THE OLD TEXT/NEW TEXT CONTROVERSY: HAS THE 20TH CENTURY GOT IT WRONG?

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Qing scholarship, and above all the famous kaozhengxue ("eviden-
tial research"), is renowned for its new approach to the canonical
scriptures of Confucianism. Setting aside the interpretations of Song
Dynasty scholars such as Cheng Yi (1033–1108) and Zhu Xi (1130–
1200), who had been instrumental in providing an orthodox basis
for any kind of classical learning, Qing scholars in their search for
the original meaning of the Chinese classical scriptures used com-
mentaries written during the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.–220 A.D.) as
their reference point. Commentators such as Ma Rong (79–166)
and Zheng Xuan (127–200) were deemed to be more authentic than
their Song successors because they were closer to the time of
Confucius.

The most important centre of kaozhengxue lay in the flourishing
Yangzi delta. During the 18th century, scholars from this area re-
discovered the different traditions of classical learning that had existed
almost two thousand years earlier. It was only at the end of the
19th century, however, that this new type of scholarship, with the
proclaimed goal to build China’s future on a reconstructed Chinese
past, seemed to have become politically relevant.

For a period of more than fifty years, beginning in the 1890s
and ending in the 1940s, the debate on the correct transmission of
the Chinese classics was one of the most controversial topics among
Chinese intellectuals. At the centre of this debate stood a contro-
versy which dated back to Han times: the Old Text/New Text Con-
trovery. During these fifty years, several books and dozens of articles
were written on questions related to Old Text and New Text schol-
arship.

Yet, when looking for a valuable exposition of the main subjects
on which the two schools disagreed, the modern historian still re-
mains at a loss: most studies centring on the Old Text/New Text
Controversy postulate an abstract difference between, on the one
hand, rationalism, and on the other hand, irrationalism or a belief in the gods (in a more negative sense: in superstitions), as the major characteristic of the two schools. A variation to this interpretation is sometimes ascertained in that the Old Text School approached the classics on a textual, not political, level, whereas the New Text School was more concerned with an overall understanding of the texts, not with philological analysis. Concrete examples showing a split between rationalist and irrationalist ideas in Han thought are, however, very rare, and whether Old Text scholars really adhered to the principles of pure philology has never been proven. In short, evidence is still wanting on whether or not the prevalent interpretation of the controversy is justified.

For an investigation of this topic, it is necessary to keep in mind the contemporary intellectual and political trends at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, when the present-day opinion on the nature of the controversy took shape. That Chinese intellectual history is to a very large degree a political history has almost gained commonplace acceptance in Western sinology. Yet, the argument needs to be reiterated once again. Otherwise it would, as will be duly expounded, remain impossible to explain the astounding lack of valuable information on the Old Text/New Text Controversy even today.

The leading questions in this article are: Why did this topic become so popular at the end of the 19th century? And why did it remain so for such a long period? Obviously, the appeal of certain inherent factors in the debate must have been stronger to Chinese scholars than mere scientific interest in ancient Chinese thought. As will be seen, it is worth comparing the results of an investigation into the 19th- and 20th-century interest in the Old Text/New Text Controversy with those of an inquiry into the nature of the controversy that took place during the Han itself: there, too, it is indispensable to look at the political background against which the scholarly discussions took place. Similar to their ancient counterparts, modern Chinese scholars were using the controversy as a repertoire to provide the arguments they needed for political purposes.