

Zhu Xi 朱熹 of the Song Dynasty used textual research in his *Biography of the Book of Songs* 詩集傳, which also created a new situation of exegesis. In it, he made a detailed study of the meaning of each word, and listed the relevant phonology, geography and other issues.

As the language we use today differs from that of ancient times due to its age, philological can be used to understand the language of the classical period and learn the meaning of its script, grammar and vocabulary through primary school research methods. During the Qing dynasty, scholars, through a variety of means such as proof-reading, identifying forgeries, collecting anonymous texts, making annotations, and examining historical facts, did a great deal to remove the forgeries and preserve the authenticity of the ancient cultural texts, so that many documents that had been lost, lost for a long time, and mixed with authenticity and forgery were basically restored to their original form, and many obscure and incomprehensible texts were now generally available for reading and study. The interpretive, on the other hand, is more philosophical and sometimes requires thought and imagination, and better expresses the ideas and values of each scholar's time. At the same time, scholars are

¹ Trans by James Legge. [The Analects : Yang Huo - Chinese Text Project \(ctext.org\)](http://www.ctext.org), January 17, 2023.

able to present the meaning of the classics in a more multifaceted way through the interpretive approach. In my research, I have found that the threshold between the two is neither clear nor fixed, and that interpretive ought to inform text, so that the philological should always reflect it, to a greater or lesser extent.

Overall, I believe that the philological are fundamental, and that exegetical are among the most elementary methods in the study of the history of philosophy today. However, both approaches have their shortcomings, so one should not stick to one or the other. A combination of both approaches is needed to reach the original meaning of the scriptures. There is an old Chinese saying: "No matter how black or white a cat is, the one who can catch a mouse is a good cat". As modern people, it is more important for us to be able to bring sages experiences and wisdom through the classics into our lives and solve problems. In fact, modern scholars have a much wider range of materials to study the classics than the great Confucian scholars of ancient times, so it is not possible to use just one. In fact, whenever I write an essay, I use philology to understand the meaning of the classical texts, extending from their original meanings to their extended meanings, and then summarising the meaningful discussions of past scholars to help me establish the final meaning of the classics. For example, in the first sentence I mentioned above, the final result of my research is: *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字 said: the character Yang 養, which represents the character Bao 保. In *the Book of Yat-Shou* 逸周書, there was a sentence that said: "Xiaoren Nanbao. 小人難保". It meant that small civilians are difficult to protect, so they should be treated with respect in everything, which is the embodiment of the traditional thought of "respecting morality and protecting the people" of the Zhou Dynasty. So it was not women and the mean people, but women and common people. The reason was that in those days women and commoners did not have the opportunity to receive education, and only the nobles in the palace could receive education. The whole sentence was in fact a reminder to the rulers that they should treat these people with courtesy and should not treat them lightly, nor should they approach them too closely. So how could Confucius, as a sage, have the intention of discriminating against women or people? This is also the result of studying the meaning of the text and understanding the thinking of the ancient sages at that time. It is the only way to explain it smoothly.

That is all for my presentation today, thank you for listening.