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An introduction to Zheng Xuan 鄭玄

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Respected Professor Honey Good morning , and good afternoon my fellow classmates. Today I want to introduce a great classicist Zheng Xuan.

Zheng Xuan was born in 127 AD, and his courtesy name is Kangcheng. He was born in Gaomi 高密 County of Beihai 北海 city (in present-day is Gaomi City, Shandong 山東 Province). He was a famous Confucian scholar and classicist in the late Eastern Han Dynasty. At the time of his birth, Zheng Xuan's family had already declined, and his family life was relatively poor. He learned mathematics from a young age, and by the age of eight or nine he was proficient in mathematics. By the age of twelve or thirteen, he was able to recite and narrate the Five Classics of Confucianism.

Since he was a young boy, Zheng Xuan had been devoted to learning. He was a pragmatic man by nature, and this is illustrated by a minor incident. According to the *Taiping Guangji* 太平廣記, when he was twelve years old, he once accompanied his mother to his grandfather's home as a guest. There were many guests at that time, and all the guests were dressed in fancy clothes and dressed up beautifully, and each of them spoke in a fancy manner, appearing to be of great status. Zheng Xuan was the only one sitting in silence, as if he could not match the others in terms of status and talent. When his mother saw this, she felt ashamed and secretly urged him to show off his talent. Zheng Xuan, however, was unimpressed, saying that these vulgar spectacles were "not my ambition and not my wish"

Although Zheng Xuan had aspired to study Confucian classics in his youth and had achieved a certain level of attainment, he was no longer in a position to continue his studies exclusively due to the poverty and hardship of his family. At the age of eighteen, he had to take up a position as a country official. Later, however, Zheng Xuan resigned from his official position to study at the imperial academy. His teacher, Yuanxian 第五元先, was a very learned doctor of *the classics*. . Zheng Xuan studied *Mr. Jing's Chnges* 京氏易, *Gong Yang Chun Qiu* 公羊春秋, the *Three Unified Calendars* 三統曆, and the *Nine Chapters of Arithmetic* 九章算術, all of which he was able to master. He also studied the *Zhou Guan The Offices of Zhou* 周官, the *Book of Rites* 禮記, *Mr. Zuo on the Spring and Autumn Annals*

左氏春秋, *The Han Poems* 韓詩, and *the Ancient Text Esteemed Documents* 古文尚書, all of which were important texts of the ancient classics. Later, he studied the *luling* 律令 under the tutelage of Chen Qiu 陳球. During this period, he also travelled around the states of You 幽, Bing 并, Yan 兗 and Yu 豫, visiting famous scholars, learning from them and discussing academic issues together. By the time he reached the age of thirty, Zheng Xuan had become a classicist with deep attainments. His knowledge was already second to none in Shandong.

Although Zheng Xuan had already learned a great deal, he was not satisfied with his knowledge. When he felt that there were no more scholars in Shandong to consult, he left his home through the relationship of his good friend Lu Zhi 盧植, and traveled to the west to enter Guanzhong, to study under Ma Rong 馬融. Ma Rong was the most famous master of the classics at that time and was very knowledgeable. After studying under Ma Rong for seven years, Zheng Xuan said goodbye to him and returned to his hometown in Shandong because his parents were old. At this time, Ma Rong already felt that Zheng Xuan was a great talent and would even surpass himself, so he said to his disciples with deep emotion, ‘Now that Zheng Xuan has gone, my path to the East will continue! 鄭生今去, 吾道東矣!’, meaning that the Confucian scholarship inherited from him would certainly flourish in the eastern part of the country due to the spread by Zheng Xuan.

In his later years, Zheng Xuan stuck to moral integrity and did not become an official. After the outbreak of the Yellow Turban 黃巾 Rebellion, the court was forced to grant an amnesty to party members 黨人. The rulers of the imperial court had already heard of Zheng Xuan's great reputation and vied with each other to hire him for important positions in the court. But Zheng Xuan stuck to his moral integrity rather than to join officialdom, and was ashamed to be associated with them, so he never wished to enter the civil service. According to the biography of Zheng Xuan in *the Book of Later Han*, he returned to Gaomi 高密 from Xuzhou 徐州 in 196 AD. On his way back to Gaomi, he encountered a large number of Yellow Turban rebels but they treated Zheng Xuan with great respect. They all paid homage when they saw him and dared not enter the county. According to the *Houhanji* 後漢記, the county of Gaomi was not plundered by the Yellow Turban army.

In 200 A.D., Zheng Xuan was already seventy-four years old, having undergone many vicissitudes and often feeling unwell. According to the *Book of Later Han*, in the spring of

that year he dreamt that Confucius said to him, Get up, get up, this year is the year of Chen 辰, next year is the year of Si 巳‘起, 起, 今年歲在辰, 來年歲在巳’. In that year, Yuan Shao 袁紹 and Cao Cao 曹操’s army met at Guandu 官渡 for battle. In order to win the support of the people and scholars, Yuan Shao asked Yuan Tan to force Zheng Xuan to accompany his army, and Zheng Xuan had no choice but to travel despite his illness. When he reached Yuancheng 元城, his illness worsened and he could not go any further, and he died in the county in June of the same year. When he was seriously ill and before dying, he was still annotating the *Zhou Yi* 周易.

After reading Zheng Xuan's life experience, I really admired and revered him. He really set a good example for scholars, and his persistence and perseverance in learning deeply touched me. I hope that I can follow Zheng Xuan as an example, and not be afraid of difficulties and dangers, and steadily improve myself on the road to study in the future