CLASSICS WITHOUT CANONIZATION: LEARNING AND AUTHORITY IN QIN AND HAN

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What authority was invested in a text reputed to be a jing 經? Did the type of authority claimed for a jing depend upon the nature of its contents? What assumptions did Qin and Han persuaders make about the authors of jing? Is a jing closer to a “classic,” a “canon,” or a “scripture” during Qin and Han, since these words carry different connotations?1 How helpful or misleading are the modern analogies constructed between the Bible and the Five Classics traditionally associated with Confucius (551–479 BC) as editor or author?2 And to what degree does the term “Confucian clerics” aptly describe Qin and Han classicists (Ru 儒) in office?3 These are but a few of the questions that students of early China would like to see put to the Five Classics (wujing 五經)4 corpus but also to all the texts labeled jing.

Two sets of resources, the excavated manuscripts and the electronic databases, confront modern students of classical learning with all that they do not yet know. The excavated materials have helped us stitch together exciting new narratives about early divination practices,

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1 All English definitions of the word “canon” entail a fixed and “relatively unchangeable” corpus, while “scripture”—suitable in some contexts, as when we speak of liturgies based on the Classics—is highly unsuitable in most Qin and Han contexts where the religious dimension of the Classics is not taken to be the reason for their elevation to jing status. I wish to express my thanks here to Christian de Pee and Griet Vankeerberghen for their comments on this essay.


3 “Confucian clerics” is the term promoted by Clart and Goossart for Qing “officials of the state” following the classics, as explained in Vincent Goossaert, “1898: the beginning of the end for Chinese religion?,” Journal of Asian Studies 65.2 (May, 2006), 307–35.

4 NB: the term wujing refers also to the Five [Moral] Constants.
military strategies, the application of the laws and the administration of the empire and family, but when it comes to classical learning, they have done little more than to confirm the early existence and circulation of authoritative writings that ultimately became part of the Five Classics. Setting aside the murky provenance of what many regard as the most exciting of the finds, the text labelled “Kongzi explains the Songs” (“Kongzi shi lun” 孔子詩論) and the over-hasty identification of the four so-called “Yellow Emperor classics,” two intractable problems remain: first, that the finds to date are too few in number and too scattered in time and space to allow confident assertions to be made about a subject as complex as classical learning; and second, the mere presence of jing or partial proto-jing in tombs cannot reveal much about the early social practices of those texts or the perceived connections between the jing and non-jing found in the same tomb. The electronic databases only

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5 For a complete list of the excavated manuscripts, see the Websites bamboosilk.org and Enno Giele’s Database of early Chinese manuscripts (www.lib.uchicago.edu/earlychina/res/databases/decm).

6 See, e.g., Robin D.S. Yates, Five lost classics: Tao, Huang-Lao and Yin-yang in Han China (New York, 1997); Nathan Sivin, “The myth of the naturalists,” in Medicine, philosophy and religion in ancient China. Researches and reflections (Aldershot, 1995), p. 20; Mark Csikszentmihalyi and Michael Nylan, “Constructing lineages and inventing traditions through exemplary figures in early China,” T'oung pao 89 (2003), 1–41. Note the degree of interpretation required to produce today’s critical editions, as evidenced by a single ten-strip manuscript from Mozuizi M18 that has generated no fewer than nine different solutions for the strip sequence. See Enno Giele, “Excavated manuscripts: context and methodology,” forthcoming in China’s early empires: a supplement to The Cambridge history of China, vol. 1. Scott Cook comments upon the illogicality in recent scholarship, both Chinese and Western, that privileges excavated writings above received texts, on the one hand, while insisting upon the “oldest continuous civilization of China” on the other, in Guodian Chu jian xian Qin ru shu hong wei guan (Taipei, 2006), Intro.

7 Most scholars in the field are using as working hypotheses: (1) Texts circulated in much smaller units than today, something on the order of a chapter or an essay in today’s books, presumably because of the sheer bulkiness and weight of the bamboo slips in use during Qin and Han. (2) In many cases, originally separate writings came together in larger compilations only in late Western or Eastern Han (the Liji is one example.) (3) Texts seem to have been edited repeatedly during the Han and post-Han periods, with the result that authoritative editions appeared only with the advent of mass printing, in the Song. (4) Moreover, early editors were expected to make far more substantive emendations to texts than would be acceptable in publishing circles today. (5) Variations in the orthography of the jing, including the Five Classics, continued long after the official “unification of script” in 221 BC, and some of these variants certainly affected the interpretation of individual passages in authoritative works. (6) Thus Qin and Han witnessed the proliferation of reference tools, as well as major changes in the formats of writing and in writing technologies, all of which would have affected the reception of the jing.