



Trinity Saint David

The Philological and Interpretive Approaches of Classical Chinese Scholarship—Liu Xiang, Wang Bi, Gu Yanwu, and Sun Xidan as Examples

1. Introduction

Good morning, Professor Honey, and good afternoon, fellow students.

In the history of Chinese classical scholarship, classicists have mainly used two approaches in studying the Confucian classics. The philological approach and the interpretive approach have commonly been employed by classicists and scholars throughout the dynasties. The differences in these approaches have long since divided scholars, even resulting in partisan schools of learning, most notably the schools of Han Learning, which is mainly philological, and Song Learning, which is mainly interpretive. Yet most classicists have utilised both philology and interpretation as fundamental elements in their studies.

In this presentation, I will introduce these two approaches, and draw from Chinese history two classicists as examples to illustrate each, these being Liu Xiang and Gu Yanwu for the philological, and Wang Bi and Sun Xidan for the interpretive.

2. The Philological Approach

The philological approach is concerned with the critical handling of texts, based in evidential research. It relies on fields such as textual criticism, bibliography, lexicography, and exegesis to establish an accurate text.

2.1. Liu Xiang 劉向

(77–6 BCE)

The first classicist that I'd like to mention here is the textual critic Liu Xiang. Liu Xiang is known as one of the giants of Han dynasty classical scholarship and an

important figure in the development of textual criticism. At the age of fifty-nine, he was appointed by the emperor to head up the collation team, where he was assigned to collate the classics, commentaries, various masters, and poetry.

Chen Guoqing 陳國慶 summarises the process of the editorial work in five steps: first, collecting all available editions; second, comparing said editions to fill in all gaps such as missing chapters, paragraphs, or passages; third, revising the fascicles—or chapters—in the case of bamboo manuscripts or the scrolls of silk manuscripts; fourth, comparing and correcting textual variants; and fifth and finally, determining a name for the work.

In one of the classics which Liu Xiang collated, the work of *Guan zi* 管子 (Master Guan), 564 fascicles from five different editions were examined, with the palace version being the base text and other versions collated against it, resulting in the elimination of 484 duplicate fascicles. This massive effort produced a final edition of 86 fascicles. This shows the complexity of the collation work. Liu Xiang's *Separately Compiled Registers* of his collective works also became a pioneering work in the field of bibliography.

2.2. Gu Yanwu 顧炎武

(1613–1682)

The scholarship of Gu Yanwu is another example of the philological approach. Gu Yanwu was an early Qing scholar who specialised in epigraphy, historical geography, and historical phonology. Gu is credited as the main inspiration behind the Qing evidential research movement. He adapted new methodological precedents in his research and was able to develop concrete scholarly achievements by stepping outside the philosophising and theorising of the prevailing climate of Neo-Confucian thought.

Gu travelled extensively during his lifetime, which was a considerable aid in his epigraphical studies. This work involved collecting and studying epigraphical evidence, such as historical inscriptions engraved on stone stele. The ancient stone

inscriptions that Gu used were largely collected by himself through his visits to historical sites. And he used this knowledge to clear up erroneous opinions, such as the debate of which mountain was the Hengshan 恆山 of the Five Sacred Mountains of China, which he determined by onsite inspection to be the one in Hebei. Gu's monumental work, the *Rizhi lu* 日知錄 (notes on daily accumulated knowledge) also shows the use and importance of epigraphy in historical research. For example, he identified historical figures and place names, thus clarifying and correcting historical facts.

Gu also made great contributions in the field of historical phonology. His scholarly productions in phonology includes the *Yinxue wushu* 音學五書 (five treatises on phonology) which studies the rhymes of the *Poems*.

3. The Interpretive Approach

The interpretive approach, on the other hand, involves hermeneutics and is concerned with establishing principles for the retrieval of meaning.

3.1. Wang Bi 王弼

(226–249)

Wang Bi is a classicist from the early third century, most famous for his text and commentary on the *Classic of the Way and Its Power*, which even now serves as the received version and has been so for almost two thousand years. His philosophy was that “Nothingness is the foundation of the cosmos and the world” and his metaphysical views were reflected in his commentaries, which were a hermeneutical explication of the essence of the message of the text rather than an interpretation based on the textual meaning. Other contributions to classical exegesis include his commentaries on the *Changes* and the *Analects*.

Here, I will use examples from Wang Bi's work on the *Analects*, the *Lunyu Shiyi* 論語釋疑 (elucidation of doubtful points in the Analects) that indicates his interpretive

approach with metaphysical leanings.

Analects 1.2: “Filial piety and fraternal submission! - are they not the root of all benevolent actions?” 孝弟也者，其為仁之本與。¹

Wang Bi’s commentary states: “Natural and personal love is filial piety; to extend love to things is to be humane.” 自然親愛為孝，推愛及物為仁也。²

Analects 3.8: “Lin Fang asked what was the first thing to be attended to in ceremonies.” 林放問禮之本。³

Wang Bi: “Contemporaries abandon the roots and elevate the branches, hence they stress the ability to search for the intentions of ritual.” 時人棄本崇末，故大其能尋禮本意。⁴

We see that Wang Bi’s hermeneutic interpretation of the *Analects* is one that fits his overarching theoretical framework.

3.2. Sun Xidan 孫希旦

(1736–1784)

A later example of the interpretive approach is the Qing classicist Sun Xidan. Sun Xidan’s *Collected Commentaries on the Records of Ritualists* 禮記集解 is known as the most authoritative Qing commentary on the *Liji* 禮記 (records of ritualists). He believed that the purpose of scholarship, and of learning rituals, is ultimately to apply the teachings. Yet he was also committed in philology, but for Sun, philological scholarship was for the purpose of establishing a correct text and accessing its message.

Records of Ritualists 4.8: “In the first month of spring, no warlike operations

¹ *The Chinese Classics*, trans. by James Legge, 3rd edn, 5 vols (repr. Taipei: SMC Publishing, 2016), I: *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean*, pp. 138–139.

² *Analects "Xue-er"*, Chinese Text Project <<https://ctext.org/analects/xue-er>> [accessed 31 May 2023]; David B. Honey, *A History of Chinese Classical Scholarship*, 5 vols (Washington: Academia Press, 2021), II: *Qin, Han, Wei, Jing: Canon and Commentary*, p. 293.

³ *The Chinese Classics*, trans. by James Legge, 3rd edn, 5 vols (repr. Taipei: SMC Publishing, 2016), I: *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean*, p. 155.

⁴ David B. Honey, *A History of Chinese Classical Scholarship*, 5 vols (Washington: Academia Press, 2021), II: *Qin, Han, Wei, Jing: Canon and Commentary*, pp. 293–294.

should be undertaken; the undertaking of such is sure to be followed by calamities from Heaven.” 孟春之月……不可以稱兵，稱兵必天殃。⁵

Sun Xidan's interpretation of this passage is hermeneutic, and uses philosophies from Daoism and the *Changes*. He says, “The virtues of spring are *yang*, softness and humaneness, whereas warlike operations are characterised by *yin*, rigor, and righteousness.” So, to undertake warlike operations in spring is against the ways of heaven and earth, and the laws of humankind. 愚謂立天之道曰陰與陽，立地之道曰柔與剛，立人之道曰仁與義。春之德為陽、為柔、為仁，兵之事為陰、為剛，為義。以正月而稱兵，則以陰而干陽，是變天之道也；以剛而逆柔，是絕地之理也；以義而反仁，是亂人之紀也。故唯不得已而應敵則可，若兵自我起，則反《易》三才之道，而天殃必及之矣。⁶

4. Conclusions

Both the philological and the interpretive approaches are fundamental to classical scholarship, and both were used by philologists and hermeneuts. A philological study of the classics without interpretation of its teachings and philosophies is an obsession in facts and technicalities, to research only for the purpose of study as the end all and be all. Whereas a purely hermeneutical approach without philology as a foundation becomes lofty philosophising, not grounded in reading and research of the text. I believe that it is the ultimate purpose of scholarship that matters most. One should study for one's own moral cultivation, or speaking on a larger scale, for the benefit of society. Therefore, I personally prefer the interpretive approach, without ignoring the importance of philology. Philology should be utilised as a means to better understand and interpret the classics, particularly the teachings from the text, and applying them, should be the goal of classical scholarship.

Thank you for listening. Any suggestions and feedback will be appreciated.

⁵ Liji "Yue Ling", *Chinese Text Project* <<https://ctext.org/liji/yue-ling>> [accessed 31 May 2023].

⁶ Sun Xidan, *Liji jijie* 禮記集解, 3 vols (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1989).