



Discovery or Invention:
Modern Interpretations of Zhang Xuecheng

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Abstract:

Zhang Xuecheng was an ordinary scholar in eighteenth-century China. But in modern times he was recognized as an extraordinary historian. His remark that “the Six Classics are all history” was especially praised as a remarkable breakthrough or distinct paradigm. This study, however, argues that the re-discovery of Zhang was in effect a modern invention.

“The Six Classics are all history” is actually quite an old concept. At least from the sixteenth-century, Wang Yangming had already set a precedent for Zhang, whose version of the dictum was quite similar to his predecessors as well as contemporaries. Zhang filled in little, if any, new wine in the old bottle. He found no new meaning in history, as he believed the so-called Dao, or Way, contained in the Six Classics was as eternal as the sun and the moon

and applied to hundreds of generations to come. He had no intention of turning history against the Classics, or of replacing the Classics with history, as modern scholars have claimed. His view of history was well within the bounds of Confucian historiography. Zhang attached a great deal of importance to history, but he was not unique in this regard. His historiography rested almost totally on the laurels of orthodox Confucianism. He criticized Dai Zhen, but his criticism was generally based on moral grounds and it seems to have little epistemological significance. Zhang Xuecheng emphasized the importance of history to serve statecraft (*jingshi* 經世), but this view, too, was scarcely original. In this regard, he was more a successor than an innovator. He remained a rather old-fashioned scholar in the eighteenth century.

The rediscovery of Zhang in modern times actually reflects modern scholars' concerns. They read their own ideas into Zhang Xuecheng's writings. Zhang never considered the Classics or history as mere historical materials as modern historians do. Nor did Zhang try to secularize the Classics and history, which might have constituted a major breakthrough in the conception of historiography. A secularized Zhang was thus the invention of modern scholars. In addition, only modern scholars, like Collingwood and Qian Zhongshu, who consider the past dead, feel duty-bound to breathe new life into this moribund history. There are no striking similarities, as a modern scholar claims, between eighteenth-century Zhang and twentieth-century Collingwood. This study is as much interested in exposing misrepresentations as in revealing the modern concerns that helped invent Zhang. These concerns, in fact, reflect the dramatic changes of modern Chinese historiography.

關鍵字：

章學誠，錢鍾書，儒家經典，史學，現代性，發明。

摘要：

章學誠在十八世紀並不是一位著名的學者，但在近代卻被認為是傑出的歷史學家。他的六經皆史說尤為世所重視，視為在學術上的重大突破；然而本文認為，近人所「發現」的章氏，實際上乃是近人的「發明」。

「六經皆史」事實上是一舊概念，章氏的先驅以及其同時代人言此者多矣，他並未在舊瓶裏注入多少新酒。他信守載於六經的不變之道，因而並未賦予歷史多少新意義。他絕無意如近代學者所謂以史抗經，或想要以史來取代經，他的見解仍不出儒家史學的範疇，遵奉正統儒學。他重視史學，但在他的時代已非特殊。他批判戴震，但主要批其德，而非其學。他強調史學應該經世致用，然此一見解更非章氏獨創。故章學誠承繼舊學遠遠多於新創，他在乾嘉時代始終是一保守的儒者。

近人重新發現章學誠，其實是反映了近代學者的「關切」，他們實際上借章氏來表達自己的看法。章學誠從來沒有像近代學者一樣，認為經或史是史料；他也不曾把神聖的經史「世俗化」，以冀在史觀上有所突破。一個「世俗化」的章學誠就是由近代學者製造出來的。再者，唯有近代學者如柯林吾與錢鍾書才認為，歷史已是陳跡，史家必須給予死去的史實新生命。十八世紀的章學誠與二十世紀的學者並沒有很相似的地方。本文既要揭露近人對章氏的誤解，也要展示導致誤解的近代人之關切。這些關切同時反映了中國史學在近代的劇變。

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Introduction

A native of eastern Zhejiang, Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 (Shizhai 實齋, 1738-1801) lived in the Qianlong era during which scholarship, in particular *kaozheng* 考證 or empirical textual research, dominated. But Zhang's learning ability, as he himself admitted, was unusually slow, and he failed repeatedly in the examinations. He did not obtain the *jìnshì* 進士 degree until he was already 41. His subsequent career was also unimpressive, holding lectureships at several academies in turn and helping to compile a number of local gazetteers. To be sure, he wrote essays and monographs, but he was not at all prolific and few of his writings had been published before his death at the age of 57. He was patently not a "towering scholar" on a par with Dai Zhen in eighteenth century China, as a modern historian claims¹.

Zhang's works failed to attract much attention after his death either. As late as the latter half of the nineteenth century, Li Ciming 李慈銘, a celebrated scholar at the time, ridiculed Zhang's mediocre scholarship and called him a mere "outstanding village teacher"². Wen Tingshi 文廷式, who won the first place in the metropolitan examination of 1889, accused Zhang of plagiarism³. And in 1894 Sun Baoxuan 孫寶瑄 read Zhang's principal work, *Wenshi tongyi* 文史通義 (General studies in literature and history), and found it "lengthy and jumbled." "While Zhang made some good points," Sun concluded, "nothing is really important"⁴.

The suggestion that the shift in emphasis in intellectual history from *kaozheng* to *yili* 義理 (exposition of meaning) at the beginning of modern China helped to elevate Zhang's standing⁵ does not hold much water. David Nivison renders "*kaozheng*" into "philology" and "*yili*" into "philosophy." While philology and philosophy are decidedly two separate subjects in the West, *kaozheng* and *yili* are integral parts of the whole in the Chinese conception. How can the hidden philosophical meaning be exposed without serious philological inquiry? Any emphasis on one at the expense of the other was considered a

¹ Yu 1996: 121.

² Li Ciming 1975: 2:781.

³ Wen 1979: 26:3.

⁴ Sun Baoxuan 1983: 1:24.

⁵ Yu 1996: 122.

major defect in traditional Chinese scholarship. No philosophical vision is worthy of pursuit, in other words, without being built on solid philological grounds. Hence, emphasis on *yili* alone represents inadequacy in scholarship rather than the rise of a new scholarly paradigm. How could such “emphasis,” even if truthful, help the elevation of Zhang to fame?

It was at the beginning of the twentieth century that modern scholars, including Liang Qichao 梁啟超 and Zhang Binglin 章炳麟 (Taiyan 太炎), began looking at Zhang Xuecheng in a more favorable light. Liang, who had no bias against either *kaozheng* or *yili*, honored Zhang as the synthesizer of the noted historical school of eastern Zhejiang initiated by Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 in the early Qing⁶, and at one point Liang even claimed that Zhang was the synthesizer of Chinese historiography⁷. Zhang Binglin, the premier philologist of his time, sang praises to Zhang Xuecheng’s advocacy of making classics history, which he considered truly groundbreaking⁸, even though he was still critical of Zhang Xuecheng’s scholarship in general.

Zhang Xuecheng’s reputation was further raised in 1920 when the Japanese scholar Naitō Torajirō 內藤虎次郎 published his study of Zhang in the acclaimed journal *Shina gaku* 支那學 (Chinese Studies)⁹. Inspired by Naitō, Hu Shi 胡適 completed a full-length biography of Zhang, in which he proclaimed that he had “brought the historian Zhang Xuecheng to light after 120 years of obscurity”¹⁰. As a result, Zhang’s hitherto relatively unknown works were published in several editions in the 1930s and were repeatedly reprinted thereafter. Modern Chinese historians thenceforth gave Zhang Xuecheng a very prominent place in the history of Chinese historiography. The pioneer modern historiographer Jin Yufu 金毓黻 considers Zhang Xuecheng along with Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 of the Tang dynasty as China’s two greatest historiographers in his *Zhongguo shixue shi* (History of Chinese historical writing)¹¹. Modern Chinese historiographers have since generally followed Jin’s generous appraisal of Zhang. They admired him especially his dictum

⁶ Liang 1985: 408.

⁷ Liang 1959: 163.

⁸ Zhang Binglin 1972: 44.

⁹ Naitō 1950: 612-628; especially, 619-620.

¹⁰ Hu 1973: 1.

¹¹ Jin 1962: 218.

that “*liujing jieshi*” 六經皆史 (the Six Classics are all history), which appeared at the very beginning of his principal work. It represents, in their opinion, a remarkable breakthrough or new paradigm. Chinese Marxist historians as well regard him as a creative author of historical theory.

In the 1960s Zhang's fame spread to the West, thanks largely to the French Sinologist Paul Demiéville and the American philosopher David Nivison. Demiéville recognized Zhang as “a historical genius of the first magnitude” and compared him favorably with the great Italian philosopher Giovanni Battista Vico (1668-1744)¹². Nivison honored Zhang with an intellectual biography, which supersedes Hu Shi's both in length and in contents, to confirm that the eighteenth century Chinese historian had exhibited “great originality and imagination”¹³. Such compliments abroad inevitably further enhanced his reputation at home. He has since been hailed as a great philosopher of history. The Princeton Sinologist Yü Yingshi 余英時 compared Zhang favorably with R. G. Collingwood and believed Zhang was the only philosopher of history to have emerged in traditional China¹⁴. Here Yü has at least slightly modified Liang Qichao's excessive claim that Zhang might well have been “the first in the world to speak on the philosophy of history”¹⁵. Under the influence of such enthusiastic claims, the younger scholar Zhu Jingwu has recently produced a doctoral dissertation constructing what he terms Zhang's unique “cultural philosophy of history” (*wenhua lishizhexue* 文化歷史哲學)¹⁶. Zhang's status as a great historian seems fully secured. Zhang cherished what the celebrated Han historian Ban Gu 班固 phrased as, “your talent is up to you, while your fame is up to other people,” adding that “talent may but does not necessarily yield fame”¹⁷. He might not have been aware that fame can be secured by trickery, by chance, or in his own case by later invention.

The twentieth century's remarkable discovery of a great historian shows a determination to claim the traditional Zhang Xuecheng as an extraordinary

¹² Demiéville 1961: 169, 185.

¹³ Hu 1973: 1.

¹⁴ Yü 1976: 172.

¹⁵ Liang 1959: 164.

¹⁶ Zhu Jingwu 1996.

¹⁷ Zhang Xuecheng 1973: 95.

modern figure, capable of transcending both his times and his cultural boundaries. But was Zhang truly a modern historian or is his “modernity” read into him by later generations? In fact, Zhang’s alleged modernity is the invention of modern scholars and reflects their own concerns more than Zhang’s concerns. Yet at the same time, the very claims of Zhang’s modernity confirm the changes in Chinese historical thinking that have occurred in modern times.

Zhang Xuecheng Revisited

The dictum that “the Six Classics are all history,” which modern historians have enthusiastically attributed to Zhang Xuecheng, is actually an older concept, as the erudite scholar Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 pointed out early in the 1940s. Qian cited a long series of examples to reject Zhang’s originality¹⁸. Until recently, however, modern historians have paid virtually no attention to Qian’s sharp criticism of Zhang. And now they generally dismiss Qian as merely indulging in semantics. While admitting that there was nothing new about the dictum itself, they insist that Zhang filled the old bottle with new wine. In the opinion of the distinguished Marxist historian Hou Wailu 侯外廬, for example, Zhang at last broke the sacredness of the Six Classics and treated the Classics as mere historical accounts of ancient institutions¹⁹. In basic agreement with this view, Yü Yingshi calls Zhang’s dictum an “unprecedented breakthrough” in the intellectual history of the Qing, emphasizing that Zhang’s creativity is seen especially in two aspects: first, that the Dao in the Classics can be seen only through history (*yinshi jiandao* 因史見道), and second, the new intellectual conviction that the Classics by no means exhaust all the Dao. Thus, in Yü’s view, Zhang used a historicist viewpoint to challenge the Classics, and so laid the foundation for his advocacy of replacing the Classics with history and substituting the past with the present²⁰.

But seeing the Dao through history already had been clearly expressed by the prominent sixteenth-century philosopher Wang Yangming 王陽明. The Classics are history, as Wang put it, because history makes manifest moral

¹⁸ Qian Zhongshu 1948: 263-265, 316.

¹⁹ Hou 1980: 5:509-510.

²⁰ Yü 1977: 47.

lessons, referring to Dao. In other words, since the Classics and history are both containers of the Dao, the Classics are in effect history. The Classics and history are really a single inseparable thing. Accordingly, there is no question of substituting one with another, let alone one challenging the other.

Wang Yangming's well-known view of the Classics and history clearly set a precedent for Zhang, whose ideas scarcely went beyond Wang's. As Zhang clearly expressed, the Classics are history because they record the invisible Dao. Confucius transmitted rather than authored the Six Classics, which contain the Dao. The Dao in Zhang's mind was eternal, finding its expression in the Confucian moral order, including the basic human relationships, which represents the universal value of man. Hence, the Dao is not merely "Confucian" but also a kind of universal ideal that all human beings at all time should observe. Thus, like Heaven, the Dao is unchangeable. This stance was entirely orthodox in the Chinese tradition, and it made Zhang Xuecheng no different from not only Wang Yangming but also the other Confucian scholars of his own time. Like other Confucians, he believed the dictum: "Heaven is unchangeable, the Dao is also unchangeable" (*tian bubian dao yi bubian* 天不變道亦不變). Similarly, Zhang's dictum that the Six Classics are all history was quite similar to the views of his predecessors as well as his contemporaries. Taking note of this, Demiéville rightly perceived that the Classics and history in Zhang Xuecheng were really interchangeable. In other words, as history is also the Classics, Zhang in effect canonized history just as Hegel tried to make it divine²¹. As Nivison put it: "if the Classics are history, and if history, like the Classics, exhibits the Tao [Dao], it should begin to share the Classics' prestige"²². It was clear in Zhang's mind that although the Six Classics by no means exhaust the Dao, history, whether past or present, contains the eternal Dao. In short, for Zhang Xuecheng, a gentleman must know the Dao through history²³. This view is traditional rather than modern.

Since Zhang insisted that the Classics convey Dao, history is Dao's container, and Dao is inseparable from history, where is the new wine in Wang Yangming's old bottle? As a matter of fact, similar views that "the Six Classics

²¹ Demiéville 1961:178-179.

²² Nivison 1966: 204.

²³ Zhang Xuecheng 1973: 304.

are all history” can be found in many of Wang’s contemporaries, in particular Wang Bidong 汪必東, who made the exact same equation of Classics to history²⁴. Even though a few modern scholars had to admit Zhang Xuecheng’s indebtedness to Wang Yangming, most continue to assert Zhang’s originality²⁵.

Furthermore, most modern scholars seem to have ignored the fact that equating the Classics to history was not at all exceptional among Zhang’s contemporaries. As the noted historian Qian Daxin 錢大昕 clearly stated at the time, “the Classics and history are one entity of learning”²⁶. The eminent poet Yuan Mei, whom Zhang personally held in great contempt, actually shared a great deal intellectually with Zhang, including the essential identity of the Classics and history, as Qian Zhongshu noted²⁷. *Unaware of* Qian’s remark, Nivison also notes that the “Classics are history” notion could be found in Yuan Mei; however, he does not know “who influenced whom?” Qian in effect had an answer: similar scholarly interests, intellectual temperaments, and personal tastes naturally led the two contemporaries to reach the same conclusion²⁸. In other words, the idea was a product of the times rather than a major breakthrough from them.

However, it is true that Zhang also emphasized that it was impossible for the Six Classics to say anything about those events that occurred in later times. On this basis, Qian Mu 錢穆 concluded that in Zhang’s view the Dao contained in the Six Classics was no longer applicable to later history²⁹. For Qian Mu, Zhang had reached the conclusion that the history after the time period of the Six Classics must have contained a new Dao. But this interpretation reads Zhang out of context. What Zhang really meant is that the Six Classics certainly could not cover forever changing historical events ahead of time; nevertheless, later historians as human beings produced writings from time to time would inevitably make manifest the timeless Dao, or the indispensable moral force, behind the evolving events. The events that occurred in later times, in other words, would illustrate the same Dao. This is why he said that the Dao contained in the Six Classics is as eternal as the sun and the moon,

²⁴ Wang Bidong n.d.: 1:2a.

²⁵ E.g. Chen 1980: 2:564.

²⁶ Cited in Zhao Yi 1972: 1.

²⁷ cf. Zhang Xuecheng 1973: 1; Yuan 1972: 10:6, 24:4; Qian Zhongshu 1984: 263.

²⁸ Qian Zhongshu 1948: 263.

²⁹ Qian Mu 1937: 1: 386.

and was thus applicable to hundreds of generations to come³⁰. There was no doubt that for Zhang the Dao is eternal; if it is not eternal, it is not Dao. Zhang therefore believed that later historians should always dutifully attain the great Dao through studying the Six Classics. No historians, in other words, could or should transcend the Dao, which the Six Classics fully possessed. This was **the Dao** that resided in history³¹. Hence, Zhang had no intention whatsoever to turn history against the Classics, nor any notion of replacing the Classics with history, as many modern scholars have enthusiastically suggested.

If Zhang wanted to substitute the classical past with the living present, as a recent writer asserts³², then what is the living present's Dao in opposition to the classical past's Dao? Did Zhang really develop a new Dao out of history? If so, what exactly was the "wholly new conception of Dao" Zhang developed? And what was its significance in China's intellectual history? None of these questions are answerable, because Zhang himself said clearly that historians and other writers found the source of the Dao in the Six Classics³³. For Zhang, since both the Classics and history contain the absolute Dao, they are really inseparable. And if he had really wanted to replace or abandon the Classics, where would he have found a new source of the Dao? Realistically, no one should expect any eighteenth-century scholar to go that far.

In fact, Zhang remained a pious Confucian through and through. His historical theory was well within the bounds of Confucian historiography. The so-called "historical meaning" (*shiyi* 史意) he entertained was identical to the Confucian meaning expressed in the *Chunqiu* 春秋 (*The spring and autumn annals*). As he explicitly stated, any unorthodox scholars who resisted the Classics were unworthy of mention, while a scholar who did not read the Six Classics were too superficial to be considered Confucian³⁴. Zhang never came close to breaking from the sacredness of the Six Classics as Hou Wailu and other modern scholars claim.

³⁰ Zhang Xuecheng 1973: 50.

³¹ Zhang Xuecheng 1973: 304.

³² Yü 1977: 50; 1996: 141.

³³ Zhang Xuecheng 1973: 280.

³⁴ Zhang Xuecheng 1973: 33.

Qian Mu believed that Zhang's 'Classics are history' idea was a challenge to Gu Yanwu's 顧炎武 conviction that the Classics are the "learning of reason" (*lixue* 理學), or Neo-Confucianism³⁵. What Gu had in mind, however, was to supplement the excessively speculative thinking of Neo-Confucianism with the more substantial learning of the Classics. As a result, Gu paved the way for the rise of the so-called "substantial learning" (*shixue* 實學) as the basis for statecraft as well the importance of philology in the study of the Classics. It seems extremely unlikely that Zhang, who placed great importance on statecraft, would have challenged Gu in this regard. He might oppose tedious, excessive empirical research, but this was mainly a problem of methodology, neither directly relevant to his philosophical thinking nor resolvable through the "Classics are history" formula. As a methodology, *kaozheng* was a tool to reveal the Dao contained in the Classics, rather than a discipline in its own right. A key element in *kaozheng* was philology (*xiaoxue* 小學), since it was indispensable to lay the groundwork for accurate interpretations of the Classics and history. Therefore, how is it possible for Zhang to believe that "it was possible to grasp the general meanings of classical texts without the technical assistance of philology"³⁶, even though he did sometimes complain of *kaozheng*'s excess.

To be sure, Zhang attached a great deal of importance to history. But again he was not exceptional in this regard. Gui Youguang 歸有光 of the previous Ming dynasty had already made the exactly same assertion³⁷, and during Zhang's own time, the historian Qian Daxin and others as well promoted the standing of history. Hence, it is hard to argue that Zhang's "Six Classics are history" idea was new in arguing for the prominence of history. Moreover, even while insisting on the importance of history, Zhang continued to revere the Classics. Zhang compared them to the sun and the moon, which, though far away from the earth, keep in close contact with men every day³⁸. In other words, he took it for granted that the Classics are as irreplaceable as the sun and the moon. The Chinese scholar Zhu Weizheng 朱維錚 believes Zhang sought to incorporate the Classics into history with the purpose of

³⁵ Qian Mu 1937: 1:381; cf. Hou 1980: 5:509; Yü 1977: 45.

³⁶ Yü 1996: 141.

³⁷ Gui 1981: 1:34.

³⁸ Zhang Xuecheng 1985: 666.

ending the intellectual rivalry between the schools of Han and Song learning. Zhu, however, concedes Zhang's failure on that score, precisely because his historiography was not innovative and rested almost totally on orthodox Confucianism, in addition to his single-minded accusations that prominent Han-learning scholars such as Dai Zhen and Wang Zhong 汪中 were a divisive influence on classical studies³⁹.

The suggestion that Zhang developed the "Classics are history" idea to challenge Dai Zhen's scholarship is interesting but questionable. Actually, Zhang was lavish in praising Dai's "profound and meticulous learning." Dai was uniquely accomplished, Zhang insisted, not just in textual criticism but also in philosophical discourse⁴⁰. To be sure, Zhang had keen interest in "philosophy" or "big ideas," along with a distaste for textual details or tedious philological inquiry. But Dai's philosophical achievements were at least in part due to his use of philology in the service of philosophy. Zhang could only envy Dai's ability to rest his brilliant philosophical vision on a solid philological base. According to Yü Yingshi, however, Zhang eventually disputed Dai's ideas and considered that "Dai, a great classicist, did not understand history." Zhang thus used his newly found intellectual base – history – to refute Dai's "radical philology" and reached a unique "holistically oriented theory" of his own. More specifically, by challenging Dai's paradigm of classical philology – namely, the existence of Dao in classical antiquity, Dao residing in the Six Classics, and the philological approach to explicate the meaning of the Classics – Zhang developed his own paradigm⁴¹. Yet if these assessments are right, where is the originality of Zhang's history? What is precisely Zhang's "historical scholarship" that Dai did not understand? Was Dai's philological approach to the study of the Classics "thoughtless" and mere "empty talk?" What is wrong with the philological method, which can illuminate the meaning of classical texts? How is possible to grasp the accurate meaning of the classical texts without using the knowledge of philology? And, above all, what is Zhang's holistic theory? Yü gives no clear answers to these questions, and he failed to find in Zhang any major concept beyond the "Classics are history." "With the thesis 'the Six Classics are all history,'" Yü declared, "Zhang

³⁹ Zhu Weizheng 1997: 9.

⁴⁰ Zhang Xuecheng 1973: 368, 369; 1985: 645.

⁴¹ Yü 1996: 130, 131.

not only demolished Dai's monopolistic claim to the Dao but also sacralized history at the expense of classical scholarship of his day"⁴². To such huge claims, I only wonder if Dai claimed a monopoly of the Dao in the first place, if Zhang ever "demolished" any of Dai's ideas, and if Zhang in fact "sacralized" history and disposed the classical scholarship of his day.

The scholarly dispute between Zhang and Dai seem to me quite trivial and insignificant. Zhang's attacks on Dai were by and large on the highly subjective moral grounds, such as Dai's insincerity in speaking, defaming such great sage as Zhu Xi 朱熹, and over his life-long quarrelsomeness⁴³. Zhang himself admitted that he wrote the chapter on "Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuyuan" (*Zhu Lu* 朱陸) in his principal work to castigate Dai's "evil intention" (*xinshu buzheng* 心術不正), because he was worried that given Dai's great intellectual and scholarly fame, he might exert a "bad" influence on the morals of the time⁴⁴. It is also noteworthy that Zhang deplored Dai's attack on Zhu Xi clearly for ethical rather than scholarly reasons⁴⁵.

In fact, Zhang not only pointed his finger at Dai's behavior but also was eager to criticize many other contemporary scholars whose performances appeared to fall short of standards of Confucian morality⁴⁶. His extremely bitter comments about Yuan Mei attached Yuan's "mischievous behaviors," despite the fact that the positions of the two were quite close on academic subjects⁴⁷. For instance, he accused Yuan of fabricating numerous beautiful woman poets in the latter's noted "Poetry Talks" (*shihua* 詩話) to satisfy his erotic desire⁴⁸. Clearly, Zhang denounced Yuan for his "deplorable intention" of trying "to break the boundaries between the sexes" (*nannü zhi fang* 男女之防). Not surprisingly, as a straight-laced Confucian moralist, he wrote a chapter on "female learning" (*fixue* 婦學) in his principal work, as he himself put it, "to rescue the decadence of morals, to defend the Confucian teaching, to rectify human relationships, and to distinguish men from animals"⁴⁹. Moreover,

⁴² Yü 1996: 143.

⁴³ Zhang Xuecheng 1973: 57-59.

⁴⁴ Zhang Xuecheng 1973: 57.

⁴⁵ Zhang Xuecheng 1973: 58-59.

⁴⁶ Zhang Xuecheng 1985: 645, 665.

⁴⁷ Zhang Xuecheng 1973: 164, 168, 175.

⁴⁸ Zhang Xuecheng 1973: 158-159; misunderstood in Mann 1996: 108.

⁴⁹ Zhang Xuecheng 1973: 175.

Zhang raised his voice on various moral crimes, such as deception, cunning, imposture, and fallacy in the literary world of his time, as Qian Zhongshu has already pointed out, in chapters such as “On Craftiness” (*xialou* 黠陋), “What I Saw” (*suojian* 所見), “The Horizontal Knowledge” (*hengtong* 橫通), “Poetry Talk,” “On Liu Zhiji’s History” (*du Shitong* 讀史通)⁵⁰. Accordingly, his attack on Dai as well as attacks on Yuan and others seem to have mainly rested on highly orthodox moral grounds and had little epistemological significance.

Here, in the world of what Yü Yingshi regards as “Confucian intellectualism,” Zhang interestingly leaned heavily toward the other strand of the Confucian Dao, namely, “honoring the moral nature” (*zun dexing* 尊德性). As a matter of fact, “honoring the moral nature” together with “following the path of inquiry and study” (*dao wenxue* 道問學) are two inseparable strands of the Confucian Dao. The dominating intellectual strand that the late Qing scholar Gong Zizhen observed did not mean he welcomed the new age of “Confucian intellectualism;” rather, he regretted that the Confucianism of his time was tilting to one side. Gong asked himself: “whether the intellectual strand is superior to the moral strand?” His answer was a flat “no!” (*foufou* 否否)⁵¹. Like other orthodox Confucian scholars at the time, Zhang simply wanted to keep the two strands as an integral whole of the Confucian Dao.

The Question of Statecraft

Virtually all modern scholars have contended that Zhang had in mind knowledge for the sake of statecraft when he advocated that the Classics are history. According to Qian Mu, Zhang wished to apply the Classics to governmental matters, and he even connected late Qing reformist ideas based on Gongyang Confucianism to Zhang’s notion that the Classics are history⁵². The modern classicist Zhou Yütong identified Zhang’s creativity in his emphasis on the meaning of history, concluding that this meaning was precisely the statecraft notion of knowledge for practical use⁵³. The Chinese historian Cang Xiuliang 倉修良 also linked the original aspect of Zhang’s statecraft ideas to his view that the Classics are history; hence Zhang intended

⁵⁰ Qian Zhongshu 1979: 3:992.

⁵¹ Gong 1961: 193.

⁵² Qian Mu 1937: 1:392; this is interesting but lacks direct evidence.

⁵³ Cf. Zhou Yütong 1983:711-727.

statecraft ideas to his view that the Classics are history; hence Zhang intended to make scholarship serve practical needs, benefiting contemporary social morale⁵⁴.

A more recent study defines statecraft as the management of state affairs, so that only office holders could practice it. A private scholar, in other words, could do nothing to help beyond making his learning more utilitarian. The private scholar Zhang was hence no exception. His learning, whether general scholarship, statecraft, literature, or philosophy, would serve the Dao for the benefit of proper scholastic pursuits and to uphold the sanctioned moral standards⁵⁵. This appears to be the broadest interpretation of Zhang's interest in statecraft, and in it the "Six Classics are history" idea seems to have become secondary in importance. In fact, it is clear that Zhang wanted history to serve statecraft and other practical purposes⁵⁶. But the idea that the Classics or history should serve such purposes was neither original nor creative during Zhang's times. The concept of statecraft had long been at the core of traditional Chinese thinking. It became especially urgent at the outset of the Qing dynasty, when many prominent scholars attributed the fall of the previous Ming dynasty to the speculative and useless knowledge that had become popular by the sixteenth century. As Huang Zongxi put it, the Classics should serve statecraft and a useful scholar should study history as well⁵⁷. Both Wang Fuzi 王夫之 and Dai Mingshi 戴名世 also contended that history as a record of past experiences could serve as the best lessons for contemporary and later generations⁵⁸. Therefore, if Zhang Xuecheng was diligently guiding the Classics and history on the road to statecraft, he was mere a fellow traveler.

If the real meaning of Zhang's "Classics are history" notion lies in statecraft, what is the essential content of this statecraft? The modern philosopher Li Zehou 李澤厚 tries to separate kingship (*waixiang* 外王) from sagehood (*neisheng* 內聖) in Neo-Confucianism, and argues that Zhang in effect opposed the "empty talk" of nourishing sagehood in favor of an assertive kingship. Li even contends that Zhang's statecraft was designed to put kingship

⁵⁴ Cang 1984: 121.

⁵⁵ Zhou Qirong, Liu Guangjing 1984: 123-25, 127, 133.

⁵⁶ Zhang Xuecheng 1973: 53.

⁵⁷ Zhao Erxun et. al. 1977: 43:13105.

⁵⁸ Wang Fuzhi 1966: 6:12; Dai 1970:97.

into practice⁵⁹. However, it is absurd to split sagehood and kingship; they were two sides of the same ideal in Neo-Confucianism. Kingship, in other words, rested on sagehood; without the latter, what sort of kingship could emerge? As well, given Zhang's highly orthodox view of Confucian morality, it is equally absurd to expect him to oppose sagehood, the highest exemplary moral achievement. Zhang did notice what he considered the unavoidable shortcomings in Neo-Confucian interpretation of the Classics, but he reserved utmost respect for the fundamental moral standards (*gangchang mingjiao* 綱常名教) it had set⁶⁰. Like many other private scholars, Zhang could contribute nothing to statecraft except for his writings. Precisely because he expected his writings to be useful to his times, he was determined to inject moral lessons into every piece of his writing. Ideologically, he was rather a conservative person. The substance of his statecraft theory likewise shows little difference from most of his contemporaries⁶¹. Generally speaking, he remained a rather old-fashion scholar.

Inventing Zhang Xuecheng

Zhang Binglin was perhaps the first modern scholar to praise Zhang Xuecheng's pronouncement that the Six Classics are all history, and he referred it to Zhang Xuecheng's dictum. Binglin was in fact quite critical of Xuecheng's scholarship, but he was overwhelmed by this dictum, which in his words "cleared up the clouds to see the blue sky"⁶². Binglin's appreciation of the dictum, however, reflects more his own than Xuecheng's understanding of it.

The two Zhangs lived in very different times, marked by great discontinuities. From the modern Zhang's perspective, Xuecheng was a historiographer not much different from Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 of the Tang dynasty. Incidentally, however Zhang Xuecheng was on record rejecting this comparison; he said he was interested in "historical meaning" (*shiyi* 史意) as opposed to Liu's interest in "historical method" (*shifa* 史法). They walked, he said, along two

⁵⁹ Li Zehou 1985: 292.

⁶⁰ Zhang Xuecheng 1985: 645.

⁶¹ cf. Wang Rongzu 2002: 327-329.

⁶² Zhang Binglin 1972: 44.

different paths⁶³. It is almost certain that Binglin could not appreciate in its own terms Xuecheng's version of historical meaning, which rests on Confucian orthodoxy. Born forty years after the conclusion of the Opium War, Zhang Binglin considered the Classics neither sacred nor Dao-illuminating; in effect, he wanted to turn Confucius into a mere secular historian⁶⁴. The reformer Kang Youwei's use of Gongyang Confucianism for political reform further troubled him⁶⁵. Zhang Binglin did not oppose Kang's reformism; however, he was disturbed by Kang's deifying of Confucius for his political purposes, and he denounced this as "crazy"⁶⁶. He thus endeavored to exorcise Confucius and the Classics of the taint of divinity. "The master and his teaching," according to Zhang Binglin, "are human discourse, not ghost talk." The Classics merely provide historical knowledge⁶⁷. His deliberate effort to secularize the Classics, far beyond anything Zhang Xuecheng could have done, logically resulted in making the Classics mere historical sources. It was the later Zhang, not the earlier one, who at last replaced the Classics with history, or in other words reduced the sacred teaching to historical sources. It is not surprising that the modern Zhang knowingly or unknowingly read his own mind into the traditional Zhang's "Classics are history" remark and took delight in it. Likewise, Liang Qichao asserted that Zhang Xuecheng "advocated how to preserve historical materials," and assumed that "the Six Classics are all history" implied that "historical materials are everywhere"⁶⁸.

When Hu Shi wrote: "that the Six Classics are all history simply conveys that there are a lot of historical materials in the Classics"⁶⁹, he ostensibly followed Zhang Binglin's as well as Liang Qichao's reading rather than represented correctly Zhang Xuecheng's own view of the dictum. After Hu, many historians, including Jin Yufu and Liu Jie 劉節, said without hesitation that for Zhang Xuecheng the Classics were all historical materials⁷⁰. More recently, along the same lines, Cang Xiuliang praised Zhang Xuecheng for his "ac-

⁶³ Zhang Xuecheng 1973: 333.

⁶⁴ Zhang Binglin 1968: 2.

⁶⁵ cf. Wong 2000: 383-407.

⁶⁶ Zhang Binglin 1914: 137.

⁶⁷ Zhang Binglin 1914: 14, 142.

⁶⁸ Liang 1959: 163.

⁶⁹ Hu 1973: 138.

⁷⁰ Jin 1962: 233; Liu 1982: 385.

complishment in broadening the base of historical materials and the scope of historical research”⁷¹. But it is simply wrong to consider that Zhang equated history to historical materials, ignoring the fact that his concept of history still contains the Dao. When he said that all authored works were history, he did not mean that every piece of the writing was crude historical material. Rather, in Zhang’s view, any form of writing, like historical writing, should never exclude the Dao. “If I exclude the Dao from literature and history in my writing,” as he himself said, “then literature and history would not be worthy of their name”⁷². Modern scholars whose thinking is imbued with the importance of historical sources to the study of history misunderstand what was the main issue for Zhang Xuecheng.

The secularization of the Classics and history was a major breakthrough in the modern Chinese conception of historiography. “Before the twentieth century,” as Joseph Levenson put it, “to call the Classics history was never constructed as a limitation on the Classics, but as philosophical description.” Levenson was right to say that the eighteenth-century Zhang Xuecheng was not reducing the Classics to “historical significance” in the modern relativist terminology⁷³. In fact, in Zhang’s mind, the significance of history was identical to that of the Classics. He believed both the Classics and history were defined by Dao and conveyed eternal truth. Only after modern secularization were the Classics and history turned into mere historical materials. Once the Classics lost their canonical character, as Qian Zhongshu has noted, they became plain words without eternal meaning and thus became recorded historical sources⁷⁴. Qian further pointed out that the ancient Daoists had already contended that the Six Classics were lifeless remains of the sages. So he said specifically “history is decidedly a dead record”⁷⁵. This is Qian’s modern view, patently not Zhang Xuecheng’s. To secularize Zhang is thus to invent a new Zhang Xuecheng for modern minds.

Since the dead records of the past have become historical sources, it is the modern historian’s duty to breathe new life to these moribund historical

⁷¹ Cang 1984: 114.

⁷² Zhang Xuecheng 1973: 304, 305.

⁷³ Levenson 1968: 1:92.

⁷⁴ Qian Zhongshu 1984: 265.

⁷⁵ Qian Zhongshu 1984: 266.

events. As a master of both Chinese and Western literature, Qian Zhongshu contends that, like novelists, historians are doing creative work; however, unlike novelists, historians should be truthful. This remark reminds us of R. G. Collingwood, who referred to the resemblance between the historian and the novelist. “Each of them,” Collingwood wrote, “makes it his business to construct a picture which is partly a narrative of events, partly a description of situations, exhibition of motives, analysis of character.” The only difference is that “the historian’s picture is meant to be true”⁷⁶. Moreover, Qian stresses that to secure truth the historian needs not only to “relate accurate events” (*chuanzhen* 傳真) but also to “animate truthful events” (*chuanshen* 傳神). The latter, for Qian, is even more crucial than the former, because events cannot really be truthful without life or spirit. In this regard, Qian advocates the importance of historical imagination and of intellectual history⁷⁷. Or as Collingwood said, “The historian must go through the process which the emperor went through in deciding on this particular course. Thus he is re-enacting in his own mind the experience of the emperor”⁷⁸. Here Qian’s call to “animate truthful events” seems to have echoed Collingwood’s “re-enactment of past experiences,” as both of men believed it is the historian’s duty to turn dead events into lively history. In fact, Qian vividly rendered the essence of the Collingwoodian re-enactment to a paragraph of elegant Chinese⁷⁹. Qian, indeed, read Collingwood’s work, and was also familiar with the work of Benedetto Croce, Collingwood’s predecessor⁸⁰. Yet here we need to remember that all these modern notions about historiography are irrelevant to the eighteenth-century Zhang Xuecheng.

Interestingly, however, the modern scholar Yü Yingshi finds “striking similarities” between Zhang and Collingwood, adding that Zhang was the only philosopher of history to emerge in traditional China⁸¹. More specifically, Yü compares Zhang’s emphasis on “historical meaning” (*shiyi* 史意), “the historian’s honesty” (*shide* 史德), and “creative thinking” (*biechuxincail* 別出心裁) to Collingwood’s notion of re-enactment. But the central component of

⁷⁶ Collingwood 1993: 245, 246.

⁷⁷ Qian Zhongshu 1984: 160-61, 266. Cf. Li Hongyan 1992:241-264.

⁷⁸ Collingwood 1993: 283.

⁷⁹ See Qian Zhongshu 1979: 1:166.

⁸⁰ Qian Zhongshu 1984: 211.

⁸¹ Yü 1976: 172.

Collingwood's "idea of history" is that the historian re-enacts "in his own mind the experience of the people whose actions he is narrating"⁸². Re-enactment is thus not designed to restore the truth of the past; rather, the historian must re-think the dead thought again in order to understand the past. Hence, history is really "the historian's picture of the past, the product of his own a priori imagination"⁸³. By contrast, Zhang's "historical meaning" really refers to the moral significance of history, "historian's honesty" to the author's integrity, and "creative thinking" to the historian's new ideas. None of these notions come close to Collingwood's re-enactment.

It is also highly questionable for Yü to compare the Collingwoodian remark that every action has an inside and an outside to Zhang's reference to "recording words" (*jìyán* 記言) and "recording events" (*jìshì* 記事), as well as to intellectual history (*sìxiangshǐ* 思想史) and political history (*zhèngzhìshǐ* 政治史)⁸⁴. It is clear that Zhang Xuecheng was referring to two separate and yet complimentary matters, while Collingwood considered thinking as a form of action. "By 'inside' must be meant 'whatever thought is expressed'," as William Dray clearly points out, "by 'outside,' whatever events expresses it"⁸⁵. This is why Collingwood criticized Tacitus for the latter's failure to "re-enact in his own mind the experience of the people whose actions he is narrating." As a result, Tacitus' "characters are seen not from inside, with understanding and sympathy, but from outside, as mere spectacles of virtue or vice"⁸⁶. There is no evidence to suggest that Zhang Xuecheng had in mind this idea. Nor is it appropriate for Yü to claim that Zhang was the only legitimate philosopher of history during the long period of traditional China. His many predecessors did produce comparable philosophies of history, in particular philosophies of the evolving organic cyclical pattern of history⁸⁷. Whether Zhang Xuecheng can even be said to have had a philosophy of history in this sense is an open question.

⁸² Collingwood 1993: 39.

⁸³ Collingwood 1993: 245.

⁸⁴ Yü 1976: 181.

⁸⁵ Dray 1995: 42.

⁸⁶ Collingwood 1993: 39.

⁸⁷ See Cairns 1962: 159-195.

Modern Chinese historians have made other efforts to make Zhang Xuecheng look “modern.” The historiographer Liu Jie, for instance, believed that Zhang, by integrating philosophy (the Classics) with history, observed the evolution of human society in order to discover its future direction⁸⁸. Here the modern Liu boldly assumed that Zhang’s historical thinking was under the same influence of Social Darwinism as late nineteenth-century Chinese intellectuals. Liu seems unknowingly to have invented Zhang in yet a different manner.

Conclusion

The remarkable re-discovery of Zhang Xuecheng in the twentieth century turned out to be a modern invention. We can see in this invention both misrepresentations of Zhang and the modern concerns that helped shaped this particular invention. These concerns in turn reflected the dramatic changes in the historical thinking of modern Chinese.

The most fundamental change was the secularization of the Classics and history in the wake of the decline of imperial China and the impact of Western ideas. As a result, the universal Dao was not only reduced to a particular Dao but also exorcized both from the Classics and from history, which suddenly became mere historical sources. Under the influence of modern Western historical thinking and its strong positivist tendencies, modern Chinese historians attached great importance to “historical sources” (*shiliao* 史料) and endeavored to take a new look at their past on the basis of reliable historical materials. Primary sources were honored as the key to historical inquiry, functioning either to raise doubts about the older versions of history or to reconstruct truthful new histories. This approach led modern historians to read the ‘Classics are history’ dictum in the new light and find a reason to praise Zhang Xuecheng’s “farsightedness.” But in fact Zhang was a conventional eighteenth-century Confucian scholar, and the old bottle he used contained very little new wine. The influence of the Classics was overwhelming in the eighteenth century, and Zhang had absolutely no intention of undermining them. The famous dictum that the Six Classics are all

⁸⁸ Liu 1982: 378.

history, which appears at the beginning of his book without much elaboration, marked no intellectual or historiographical breakthrough. If cannot say Zhang “succeeded in raising Confucian intellectualism to a new height in eighteenth-century China”⁸⁹, if we cannot show exactly what this “new height” consisted of.

Only in modern times did the Dao become Chinese, thus losing its universal validity and most of its eternal value. In general, modern Chinese scholars reacted to this loss in two major ways. Some embraced modern, or Western, values as the new universal value and embarked on the path of wholesale Westernization. They inevitably tried to fit Chinese history into the pattern of a certain Western theoretical scheme. Others found a solution in cultural pluralism by placing Chinese history in a multi-national world history. Whatever new ideas have shaped modern Chinese historiography, they are fundamentally different from the Dao, which resided deeply in the traditional Chinese historiography. Modern historians projected their newly acquired ideas into Zhang Xuecheng’s “historical meaning” and sang praises to its compatibility to some great Western philosophies of history. But what was meaningful for Zhang lay in Confucianism, and any interpretations of Zhang must take this into account. He could not be much ahead of his time: when the universal Dao was still virtually unchallenged. The unprecedented creativity and originality that many modern historians have attributed to him are by and large inventions.

⁸⁹ Yü 1996: 151.

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