CHAPTER 2

Features, Problems, and Puzzles in the Received Zhongshuo

Even at the structural level, we encounter evidence of the Zhongshuo’s fluid state in the course of its transmission history. An initial survey of the different notational formats that were used to memorialize Wang Tong’s various words, deeds, and virtues reveals probable traces of past reorganizations of the text, or of numerous interpolations of new material, or just as likely, both these types of editorial intervention. In the coming analysis of lexical items and other textual details, moreover, I demonstrate that the Zhongshuo could not have undergone revision or expansion by just these two means of rearrangement and interpolation, even by multiple hands. The process was certainly messier and more mysterious, involving many types of changes that defy easy labeling. Some features, for example, that are seen as insidious corruptions or signs of forgery when noticed by modern Wang Tong scholars might well have been viewed as wholly appropriate and respectful updates on the part of a given editor during the Tang dynasty.

Nevertheless, as I move through my analyses of different features of the Zhongshuo it will be increasingly apparent that its continued shaping over time answered certain purposes, or was driven by certain desires, that transcended any individual editor or discrete stage of its transmission. The various dimensions of the Zhongshuo’s appeal served different constituencies of readers throughout the medieval period, and although their respective emphases shifted in different epochs, from the beginning the seeds of these dimensions of appeal were planted within the text. And to be sure, the history of their enhancement is part of the story of this text’s fluidity. In preparation for my subsequent chapters’ study of who wanted what out of the Zhongshuo at different periods in the Tang and early Song dynasties, therefore, I examine the evidence of its transformation not only to document textual change, but to ask what purposes the changes reveal, what needs did these changes meet, and in what ways did certain changes improve the Zhongshuo for certain readers.

Finally, because in this chapter so much of my concern is with textual features of the Zhongshuo, it is practical that I employ two different methods for presenting passages of quoted Chinese text and their English translation. When conducting textual analysis, I supply the original passage first, followed by the
translation; when the mode of my discussion shifts back to exposition or historical narrative, I return to my usual order of providing the translation first.

I Format Types

The Zhongshuo, as noted earlier, is conventionally divided into ten chapters, and each chapter consists of an assortment of independent, short Analects-like pieces or “entries,” as I hereafter term them, of various types. Yet thus far, there has been no study of the formal character or organization of the text beyond scholars’ brief remarks on the basic rubric of its chapter divisions. My analysis of the Zhongshuo in this and coming chapters requires, in contrast, an itemization of the different formal types of the parts that make up the whole. Not only will such an itemizing facilitate later discussion of the Zhongshuo’s multiple appeals to different constituencies of readers in history, but it makes it possible, as well, to observe crucial internal evidence of the text’s historical transformation – which in part resides, as I argue, in the distribution of these formal types within the received Zhongshuo.

Based on my own division of the text and tally, there are 450 total entries in the text of the Zhongshuo proper.1 Excluding the roster of Wang Tong’s principal disciples at the end of Chapter Ten, four different notational formats are employed: quotations of utterances (sententia), transcriptions of conversations (dialogues), recounted incidents (narrative accounts), and observations of Wang Tong’s deportment and disposition (testimonials). The first type, sententia, constitutes the largest portion of the Zhongshuo. There are 216 entries in this format comprising forty-eight percent of entries totally. All but six are commentarial remarks and wise sayings ascribed to Wang Tong.2 Some are terse and hackneyed homilies, strikingly resonant of the maxims of Confucius as recorded in the Analects. Some are Wang Tong’s allocutions on the purpose and import of the classics and his own classics-inspired works. Others are Wang Tong’s commentarial elucidations of his political and ethical philosophy, his prescriptions of etiquette for men of culture, and his views on different points – e.g., the decline of conventional scholarship since the Qin and Han, the character of

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1 The Zhongshuo was not previously divided and numbered in the manner of the Analects until the recent publication of Zhang Pei’s baihua translation, Zhongshuo yi zhu. Interestingly, though the division points of our entries differ in many places, we agree on the total number (450).

2 The six exceptions are commentarial remarks made by others – Wang Tong’s disciples and visitors – in praise of Wang Tong and his teachings.