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Two main approaches to study the Confucian classics

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Respected Professor Honey Good morning , and good afternoon my fellow classmates. Today I want to introduce two main approaches to study the Confucian classics.

I. Introduction

When it comes to Chinese Classical Scholarship, we should first know what is Jing 經—the classics. In ancient China, when it comes to Jing 經, it usually refers to the Confucian classics. However, In the beginning, Jing 經 was not a proper term of the Confucian classics, the original meaning of Jing 經 refers to the vertical lines of textile. This is why the word Jing 經 was later used to refer to the common principles. During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, there were various classics in circulation. At that time, the Confucians regarded six books as Jing 經—the classics, they are *The Book of Songs*, *The Esteemed Documents*, *The Book of Rites*, *The Classic of Music*, *The Book of Changes*, and *The Spring and Autumn Annals*.

II. An introduction to two approaches

In Chinese history, scholars of classics usually use two methods to interpret the classics. One is to explore the true meaning of the classics from the text itself through Chinese philology, phonology and exegesis; the other is to explore the deep meaning behind the classics. The difference of these two approaches has created two schools of thought with different directions, namely the new text school and the old text school. The distinction between the new text school and the old text school first emerged during the Western Han Dynasty. Because the first emperor of Qin burned books and buried scholars, then most of the Confucian classics were lost. By the time the Western Han Dynasty was established, a large number of books were presented or collected during the period Wen Jing 文景. Some of the senior doctors and other Confucian scholars of the Qin Dynasty orally recited the burned classics. Although there were some differences, but their versions were basically the same, so later they were collectively known as the new text school.

Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 in the Western Han Dynasty was one of the important figures who promoted the development of the the new text school. He was a famous classicist and

served as a doctor during the reign of emperor Jing 景. When the period of emperor Wu 武, he proposed that all those who were not in the six arts or the art of Confucius should be excluded and this advice was adopted by the emperor Wu 武, which made Confucianism the orthodox thought of Chinese society and influenced it for more than two thousand years. In Dong Zhongshu's understanding of the Confucian classics, he placed emphasis on the deep thoughts contained in classics rather than on the textual meaning. This can be reflected in his work *Chunqiu Fanlu* 春秋繁露. *The Spring and Autumn Annals* is the earliest chronological history book of China. Its language of record is extremely concise. Yet Confucianists believe that almost every sentence implies a positive or negative connotation, reflecting the thoughts of Confucius. The *Chunqiu Fanlu* 春秋繁露 was written to illustrate the subtleties of *the Spring and Autumn Annals*. In the first chapter of this book, a passage from *the Spring and Autumn Annals* is quoted: ‘晉伐鮮虞。Jin 晉 attacked Xian Yu 鮮虞.’ Dong Zhongshu understands that in this passage, the author used the only word ‘Jin 晉’ to refer to the state of Jin instead of ‘Jinguo 晉國’, which means that the author regarded the state of Jin as the same as the barbarians. He explains why should people hate the state of Jin and regard it as a barbarian as well. The reason is that during the Spring and Autumn period, the propriety and honesty were important, all the people of the world who were surnamed Ji 姬 were close to Jin 晉, and the tribe of Xian Yu also belonged to the Ji surname. The State of Jin did not pay kindness in return, but made the people with the surname Ji afraid, so what is the difference between the state of Jin and the barbarians. From the above passages we can see that Dong Zhongshu focused his interpretation of on the deep thoughts behind the classics.

During the Qing dynasty, a group of new text scholars emerged who shared Dong Zhongshu's approach to the classics, and one of them was Zhuang Cunyu 莊存與. He also believed that *the Spring and Autumn Annals* were not just a history book to record events, but a book that conveyed profound meanings in simple words. His work *Chunqiu Zhengci* 春秋正辭 is an exposition of the subtleties of *the Spring and Autumn Annals*. Its aim is to summarize successes and failures, and to apply the classics in a practical way. The examples he uses are not limited by time, nor are they based on the historical facts involved, he only used classics to elucidate the meaning of sages respecting heaven and putting king first, which is a completely different style from the old text school.

Another school of thought, which interprets the classics by exploring the textual meanings, is the Old Text school. This school was born out of burning of books and burying

of scholars during the Qin dynasty, but later, during the Han dynasty, some of the Confucian texts were found in the folklore and on the cliffs of mountains, most of which were written in the seal script of the Qin dynasty or in a pre-Qin script, and therefore differed from the prevailing modern texts.

Old Text scholars differed from the New Texts in that they placed great emphasis on the use of textual exegesis to interpret ancient texts. Xu Shen 許慎, a famous scholar and philologist of the Eastern Han period, used this method to annotate the classics. It took him 21 years to compile the *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字. In the preface of the book, he criticize that ‘Now the students of the Imperial Academy are all vying to interpret the script and elucidate the meaning of the classics. They claim that the clerical script of the Qin dynasty are the same of the script of the Cangjie 倉頡 era...These do not correspond to the old texts from Confucius' wall, nor to the Great Seal Script.’

He also declared that the classics he quoted in the *Shuowen Jiezi*, such as *the book of Changes* 易经, *The Esteemed Documents* 尚書 and *the Book of songs* 詩經, all come from the Old Text. As can be seen from this preface, Xu Shen's research of the Confucian classics seeks to examine the meanings expressed in the texts themselves, not the derivative meanings that could be recognized by the ruling nobility.

In the mid-Qing period, there was a group of Old Text scholars who insisted on the use of exegesis to interpret Confucian classics. One of them is a prominent scholar Dai Zhen 戴震. He had an extensive scholarship and succeeded in astronomy, mathematics, history, geography and exegesis, became the representative of ‘Qianjia 乾嘉’ school and the great figure of ‘Wan 皖’ school. Most of his works focus on textual criticism and name research. Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 once commend him that ‘What Mr. Dai had learned is a deep and thorough understanding in terms of exegesis. He mastered not only the names of things and their systems, but also the reasons.’

III. Conclusion

In my view, these two approaches of interpreting Confucian classics have their own advantages and disadvantages. The first approach, which focuses on the interpretive, may tend to be empty talk, or become a tool for the emperor to unify the people' minds, thus losing the true meaning of the classics itself. The second approach, which focuses on textual

meaning, is likely to fall into the rut of characters or objects and to be blinded, thus missing out on some important ideas and thoughts. If I had to choose between these two approaches, I would personally prefer the old text school, because I think it is a more pragmatic and truth-seeking approach.