



The Authority and Construction of the Confucian Classics Hermeneuticst

L'AUTORITE ET LA CONSTRUCTION DES HERMENEUTIQUE CLASSIQUES CONFUCÉENS

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Abstract

Confucian Classics, *The Thirteen Ching*, have been regarded as Canon in the traditional Chinese hermeneutics. Confucian scholars' ultimate telos is to understand the significance of Confucian Classics. The Confucian Classics hermeneutics, which is related to Confucian scholars' ultimate concern, has not been served entirely as the theory of the art of interpretation but the ontological hermeneutics from the beginning. However, it is the interpretation that has given and established its authority. And, it requires a hermeneutical reflection of some sophistication to discover how it is possible to acquire and regain its scholarly legitimacy in Chinese history. The Confucian Classics had been understood and interpreted in a different way by Confucian scholars, in fact, it is a kind of transmission and sharing of a unified belief in Confucian *Tao* and *Sheng*. It is necessary to interpret the continuity of meaning or the break in some given stages in the course of construction of the Chinese Classics hermeneutics, in which the interpretation systematicity has been established as well.

Key words: Classics; Authority; Confucian Classics Hermeneutics; Interpretation; Understanding

Résumé

Les confucéens classiques, le Yi King Treize, ont été considérés comme Canon dans l'herméneutique traditionnelle chinoise confucéenne scholars' ultimate telos est de comprendre la signification de Classiques confucéens Le herméneutique confucéenne Classics, qui est liée à confucéenne préoccupation scholars' ultimate, a pas été entièrement desservi que la théorie de l'art de

l'interprétation, mais l'herméneutique ontologique de la beginning. However, c'est l'interprétation qui a donné et a établi son autorité. et, il nécessite une réflexion herméneutique de certaine sophistication de découvrir comment il est possible d'acquérir et de retrouver sa légitimité scientifique dans l'histoire chinoise. Les Classiques confucéens ont été comprises et interprétées d'une manière différente par les lettrés confucéens, en fait, il est une sorte de transmission et le partage d'une croyance unifiée dans confucéenne Tao et Sheng. il est nécessaire d'interpréter la continuité de signification ou de la rupture dans certains stades donnés dans le cadre de la construction de la Chine herméneutique Classics, dans lequel la systématique interprétation a été créé ainsi.

Mots clés: Classiques; l'Autorité; Les Confucéens classques; Herméneutique; Interprétation; La Compréhension

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In a general sense, the classics can be divided into many different types. However, the Classics we discuss here specifically refer to those which can ensure the unification of worldview, truth and values in a traditional society and obtain an authoritative status; they are probably the equivalent of the Bible or the Holy Scripture. Therefore, this type of Classics is more properly named as Canon, that is, "canonical" or "sacred Classics." And when we use the concept of the "Classics" in a sense of the Canon, we find that the so-called "Classics" does not mean a statement of things in the past. The key to formation of this concept is in fact a normative consciousness which is inherent in recognition of the sanctity to the authority of the "Classics". The "Classics" which can be regarded as a Canon is criterion, axiom and fundamental principle

for judgment or evaluation, and itself contains a meaning of a self-evidence truth. In many cases, the essence of Classics authority is not based on a blind obedience but on a rational act of acknowledgment and knowledge, that is, a faith which is requested a conscious conversion and put it into practical action. However, the process of the “Classics” formation and establishment often reflects certain awareness of power. In every unified era, it is necessary to take classics as content of faith to establish the standards and delineate the scope of thoughts.

Although Buddhism and Taoism also have their own holy books, their own classics, we know exactly that what can be regarded as the Canon or Holy Scripture is only the Confucian Classics in the context of the traditional Chinese hermeneutics. In this regard, we adopt an ancient usage with some justifications. As a certain category of tradition, what the Confucian classics, *The Thirteen Ching*, is known as *Ching*, on the one hand it is because those ancient authors were the same ones, Confucians who established the same criterion for Classics in different eras, namely *Tao* and *Sheng*. It is in this sense that the meaning of the Confucian classics surpasses the classics in which there is a consciousness of something with enduring value and significance. From the Spring and Autumn Period to the Qing Dynasty, the value and significance have always been maintained and are independent of all the circumstances of time — a kind of timeless present that is contemporaneous with every other present. On the other hand, the Confucian Classics has always been the official textbooks from the Spring and Autumn Period when academic and education were dominated by the official. This means not only the existence of political authority in the Confucian Classics, but also implies an orthodox sense in the Classics itself. Therefore, it was considered incomprehensible by later scholars that *Lao-tzu* and *Chuang-tzu* were included in the *Jingdianshiwen* by Lu Deming. There is an explication to *Jingdianshiwen* in *Sikuquanshuzongmu*, “it was really incomprehensible to list Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu instead of Mencius to Classics. One reason is that Mencius was not included in Classics before the Northern Song Dynasty, and Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu were popular among the scholar-officials since the Western Jin Dynasty. Lu Deming lived in Chen Dynasty, so he just followed the tradition from the Liuchao Dynasties”. The reason for what we call *Ching* a Canon or Holy Scripture is precisely because of a sheer fact that it is written down, which gives it an effective authority not requiring to be proved and but naturally restricting all Confucians.

Here is a starting point for the Confucian Classics hermeneutics. It requires a hermeneutical reflection of some sophistication to discover how it is possible to acquire and regain its scholarly legitimacy in Chinese history. The goal of Classics interpretation is originally to safeguard the reasonable meaning of the text so as

to oppose all unreasonable suppositions. And, it is the interpretation that has given and established its nature of Canon far beyond the meaning of the classics, and in the light of which a generally-accepted sacred authority can be shared. However, the reasonable meaning of text is invariably limited by interpreter’s hermeneutical situation, in which an understanding occurred is essentially a historically effected event. The Classics text can be correspondingly understood in a different way as a new perspective can be obtained relying on a fusion of horizons between the past and the present. This is the true locus of the Confucian Classics hermeneutics. In the process of every so-called understanding and superior understanding, Confucian Classics hermeneutics must be understood at a higher level of reflection to which the Confucian Classics may reach. That is to say, whenever *Ching* is in danger of “exhaustion”, “absurdness”, “fraud”, “intricacy” and “no standard” etc., or Confucians are anxious that *Ching* is likely to be destroyed by heresies, it is the moment when *Ching* needs to be interpreted so as to re-establish its authority timely. And the Classics authority is solidified again at a new level in every so-called superior understanding. The authority is obtained and established in the process of interpretation. The Confucian Classics hermeneutics need to make their own understanding for those so-called superior understandings hidden in series of collations, phonetic notations and commentaries.

We have found out that the goal of all attempts in Classics interpretation from Qin to Qing dynasties is, on the one hand, to bring about agreement in content of classics; on the other hand, to establish a unified meaning of significance and value or reinstate the meaning where it had been destroyed in some way. In fact, the history of the Confucian Classics interpretation confirms a process in which the generally accepted meaning of *Dao* and *Sheng* has been handing down, sharing and having a part in a variety of ways. It is necessary to indicate the interpretation to the continuity of meaning or the break of it in some given stages in the course of construction of Chinese Classics hermeneutics, meanwhile the systematicity of interpretation of classics has been established as well.

Moreover, what should be noticed is that there are two different alternate clues in Classics interpretation for the purpose of obtaining the authority legitimacy of significance and value in Classics.

First, political authority had been achieved by means of an act of annotations and commentaries. In this regard, the definition of significance and value for classics and interpretation of classics actually depends on some saints and Confucians who were identified as authoritative interpreters by political rulers. This makes the Classics interpretation turn to be an official academy with the nature of state ideology. The task of Classics interpretation is to provide theoretical support

for the legitimacy of a unified ruling based on an acknowledgement on the meaning of *Dao* and *Sheng*. For example, a unique position was awarded to Confucianism and *SixChing* since Emperor Wu in Han Dynasty accepted the recommendations in the *Juxianliangduice* (selection of virtuous and talent persons) written by Dong Zhongshu, and the other various schools of thought and their exponents were discarded by rulers at the same time; then Emperor Taizong in Tang Dynasty laid down *Wujingzhengyi*. All these attempts achieved the unification of classics forms in terms of contents and versions within a certain period of time, ended the chaotic situation of “no standard” in Classics studies, and a meaningful agreement in Classics thought was reached simultaneously. Such collations and interpretations are the government-led initiatives which embody the power and will of rulers to a maximum extent, so the revised Classics is easy to maximally meet the requirements in ideology, reconciles the confusion and chaos resulted from the internal different opinions on Classics studies, and produces the official textbooks adapted to real political affairs consequently. And it is the support by the rulers’ power that brings about the meaningful agreement on Classics studies and achievement of Classics authority. In other words, how to regulate or interpret must be in accordance with what the rulers’ request during this period. For example, *Wujingzhengyi* is originally named *Wujingyishu*, which means to make the Classics understood by means of annotations and commentaries. It is a good explanation for Yishu in Tanglvishu edited by Zhangsun Wuji in Tang dynasty. He said, “In the past, works of saints are called upon Jing, following the teacher’s explanations are called Zhuan, which is the origins of Chunqiu and Lijing. “Recently, it is not only notation but exegesis, which is called Yishu. The original meaning of the word Shu is sparse wide or distant. In addition, the word Shu was interpreted by Guanya as cognition and record. Si Maqian said in *Shiji*, “What approved by previous emperors is edited as law, and what approved by later emperors is interpreted as decree.”

However, the reason why Emperor Taizong in Tang Dynasty named it *zhengyi* is in fact to obtain the authority meaning by interpretations. That is an imperial authority in which a normative meaning such as “zhengyi”, “yinkuo” and “zhunsheng” is determined by what the rulers asked.

The *Chunqiu*, a so-called new Classics interpretation, can be used as an example to provide theoretically the legitimacy of a unified state power. The reason for what the interpretation on *Chunqiu* was called a new Classics interpretation lies in its starting of a new trend of thought in interpretation. The interpreters, such as Tan Zhu, Zhao Kuang and Lu Chun, etc. who were positioned in a hermeneutics situation in the mid-Tang Dynasty, would rather adopt a principle of “Shezhuanqiujiing”, namely put

the previous annotations aside, refute the commentaries and strike significance directly from the text itself, instead of “Shububozhu”, i.e. commentaries can only be consistent with the annotations, rather than the opposite. Thus a dominion idea of “Cuotianxia” and “Zhengtianzi” had been established in the sense of the Classics authority. A point of view about “Chuzhouwanglu” presented by He Xiu had been rebuked so as to go against *Li*, sully saint’s reputation, oppose to *Jing* and do harm to *Zhuan* by Tan Zhu in his *Chunqiuizongzhiyi*. Tan Zhu thought that Confucius’ purpose on compilation to *Chunqiu* was to establish the authority of the King to facilitate national unity and the unity of autocratic centralization for fear of the King’s no authority on his reign. Accordingly, Tan Zhu made a point of its aiming at “Zunwangshi” and “Jianlingyue”, i.e. one should show an honor to royal families and correct a deviation on transgression. It is through the action on incorporation of *Sanzhuan* and interpretations of *Chunqiu* that Tan Zhu explained the rationality of centralization in response to the needs of the political history in this period.

Second, religious authority had been achieved by interpretations on significance of texts. When the Classics interpreted by annotations and commentaries had been identified as an authority based on political power, Classics interpretation was fixed and believes became dogmas which are used to serve for national ideology. The Classics interpretation had been reduced to a pure skill, but a unified meaning does not only mean a success in the fight for discourse power, also make Classics thought firm-fixed negatively and no longer forward. The intention to pursue an understanding to holy Confucianism easily with annotations and commentaries turned out that the Classics text itself sunk into oblivion in a large number of texts *zhushu*, and made it more and more difficult to understand. The real Confucian saints’ significance had been buried in the voluminous word games. As Wangbi said, “writing is aimed at cultivating and shaping people’s lives but comes to nothing because of difficult understanding; writing is aimed at rectifying and correcting people’s vicious qualities but comes to nothing because of verbose and trivial interpretation”. The Confucians lost their faith and became homeless in soul as a result of the loss of the Classics’ inner spiritual life. In this case, people suspected of the detailed commentaries firstly, then further doubted the saints and Classics itself. Ji Kang advocated not to conform to King Shang Tang or Zhou Wu, who were ancient wise monarchs approved by Confucianism, and to despise Zhougong or Confucius, who were acknowledged Confucian sages. And *Liu Ching* were not necessarily like the sun as a supreme. Xun Can considered *Liu Ching* worthless as chaff, though it was still there. Heshao said in Xuncan’s biography, “Xuncan, styled Fengqian. His brothers are known to the world with Confucians, but Xuncan is only interested in

Taoism, He is always considered what Zigong's saying is right, that is Confucian's discourses about man's nature and the way of Heaven, cannot be heard. So Liu Ching is just worthless chaff, though it is still there."

The trend of thought in doubting *Ching* and *Zhuan* occurred frequently between the Tang and Song dynasties. All of these are inconceivable for the community of Confucianism. If there is no way to interpret the Classics relevant to spiritual life, Confucians could be led to confusion in the loss of faith, and the widespread trend of failure of faith will become very popular among the Confucians. Therefore, to aim at seeking the intrinsic spiritual significance in Classics itself, the Confucian Classics interpretations by some more sophisticated questions reconstruct the authority destroyed by all preceding annotations and commentaries in Wei-Jin and Song dynasties. If we treat the annotations and commentaries in rulers' control as an external authority construction, then the interpretations on significance may be regarded as an internal authority in Wei-Jin and Song Dynasties, that is, a faith to settle down Confucian' soul and spirit. The question Confucian Classics interpretations need to answer here is what is the ultimate basis for its self-evidence legitimacy if it can be thought as a faith, and what is the ultimate strength to cope with challenges of all kinds of heresies, such as Buddhism and Taoism?

He Yan and Wang Bi interpreted the Confucian Classics in a Taoist way, and although they were criticized by later generations as advocating mystery, after all, a sacred Classics authority on the ultimate metaphysical basis had been established in the light of their interpretations, in which the Confucian saints can apprehend *Wu* or *Dao* in the metaphysical sense. In addition, Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi interpreted in the ways of Buddhist and Taoist, and although they were criticized by later generations as prattle on *Xing* and *Li*, after all, a self-evident absolute basis or presupposition was set for Confucianism by means of their interpretations on concepts of *Xin*, *Xing* and *Li*. Zhuxi said frankly, not until

apprehension the ultimate value of the Confucian's Dao in the sense of ontology, he himself was swinging in the world, just as among the waves and having a litter rest. Although he was very painful, but had nothing to do. And after he was suddenly awake, he understood finally that all had an ultimate concern, which was a place for him to settle down. Actually, all of these indeed provided Confucians with a spiritual home to settle down and withstand varieties of trials and tribulations in the tough life full of wind and waves. "And since then, Chinese thoughts and academies would eventually not be fully under the rule of the Zen".

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